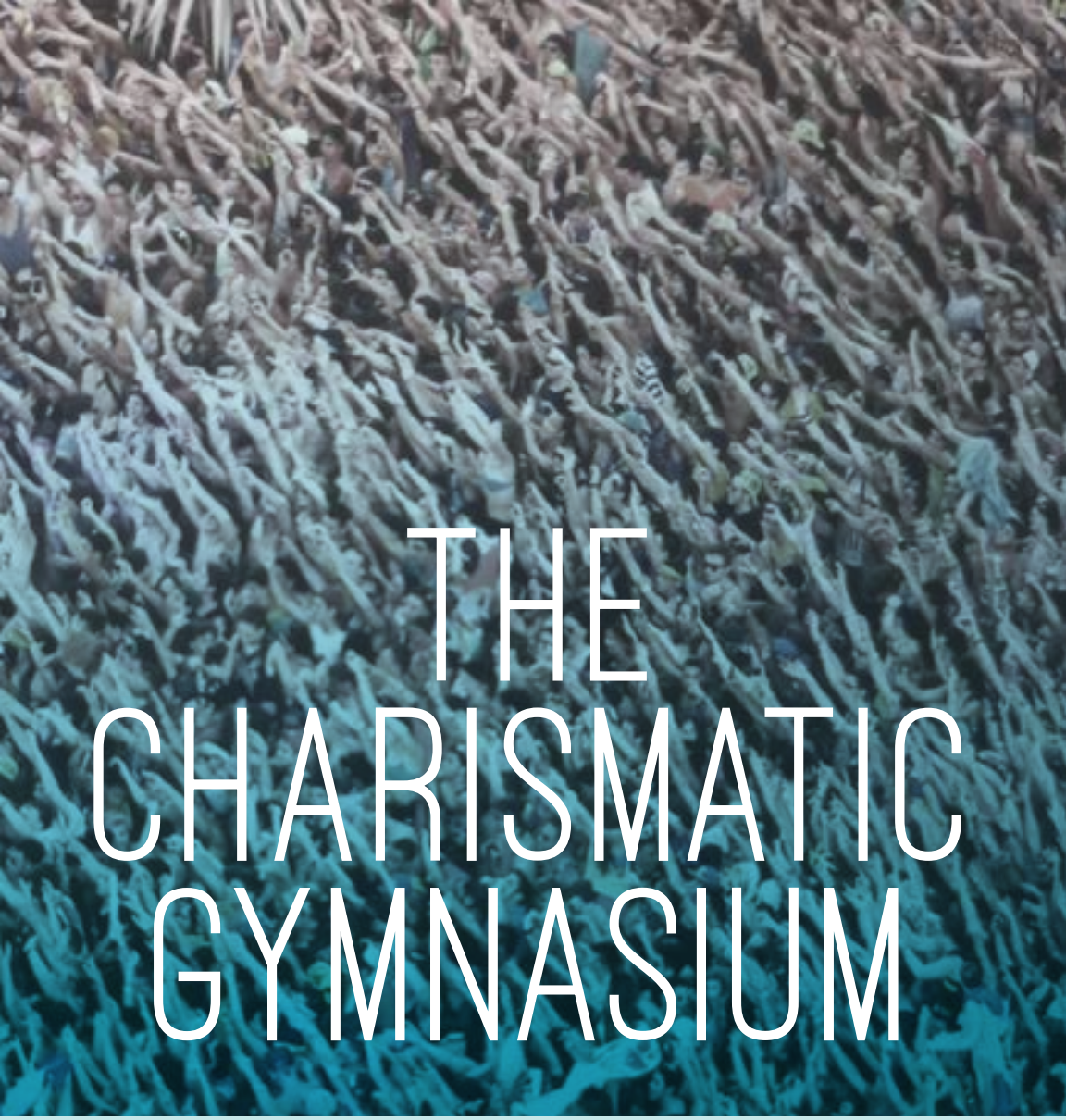

THE CHARISMATIC GYMNASIUM

BREATH, MEDIA, AND RELIGIOUS REVIVALISM IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZIL

MARIA JOSÉ DE ABREU

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS *Durham and London* 2021

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Amy Ruth Buchanan
Typeset in Minion Pro by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Abreu, Maria José de, [date] author.
Title: The charismatic gymnasium : breath, media,
and religious revivalism in contemporary Brazil /
Maria José de Abreu.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2021. |
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020020640 (print)
LCCN 2020020641 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478009719 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478011347 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478010296 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Anthropology of religion—Brazil. |
Leadership—Religious aspects—Catholic Church. | Religion
and politics—Brazil. | Christianity—Brazil.
Classification: LCC GN470.A274 2020 (print) |
LCC GN470 (ebook) | DDC 306.60981—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020020640
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020020641

Cover art: Photographs by the author.

For Lina, of course.

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PREFACE: BREATHE IN. BREATHE OUT.

Like millions of others, I am under lockdown in response to the spread of the coronavirus. From my apartment in New York City I look down a deserted Broadway. The avenue is one straight line for ambulances speeding by, but there is little more. Yet the edges of this central artery within Manhattan look slightly out of focus, a trembling of contours I associate with the heat of fever. It is as though global warming's continued muffled cry has eventually downloaded into humans in the form of a virus affecting our breathing and our average temperature. If something will become apparent in the years to come, it is that air is not just an empty dimension within which humans exist but the substance through which existence itself is possible.

In such times it is not lost on me that the organizing concept of this book is *pneuma*, the Greek term for air, breath, or spirit. Written under the signature of gratitude to my 86-year-old mother, she will just miss its release. As I write these lines she is in hospital infected with COVID-19. COVID exposed a tumor. A doctor informs me over the phone that the situation is irreversible. For all the powers of digital media to offset our physical confinement, I am told that no communication technologies are available in her ward, the same one where she worked for nearly forty years. I wake up to the fact that she never owned a mobile phone, and I ask an old friend from my hometown to bring one to her. This technological interface seems to be the only way to share airspace with my mother, as though the digital has become the great air reservoir of the world. Despite agreeing to bring the device to her bed, the hospital staff tell me that she is disoriented and isn't making any sense. "And who isn't disoriented?" I ask in frustration. But I realize there is no point in arguing. I am smashed by the complexity of it all, my daughterly love finding solace only in the memory of a woman who loved silence and lived it soundly, especially in the later years of her life.

Breathe in. Breathe out. A fine balance keeps us alive. And yet for most of our lives we are hardly aware of its mechanism. Air partakes in eliding the conditions of the very reality it enables. Yet the air we breathe today is becom-

ing closer to our thinking, no longer the mere (read: vital) background substance through which thoughts are possible but instead the very element that aligns our lungs to our brains. One good example of this is how performative paradoxes dominate our thinking, as though one side of a pressure seeks to draw balance from a pressure on the other. I sustain my condemnation of corporate capitalism through books I buy online from Amazon. I teach my students not to doubt the benefits of methodological doubting. I tell my son to think with his own head. Because of the virus, I'm in confinement in the name of a common good that exposes my economic privilege. Conscious of it or not, we have grown sick of hearing about performative paradoxes. And yet our sickness itself is symptomatic of the fact that, ubiquitous and insistent, the performative paradox has gradually lodged itself in our chests. It hosts itself in the structure of our breathing. For what is breathing—the alternation between opposites—if not a performative paradox, civil war in our lungs.

The rule in religion, politics, media, or the market is no longer simply to discipline or regulate the rhythms that animate public institutions and populations but to infuse them with what William Butler Yeats once called the "antithetical multiform influx," that is, an undecidable veering that draws us to its middle. The image is that of the swing of a pendulum whose oscillation from tick to tock does not tell time, less so where things are going, but constitutes itself as time by means of the very motion.

Bearing this in mind will help make sense of contemporary authoritarian populism in Brazil and other parts of the world. When Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump talk about the threat of coronavirus, their words are not pronouncements that take place in the present tense. Insomuch as the present is disjointed, the virus is always already both a dire danger and an overblown nuisance. To say that Bolsonaro and Trump are deniers of the virus is to fail to see how entangled their denial is in the already tomorrow when they will be saying the extreme opposite. To accuse these rulers of being paragons of contradiction is to miss the point entirely. That would be to impart them with grounds they actively disavow. A contradiction would assume a subject without caesura, a form of singularity that aspires to be self-identical. But sovereigns like Trump and Bolsonaro are deeply fractured; indeed they wield their sovereignty by upholding the rift like a war trench from which to launch their semiotic terrorism, even to the point of auto-annihilation.

In an odd twist of brutalist aesthetics, the cracks in the system are exposed, and not in purview of transparency but so as to allow for the total and organic identification between a subject and his praxis. As long as we fail to

see the strategic coupling of opposites at the heart of contemporary governance, we won't be able to grasp how the Right operates its extremism. The epistemic leap I see necessarily involves something like a reconceiving of the political through the problem of substance. In this sense, the operations of breathing that COVID-19 is making apparent, like some powerful reagent, may also lend themselves to better grasping how power works today.

—New York City, April 17, 2020

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book began in conversation with a crew of faculty members and colleagues at the Amsterdam School of Social Science Research. Thanks to Birgit Meyer for inviting me to be part of the international research group she ran on religion and media in that institution, in whose dynamic and intellectual bosom many of the ideas in this book were found. Thanks to Peter van der Veer for his advocacy on my behalf. I am grateful to Johannes Fabian for his teaching and for his trust in my project when doubt threatened to engulf it. And to Ana Lindo for graciously introducing me to the city of São Paulo. Special thanks to Irfan Ahmed, Marieke Bloomenberg, Alexander Edmonds, Ajay Gandhi, Anouk de Koning, Suzanne Kuik, Rachel Spronk, Shifra Kisch, Olga Sezneva, Olga Soudi, Malini Sur, Marleen van Ruijven, and Marta Zogbi for friendship and comradeship.

I want to thank those who, at one point or another, read and talked with me about my writing, transforming it for the better: Ananda Abeysekara, Alena Alexandrova, Courtney Bender, Thomas Carlson, Elizabeth Castelli, Thomas Csordas, Marleen de Witte, Iracema Dulley, Claudio Lomnitz, Eduardo Dullo, Abou Farman, Francio Guadeloupe, Lotte Hoek, Stephen Hughes, Mette Løvschal, Eileen Moyer, Valentina Napolitano, Bruno Reinhardt, Emilio Spadola, Patricia Spyer, Martijn Oosterbaan, Mattijs van der Port, Michael Taussig, Otávio Velho, and Samuel Weber. Special thanks to Rafael Sánchez for his intellect, Peter Geschiere for collegial sustenance, Rosalind Morris for brilliance, Brian Larkin for inspiration, and Jeremy Stolow for stalwart encouragement. Carlo Caduff and Angie Heo have been a source of friendship, spirited engagement with ideas, and support all the way. I have often asked myself whether I would be where I am now had they not been on my horizon. I am thankful everlastingly to Charles Hirschkind for being a seriously critical interlocutor and generous reader for many years. Rosa Norton has been a diligent proofreader and concept polisher too. One last read of parts of the manuscript by Emily Ng sharpened the idea of the project. Thanks to Gisela Fosado and Alejandra Mejía at Duke University Press for

trust and direction, and to my project editor Lisl Hampton for patiently and valiantly traversing the gaps between the worlds of the book, the readership, and my nonnative English. This work has been possible thanks to funding support from Fundação Para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, and the Forum for Transregional Studies of the Wissenschaftskolleg of Berlin.

In New York, Daniella Gandolfo and Jason Pine are two angels whose guidance I hold tight. To my friends Cristina Barros, Orquidea Calisto, Paula Caspão, Paulo Domingos, Paulo Ferreira, Sandra Guarda, Patricia Guarda, Anabela Ribeiro, Luis Ribeiro, Pedro Santos, and Eric Woodley, I am grateful for years of sustaining care and affection. To Sota and Marie-Ritchie the pleasure of long walks under the Dutch sky, and for the laughter. In Michael Vatcher I found love and an entry into the vibrant worlds of jazz music. To Louis, my darling son, I am grateful for years of tremendous joy (he really is so funny) and for being one with my foolish heart. I dedicate this book to my mother in whose brave life I see the predicament of many women.

This journey wound into the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University, which I joined in 2017. I am grateful for the formidable crew of thinkers, colleagues, and friends there. I have long believed—as I could only do—that the best arrivals are those that bring one to a place of realization about how much more is out there to learn from. This never-finished endeavor is perhaps the gift the immortals speak of.

INTRODUCTION

We are showing people that this here, oh, oh [*he pummels the image*], look here, oh, oh, this here [*he kicks the image, holding it by the head*] does not function, this here is no saint. . . . Do you think God could be compared to such an ugly, horrible doll?

—PASTOR SÉRGIO VON HELDER

It was with these words and gestures that Pastor Sérgio Von Helder, on the October 12 religious holiday dedicated to the Virgin Mary, sparked a controversy that would become known in Brazil as the Guerra Santa. On that day in 1995, while millions of pilgrims were heading to the Basilica of the National Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida, dedicated to the patron saint of Brazil, the evangelical minister brought a 42-inch replica of the saint to the studios of RecordTV (owned by the Protestant Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), with the aim of ridiculing it on live national television. Starting with verbal insults, the pastor moved on to physical aggression: holding the image by the neck, he administered, rhythmically, eight blows and twelve kicks. *Thwack, thwack, thwack . . . kick, kick, kick, kick . . .* Other local TV networks quickly appropriated the video of the attack on the statue and looped it endlessly on prime-time news, provoking outrage and protest throughout Brazil.

Time and again the media reproduced the scene of the kick. Widespread accounts and recollections of "the kicking of the saint" (*o chute na santa*), as the televised episode became known, claimed that the statue suffered a shattering blow. But even though he indeed struck the icon several times with the side of his shoe, Pastor Von Helder never came close to smashing it to pieces. And yet that is not how most people remember it. It is as though the very reproducibility of such a moment had the power of affecting its perception. As the weeks went by, the magnitude of the injury became ever more dramatic among various publics. I heard accounts ranging from the claim that the statue was merely broken to its head having been cut off (reminiscent of how three fishermen first found a statue of Our Lady in a river in 1717).[1] Defending his actions, Von Helder asked people to examine the footage again to verify

that he did not shatter the icon, as everyone was claiming. But the more he proclaimed his innocence, the more the scene was replayed. At stake was what the operation of mediation itself can do to images, the media's power to transfigure the realities it depicts. In the end, the image could not hold up against the hammering force of serial repetition produced by its relentless rebroadcast. The more often the scene of the attack was broadcast, the more the statue disintegrated, the deeper the cut into the flesh of the nation, of Our Lady of Aparecida.

This book sets out to show how the cut wrought by Guerra Santa opened up a space for the rise and expansion of a form of Catholic revivalism in contemporary Brazil. Best known as the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, this movement rose to popularity in the mid-1990s, a period of great structural change dominated by conflicting visions and tendencies in religion, politics, and aesthetics. Combining theological concepts with mass media and with bodily exercises, Catholic Charismatics would enforce a particular logic of value that prizes the ability to articulate and extend things in view of a certain suppleness of form. Much like the gymnast works on stretching her limbs to the utmost limit so as to expose the network of the joints and articulations of the body, Charismatics set to work on the elasticity that will bring the church back in form. This orientation toward elasticity is the central idea behind what I call the *Charismatic gymnasium*.

Applying the uses of the Greek gymnasium to Christianity, I explore the dawn of a new regime of devotional practices designed to build spiritually fit Catholic devotees in contemporary urban São Paulo (see Forbes 1945; Dutch 2005). I document the central role of *pneuma*, the Greek term for "breath," "air," or "spirit," in a vast respiratory religious program—popularly branded as "the aerobics of Jesus"—in reforming Brazil's Catholicism in doctrine as well as in conduct. Gathering in stadiums, big tents, sports venues, or old hangars, Charismatics transform spaces into gymnasiums for devotion. Their programs consist of well-orchestrated juxtapositions of choreographed bodily gestures and exercises, with mass media technologies, popular culture repertoires, and elements from Greek Orthodox theological doctrine. Their religious practices hinge on a productive semantic slippage between "going to the gym" in the sense of "building mass" and doing gymnastics as in developing elasticity, coordination, and proprioceptive awareness. This practical elasticity that underpins Charismatic theology and practice functions as

the adequate foundation of a particular power structure. The implicit aim of this structure is to produce religiously fluent bodies congruent with the rise of neoliberalism in Brazil.

Von Helder's assault on the nation's patron saint and most revered Catholic icon offers an opening into the worlds this book explores. Through the power of shock, he initiated the rise of a dramaturgical epoch within Brazilian society, politics, and culture, one that is still unfolding today. This dramaturgy is characterized by a disavowal of the powers of representation, favoring instead the regimes of operation—the technical apparatuses—involved in the reproduction and circulation of things. Thanks to the repetitive viewing of the scenes of Von Helder kicking the statue, what was held to belong to the order of the visual became in fact musical, suffused with rhythm: the rhythm of mass mechanical reproducibility. What the eye, time and again jolted by the staccato repetition of the same scene, did to perception, so Walter Benjamin (1968) wrote, technologies of image reproducibility in the modern world do to the integrity of images. Reproducibility—the *ability* to reproduce—alters the limits of time and space. It erases the uniqueness and distance that was thought by the spirit of an epoch to preserve the sacrality of things.[2]

In being subjected to such rhythms, the statue of Our Lady subjects the circumscriptive borders of its being in a time and in a place to a new power configuration. What before was held as rigid and three-dimensional becomes reimagined as a two-dimensional medial space. More than a representation of the sacred, what becomes available in this two-dimensional sphere is the manual of operations—the "how" of the image—through which "imaging" itself is possible. Thanks to the power of shock, the rigidity of the statue can now accommodate a new graceful malleability, and it is this malleability that Catholic Charismatics will channel into institutional form.

In the context of this book, the shock of mechanical reproducibility opens up the aperture—the cut—through which the Charismatic gymnasium appears. It is as though in the perceptive disintegration of the statue of Our Lady Catholic Charismatics were able to reconnect, as though through a breach, with an older doctrine of doings—an orthopraxis—and therein pave the way for a project of renewal. This project of renewal links pneumatic theology to technological processes and then these to breathing exercises as the essential components of the Charismatic gymnasium. What is crucial to keep in mind, as you go throughout the chapters, is how a focus on operations opens onto a theological doctrine of the gymnasium among Charismatics in contempo-

rary Brazil. In that effort, the main protagonists of this book are the operations that integrate the Charismatic gymnasium: reproduction, citation, recursion, interruption, overlapping, retarding, folding, bending backward and forward, the alternation between falling and restoring, among others.

Based on a theology of practical belief, more than argumentative reasoning, Charismatics' doctrine of the gymnasium hinges the breathing body to an entire network of relations, the prime aim of which is to expose—and thereby thematize—the "spirit" of renewal under which it functions. In the spaces of latency thus exposed, flesh and artifice, life and the machinic, not only cannot be differentiated but are seen as mutually constitutive of the operative logics of incarnation. A recursive imbrication exists between mystical *wound* and technological *cut*, between theology and technology, such that to talk about one is necessarily to talk about the other. Ramifying at the level of the doctrinal and the sociopolitical alike, these theo-technological operations are at the core of this investigation.

In times of contradiction and disputation such as those that led to Guerra Santa in 1995, Catholic Charismatics were faced with the challenge of deciding between extreme poles. On the one side, there was the Catholic Church losing its long-held hegemony over other credos—above all, over Pentecostal denominations. On the other, there was a clear sense that a paradigm change was underway within Brazil and the world writ large. Without saying that the pastor of the Universal was right in his attack on the rigidity of the statue, it was becoming clear for a certain strand of Catholic conservativism that the institutional body had to be renewed, trained in flexibility.

Neither liberation theology nor its practical mission in the form of grassroots ecclesiastic communities (seen by some as too worldly, by others as too caught up in stoic moralism) seemed to find the necessary vigor to hamper the rapid advance and penetration of evangelicalism and televangelism into key areas of the social, political, and economic spheres in Brazil. In turn, the aesthetics of scandal, often associated with a mediatic fascination with corruption stories, seemed to be the very force facilitating the penetration of televangelism into Brazil. In an ironic twist from the aims of modernism, radically reformative conservativism came forward in the public scene by way of an avant-garde engagement with interruption and shock.

But the more shocking the interventions, the more stunned and melancholic the local institution of the Catholic Church seemed to appear through its talking heads. A tension was arising between those two sides, and this opposition was, in a strong sense, what the attack on the statue on live TV and

its subsequent renditions performed through a series of retaliations and nationwide public debates. The time was ripe for a new dynamism, and this dynamism was the terrain on which the Charismatic gymnasium would unfold with a determining influence.

Walter Benjamin ([1963] 1998a), who insisted on the necessity of anachronism for an accurate understanding of history, offers powerful clues in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* to how a counter-reforming baroque sensibility rose up to a formal stiffness in the seventeenth century. As Benjamin notes the modern baroque sensibility first erupted in places like Germany and Spain out of the need to undo "a massive ornamental layer of truly baroque stucco" (1998a: 78–79). Prone to oscillation and political indecisiveness, the baroque craved more fluid mechanisms, supple logics apt to accommodate, even if grotesquely, all sorts of opposites and adapt, even if poorly, to all sorts of contingencies. The baroque virtuosity consisted in propelling the swaying motion, thanks to which "heroes are always able to turn around the order of fate . . . [and] like a ball in their hands, contemplate it now from one side, now from the other" (Benjamin 1998a: 84). Such a layer of stucco, Benjamin writes, "conceals the keystone" to "constellations" that "only the closest investigation can locate" (78–79).

But whereas Benjamin associated such "constellations" with the progressive energetics of the "dialectical image," I see the engine for a new power arrangement that more closely resembles a form of paradigmatic totalitarianism. As I argue this power arrangement expresses a notorious ability to deploy the extreme. What is key about this deployment of the extreme is how it is transformed in the process. Such transformation consists in a striking ability to consider extremes only to deprive these of a particular place or position. Abstract as this idea may sound, this is the key to the door of the Charismatic gymnasium and, as far as I am able to tell, the very essence of the political theater in which Bolsonarismo unfolds.

Underpinning the complexity of the Charismatic movement in Brazil is a command to hold tension through opposites. Such an orientation, however, is the applied formula of an older strand within Orthodox Catholicism called the *complexio oppositorum*: the principle by which thesis and antithesis endure their antagonism without mediation into a higher third. In *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* ([1923] 1996), Carl Schmitt described how the complexio allows Catholicism to embrace antonyms—the natural and the mechanical, the spiritual and the institutional, self-effacement and conspicuous propaganda, humility and arrogance, poverty and entrepreneurship, au-

thoritarianism and capitalism. This capacity to draw vitality from the simultaneity of opposites explains, according to Schmitt, an "elasticity that is really astounding" (4). What is distinctive about the complexio is the methodological opportunism with which it draws on the extreme.

Significantly, if it takes things to an extreme, it is only so as to test the elasticity of its structure in becoming closer to what seems to oppose it. The more extreme it goes, the more able it is to assert the center (epitomized in the figure of Rome) from which it simultaneously wants to distance or decenter itself. Through such a mechanism the church revitalizes its institutional status—its muscle power—via what seems most radically opposed to it. Accordingly, tension and conflict are not to be seen as deriving from the meeting of opposites. Rather it is the pragmatic application of a particular kind of power that draws on tension as such. Hence, pneuma—and its respiratory logics—is reincorporated into the heart of the institutionalized body it simultaneously criticizes and distances itself from.

Given the Brazilian Charismatic Renewal's conspicuous investment in mass media, how can one reconcile that orthodox principle, the elasticity of opposites, with a model of communication? Charismatic Catholicism draws on the institution it simultaneously opposes as a way to resignify the communicative model through which to think the concepts of tension and opposition. This happens through an enabling abstraction that consists in displacing the powers of the argumentative—as classic liberal theories of communication have it—into the physiological mechanisms of the breathing body. As is the task of this book to show, Charismatics are interested in the "how" of communication, the pneumatic operations that enable communication as such.

What is so profoundly significant about this move is that it allows Charismatics to step outside the modern frame of dimensionality that undergirds protocols of argumentative reasoning into the mechanisms of fluidity and substance. Accordingly, pneuma does not warrant signification in referential terms. But neither are such mechanisms about a turn to ontology or materiality in a radical alterity to transcendence (see Reinhardt 2016).

At stake, rather, is a theology of mechanisms—a theo-technocracy—that must never succumb to either one of those sides but use every opportunity to activate and expose (indeed, pneumatize) the fluidity of the "how" itself. In Charismatic practice, in sum, communicative "tension" enters the circuitry of the breathing body so as to be rendered in gymnasium-like idioms such as tensile, stretchable, malleable, workable. In being reduced to its abstract

elemental operations, this religious movement can move in all sorts of directions and accommodate many repertoires at once and without the slightest sense of contradiction.

I cannot emphasize enough the key importance of the complexio in Charismatic theology, practice, and rhetoric. Distilled into a theology of the gymnasium, the old complexio is responsible for the miracle of elasticity that undergirds much of Charismatics' contemporary media and religious programs. Charismatics' option for the elastic enables a deliberate instability. It promotes a pauperism of structures that precisely strengthens a neoliberal ethos. The complexio sustains a vigorous impoverishment of ways and things, a pliable modality detectable in myriad manifestations: the flooding of aphorisms in Charismatic daily talk, of trite and crude analogies, tropes, contorted semantics, stretches in logic, obsessive repetitions, grotesque puns and spoonerisms, infatuations with archaic media equipment (often mirrored in the povera of Saint Francis/Saint Clare of Assisi as a figural operation), a fondness for brutalist aesthetics and for precarious structures. For Charismatics, the function of such stylized impoverishment is twofold: it *both* draws on a Christian tradition of self-effacing asceticism (*ascesis*, training) *and* approximates the latter to the powers of potentiality intrinsic to Brazil's socioeconomic and political era. Impoverishment, thus conceived, is not a status or an identity one can own or locate. It is power's own flexible expression: impoverishment not as socioeconomic condition but as the condition of the socioeconomic.

Catholic Charismatics would come up with their own counter-reforming solution, one that would not embrace the shock of iconoclasm but, more ingeniously, *make shock internal to a pragmatic theology of compromise*. To the demands of having to decide whether to be more Catholic or more Pentecostal, more "option for the poor" (as proclaimed by liberation theology) or evangelical vitalism, more institution or more spirit, more stucco or more electronic media, Catholic Charismatics set out to produce a synthesis that sees undecidability not as an obstacle but as an energetic expression of the system itself. This synthesis that offers a throne to the powers of the undecidable draws on an old key strain in Orthodox Eastern Christianity, notably, the Byzantine. It's an extraordinary leaping operation. Yet such operations bolster the elasticity that Charismatics never stop emphasizing in their day-to-day versatile religious practices.

Arising out of a synthetic diplomacy within Christianity (specifically between Western Catholicism and televangelist Pentecostalism), the Byzantine provided Charismatics with a theology of compromise, or better, the

compromise of noncompromise. The powers of the gymnasium lie in this outstanding encircling of incompatibilities, its attempt to articulate two traditions within Christianity. What pneuma awakens in the body through aerobic prayer, the Byzantine—itself born of tension between iconoclasts and iconophiles—legitimates. It is what mystics like Saint John of the Cross, also called gymnasiarchs, formulated as a test of the pliability of the soul (Largier 2007; Faubion 2013).

Far from pacified or repressed, therefore, unalloyed oppositions are emphasized as part of a discipline of revival. Rather than opting for a decision in either/or terms, Catholic Charismatics embrace an inclusive both/and. But then again, the both/and structure is not propositional. Rather, it informs the tenor of a bodily discipline that draws on the basic operations of pneumatic breathing. Practically, it would not make sense to speak of *either* inhaling *or* exhaling but rather of the *movement* that in actually alternating between one and the other pole potentiates the *coming to pass* of breath. What takes place then is the *holding-together* of a tension between opposites that must itself play out in Charismatic practice. This is how Catholic Charismatics in Brazil are able to wield the most abstract-concrete (both/and) unit of life, such as the event of breathing, to an all-encompassing and universalistic Catholic Spirit. In its semantic slippage among spirit, breath, and air, pneuma is the fundamental criterion for the practicing gymnasium.

The staging of operations involved in Charismatic revivalist reform runs across this book. With pneuma as its central protagonist, the book closely describes how media montages, speech, gestures, spaces, and objects are construed to render explicit the principles—the logical dispositive—that cause them to be. Throughout these pages I show how those elements are made to be in constant communication with their cause, so that each scenic manifestation becomes a witnessing of the underlying operations—the infrastructural underpinnings—of what Charismatics associate with spirit (pneuma). The progression of scenes in each chapter is designed to expose the persistence of this pattern in Charismatic religious media practice. It shows the continuity of action that characterizes the Charismatic gymnasium: the power of reiteration by which the thing described enforces the very logic that propels it.

Such a procedure inevitably affects the style of analysis and narrative. My focus on the episteme of operations draws its motivation from the very phenomena under study, from having the object influencing its methodology. There is peril in this performative move in that the analysis risks participating in the (self-referential) logic it tries to elucidate. At the same time, theories

of performativity have precisely shown us the limits of the Western episteme in shaping the canon of critique. Relying on a transcendental outside, the liberal critical subject has a hard time bending to the self-enunciating nature of the performative, that is, in its ability to excite into being the very reality it names. Such limitation, however, also opens an alternative path to critique, one in which we critically test the distinction between the analyst and the object of study itself as an intrinsic requirement to the task of examination. As Johannes Fabian (1983, 1991) reasons, the intrinsic value of anthropological theory lies in its ability to speak the language of the very traditions it seeks to criticize, for it is precisely in that echo from within that transformation may ensue.

What I take to be particularly instructive about Catholic Charismatic revivalism lies less in its particular sociological components than in the epistemic mode through which it operates. My goal is not to historicize or sociologize the events on the ground, which other studies on Catholic Charismatics in Brazil have done proficiently, but rather to submit these to a conceptual treatment that will help us come to grips with the principles of composition they adopt in their practices. If this idea sounds abstract, it is because abstraction is the operation in question. And I hope to be able to show how the powers of abstraction conjure tremendous political force in today's theological and political configurations of the social, not just in Brazil but elsewhere in the world.

Such a focus requires addressing the problem of what is meant by abstraction in the particular case of Charismatic Catholicism and what frames such a notion more broadly in the history of Western thought. If abstraction in the latter is often confined to the realm of ideas, far removed from the bodily, the mechanical, and the physiological, Charismatics instead proceed to effect abstraction as intrinsic to basic operations of the breathing body. The prime operational model of this abstraction, which they extract from the biblical Book of Acts, is "the act(s) of breathing": the oscillating and paradoxical movements of expansion and contraction. As I show at different points, the centrality of pneuma in Charismatic thought and practice is associated with a loss of eschatological dimension—the loss of a sense of ending—in favor of the promotion of an ongoing middle: a highly dynamic middle (*meio*, as homologous and homophonous to *medium* and *midst*), where elements move a lot without going anywhere in particular. This loss of eschatology, tied to a Westernized narrative-teleological conception of history, results in a transformation not only of what we mean by abstraction but also of the

theatrical elements and the structure of the dramatic form to which it is attached.[3]

For example, Charismatics are fond of analogical thinking. They often bend the past and the present, bringing them face-to-face as mirror images. Yet they do so not out of a penchant for structuralist thinking, the kind that holds that the secular is a modern version of the theological or likens special effects to secularized miracles, only to reintegrate them in a linear conception of time. That is not the kind of abstraction in question. Rather, Charismatics are interested in how the structure of analogy can be effectively embodied as an exercising of the members—both in the sense of laypeople/membership and in the sense of limbs. Thus when Charismatics say, as they do in chapter 1, "Let us launch the nets," they are not simply making an analogy between the fishing nets of the apostles according to the Book of Acts and the nets of media technology today. They literally work it out on the level of a bodily act, turning analogy and other rhetorical devices into an aerobic exercise of sorts.

Such stylistic devices are important in Charismatic power rhetoric insofar as they enter the flesh of the participant. Importantly, entering the flesh does not mean it becomes a yielding to presence but instead it becomes a rhythmic partaking. What distinguishes "partaking" from "presence" is the "leave-take" quality of the former. In repeating certain phrases (as when they verbalize "Let us launch the nets" ten times according to the structure of the Byzantine rosary) in prayer and sermons Charismatics explore language's capacity to act and give form: to build up. However, building up does not mean becoming more present to oneself. Rather, it means to be better at exposing the undecidable structure of "leave-take" in incarnational partaking. As we learn from performative theory, "citational practice" produces a double effect: it both joins and displaces. *It joins in displacing.* It both adds to what was before and transforms it into something else.[4] Ideally, for Charismatics, formal aspects of language and referential meaning enter a relation of recursivity between constative and performative in that the act of reciting itself is seen as the act of weaving the net—a net*work*—it is proposing to launch. In sum, the aim of practice is to transfigure the subject who *actually* acts and yet in acting also ensures a certain virtuality for transformation. Analogies and other duplicitous forms such as resonances, mirrorings, and equivalences are not to be understood through a frame of identification between entities. These are the effect of a synthesis in the acting body itself.

This is also why the notion of mediation that informs the vast majority of theories on religion and media cannot do justice to the aspect of "incarnated operations" that concern Catholic Charismatics in Brazil. Terms like *mediation* and *immediacy* are often treated as collaboratively involved in bringing the sacred into presence across religions (Meyer 2011, 2012; Witte 2011, 2018). Yet such collaboration among mediation, immediacy, and presence confounds the desire to efface mediation with that to bypass it altogether (Morris 2017). The effacement of mediation places immediacy as the trading technique, the trick, that mediation itself allows. But an assumption of the primacy of mediation excludes the fact that there are forms of immediacy that are irreducible to mediation, even when it involves technology.

Such becomes apparent in how Charismatics draw on media technologies not to mediate the sacred but to expose the principles under which, technically speaking, revivalism functions. What gets to be communicated is the engineering power of pneuma, which, ideally, is less conducive to presence as to a kind of impropriety whereby songs, slogans, recitations, and gestures are owned by all and by no one in particular. In being interested in the underlying operations, for Charismatics it matters little where the organic, the mechanical, and the spirit begin or end. One is always in the middle, what Charismatics sometimes refer to as being within the third person (Holy Spirit). The relevance of the aerial (pneuma) in Charismatic theology (as opposed to the earthbound liberation theology) resides precisely in absorbing all causality—which a theory of mediation implies—into acting as such.[5]

In a special forum on the notion of mediation, Charles Hirschkind (2011) calls attention to the at once parochial and universalistic uses of mediation in the study of religion and media or religion more broadly. Despite how encompassing the term *religious mediation* is, Hirschkind rightly questions its adequacy in the study of other religious traditions, where such concepts, at least in their dominant framing, may not apply. In his own study on the practice of listening to recorded sermons among Muslims in urban Cairo, Hirschkind (2006) distinguishes how listening to sermons on cassettes does not merely mediate a religious message, for that would imply a relation of noncontiguity between the ethical sphere of the sermon and the act of proper listening. He proposes a more intimate connection of sound and power not to be rendered as either mediation or immediacy, as mediation's other, but as learned techniques. To give shape and "flesh to the ear" (Hirschkind 2006: 25) is to act on the ability of listening itself. In Hirschkind's analysis, therefore, it is precisely

the irrelevance of mediation in the process of ethical formation that warrants the proper function of listening as a virtuous, constitutive act.

In view of the aforementioned tension between Catholicism and (in many respects, Protestant-derived) Pentecostalism internal to Brazil's Charismatic Catholicism, neither mediation nor immediacy will be adequate notions for understanding the operations in question, or, indeed, the concept of operation as such. As Christianized a reading as the pairing mediation-immediacy may be, *it is not Christological enough*. A Christological reading, as pursued in this study, owes little to the logical frames that normally accommodate that coupling. This is due to the particularly disjunctive temporality that characterizes Charismatics' *ongoing* acts.[6] Featured in a gerund as these are, these goings-on affect the very idea of presence. For Charismatics to incarnate is not to bring into presence. Neither is presence a problem in light of the possibility of nonpresence as is the case elsewhere (Engelke 2007). Rather, to incarnate is to give flesh, and to give flesh is to operate. It is to communicate the operations through which the *coming to pass* of the present itself is possible. It is to show, in the most technocratic sense, what in the sacred is at work. Presence, one could say, is the exhibition of a mediality in the flesh.

Charismatic operations hinge entirely on acts, not on figurative content; on practice, not on proposition. As we will see throughout, but particularly in part II, such is the crux of why Catholic Charismatics in Brazil must find aesthetic and doctrinal support in the tradition of the Byzantine from Eastern Orthodoxy, a tradition where, as several chapters will show, even the concepts of (real) presence, materiality, and immateriality fit awkwardly when it comes to grasping what in Charismatic doctrine is essential, notably, the operon underpinning incarnation as logos.

The present argument reflects on, and to some extent stages, a particular theatrical political form. This form is alternative to the one indebted to the structure of empathy. As an established referent of Aristotelian dramaturgy behind modern Western epistemes, empathic identification has long sustained a privileged acquaintance among sociohistorical analyses, the concrete, and the empirical, thus equating, in turn, the abstract with the nonconcrete, nonempirical, and noncorporeal. The structure of empathy likewise undergirds the centrality of terms like mediation and immediacy acquired in recent anthropological analysis. These notions highlight the role of practice in producing displacement and transformation. Yet the empathic structure that supports it implies a politics of grounds that ousts the full scope of the theory of performativity that interests me. Through empathy we get to learn

how actions happen on grounds but not as much about how grounds themselves partake in actions as an intrinsic feature of the performative. Mediation helps us understand how citationality occurs in a space-time interval through repetition, but we do not understand enough about how the notion of the interval itself is transformed in that very cultural process.

To incarnate, then, means to step outside such an empathic framework. Indeed, it is this epistemic legacy born of empathic identification that Charismatics suspend in the ordinary practice of the disciplining gym. Instead of relating to the world (and to the theatrical) through a problematic of empathic identification, their practice draws on the powers of speech and acting to constitute the subject who acts as inseparable from the grounds that enable it. Instead of pursuing a form of presence in light of "the unity of action," as the structure of mediation and related empathic identification would require, Charismatics adhere to the performance of certain acts—such as re-citation—that stretch and extend the here of presence to an elsewhere. The result is a simultaneous here-else.

What is most required from religious practice is the ability to expose the principles of articulation as such, not unlike a gymnast whose acts show the entire economy, the operational network of muscles and joints. Put differently, what is important to retain is how this forming of the subject is the function of a highly pragmatic form of abstraction, the prime function of which is to expose the medial principles—Charismatics call them pneuma, spirit, flow, third—recognizable in their power to articulate, to bring formerly separate worlds into contact. It is a stretching of sorts, not a dramaturgy where meanings or even sensory experiences might be conveyed.

Given the crucial reconstruction of the narrative frame in which it operates, this study adopts the typologies it describes. Instead of framing critique as a problem of empathic identification, the chapters build on the economy of "articulations" that compose an act, a scene, a gesture, a word game. This approach makes the writing at times crude, jolting, and obtrusive (at points, even unsteady), but that should rejoin my ambition to take thought and language to the gym: less by way of revealing meaningful bodies than of exposing the articulations that allow Charismatics to speak of bodies, acts, and speech in terms of rule, logic, play, principle—in short, operations. The style of narration ought to reflect an effort to train myself in a form of writing that absorbs the content into its form. This double bind was challenging as it required a simultaneous doing and undoing of proficiency in standard academic writing. The task was to unground myself in a largely earthbound discipline

through leaps and connections so as to bring the Charismatic gymnasium—and its pneumatic worlds—into full view.

With the aim of showing how particular reformulations and practices have been taking place within Brazilian Catholicism through the example of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, I focus on two key structuring sites of description and analysis. These are divided into two parts. The first part of the book is dedicated to the Canção Nova Community, a global media network compound situated outside São Paulo. In these first three chapters, the argument evolves from an overarching perspective of the place to the most particular, yet without refraining from showing the oscillations between one and the other.

Chapter 1 analyzes the constitutive circuits of pneuma involved in the making of the Canção Nova Community. Through the reenactment of the biblical Acts of the Apostles in the current age of global media, Canção Nova fashions itself not as a community that communicates but as a community that *is* communication. The community is its ability to communicate its own operations. This tautological arrangement has tremendous power as it transforms a noun into a verb: *being* community and *doing* communication coincide. In coinciding it implodes the borders of all containment, spatial and temporal, so as to institute the temporal logic of a gerund—an ongoing middle—through which power is deployed. This gerund is the temporality that ties the ongoing breath to the expanding life of the media community itself, linking a theological understanding of laboring operations in view of a certain orthodoxy.

Chapter 2, dedicated to confession, focuses on the linguistic tropes of the physiological human body explored in a show of public confession at Canção Nova. Specifically, it explores how the function of rhythm in language and movement helps to reveal the technical articulations that structure the possibility of the circulation of pollution or sin between bodies across space and time. If in chapter 1 my examination identifies the circulations that tie and entangle the different nodes and joints of the community, chapter 2 investigates that work of circulation in bodies in performance. Both chapters posit circulation as the being in relation.

Chapter 3 then zooms in for a close-up of the dramaturgy of *Adoration Hour* on the Canção Nova TV channel. The chapter describes and analyzes the economy of operations behind a one-hour mise-en-scène exposure of the

Eucharist on TV in real-time transmission. Given the technical ability of television to show at a distance, that is, to be at the same time both *here*, in front of the spectator, and *there*, on the scene, the Eucharist can neither fully be here nor entirely be there. It is a stretchable here-else. But how will the claims for the mystery of real presence be realizable in light of such a split? How do the postulates of real time and real presence meet on the TV screen?

Together these three chapters offer an analysis of the different entanglements, exercises, and techniques in and of material production within which sovereignty is incarnated. All three chapters also come back to the overarching argument that the exposure of operational techniques suspends all representation in order to direct the flow of the images coming to pass. The chapters show how this coming to pass of the image (as incarnation, as flesh, as opus) unfolds according to a synthesis not just of the Trinitarian apparatus but also of the Catholic Pentecostal tensions that set and allow Catholic Charismatics to adapt and utilize elements from Eastern or Byzantine Christendom.

These same aspects are taken up again in part II, but even more explicitly. Starting with chapter 4, the book concentrates on the multiple sites associated with a single personality, the media-savvy lover of sports and Charismatic Padre Marcelo Rossi. Emerging as a priest in the iconoclastic atmosphere of the Guerra Santa, Padre Marcelo (as he is commonly known) popularized the Charismatic movement. Through skillful adaptations of what seem like incommensurable elements—medieval Byzantine prayer, aerobics, and techno music—Padre Marcelo has orchestrated a powerful regime of prayer that has become incorporated into the daily habits of millions of Brazilians, ranging from the very devout to the casual fan. Exploring the granular effect of aroused skin through the power of song, this chapter is a precursor to the *béton brut* affectivities that will become apparent in the next chapter dedicated to architecture. From bodybuilding as what gives form to spirit through choreographed breath, we move on to a building that draws on a certain conception of the body, indeed, of the body as conception.

Chapter 5, then, analyzes how the Byzantine icon of Theotókos came to be an architectonic model for a new sacred space: the stylized ferroconcrete megasanctuary Santuário Mãe de Deus (Mother of God Sanctuary) in São Paulo. The chapter tells how, unable to pay off the prohibitive expenses of building a space, Padre Marcelo transforms such limits into a theology of Marian conception. To come to the church, to participate in his "aerobics of Jesus," becomes in itself a mode of contributing to the outgrowth of the sanc-

tuary. First dedicating the sanctuary to the Byzantine Virgin of Theotókos, at a later point Padre Marcelo would withdraw from such referential worlds and turn Theotókos itself into a model for the administration (*oikonomia*) of a territory. This he does when Brazil is being torn apart by the shock and scandal of Operation Car Wash. Circular and self-adaptive, as in a topological feedback structure, the icon of Theotókos will be a lesson in orthodox theology as much as in civil engineering. It will be theology in the flesh, whereby the construction of a massive space is administrated around emergence, self-referentiality, and self-transformation.

Chapter 6 focuses on the monobloc chair (the white, lightweight, stackable, plastic, ubiquitous, and anonymous chair) as an object to think the relation between pneuma and design. The chapter analyzes the popularity of the chair as an icon of neoliberalism among Catholic Charismatics. It highlights how the conceptual and aesthetic properties of the chair encode unexpected relations among politics, plasticity, and theology in a religious tradition such as Roman Catholicism that has long valued noble materials, weight, and gravity.

A short epilogue reflects on the value of theology in ethnographic analyses.

An afterword recapitulates how the logics and operational mechanisms this book sets out to expose—the "how" of the Charismatic gymnasium—can be thought as a *dispositif* for thinking Brazil's contemporary political system under Jair Bolsonaro. In the interval that Guerra Santa opened up in the "body of the nation" during the 1990s, there appeared a shift in political dynamism that finds its apotheotic—and ultimately, I suspect, sacrificial—governmental expression in Bolsonarismo.

My interest in researching Brazil's Catholic Charismatic movement has been primarily guided by the desire to expose the form of an idea, the technical operations that attend it, and the conceptual work behind the spiritual and political constitution of an important religious phenomenon. While this book is certainly not a description of Brazil's political life, it does constitute a serious attempt to come up with the rhythmic mechanisms—the operational logics—that subtend a particular era. In laying bare the principles through which Charismatics operate, I hope to induce a particular mode of critique, the kind that Janet Roitman (2013: 36) calls an "unveiling of latencies." And yet, this nonrecognizability perhaps is precisely the point. In insisting on attaching critical function to positionality, in reaction to the legacy of appro-

priation and capture under colonialism, contemporary critique and political resistance fail to consider how the "Right" operates today on entirely different grounds and under very different parameters and temporal horizons. Much like the "gymnast" in the case of Charismatic Catholicism or the "Cossack dancer" (see the afterword) in Bolsonarismo, our critical function must now adjust itself to mechanisms of movement and fluidity. At stake is a form of power that draws energy and political shape not from moving toward a specific goal but by running, like an athlete in training, after itself. Such power goes nowhere in particular and yet, precisely, makes this lack of motion without telos its own inevitable end. My hope with this book is to inch our way into a breach and thereby lay bare some of those operational mechanisms and vocabularies intrinsic to a power formation of our time.

NOTES

Introduction

1 As the anthropologist Eric W. Kramer (2001: 45) writes, "The reaction to Von Helder's televised attack on the statue was so profuse that the impression of injury and physical violence grew in proportion to its narration in the media." Kramer describes an erroneous notation by David Lehmann that the image was attacked with an ax, implying that even anthropologists are not immune to what technological iteration does to perception. See Birman and Lehmann 1999.

2 Despite many readers of Benjamin insisting that this was his own vision of things, the attentive reader of this important thinker will know that he was always and primarily interested in authoring the spirit of an epoch. Above all, his authorship ought to express the ability to voice that epochal spirit. It is, therefore, wrong to think that Benjamin mourned the loss of the aura associated with art, just as it is to think that he regretted the novel superseding storytelling. It is not that painting or storytelling stood for something gone, which would point to an idea of nostalgia. Nothing about his writings could be further from this idea. Rather his interest in painting and storytelling was in how precisely untimeliness, due to the advent of new technologies, becomes part of its own critical function. Benjamin was fascinated by how "new" media could contribute to expose the anachronism of older media; by way of a kind of retardation of the message, the medium's communicability (the techniques through which perception is shaped and apprehended) becomes all the more apparent. (For more on this important idea see, for example, Weber 2008: 113; see also Hirschkind, Caduff, and de Abreu 2017.) To this capacity of media to partake in their own critique, Benjamin attributed a form of Romanticism, an idea that to my knowledge has been insufficiently explored. Nevertheless, see Weber 2008: 20–30.

3 Judith Butler's (1993, 1997a) important work on "citational practice" informs my own take on the reiterative structure in Charismatic ritualized and daily practice. My qualm is with whether the emphasis on matter and materiality in Butler's incisive writings does justice to the focus on operations Brazil's Charismatics offer and stage. Jacques Derrida (1988), on whom Butler expands, posited that citation is not a secondary example of the performative, but it

is that which reveals the structure of the performative. While this idea has highlighted the need to pay attention to materiality, it has also produced the assumption that structure and infrastructure are intrinsically material and, therefore, nonideological. But what if infrastructure is not the exclusive domain of the material, no less than superstructure, as Louis Althusser (2014) also noted, is the province of ideology alone? My reading is this: the common association of infrastructure to materiality draws on modernity's understanding that power operates through opacity. This conception then dictates that the task of critique is to expose (bring consciousness to) "the material infrastructural conditions" as a gesture of overcoming opacity. Yet, my ethnographic engagement with Charismatic Catholicism in Brazil requires that I rethink such determination around the relation between opacity, materiality, and critical function in modern thought. For it is not opacity that underpins the logics of this religious revivalist movement but rather overt exposure. The Holy Spirit anoints, and the function of this anointment is preternaturally rendered by Catholic Charismatics as "seeing through." The question then is what is the political nature of this exposure? What does the power of "seeing through" bodies, buildings, and media screens that this book describes and analyzes do to our inherited paradigms of critique and denunciation? My take is that an emphasis on transparency, the way Charismatics apply it, happens at the cost of a semiotic displacement that disavows the power to index anything in particular. What the showing shows is but the site of an operation that brings the site into full view, totalizing it. The epistemic model that comes to mind is the oil platform anthropologist Hannah Appel (2012) investigates in relation to oil and modularity in Equatorial Guinea. As Appel shows, oil economies function through a radical openness of the "how" that, paradoxically, colonizes the entire space by way of evacuating all specificity and context. This includes the specificity of the how itself. Performative, self-reflective, and modular, the "how" is transferable to elsewhere(s). Charismatic Catholicism aspires to derive its force precisely from a mode of "anointed universalism" that is untethered to any context, even as such effort all the more entails the mobilization of contextual possibilities in which such decontextualization takes form. To go full circle back to Butler in this thinking, see Amy Hollywood's (2012) superb reading of Butler, Derrida, and the problem of meaning and context.

4 What Marie-José Mondzain (2005: 154) in her work on the Byzantine icon calls "the making of the meadow." To talk of mediation would for Mondzain be tantamount to calling the icon art, but as she writes the icon is not art but economy; it is work and it is a network of relations.

5 This exemption of eschatology, then, is an interesting paradox in Charismatic thought in particular, given Charismatics' reliance on Pauline theology that is often associated with a doctrine of ends and messianic return. Yet, this loss of eschatology becomes an end in itself in establishing the dramatic element of

theater that Charismatics draw from the Bible, particularly from the Book of Acts.

6 In Charismatic terms temporality thematizes the operations through which time itself is perceived. This often involves engaging tensile dynamics between opposites whereby, for instance, an experience of fullness is best experienced through emptiness, that is, the point at which one extreme is about to become the other.

1. The Media Acts of the Apostles

Portions of this chapter first appeared in "Breath, Media, and the Making of Canção Nova Community," in *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, edited by Birgit Meyer, 161–82 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

1 Stories such as these circulate among Canção Nova media publics and in the CCR more generally. They are repeated time and again and gain the status of myth or parable that often ends up being inserted in sermons or proselytizing.

2 All biblical passages are from the New King James Version (1982).

3 Nelsinho, in conversation with the author, Canção Nova, May 12, 2001.

4 Laércio, in conversation with the author, Canção Nova, May 13, 2001.

5 Charismatics repeat this phrase as part of a common archive (familiar forms of reproducible sentences and gestures or sometimes simply gestures). They customarily create sentences, proverbs, and idioms whose purpose is to be cited. This creates a cycle of circulation of citable speech, that is, language poised to be transported elsewhere.

6 Nelsinho (a member of Canção Nova), Canção Nova website, accessed November 9, 2015, www.cancaonova.com/cnova/eventos/coberturas/2004 (no longer available). He repeats the story here: "PHN Diácono Nelsinho Partilha Historia com a Canção Nova," posted by Canção Nova (Oficial), February 4, 2016, accessed May 22, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUrRQTE1_u0.

7 The Acts of the Apostles (in Greek, *Praxeis Apostolon*) is the fifth book of the New Testament. Acts narrates the story of the early Christian church, with special emphasis on the ministries of the twelve apostles and of Paul of Tarsus.

8 I draw on Charles S. Peirce's linguistic-anthropological distinction between referential terms and indexical terms, the latter being words that refer to the aspect, truth-value, or spatiotemporal coordinates such as *that* or *then* (see Silverstein 1976: 25). See Maurer 2002 for a fascinating account of the relation between the abolishment of anteriority in semiotic terms and the operations of financial derivatives in neoliberal logics through the articulation between mathematical technique and what he calls the "theological unconscious."

9 In Austin's conception of the performative, theater would fall into what he considered "parasitical" and nonfelicitous precisely inasmuch as he considered theater an instance of the extra-ordinary, which he opposed to ordinary performative speech-acts (Austin [1962] 1975; see also Weber 2004: 7).