Escaping Gentrification?
The Athenian Metaxourgio Grassroots Carnival as a Contested Event
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ABSTRACT
Contemporary carnivals represent rather banal spectacles, harnessed by institutional control and stripped of their meaning as disruptive processes of revelry, expressivity and defiance. However, when organised at grassroots level, carnivals may retain their subversive character, revealing intentions to cross the limits of urban normality. By drawing on ethnographic data, this article explores the carnival of Metaxourgio in Athens, performed in a multicultural neighbourhood at the heart of the metropolis by a small group of young artists and creatives. Based on the notions of liminality and threshold, it analyses how the carnival creates a temporal universe that challenges mainstream perceptions of public space and Otherness, contests gentrification and seeks to maintain a sense of community in a world of ever-shifting boundaries of precarity.

KEYWORDS
creative culture, gentrification, grassroots movements, liminality, urban carnivals

Carnival festivities are interwoven with modern cities’ history. Many European and American cities promote their annual carnival parades as trademarks, while their social history manifests in the form and performance of carnival ritual. Carnival, a feast dedicated to the joy of life, is the primordial time and place for the unfettered expression of the lower strata against social control and the aesthetics of the ruling class (Bakhtin 1968). Although contemporary urban carnivals have developed into major cultural events, managed by local authorities (e.g., in Venice, Cologne, Nice and Cadiz), carnival practice can still express the contested identities of city dwellers, who seek to surpass the limits of urban routine, creating an ephemeral emancipating urban chronotope. Carnival period is the time and space for an outdoor, public expression of what is normally discussed and practiced in the privacy of indoor spaces.

Aside established mega-carnivals, new carnival festivities may emerge as a result of socio-economic struggles and contested processes...
of identity formation. Carnival, according to Cohen (1993: 4), is always political in the sense that it is related to the struggle for power within a given political order. Moreover, as carnival practice is linked to political demonstrations and the new social movements (Bogad 2010; Hammond 2020; Peeren 2007; St John 2008), contemporary urban carnivals and their prevailing grotesque extend beyond purely entertaining features (Godet 2020: 4). However, apart from the summer Notting Hill Carnival, which has emerged in the literature as an exemplar of an urban cultural movement (see inter alia Carver 2000; Jackson 1988; Tompsett 2005), there are hardly any other apt illustrations of urban carnival performances as contested events that have been identified and academically explored in the extant literature.

Focusing on this relatively understudied area, this article discusses the grassroots Carnival of Metaxourgio in Athens, which deviates from stereotypical, institutionalised big carnival events. As a far more inventive and contested city performance, the Metaxourgio Carnival reflects the need of urban residents for a self-organised imaginative expression and their claim for more public/communal space. To our knowledge, there is no other twenty-first-century carnival performance held nowadays in the cities of Europe that has the same size and characteristics of the Metaxourgio Carnival (self-organisation, independence from state/local government, DIY practices and anti-consumerist principles). Metaxourgio, a metropolitan neighbourhood where artistic creativity and bohemian ambience antagonise gentrification, hosts a blend of ethnic and social groups and minorities, creating a unique locale that can be explored through the concept of liminality as elaborated by symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner (1982, 1991), philosopher Walter Benjamin (1979) and urban theorist Stavros Stavrides (2007, 2010).

Through these lenses, the article explores the role of the cityscape in triggering contested events such as the grassroots carnival performances, organised since 2010 by a group of young people, who mostly engage in the arts and creative professions. This small community employs the carnival as a medium for questioning boundaries between public and private space, establishing a temporary one-day universe of quasi-limitless self-expression, permeated by an anti-consumerist mentality. Based on ethnographic research, our analysis examines how the neighbourhood created liminal spaces or thresholds that permitted the unencumbered organisation and performance of carnival activities. By applying the notion of liminality both in its spatial (limen/threshold) and temporal/performative dimensions, the
study further explores the Metaxourgio Carnival as a locus of contestation for the organisers who, in an attempt to respond to ongoing gentrification and commercialisation processes, turned to a ‘migratory’ performance tactic.

Carnival and the Concept of Liminality

The notion of limen (threshold) and liminality firstly appeared in van Gennep’s monumental ‘Rites of Passage’ (1909), where he analysed the three stages of rituals that mark the passage from one state of life to another, using the terms separation, margin and reaggregation or pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal, with primary reference to spatial transitions. The second phase, the one ‘in between’, where normality is suspended and roles are inversed, was coined as ‘liminal’. Thus, liminal describes a phase ‘in the threshold’, a social limbo.

Turner (1982) explored further the notion of liminality as an interstitial condition of in-betweenness that manifests in major rituals of tribal and agrarian societies; ‘a temporal interface whose properties partially invert those of the already consolidated order which constitutes any specific cultural cosmos’ (41). At liminal stage, individuals experience a sense of communitas that unites them with their counterparts. Communitas is ‘an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community or even communion of equal individuals’ (Turner 1991: 96). It has a spontaneous, immediate and concrete nature and an aspect of potentiality. It ‘breaks through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality’ (Turner 1991: 128). Tribes or individuals who find themselves in the margins of liminality seek in communitas ‘a transformative experience that goes to the root of each person’s being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared’ (Turner 1991: 138).

Turner distinguished the ways tribal/agrarian and modern societies approach liminality. When referring to modern industrial consumer societies, he applies the term ‘liminoid’ to all performances and collective activities that generally aim to create temporal and ephemeral communitas, which are seen as the end of human endeavour rather than a means to get to it. Liminal is collective, concerned with calendrical, biological, social and structural rhythms, integrated into the total social project, whereas modern liminoid phenomena although collective, are genuinely more individual projects. They do not have a common intellectual and
emotional meaning for all society members but are idiosyncratic, quirky and mostly concerned with leisure and play. ‘The liminoid is more often like a commodity . . . than the liminal, which elicits loyalty and it’s bound with one’s membership or desired membership. . . . One works at the liminal, one plays with the liminoid’ (Turner 1982: 55).

Turner considers contemporary urban carnivals as liminoid cultural phenomena, a genre of industrial leisure with optional character that ‘can be attended or avoided, performed or merely watched, at will’ (Turner 1982: 43). He further suggests that they represent ‘an intersecting metalanguage’, as ‘[at the performances] the group or community tries to understand itself in order to change’ (Turner 1982: 101). In doing so, he deprives contemporary urban carnivals of their reclaiming and temporary reversing capacities, which characterised their medieval and early modern counterparts. In contrast, research set in South America and Europe (e.g., Notting Hill, Salvador, Trinidad, Cadiz) highlights the dynamics of contemporary carnivals to reshape identities and question, through their liminal features, the values of everyday routine (see indicatively, Agiers 2000; Browning 1995; De Freitas 1999; DeWaal 2013; Dunn 1992; Ho 2000; Manjavacas Ruiz and Tom 2016; Riggio 1998; Salzbrunn 2014). Although carnival nowadays may not retain its tribal character, it is still a major public ‘rite of passage’; the most glorious feast that transforms, even for few hours, the lives of city dwellers.

Thresholds in Urban Landscape

The concept of limen/threshold can be applied not only to the ritual but also to the spatial context. This has been demonstrated in the very pages of AJEC by Francisco Martínez and Patrick Laviolette (2016). As Stravrides observes ‘thresholds mediate relationships with otherness by marking passages in time and space’ (2010: 81). In his study on Kabyle houses, Bourdieu observes ‘the symbolic value of the threshold’ which can be fully understood when conceived as ‘a magical boundary’ (Bourdieu 1992: 281–282). He defines threshold as a ‘meeting-point and a crossing-point’ in space, where space embodies the structure of the world (Bourdieu 1992: 282). In doing so, he attaches attributes of the mythico–ritual realm, such as the ‘upside-down world’ of Bakhtin’s (1968) carnival, to urban territory.

As early as 1903, Simmel’s work ‘Bridge and Door’ studies connection and separation through these two ‘crossing points’. The bridge
is an artefact that connects the separated banks; two ‘Othernesses’. The door (Bourdieu’s threshold) is also an artefact; a boundary set between the inside and outside world, which can be crossed at free will. ‘The bridge indicates how humankind unifies the separateness of merely natural being and the door how it separates the uniform, continuous unity of natural being’ (Leach 1997: 66). Contrary to the door, the bridge shows mobility, an openness to the Other, which is characteristic of thresholds.

Benjamin’s (1979) writings on European cities also explore the blending and juxtapositions of old and modern, public and private, creating hidden ‘passages’ to a reality not yet existing. Benjamin considers the urban conglomerates as a mirror of the modern condition and sought thresholds inside them, the signs of transition and the experience of modernity and contemporary life. In the Mediterranean city of Naples, Benjamin sees ever-shifting boundaries between public and private, profane and pious spaces, stressing the way ‘each private attitude or act is permeated by streams of communal life’ and how ‘just as the living room reappears in the street . . . so the street migrates into the living room’ (1979: 174), conceptualising the idea of ‘porosity’. Porosity is depicted in architecture and penetrates people’s action in the city, stemming from ‘the passion for improvisation, which demands that space and opportunity can be, at any time, preserved’ (Benjamin 1979: 170). It forms some inexhaustible and implicit law that governs urban life.

In Benjamin’s porosity, Stavrides discovers ‘the core characteristic of an everyday life oriented towards the fleetingness of ordinary circumstances. . . . Social interaction characterised by porosity preserves the qualities of otherness . . . porosity is the creation of passages . . . of ‘pores’ through which every individual . . . breathes the air of inventive interaction’ (Stavrides 2010: 76–77). Porosity in urban space creates thresholds, passages to Other, parallel forms of life that co-exist within the city’s boundaries and transcend them, towards a potentially emancipating future.

Stavrides explores the concept of a ‘city of thresholds’ as an alternative to the modern city of enclaves; a city of urban stages where Otherness is accepted. Thresholds symbolise and concretise ‘the socially meaningful acts of connecting while separating and separating while connecting’ (Stavrides 2007: 175). As thresholds mark passages in time and space, ‘they provide the ground for a possible solidarity between different people allowed to regain control over their lives’ (Stavrides 2010: 141). The city of thresholds, therefore,
‘precarious and ambiguous as it is, could have been the cultural pattern through which modern cities would become performed spaces of human emancipation’ (Stavrides 2010: 56). Festivals are thresholds par excellence as they momentarily unite different groups of people appropriating urban space, such as streets occupied by cars. Festivals as acts of appropriation open networks of passages that are common to everybody (Stavrides 2007: 2–3).

In Metaxourgio, one can witness this porosity of the threshold, made up by a multitude of social groups that co-habit the neighbourhood. As we discuss in the next section, the carnival, organised as a spontaneous grassroots street festival, is intended to celebrate and defend it.

The ‘Urban Village’ of Metaxourgio

Metaxourgio, a neighbourhood in the centre of Athens, near Omonia Square, reflects clearly the conflict between past and present that characterises most metropolitan centres. It emerged in the nineteenth century as an industrial working-class district (Sarigiannis 2000). During interwar period, Athens’s economic boom made it appealing to several bourgeois families that settled in new-built neoclassical houses (Potamianos 2015). However, post-war years marked a sharp turn in its urban landscape; heavy industry was removed from the area and economic activity was confined to small craft and trade businesses.

As the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a suburbanisation wave, the most affluent Metaxourgio residents chose to move to other neighbourhoods in the pursuit of a higher quality of life (Angelidis 1992). By the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s, local population comprised low-income residents, minority ethnic communities and marginalised groups, such as sex workers and drug addicts (Alexandri 2018; Yannakopoulos 2010, 2014).

At the end of the 1990s, the neighbourhood began again to flourish. Its central location, low rents, large stock of industrial empty buildings attracted several theatre scenes, creating an ‘alternative’ artistic neighbourhood (Avdikos 2015). Creativity and artistic aura retain a prominent place in local depictions (see interview excerpts 1–2), attaching an ‘alternative’ ambience to Metaxourgio and creating a sense of an ‘urban village’, mostly felt by a bohemian community of newcomers:
So many people come to the area; artists, young people . . . Metaxourgio has a distinct allure. (Panos) [1]

Metaxourgio is not just any neighbourhood; many creative people have gathered here. (Vassilis) [2]

Notably, since mid-2000s, a gentrification programme was put into motion to invigorate the area through regeneration-led interventions, such as the redevelopment of public squares and historic buildings. Public investment attracted private-sector interests and rent prices went up, leading low-income residents to eviction (Avdikos 2014). New complexes of luxurious apartments were erected, defining their target market as ‘creative people who choose a new way of life in the city’ (Avdikos 2015: 121). Upper- and middle-class individuals were attracted to the area along with a plethora of bars and cafés.

In 2010, the Greek debt crisis disrupted gentrification temporarily whereas the first carnival performances took place. At this point, Metaxourgio still featured the characteristics of a ‘city of thresholds’, hosting old residents, Roma families, immigrants, drug addicts and the newcomers – mostly young people, who settled the area at some stage of the gentrification process, and who belong to two distinct groups. The first is formed by affluent individuals, who were attracted by the bohemian atmosphere of the neighbourhood and came in to occupy new luxurious apartments or renovated buildings. The second represents the so-called alternative newcomers (Alexandri 2015: 5), namely people of a relatively lower socio-economic background who engage in the performing arts, music, cinematography and design. Yet, the boundaries set by each community were continuously crossed. The Chinese retail shops and the Roma open-fruit market next to ‘alternative’ coffee shops could prove that to every visitor. Metaxourgio, situated less than one kilometre away from the busy Omonia Square, formed a spatial discontinuity, a localised exception in the dominant rhythm of a boisterous city centre. This discontinuity constituted a different kind of social order; a liminal condition where the relationships into the city’s web seemed to be partially inversed and replaced by a different normality. For the alternative newcomers, living in this ‘urban village’ created a strong sense of belonging and participation to an exceptional condition, an experience similar to Turner’s notion of communitas (see excerpts 3–4). It is this sense of communitas that sparked the conception and organisation of a distinct grassroots carnival.
Metaxourgio is not a neighbourhood of strangers – we know each other. When we want to do something, we do it together. (Anna) [3]

In Metaxourgio there is always a sense of togetherness, a diffused hug, a swirling vortex that catches you. (Iris) [4]

The Carnival’s Community: Florida’s ‘Creative Class’ or Benjamin’s ‘Flâneurs’?

The ‘alternative’ newcomers (Alexandri 2015: 5), identified with the carnival’s organising community, are a group of individuals aged from twenty-five to forty-five years, who settled in Metaxourgio at an early stage of the area’s gentrification. Although they differ in terms of their economic background, they commonly engage in creative professions or artistic ventures – mainly small creative enterprises and art studios. As commented by Avdikos (2015: 120), this flow of creative newcomers ‘can be regarded as the first gentrifies in the neighbourhood’ who nonetheless, ‘share the communitarian and spontaneous spirit of the local underground’. They form a distinct community that engages in unconventional processes of cultural production, ruled by collectivism, spontaneity and their Do-It-Ourselves (DIO) mentality.

At the beginning of the 2010s, the alternative newcomers lived in rented old, non-renovated and affordable properties. They formed a community living in a metropolitan ‘village’, which was characterised by fervent cultural production, including drama and dance schools, music schools specialising in brass and percussion instruments, alternative theatre stages and small taverns, shaping a unique spatial identity. Interestingly enough, the word ‘creative’ was the most frequently chosen by community members to describe themselves. Carnival itself was depicted as intending ‘to bring together all the creative people in the area’ (Anna).

The notion of creativity as a distinctive identity, establishing a ‘we/they’ or ‘creative/non-creative’ distinction, echoes Florida’s ‘creative class’ (2002). As claimed by Florida, a strong proponent of gentrification, the ‘creative class’ represents a collective of ‘highly individualised and even atomised social stratum’ (2002: xv), of which ‘all members . . . share a common ethos that values creativity, individuality, difference and merit’ (2002: 8–9). Florida’s views were viewed favourably by neoliberal policy but heavily criticised for their rosy depiction of the ‘creative class’ and its contribution to urban economic growth (for an extensive critique, see McRobbie 2016: 45–49).
In our case, the carnival community does not exhibit an individualistic behaviour but rather share a strong sense of belonging: ‘We all feel as one, like a group. . . . With all these people I feel like a family’ (Iris). ‘We’re all very close friends, we decide everything in common’ (Stavros).

They are driven by pro-social, eco-friendly, anti-racist and anti-fascists beliefs. As to their political beliefs, they describe themselves in various ways, such as ‘a community that has no social classes, no colours’ (Petros) and ‘is politically conscious, even if political is not commonly used as a term’ (Stavros). ‘There are obviously the leftist claims for autonomy and self-organisation’ (Kostas), but the community prefers to avoid ‘labels’ (Iris). Instead, many members of this ‘creative blend’ emphasise common lifestyle qualities, such as a precipitance to a hedonist and bacchanalian way of life (see excerpt 5). This description of a group of *bohèmes* in search of experiences that deviate from everyday normality, echoes strongly Benjamin’s notion of the metropolitan *flâneur*:

[We] are a motley group of people. X is a bourgeois with a lot of money. There are others who are hippies, they don’t work and have no money. There are people for whom I’m not sure how they make their living. Very few have a work schedule . . . scheduled work doesn’t fit a bacchanalian way of life. (Liza) [5]

As a community of young people who engage in creative or artistic jobs without a work schedule and describe themselves as leading a carefree lifestyle, they can be viewed as post-modern metropolitan *flâneurs*, who have discovered in Metaxourgio the rupture in the normality of city’s continuity, the liminal character that embraces their unconventional way of living and encourages collective action. Far from Florida’s homogeneous ‘creative class’ that belongs to no social stratum, the multi-coloured and multifarious collective of Metaxourgio’s ‘alternative newcomers’ does not only disrupt hegemonic neoliberal ideas of conformity to individual economic pursuits but strongly defends, as we shall see, Metaxourgio as a neighbourhood of thresholds, and their grassroots urban carnival as a liminal performance par excellence.

**The Metaxourgio Carnival: The Second – and the Only Real – Life of its People**

Carnival is a unitary world of social relations independent of those in everyday life, a realm of joy and laughter to which nobody can resist
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During carnival ‘you forget everything and you just have a good time’ (Christos). The Metaxourgio Carnival involves a preparatory period that allows ‘fermentation among people and collectives; one throws out some crazy idea, we burst in laughter and eventually carry it through. [The carnival] is a source of light in Athens, for one month every year’ (Iris).

Carnival as a form could provide an ideal platform for creating a channel for artistic expression and cultural creativity, while bringing together the multicultural communities of the neighbourhood. Its pagan elements and multi-ethnic influences transmit common codes, relevant to people of different ethnic groups and religious beliefs. Being a universal cultural practice, it combines artistic production and a ritual process that inherently induces people to walk together literally and metaphorically. Music and dance performances further encourage multicultural fusion as samba dancers promenade the neighbourhood’s streets alongside musicians playing Balkan and African themes (Figures 1–2).

Given the ethnic and cultural diversity of the area, the organisers visualised a celebration that would embrace them all: ‘Everything is done for the neighbourhood’ (Christos). Events are advertised informally through a town crier, word of mouth and multi-lingual posters. As attested by Yorgos, a local tavern owner: ‘the organisers are people who love the neighbourhood as it is, so they encourage Roma and

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**Figure 1.** Snapshot of the carnival march in Metaxourgio, Athens, 2014 (photo by R. Zervou)
immigrants to participate’. The effort to establish contact with the different ethnic groups of the neighbourhood was also emphasised by several members of the carnival community:

Posters were made in different languages. There have been some organised groups of participants from Philippines and Senegal. . . . We visited the brothels too. At first, they looked suspiciously upon us but now they look forward to it. . . . Last year, we went to the streets near Omonia Square and it was very nice – people needed it a lot there.’ (Vassilis) [6]

The Chinese were the most reluctant; so, we decided to construct a giant dragon and march to China Town. This is how we won them over. (Stavros) [7]

In his analysis of the Notting Hill Carnival, Cohen (1993) describes carnival performances as a cultural movement that ‘may appear to be a cultural performance, but it is inevitably political from the start’ (154). Although some organisers renounce the existence of political connotations, the organisational structure and the means of celebration resemble practices of the new social movements. Carnival’s life relies solidly upon self-organisation and voluntary work. Meetings are open and held at informal public spaces. The organisers also appear to share views and practices with Athenian and international anti-consumerist and alternative consumption movements (Binkley 2008;
Williams and Paddock 2003). The carnival’s bricolage aesthetics, expressed through crafty costumes and DIO chariots, voluntarism and organisation based on ‘petty cash’ communicate a clear anti-consumerist message: ‘We try to break the capitalist model, where everything comes at a price... We can have a great time without any money... and that is also politics’ (Stavros).

An integral part of the carnival’s preparations involves a daily routine of collective artistic work, creating its temporal materiality literally out of garbage (see excerpt 8). The organising community resists the involvement of local government or other state authorities (e.g., traffic police) with consistency, considering it unnecessary and potentially restraining. Apart from the informal ‘sponsorships’ of local taverns, which customarily offer free rounds of wine and raki to carnivalists, the organising community rejects any financial support, insisting on the grassroots character of the event.

We find things on the street or bring in whatever we have at home. For materials that need to be bought, such as screws, we all cheap in with one or two euros. The budget is minimal for a feast that attracts 5,000 people. (Stavros) [8]

**Escaping Gentrification: Towards a ‘Migratory’ Carnival**

In recent years, Metaxourgio was pressured by gentrification, marked by real estate investments, trendy eateries and bars that appeared in the neighbourhood to accommodate the Athenian hipster nightlife. Although the carnival was intended to resist gentrification and commercialisation, it had paradoxically contributed to the processes it sought to contest. During carnival performances, crowds of people visited the area and were served at the numerous bars, cafés and restaurants that saw their daily profits skyrocket. Furthermore, it contributed to establishing the neighbourhood’s bohemian and hipster features as a brand, described by the media as ‘the most cheerful and original carnival of the city’ and ‘a wild party until the sunset’. The galloping gentrification of the area led to a sharp rise on the rents and many old inhabitants – some members of the organising team among them – were forced to move out of the area. Among those evicted, Petros from the organising committee described the impact of investment capital on the area as ‘a neutronium bomb’.

After a decade of consecutive carnivals, its performance evolved into a popular routine threatening to distort its nature as ‘a local
project for the locals’ and a street party for active participants, not spectators. Several members of the organising community were disappointed by this development: ‘There was a denial towards the new situation – we wanted to do this for us and for the people of the neighbourhood – the outcasts and minorities’ (Iris). Moreover, the new eatery businesses seemed unfriendly towards ‘non-client’ carnival participants, antagonising the organisers’ vision of the carnival as a gift-giving occasion governed by a ‘free drinks and food’ norm.

The organising community began to negotiate with the potential to radicalise the carnival by transferring it to another neighbourhood, one that would resemble Metaxourgio in some prior ‘version’ of collective imagination as an underground and creative district. The idea started crystallising due to fears of police intervention and the efforts of the city council to appropriate the carnival by arbitrarily advertising it as part of its official events programme. General fatigue and saturation further led the team to seriously consider the migration scenario. Making the carnival (secretly) transferable was conceived as a strategy to defend its independence and a tactic for maintaining ownership and control, since switching places were thought of ‘as a means to deter exploitation by outsiders’ (Kostas). Furthermore, the organisers thought that the Metaxourgio Carnival had reached a point of maturity, needing some kind of change that would be tantamount to a passage to adulthood. In that way, the carnival community wanted to include a collective coming-of-age initiation rite into a performative ritual which is mostly characterised by its liminality, introducing a loop-in-the-loop marginal phase in van Gennep’s tripartite schema.

The adjacent neighbourhood of Akadimia Platonos was promoted as the ‘most natural transitional neighbourhood’ (Facebook post 2020, January 19). Located in the southwest of the city centre, Akadimia Platonos, is also one of the most multicultural Athenian neighbourhoods (Alexandri et al. 2017), resembling Metaxourgio’s social blend. Its deserted commercial streets, full of closed-down shops remind the visitor that the area was one of the most crisis-ridden districts of the capital (Balampanidis 2017). Its housing stock, consisting mainly of old, low-rent apartments, made inner-city accommodation affordable for low-middle class populations (Gribmann et al. 2019). However, in Akadimia Platonos tolerance and solidarity co-exist with xenophobia. Grassroots initiatives and solidarity networks for both natives and immigrants (e.g., a ‘market without intermediaries’ and community kitchens) had bloomed next to liberal collectives and citizen movements. At the same time, voting rates of the neo-Nazi ‘Golden Dawn’
party (now convicted as a criminal organisation), had been steadily high.

Up to that point, the acquaintance of the organisers with Akadimia Platonos was based on personal links with individuals and groups. One would expect that the organisers would try to reach out to the different population segments and seek to establish relationships that would ensure their active participation in the carnival. However, this did not really happen. A potential collaboration with a local primary school did not flourish, immigrant and ethnic-minority groups were not approached, and the contact was restricted to the traditional town crier and a pre-carnival paganist/new-age ritual, which was held in the new neighbourhood a few days prior to the big event.

The Migratory Carnival in Practice

The eleventh Metaxourgio Carnival was held on 23 February 2020 in the streets of the two neighbourhoods. The carnival march set off from Avdi Square in Metaxourgio at noon and culminated at Plato’s Academy Park about five hours later, covering roughly a walking distance of 3.5 kilometres. During the carnival’s short stay in Metaxourgio, there was a diffused feeling of hastiness which created a somewhat uncomfortable sense of moving in ‘fast forward’. The organising community was anxious about what would happen next while the rest of the attendees had little time to relax, dance and enjoy, themselves as the brass bands walked in a galloping pace towards the new territory.

Similar to previous carnivals, no formal permission had been attained and the whole ‘mission’ of road closures was co-ordinated collectively by the members of the organising team. This year, the transition presented an extra challenge; to reach Akadimia Platonos, the march needed to cross the busy Achilleos and Lenorman central avenues. Avenues form boundaries in the cityscape, constituting non-places, passages that do not host social relations and bear no history or identity (Augé 1995). People just pass from city avenues; they do not spend time there or engage in any social exchange. Avenues do not belong to neighbourhoods but rather divide them, they hover in between the city’s daily routine.

As the march approached the said spots, those liminal non-places were transformed into a noisy, joyous river of people that gave shape and meaning to this neglected part of the urban landscape. When Tasos, one of the oldest carnival members, first stepped his foot on the
pavement of Achilleos Avenue, aware of the ceremonial importance of the moment he cried out: ‘This is the first time that the Carnival leaves Metaxourgio’. Although unnoticed by the majority of the boisterous crowd, this move connoted the ‘passage’ from one stage to another in the *sui generis* coming-of-age initiation rite of the Metaxourgio Carnival: *separation* from Metaxourgio and its familiar streets, passage through the *margin* that lies between the two neighbourhoods, and *reaggregation* upon the carnival’s arrival at its new location. The step was taken and the march’s crowd broke on through to the other side, passing the threshold towards the carnival’s long-wished maturity.

Passing through Lenorman Avenue was more complicated. The avenue was closed for more than half an hour, causing traffic chaos. Music and dance soon spread out as the crowd went deep into its dark underground passage and came out in bright colours, while bystanders at the edges of the Constantinoupoleos bridge threw confetti to the crowd (Figure 3). The emotion arising from the ephemeral transformation of a non-place, reserved exclusively for cars, into a liminal space for *communitas* was intense. Yanna, a street performer and organiser, deeply moved by the occasion could not hold her tears. As she confessed: ‘It was a proper claim to the city. It felt just like December 2008. You could see the crack in the system and believe that it will eventually fall apart and people will celebrate together on

**Figure 3.** The carnival march crosses Lenorman Avenue in Athens, 2019 (photo by M. Dragouni)
the streets. After 3:00 p.m., the march eventually entered the district of Akadimia Platonos. Even though the residents were caught by surprise at the arrival of a large colourful and noisy crowd of about five thousand people, their response was welcoming. They watched the march from their balconies or front doors and seemed to enjoy the event. The habitués of small local taverns exchanged friendly chatter with the young carnivalists. A few locals joined the march, while some families were standing by with their masqueraded children. Several Roma kids also participated spontaneously. At about 4:00 p.m., the carnival entered its final destination; Plato’s Academy Park. Locals, people of all ages – from toddlers to elders who happened to be at the park – seemed pleased with the joyful crowd. Some elderly women cried with emotion and thanked the carnivalists for bringing happiness to the neighbourhood. Before sunset, an increasing number of youngster arrived at the spot to have a drink or two while enjoying the spectacle. Contrary to Metaxourgio, where at this stage of the feast peripheral bars and taverns allowed the decongestion of the crowd, the new neighbourhood had little to offer beyond the park’s public space. When the time came for the ceremonial burning of Karnavalos, overcrowding at the Akadimia Platonos Park began to reach an unprecedented scale and a growing feeling of uneasiness soon replaced the earlier sense of communitas and joy.

When the fire was set up, an already unpleasant situation became overtly threatening as the defects of a loose organisation came into the surface. As people were pressed around the flames feeling the heat upon their faces, some members of the organising team engaged in futile efforts to regain control of the situation. At about 9:00 p.m., most of the members of the organising group had gone, as the carnival was always supposed to end by sunset. However, many of the late attendees stayed in the park, drinking and swinging under the tunes of various brass bands that continued playing. The remains of this inglorious ending were ‘hoards’ of rubbish across the park, cleared by the municipal cleaning service the following morning. Meanwhile at Metaxourgio, bars and restaurants were kept busy until late that night.

The Day After: Crossing the Threshold of ‘Adulthood’ Without Coming of Age

The organisers of the 2020 Metaxourgio Carnival woke up the next day with feelings of joy and happiness. ‘There are not enough words
to describe what we lived’, ‘the Lenorman crossing was a gorgeous moment’, and ‘we have the best Carnival’ were some of the first messages published on Facebook, reflecting the ecstasy still in the air. Within a few hours however, the joyous, light-hearted feelings were replaced by concerns about potential risks exposed by the lack of protection measures: ‘During the burning of Karnavalos I was terrified. Nobody could control it anymore’ (Facebook post 2020, February 24).

Similar posts highlighted organisational omissions and the possible perils that had been miraculously avoided thanks to some Satyr or other Carnival god. In the same evening, a gathering took place in which participated almost all the active members of the organising community. Everybody agreed that the number of attendees was far beyond the group’s capacity for control. Some suggested that the carnival should be more strictly organised, while others openly considered the idea of involving municipal authorities or even the police – an unthinkable possibility during the past. Other members strongly counter-argued that having fun means to be careless, namely, not worrying about a thing, including own or others’ safety. Many confessed that the carnival had matured in the course of the past ten years, as they had themselves grown up. As the eleventh carnival concluded, so did this peculiar coming-of-age rite of passage for the organising community. Here, careless adolescent-like individuals realised that walking through life – even carnival’s second life – requires far more than just having fun (see excerpt 9). One could discern a sour nostalgia of an innocent, careless carnival past; its ‘adolescence’, Bakhtin’s golden era of Saturn:

The team is marked by a teenage carefreeness. It provides space for everyone to express themselves, defends Otherness, creates the most diverse and unconventional carnival that colours with joy the city’s grey concrete. During yesterday’s meeting, we suddenly reached adulthood, realising the carnival is no longer manageable. (Facebook post 2020, February 25) [9]

**Discussion and Concluding Remarks**

The Metaxourgio Carnival emerged in 2010 in a multicultural neighbourhood which, at the time, was oscillating between its working-class past and gentrified future. Its palimpsest of various communities, with its multifarious co-habitation patterns, formed a web of spaces that disrupted city-life continuity and created thresholds, namely ‘spatialities
in which new hybrid forms of public culture emerge’ (Stavrides 2010: 23). In this neighbourhood, a local group of creatives organised a grass-roots carnival which had all the features of urban carnivals (i.e., imagina-
tion, inclusion, spontaneity) as described by Bakhtin, Cohen and other theorists. The Metaxourgio Carnival, performed in otherwise busy streets and high-traffic roads, represented a temporary re-approp-
riation of public space, defended by the organisers’ determination to resis-t institutional support even for the most challenging tasks, such as the orchestration of road closures during the carnival march. As its festive atmosphere brought together groups of different socio-econo-
mic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, it created a transformative potential for an alternative model of society, reflected in its DIO and anti-commercial messages and in the warm hospitality offered by all those in the neighbourhood, who saw the carnival as a gift rather than a commodity, including local shop-owners who, in the beginning of the 2010s, offered free food and drinks to the participants.

Nonetheless, carnivals are fluid and contested events. Their multi-fac-
etted character, the constant trespassing of limits and their subversive tendency may be – and in the case of Metaxourgio have been – consid-
ered as an attractive feature of a neighbourhood, especially one located at the heart of a metropolitan city. As the carnival emphasises multicultural-
ism (consisting not only of diverse ethnic groups but also different urban subcultures and ways of living), it accentuates the feeling of ‘Otherness’, which is part of the symbolic capital of the place.6 As such, real estate agents can draw on romanticised notions of diversity and difference to transform multiculturalism into an asset. This is why, against the will of the carnivalists’ community, often and openly declared, the success of the carnival and its festive aura did eventually contribute to the gentrification processes it sought to undermine, as the incoming flux of visitors gradu-
ally transformed the carnival into a cultural spectacle while the local businessmen no longer shared the same anti-consumerist values with the organisers. When the latter realised that what they loved and cherished for one decade had been appropriated by outsiders and attracted spec-
tacle consumers rather than feast participants, they decided its migration. The 2020 Metaxourgio Carnival (the last held prior to the pandemic), being itself the liminal phase of a collective rite of passage, featured as a babushka doll, a passage rite of transition while moving from its ‘native land’ to a new neighbourhood, following all van Gennep’s (1909) ritual stages. This rite of transition was felt by the young-minded organisers as a coming-of-age rite that would lead to a long-wished maturity at a carnival and personal level.
Migration to Akadimia Platonos was driven by the neighbourhoods’ familiar qualities of an ‘urban village’ – a powerful feeling of community belonging (*communitas*), a pronounced presence of Roma and immigrant minorities, an emerging artistic and creative aura. Yet, the migration mission was not based on any particular planning or serious effort to approach and exchange views with the various working-class communities and groups that made up the diverse social landscape of the new neighbourhood. As a result, the 2020’s ‘experiment’ did not bear the expected fruits. Apart from expressing their joy in watching the colourful march as it passed in front of their doorsteps, the residents of Akadimia Platonos could not find many ways to actively participate, whereas the sheer number of attendees, who could not disperse among local taverns as in Metaxourgio, created chaos. The overall experience led the carnivalists to realise that, instead of a return to a nostalgic past, a space and time transportation to the cherished *chronotopos* of 2010 Metaxourgio, the 2020 festivity was an ‘initiation rite’ towards a difficult collective ‘adulthood.’ Instead of rejuvenation aimed by the transition rite, symbolically marked by the passage of the carnival march from Metaxourgio to Akadimia Platonos, the organising community acknowledged through this extremely liminal moment that the carnival got older and so did they. The transfer of the Metaxourgio Carnival to a new neighbourhood may also expose a sense of ownership on behalf of the organising community, which contrasts with its inception as a celebration free from any form of constraints. Moving a performance out of its original context raised problems, as the carnival is far bigger and more significant than a street party; it could not simply switch places at will.

By virtue of its liminality, Metaxourgio was able to host a grassroots carnival, as it constituted a neighbourhood of thresholds, where inhabitants of various communities coexisted by creating ‘spaces’, breaking the city’s dominant continuity. However, as gentrification of the neighbourhood and carnival commodification proceeded, the organising community came to realise that it was increasingly difficult to avoid repetition and stereotyping brought about by the transformation of a spontaneous grassroots performance into a spectacle. When considering emerging neoliberal agendas and gentrification phenomena in many metropolitan cities, a question arises: to what extent can spontaneous, grassroots activities at neighbourhood and community levels contest the power of real estate and economic interests, which capitalise on symbolic capital by transforming it into a city-brand?
In *Masquerade Politics*, Cohen (1993) discusses Notting Hill Carnival’s history as a contradictory process of increasing gentrification and institutionalisation while expressing the efforts of the Black community of British Trinidadians and later on, of the entire West Indian community to reclaim its ownership and radical character; a struggle that culminated in the transformation of carnival into a symbol of West Indian culture and identity. Although the Metaxourgio Carnival has a far more recent history, smaller scope, different goals and weaker social ties than the Notting Hill Carnival, it is also linked with the liminality of social space.

It is this very scope of liminality which renders the thresholds so porous so that they can be permeated by different expressions of Otherness on a daily basis. Yet, unavoidably, liminality also permits ‘invasion’ of gentrifying forces – the carnival performance cannot remain intact and on principle, it cannot be shielded (selectively) against external agents, even threatening ones. This is why business interests and the fervent activities of real estate were able to ‘freeride’ on the Metaxourgio Carnival. Being porous, being on a liminal phase, means being overt, open to challenges and changes, and consequently, having no or loose defences. That also explains, in part, why most of the major carnival festivities held in Europe and Latin America in the previous century led to gentrification projects. This holds even for carnivals which – compared to Metaxourgio – were much more radical; imbued with a more consistent political message that was communicated by well-organised blocos, such as the Salvador da Bahia Carnival, which served as a medium for defending Blackness in the 1970s and was nonetheless gentrified. It is thus rather common for grassroots carnivals to emerge as the unmediated expression of the lower strata, oppressed identities and/or ethnicities, only to end up as cultural mega-events that benefit the socio-economic elites.

In this light, transmuting the Metaxourgio Carnival and its liminal condition to another place was, at first, a bold idea – a tactic to avoid the carnival history from repeating itself and an act of defence against gentrification, which is seldom observed in similar performances. Unfortunately, the organisers’ expectations of reclaiming rejuvenation through a switch of neighbourhoods were not realised mainly due to the loose bonds with the communities they wished to serve. However, it remains to be seen whether the Metaxourgio Carnival will find ways to resist to the oncoming alteration. Will it succumb to institutionalisation, similarly to many other urban carnivals that strayed from their grassroots past, or will it regain its momentum as
a means to promoting its own values and messages of togetherness, anti-consumerism and liberating creativity? A long period of hiberna-
tion, due to pandemic restrictions, could bear fruitful results in the
coming years. The carnival may take different forms, held in different
places yet we hope that it will remain an open urban performance of
collective joy and an antidote to individualistic self-images.

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Notes

1. Although the term is employed by the cardinal carnival theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, in literature and language studies, it is mostly used to refer to the coordinates of time and space invoked by a given narrative or the spatio-temporal experience of urban life (Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms).

2. Based on participant observations and in-depth interviews with members of the carnival organising community, conducted in 2014, 2019 and 2020.

3. See Yannakopoulos’s view of these newcomers as using the heterogeneous mix of the neighbourhood’s geography as a spectacle, a scenery they enjoy from the distance of their lofts while simultaneously treating the neighbourhood as a ‘non-place’, refusing to become part of its everyday life (Yannakopoulos 2010: 128; 2014: 373–394).

4. In the introduction of his emblematic ‘Rabelais and his world’, Bakhtin’s suggests that the carnival built ‘a second world and a second life outside officialdom’ (Bakhtin 1968: 5–6).

5. December 2008 describes a period of public unrest and systematic demonstrations in Athens and other major cities of Greece, triggered by the unprovoked assassination of a fifteen-year-old schoolboy by a police officer in Exarchia. For about a month, political activism was ‘performed’ in the city streets in new and imaginative ways.

6. See also the work of David Harvey (2002, 2012) for an analysis of the processes of culture commodification and extraction of symbolic capital.

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