

ACTS IS ACTS

Tautology and Theopolitical Form

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Abstract: My aim in this article is threefold. First, to identify the function of tautology in Catholic Charismatic religious practices. Second, to analyze the formal structure of tautology as an embodied regime of citationality. Third, to expose how Charismatic practice both mirrors and anticipates the unfolding dramaturgy of sovereignty within current populism in Brazil and elsewhere. These aims converge in a reflection on the nature of political theater within and beyond political theology.

Keywords: Bolsonarismo, Brazil, Charismatic Catholicism, political theology, tautological speech, theatrics, theopolitics

The technique is not always transparent, as when the stage itself is set up on stage, or the auditorium is extended onto the stage-area.

— Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*

In this article I analyze the role of tautology in Catholic Charismatic religious performances in Brazil. In its most elementary form, a tautology is a logical proposition whereby something is made true via repetition of the same (*tautos*) statement. In this form of Catholic revivalism, tautology is deployed as and through a particular theatrics. Valued for its practical rather than propositional aspect, tautological speech is highly rhythmic. Formally speaking (literally), tautology operates like a pendulum in motion. In repeatedly oscillating from one clause to the other, with the support of alliteration and metalepsis as rhythmic linguistic devices, participants in ritualized speech become aware of the possible conditions of speech as such (Bloch 1974; Cordas 1990; de Abreu 2021). Moreover, they experience such conditions on a physiological level, thus associating linguistic embodied awareness with spiritual anointment (Bialecki 2017; Csordas 1993; de Witte 2011; Espírito Santo 2013; Meyer 2010; Ng 2020; Reinhardt 2014, 2016).



Drawing on *pneuma*, the Greek term for breath, air, or spirit, Charismatics enact a system in which practical manifestation is more important than theological argumentation. Similar to *mana*, or the Afro-Cuban *Ifá*, the Charismatic notion of *pneuma* is a force whose manifestation moves from a substance to the causes that generate it (Bonfim 2012). The self-referential conduct of *pneuma*—where a thing is simultaneously the manifestation of its cause—logically explains its fitness for crossing otherwise separate realms (Hardin 2016; Holbraad 2007; Keesing 1984; Mauss [1902] 2001). This self-referentiality, which Wittgenstein ([1922] 2016: 54) saw as intrinsic to the “logical space of tautology,” is the linguistic arena within which Catholic revivalism thrives in present-day Brazil. The function of language in Charismatic pneumatology is not primarily to signify spirit but to make apparent how spirit works.¹ Using the biblical story of Pentecost (per Acts 2:4) as a model of stage form, Charismatics apply distinctive ideas of ‘acting’ for particular rhetorical effects. The pendular movement of performed tautology gradually leads practitioners to become aware of the most basic and universal act, what Charismatics sometimes refer to as “the acts of acts”—that is to say, “breath in the spirit.”

One of the sites where such tautological and theatrical form is most apparent is *Canção Nova*, a major global religious media corporation owned and operated by community members of the Charismatic movement in Brazil. At *Canção Nova*, religious events are technologically mediated with the aim of evangelization through mass media. In their practices, Charismatics invest a great deal in conflating medium (technological, spiritual, linguistic) and message through the common sign of repetition. Much like the reproducible qualities of the electronic medium, so messages ought to express their citability (Butler 1993; Nakassis 2012). Such conflating of medium and message is subservient neither to a form of structuralism owing to analogical thinking nor to a desire for immediacy (as the elected alternative to the concept of religious mediation). Rather such conflating is the condition by which Charismatics highlight the operative powers of the voice as such. As Rosalind Morris (2016: 229) reasons, voice is the site where ‘said’ and ‘saying’ converge as the auditory register of a particular performative. To voice is to establish that what is said cannot be separated from the act of saying. In this sense, Charismatic tautology is an instance of what Maurice Bloch (1974) calls a ‘feature of articulation’, a formal operation through syntax with its own coercive force. For Charismatics, as we will see, intertwining technology and tautology fulfills a specific dramaturgical function: it draws attention to its formal logics and turns these into the spectacle it stages.

In what follows I set out to examine how Catholic Charismatic political theater might help us understand some of the logics and themes of Brazil’s political moment. Focusing on tautological speech acts within technologically mediated Charismatic practice and performance, I argue, allows us to reassess aspects of

canonical political theology, such as the relation between sovereignty and territory, with a view to new dynamics and rhythms in the structure of the present. More specifically, I wish to examine how Charismatic theology and practice expose the critical limits of political theology, aligning it with the insights that the editors of this special issue propose under the concept of ‘theopolitics’. My use of theopolitics is not meant as a substitute for established political theology, but as a way of naming political theology’s own critical function: its criticizability.² Theopolitics names the reflective work by which historical conditions of the politico-theological are themselves made apparent. More generally, I seek to show how the formal structure of tautology makes evident the operational logics that tie and regulate the broader relations between evangelicalism, neo-liberal logics, and authoritarian populism in contemporary Brazil.

The use of tautology is rampant in recent populist communications, from Donald Trump’s “It is what it is” to Theresa May’s “Brexit means Brexit,” or Jair Bolsonaro’s “I am here because I believe in you. You are here because you believe in Brazil. [And, therefore, we] won’t negotiate anything.” These examples display the populist practice of reducing language to slogans and propaganda, an impoverishment, I suggest, that potentiates new relations between sovereignty, language, and territory in the contemporary political scene. Such impoverished language not only lends itself to compression and thereby to networked media and social media platforms, but also intensifies the levels of semiotic warfare within which such populist rulers thrive today (Cesarino 2019; Leirner 2020). In what follows, I have three aims: to describe the role of tautology in Charismatic Catholicism through the example of *Canção Nova*; to analyze the formal structure of tautology in ritualized language and practice; and to illustrate how Charismatic tautological speech is an example of a theopolitical formation that illuminates populist dramaturgy in Brazil and beyond.

Acts Is Acts: Linguistic Operations

“The Acts of the Apostles is the Acts of the Apostles,” Padre Jonas Abib preached over a microphone to a crowd celebrating a Sunday mass being recorded and broadcast on *Canção Nova*. “This is all you need for building the Lord’s stage. Repeat with me *now, twice*,” he instructed, “the Acts of the Apostles is the Acts of the Apostles—and again—and again and again.” Expressed from a stage in the form of a command, Padre Jonas directs the live crowd and those following on TV *Canção Nova* to partake in the repetitive recitation of words and verses. The role of such repetition is to direct the audience’s attention to the power of speech in constituting the speaker who recites it. Working on the pliability and embodying of sentences is more important than conveying communicative content. Where phrases could be liable to interpretation, what is most valued

is to involve language in exposing its own exercisable potentialities (Heo 2018; Hirschkind 2006). The labor that repetition brings to sentences is comparable to what a gymnast would bring to her muscles—a regime of practical engagement whose prime goal is not to move toward defined ends but, as Benjamin (1969) drawing on Brecht’s epic theaters notes, to work on the articulations themselves. Such a labored, anatomized speech reveals its elastic, leaping style.

In the exercise of collectively and repeatedly saying “The acts of the apostles [is] the acts of the apostles,” *Canção Nova* on-site participants and those following elsewhere via radio or television are asked to direct their attention to the formal principles of language: symmetry, balance, paratactic rhythm, circularity. The underlying goal of such practice is not to uncover or decipher symbolic meaning through reference to an externality, but to allow the operations of language to, as Charismatics put it, “incarnate”—a term that those within the *Canção Nova* community often alternate with “operate.” Ritual language ought to pierce “like an arrow” the corporeal flesh of the group, a process Catholic Charismatics render as a partaking in Christ. The function of tautological speech, and of ritual language in general, is to both cause and perform an incision in the body of the community. And this power to produce an incision or chiasmus in its *corpus ecclesia* affects the relation between language operations and metaphysical foundations in particular ways, a point to which I will return later.

Working as part of the broader matrix, participants adopt a particular technique known in Orthodox Christianity as the “prayer of the heart,” and this prayer is at once the basis and horizon of Charismatics’ fondness for tautology. Referred to by Catholic Charismatics in Brazil as the *Rosário Bizantino* (Byzantine Rosary), the prayer consists in the repetition of a verse ten times. The shorter 10-pearled stone of the Byzantine prayer replaces the official, romanized 59-bead rosary. Valued for its psychosomatic effects and its realignment of breath and heartbeat to the production of virtue, the Byzantine Rosary foregrounds a desire on the part of prayer practitioners not to attain a divine end, but to maintain or inhabit a certain unknowingness associated with the flourishing of new potentials. This ability to inhabit the unknown calls on a logic of temporality whereby individuals are trained less to anticipate the future and more to adapt to emerging circumstances. Adaptability, flexibility, and indeterminacy are features that link religious pneumatic practice to the larger demands in Brazil’s current neoliberal culture of temporality (de Abreu 2012, 2015).

Supporting such a temporal orientation is the fact that the “prayer of the heart” lacks the narrative conceit of the common Western rosary. Unlike the latter, what is repeated is not a storyline, but short mantra-like sentences—also called “arrows” or *jaculatórias*—the prime function of which is to pace heartbeat and breathing and synch the community (those on-site and those on-screen) to a common rhythm and time. Where referential content is a feature

of the Orthodox “prayer of the heart,” Charismatics explore the formal aspects of the Byzantine Rosary through a simultaneous adaptation of those features to a modality of pneumatic religious exercises popularly branded the “aerobics of Jesus” (de Abreu 2008: 59). Charismatics draw on the tradition of the ancient gymnasium of Corinthians among whose routine the Apostle Paul appropriated his doctrine of the Holy Spirit (the oiled bodies of the gymnasiarchs becoming rearticulated into spiritual anointment) (Dutch 2005; Forbes 1945). The act of prayer among Catholic Charismatics exposes the operations through which religious bodybuilding is possible. The pneumatic of the Byzantine Rosary helps Charismatics exercise the elastic potentials of grace in its ability to flow and connect. As Charismatics often put it, prayer and canto make the community “fit for God.” Altogether, this set of practices constitutes what I elsewhere describe as ‘the Charismatic gymnasium’ (de Abreu 2021).

Canção Nova and the Problem of Foundations

According to local legend, the birth of Canção Nova happened in the early days of February 1978 when its founder, Padre Jonas Abib, whom many consider a prophet, addressed his audience with a question: who would be willing to leave their lives behind and follow him in order to, much like the apostles in the time of Jesus, “launch the nets”? The story, repeated time and again by community members, followers, and supporters, goes that exactly 12 people volunteered “as they were moved by an incredible force” (de Abreu 2010: 161). Such a founding legend is expressive of the kind of mirroring equivalences that Charismatics in Brazil are fond of. The scenic doubling—of the 12 apostles launching nets in the time of Jesus and in the time of electronic (and later digital media) in Brazil—points to the important and foundational role of making things citable and, by doing so, transporting them elsewhere. Such is, in essence, what is at stake within Canção Nova as a global media corporation, where logics of mass media communication and tactics of evangelization intertwine within Brazil’s neoliberal moment.

Arriving in Campinas, São Paulo, in 1969, Catholic Charismatics—also known then as Catholic Pentecostals due to the movement’s ecumenical basis—met in the form of prayer groups to participate in what is still today called Life in the Spirit Seminars. Imported from the US to Brazil by two American Jesuits, the Charismatic movement was mostly composed of upper-middle-class white individuals, many of whom were former members of the conservative Opus Dei and *Crusilhos de Cristandade*. Resisted by the political and religious local establishment, whose allegiances were strongly allied to liberation theology, early Charismatics met on a weekly basis within private condominiums, garages, and university headquarters (much like their American counterparts

did at Duquesne University throughout the 1960s and 1970s). During these Spirit Seminars, Charismatics would immerse themselves in intense prayer, which would often lead to the experience of the “baptism in the Holy Spirit.” With *pneuma* at the center of their practices, Charismatics named then—as they do today—the experience of the baptism “a second Pentecost,” that is, the preternatural downpouring of graces or charismas of the Holy Spirit in the form of a rushing wind. The passage in question goes like this:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

This biblical passage, described in Acts 2:1–4 (NIV), has since worked as a foundational narrative around which the pneumatology of the Charismatic movement—from logics of devotion to rhetoric and conceptions of space, time, the body, the natural, the technological, and the metaphysical—unfolds into and structures daily religious practices. Catholic Charismatics in Brazil use the parable of Pentecost to draw a relational continuum between utterance, event, and trace, which together form an ‘address *in spirit*’ (*morada no Espírito*). This continuum between elements is an illustration of the apparatus or dispositive—the *oikonomia* from which such terms derive—that structures the Charismatic universe. This structure resembles less an edifice with solid foundations and more a kind of open-ended network (a net work) that is in the continuous process of weaving itself through ongoing operations. While Pentecost best captures the kind of relational monumentality that Brazil’s Charismatics adopt, monumentality is often (negatively) analogized to the Tower of Babel. Babel and Pentecost, Charismatics emphasize, are inverted mirrors of each other: in the former, a community speaking different languages was able to communicate; in the latter, a community is unable to communicate despite speaking the same language. The two parables, however, are tautologically related. They evoke the same twice in their linking of utterance to dwelling, to poor foundations, to process, and, lastly, to open-ended universalism.

In his groundbreaking work on Catholic Charismatics in the US, Thomas Csordas (1990, 1993, 1994, 1997) shows how Charismatic religious language is highly performative. Attending to the reflective bodily aspects that are foundational of religious practice, Csordas (1990: 5) examines the relation between body, language, and charisma as part of what he calls “the existential ground of culture.” Csordas’s phenomenological approach shows how such existential grounds provide foundations upon which embodied linguistic regimes are erected during religious ritual. While admitting that these grounds are not

pre-given but enacted—by what he calls “an embodied process of self-objectification” through Merleau-Ponty (ibid.: 15) and “the socially informed body” via Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ (ibid.: 8)—Csordas nonetheless operates within a regime that asserts the possibility of a concordant relation between subject and grounds. The subject, he argues, moves from the pre-objective to an objectified experience; that is, there is a movement between stages. Yet the grounds within which this movement occurs—from the pre-objective to the objectified—are themselves conceived in positional terms. Positionality has often been at the service of a logic of perspective and ends. Csordas interrupts this alliance within the modern episteme by foregrounding the indeterminacy of perspective. Indeed, through coupling the ‘pre-subjective’ and Bourdieu’s habitus, Csordas is able to argue that insomuch as intentionality is always already embodied, it is traversed by indeterminacy. However, the way indeterminacy is gauged is by situating it as a limit to perception—a positive limit, but a limit nonetheless. Thus, while for Merleau-Ponty indeterminacy appears because “there is always more than meets the eye” (ibid.: 8), for Bourdieu the unfolding of one’s actions always supersedes one’s conscious intentions.

For both authors, and thus for Csordas, indeterminacy happens but at the edge of perception. The result is that even as the subject is positioned against a horizon of indeterminations, it is not constituted by it. The beyond it poses opens vistas, but only to swing back and reinstate self-presence. The example of the boulder, which Csordas (1990: 10) takes from Merleau-Ponty as a “pre-abstract” thing in the world that “is not perceived as an obstacle until it is there to be *surmounted*,” attests to how even though indeterminacy is being accounted for in Csordas’s reading of Charismatic religious experiences, indeterminacy does not implicate the grounds on which those very experiences of the indeterminate depend. In short, indeterminacy happens *on* (existential) grounds but not *as* grounds.

In my analysis of Brazil’s Charismatic religious practice, however, linguistic performativity hinges upon the constitutive chiasmus that formats presence in particular ways. What is distinctive about presence is how its conceptual space fully impregnates the ‘how’, such that subjects are not ‘before’ or ‘after’ but a kind of oscillatory rhythm that encircles linear time as such (Weber 1992). It is an odd operation that steps outside modern frames of empathy, which are marked by the ability to move from one position to another, as when we say that we are stepping into someone else’s shoes (Greenblatt 1980; Throop 2012). This curious operation, in my view, carries tremendous political power today among various religious and political groups. For Charismatics specifically, everything proceeds as though the linguistic architecture they adopt emanates from a movement of *crossing through* and is thus *ungrounded* in a Euclidean position or perspectival point. What gets erected on its aerial/pneumatic foundations can never be simply built upon or added to it, but *stretched from*

it. Such grounds owe little to the earthbound logics of modern Western metaphysics. The parables of Pentecost and Babel are staged, as it were, in mid-air and, in consonance with Charismatics at the Canção Nova media station, are to remain in mid-air. They are biblical passages, but in the literal sense of an immense bendable corridor whose prime function is to reveal the principle or force (pneuma) that causes it to be so. As dwellings of sorts, both Pentecost and Babel are architectonic illustrations of transience, of *middleness*, of ongoingness, without beginning or end, whose foundations are affirmatively poor.

My use of the term ‘poor’ is not denotative of a socio-economic status with respect to ownership or propriety. As mentioned, the vast majority of Catholic Charismatics are from the upper-middle-class stratum, individuals who resented liberation theology’s ‘option for the poor’ and went in search of a more all-encompassing entrepreneurial universal Spirit (see also Csordas 1992). Rather, what I am describing as impoverished foundations are the ungrounding conditions for tautological play through which a form of pneumatic universalism is adopted into Charismatic orthopraxis. By proposing an ethics of dwelling in language (language as that which builds up a pneumatic dwelling, an atmosphere)—an ethics whose impoverished grounds precisely require the activation of a principle of continuous and indeterminate self-transformation (*askesis*)—Charismatic pneumatology is able to jog alongside neoliberal demands of adaptable flexibility to emerging unknowns. The poor grounds of Charismatic Catholicism, in sum, are not expressive of a social condition. They precisely withdraw from more static notions of social *condition* in order to highlight their function as a *conditioning*: a training. They hail to a reduction, a flattening—even a decrepitude—that potentiates. In sum, the entire Charismatic edifice is consonant with a methodology of acting, a gymnasium-like structure where lexical units (not semantics), cadence (not context), and modulation (not mediation) are seen as valuable assets.

Cântico: “I Am That I Am”

On 1 July 2001, I attended a religious celebration within the Canção Nova Living Community (Comunidade de Vida). According to Latin and Syriac calendars, 1 July is Aaron’s day. Aaron being Moses’s older brother and a prophet, this day is a time to reflect on the parable and its relation to evangelization. During the celebration that I attended, Aaron’s well-known qualities as a communicator, high priest, and prophet were highlighted as lessons to draw on for evangelist communicators in a time of electronic media. Yet it was not primarily Aaron’s eloquence that took center stage in the various moments and events that transpired; rather, it was the character of Moses and the intimate relation between language, crossing, dwelling, and indeterminacy that ensued.

A biblical passage from Numbers was read: “Now the man Moses was very humble (gentle, kind, devoid of self-righteousness) more than any man who was on the face of the earth.” The humility of Moses was then aligned with a favorite tautology in Catholic Charismatic oratory: “I am that I am” (or “I cause to be who I cause to be”) from the Book of Exodus 3:14. Moses had been sent by God (*Elohiym*) to establish places of dwelling for the Israelites. That God’s answer to Moses when he asks “Quem deverei anunciar ter-me enviado?” (Who may I say sent me?) is tautological attests to the radical absence of anteriority upon which divine linguistic referentiality depends in this situation. The task at hand can work only under the force of a command whose efficacy depends on its auditory—that is to say vocal—deliverance being evacuated of all referential contents. Padre Jonas’s reading of the bare landscape in which God appears to Moses on Mount Sinai shares with the structure of tautology a vastly stark non-referentiality—a zeroing of meaning. And yet, as I further learned, such reduction by virtue of the energetics of repetition was also a variation in potentiation toward future iterations. Thus, the phrase “I am that I am” reappeared, like a refrain in a song, across other events at Canção Nova and in people’s conversations that week. The exemplary importance of this biblical passage did not therefore hinge upon the narrative force or theological provocation of this representation of divinity as tautonymy; it was rather by treating its formal components—its twofold symmetrical structure—as a form of canto that this scriptural tautology acquired its working force.

In describing the function of the performative, John Austin (1962) suggests that its explicit powers lie in how it makes clear what kind of speech act the utterance is. In response to Austin, as well as to John Searle (1969), Derrida (1982) maintains that citation underwrites performatives. Departing from Austin’s well-known formulation of citation as a powerful means through which language acts and thus becomes performative, Derrida is interested in the question as to whether performatives themselves can be cited. Counter Austin, Derrida explains that citation is not a second order of the performative; rather, it renders apparent its underlying structure—the ability to cite as such (Derrida 1988). That is, in rendering apparent its structure, citation is no longer simply an example of a speech act, as Austin suggests, but the mechanism internal to linguistic practice whose prime goal is to render explicit language’s own citability or iterability (see Butler 1997; Hollywood 2002; Morris 2007; Weber 2008). Furthermore, one of the key and contentious points in Derrida’s (1988) analysis of performativity is how what he calls the ‘iterability of the mark’ has the power to enact—indeed requires—the ‘implosion’ of context. This implosion of context, according to critics such as Butler (1997), dangerously points performativity theory to a form of universalism.

In fact, it is precisely this aspiration to the category of universality that prompts the Greek-led thinking of Charismatics at Canção Nova to adopt

tautological speech into its religious practices, which offers a mirror to the embodied principle of universality. Emanating from biblical scripture yet irreducible to a scriptural representation, Charismatic pneumatology suppresses basic distinctions such as those between foreground and background, container and contained, internal and external. Just as citation, according to Derrida, exposes the possibilities of language itself to be citable, so tautology, as put to use by Charismatics at *Canção Nova*, exposes the operational mechanisms through which speech is possible. The doubled reflexive formulation of tautology enacts a performative split that makes explicit the capacity of language to re-cite. Yet this revealing, whose function is to have language act on itself, also becomes problematic due to its radical appropriation of the ability to iterate (i.e., iterability) as a pragmatics of movement. What is problematic about this emphasis on movement is that it hides its universalistic orientations under connotations such as process and non-teleological open-endedness that have entered the protocols of modern critique as positive markers. This is why Charismatics will insist that spirit is essentially not a thing or a person but an opus everywhere. Drawing on *pneuma* to enhance the category of universality itself, it is as though the global and (neoliberal) corporate nature of the Catholic media station has had to find a linguistic counterpart through which to overcome the contextual specificities of being bodily subjects in the world.

Returning to the notion of ‘breath in the spirit’ as the most universal act, this ‘act of A/acts’ in Charismatic practice is given by the at once abstract and concrete mechanism of breathing (in the Spirit). Just as tautology works as a linguistic counterpart to breathing, so breathing is seen as a trope of the body. It is the methodology by which to disclose both the citable structure of religious performative speech and language’s mechanical counterpart in the physiological body. In the process of recitation, in the infinite and dynamic spaces between tautology, technology, and breathing, language both transforms and is being transformed. In its journey of repetition and dislocation, language will be neither solely meaning nor simply sound, neither opacity nor transparency, but variation (Robbins and Rumsey 2008). And yet, gradually down the line, the twice-being of tautology morphs into a kind of intoning mantra-like continuum, which oftentimes, in its impending Doppler effect, has as its ultimate horizon the act of speaking in tongues. A speaking that speaks nothing but its own event. A speaking that ‘is what it is’.

Put to use in this way, tautology stretches into a form of canto, and Charismatics at *Canção Nova* exemplify the proverb “*Quem canta reza duas vezes*” (Those who sing pray twice). This twice-ness is not an addition. Rather, it is an operation that works on the level of an excluded middle, a chiasmatic liminal neither/nor. Stylistically, canto is a repetitive rhythm that is neither spoken nor sung. It is a crossing between the two—the sonic register of recitation tones. The liminal voicing between speech and song draws vaguely on the tonal system

of Byzantine music according to the *stichareon* tradition or the *cantus planus* (plainsong) of Gregorian chant that would also later inspire modernists, influencing Kurt Weil's operatic style and Brecht's 'epic theater'. What these tonal systems share in common, and that Canção Nova taps into, is the choral fantasy to deliver a song that is what it simultaneously is about. A good operatic song tells a story through its operations. It implicates its narrative or story plot in the very conditions that generate it and emanate from it, allowing it to appear.

In that sense, canto singing or recitation can be read as an instance of the caesura or break that Butler (1997), through Derrida, notes as intrinsic to iterability. Performative acts, Butler argues, draw their power from the constitutive chiasmus that the act of citation itself exposes. Indeed, it is in the "very space of the chiasmus" (ibid.: 75) that acts—resistant or conforming—may appear as potentially transformative. Similarly, for Benjamin (1969), reproducibility (i.e., the ability to reproduce) exposed the split intrinsic to communication, the 'take-leave form' that for him ultimately defined a medium. In other words, all these instances of citation, recitation, and (*pace* Butler) ex-citation conform to a format that is at once chiasmic and self-referential. According to the *New Princeton Encyclopedia*, "chiasmus describes 'any structure in which elements are repeated in reverse, so giving the pattern ABBA'" (cited in Wilson 1997: 66).³ That is, chiasmus itself has a tautological basis, except that this basis aims not at enclosing the worlds it considers⁴ but at moving across them. Crossing, cruising, erring, crossroads—these are the ideas that, in the case of Canção Nova, link tautology to the powers of recitation as a particular kind of doing.

It is the realization of the generative powers of the gap, as that which spurs speech into action, which lead Padre Jonas, Canção Nova's prophet and leader, to emphatically dramatize the Judeo-Christian interpretation according to which the delivery of God's message to the Israelites—a message that is not only a citation but also a tautology ("I am that I am")—could only be carried out by someone who, like Moses, had a speech impediment. The stuttering of Moses, his discontinuous utterance, is the gap or fracture of the tongue that could best convey God's message in the form of a 'crossing'. Such precisely is the crossing that Moses is being asked to undertake. Moses, Padre Jonas suggested, was the unarticulated necessity or displacement for a different kind of tongue: the tongue of displacement, indeterminacy, and crossing as such, not of argumentation and closure.

Later that day, a lay Charismatic theologian and community member of Canção Nova, in conversation with Padre Jonas on the television program *Nossa Missão é Evangelizar* (Our Mission Is to Evangelize) underscored that what must be conveyed by Moses is nothing in particular; his message must communicate the self-identity of the divine, except that its circularity is at the service of a different operation. Much like a speech act, Moses's fissured tongue exposes the structures through which speech itself may appear. It is thanks

to “the gaps” in speech brought about by Moses, Padre Jonas suggested, that Aaron, who spoke well, could proceed to teach the Israelites to dwell in language not by speaking but by chanting. This is because, as a register halfway between speaking and singing, the practice of chanting best stages the idea of circuit and transience. After all, it is toward that ideal that Canção Nova too, if worthy of the name, must aspire in its daily work of evangelization through electronic (and nowadays digital) mass media.

That day, during the prayer event, as often happens during services at Canção Nova, spoken speech led to prayer which led to canto which led to glossolalia (the crossings of crossings) as the ultimate tautology—the realm where the distinction between constative and performative speech collapses. Solicited by the repetition of verses, canto honed the power of language to affect the speaker as the speaker synched the word-bearing air of phrasing to the powers of oscillation that breathing itself performed. The scene was dominated by crossings between domains. By articulating speech to the physiological mechanisms, language became gestural, but so did gestures become extensions of the technological, thus connecting “the flesh of speech,” as Charismatics put it, to the flesh of the image. Speech became *planus*, a compressed, charged site where absolute opposites got into contact.

Finally, with prayer in tongues, the exercising of the powers of articulation itself appeared in its bare form—that is, fit to say *this* as well as *that* indiscriminately and non-referentially. In the shallowed affirmation of “I am that I am,” many times repeated, speech oscillated between nihilist sameness and overarching multiplicity, between nothingness and everything. What mattered was not one thing or the other, but the pliable rotation that allowed one to swing and sway, to one and the other extreme at once, and finally encircle these in the *mise en abyme* of glossolalia: a speaking so total that it speaks only itself, emptied in its fullness, absent in its presence, nowhere in its ubiquity. Universalistic and distinctively evangelical at that.

Conclusion: Theopolitics and Tautological Form

In this concluding section I address the relation between tautological form in Charismatic Catholicism and theopolitics in contemporary Brazil. Given that one key agenda of this special issue is to reassess the legacy of political theology in and of the Americas, I use the concept of theopolitics to address the following predicament: how might we move beyond the idea of the ‘extreme exception’ behind sovereign decision, which has long been the grounds on which political theology stands, without disarticulating politics and religion, or even politics and theology? This predicament is all the more relevant in view of the peripheral position ascribed to the Americas with relation to a European

center, which, paradoxically, required the sovereign to occupy its transcendental role as ruler of the colonies all the more decisively.

In view of this historical violence, it would seem that liberation from colonial oppression would be capacitated by abolishing the extreme and by emptying the space of transcendence—in short, by disavowing political theology. In a strong sense, this is what Catholic Charismatics are doing through their pneumacentrism, a spiritually endowed pragmatics whose effect is to blur, among other things, the very distinction between center and periphery toward a form of universalism. In effect, however, what is involved in this spiritualized universalism is a pragmatic opportunism that enables Christian Charismatics to act at *cross* purposes—that is, to adopt the kind of oblique *crossing* that I describe in this article through forms such as tautological rhetoric.

What is involved in the idea of an oblique crossing is where I think the value of a theopolitics applies. Both Bakhtin (1982) and Vološinov ([1929] 1986) suggest that citing something can change the point of view of the thing cited (see Nakassis 2013). In this article I have tried to show how citation in fact alters the very ‘grounds’ that have long sustained the logic of the ‘point of view’ supporting the modern episteme. Citation and re-citation generate the rhythmic-like singing or canto behind the community’s name as *Canção Nova*—as a ‘new song’. Expanding on techniques of televangelism, Catholic Charismatic rhetoric is animated by the powers of conductivity proper to electricity: its language is charged. Language here is not only a signifier but the conducting grounds for the signifier itself. A recursive relation exists between medium and message, form and content, such that Charismatic speech partakes in the very tautological structure it thematizes.

Such a self-referential power arrangement is symptomatic of regimes whose model of sovereignty no longer relies on decision as the index of a transcendental outside. Importantly, however, to say that there is no transcendental outside does not mean transcendence is gone. On the contrary, it means to ascribe the outside with the powers of its own practical manifestation—its force and ability to move across domains. Such force in the case of Catholic Charismatics is *pneuma*. Its mode of operation is not based on decision, and thus on exception, but on the ability to elastically incorporate, through shock and tension, as much heterogeneity as possible. A necessary counterpart to this expanding ambition is a proportional reduction in language, precisely so as to empty the signifier of all transcendental content and make it available across fields.

This same strategy is adopted today by the right-wing populism of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and also globally across regimes. And it is not surprising that tautology has returned as a strong feature in sovereign’s speech, as part and parcel of the semiotic warfare that facilitates the circulation of slogans and weaponized language. What is so confusing about this political moment is how violent aims have become lodged in logics that the left once deemed liberational. Rather than

posited as a point outside the curve of exception, the extreme—once manipulated to serve sovereign (colonial) violence—is now undergoing what Benjamin ([1963] 1998) describes as a ‘bending’ in logics. Writing on the baroque stage form of the seventeenth century, he notes how the “bending of the extreme” (ibid.: 49) is proper to regimes undergoing a ‘crisis in sovereignty’. It reflects a mindset that has lost all perspective and thus no longer operates according to the logic of decision as the condition of sovereignty. Such lack in teleological vision, he proceeds, thrives in a pendular motion thanks to which characters “are always able to turn the order of fate around like a ball in their hands, and contemplate now from one side, now from the other” (ibid.: 84). Insofar as the sovereign cannot decide, he will not go anywhere in particular (de Abreu 2019). Rather, his moves to and fro will dig him deeper into the rhythm of contradiction, for which only a reductive tautological “it is what is” will be capacious enough to include at once all and nothing.

In the case of Brazil’s Bolsonarismo, this sway of motion that conjures chaos and vortex while strategically aiming toward no solution is reminiscent of what Paul Virilio (1998) names ‘the suicidal state’ (see also Safatle 2020). Whereas the strength of the political-theological was to empower the extreme in light of a transcendental representation, the challenge now is in scrutinizing what other configurations the extreme can take in the encircling logics of contemporary populism.

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Notes

1. This is not to say that meaning is not important in ritual. My aim here is solely to highlight the interchange between ritual, reiteration, and theatrical performance as central to the nature of Charismatic practice. For a compelling call that we disengage ritual from theatrical practice and both of these from the problem of meaning, see Hollywood (2002).
2. In writing about the romantic tradition of critique, Samuel Weber (2008: chap. 3) asserts the value of each formation lies in its ability to accommodate within itself the possibility of its own critique: its criticizability. As elsewhere in Weber via Benjamin, the nominalizing '-ability' points us to what in the possible is structural. I think theopolitics is a productive venue through which to take this project even further in the contexts of the Americas.
3. A good example to reflect about the relation between song, name, and tautology is ABBA, the Swedish pop band formed in the 1970s. While the group's name is an acronym of the first letter of the individuals' first names, one cannot avoid seeing how the name of the band affected and appeared in tandem with the concept of self-mirroring as patented in the staged visual tautology of the two couples on the cover of their records and in public appearances.
4. Roland Barthes (1972) refers to tautology as a *cul-de-sac*.

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