

Gender Fluidity and Yoruba Religion in the Construction of an Afro-Brazilian Identity: Karim Aïnouz's *Madame Satã*

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Despite the widespread discrimination facing the Afro-Brazilian community in the early twentieth century, João Francisco dos Santos, rose to prominence as one of Rio's most famous malandros. Simultaneously feared and persecuted by Brazilian authorities for his violent outbursts, on the one hand, and his sensual incarnation of the Afro-Brazilian mulatta on the other, he was portrayed in Karim Aïnouz's biopic *Madame Satã* as an individual whose gender identity intersects his race and religion. Yoruba religious practices demonstrate a gender fluidity in which roles were neither rigidly masculinized nor feminized. At the time, patriarchal Brazilian society punished any deviation from the social prescriptions of normative gender behavior. This essay examines the role that João's religious beliefs played in the construction of his identity. We contend that the concept of gender fluidity rooted in Afro-diasporic Yoruba religion provides a normative framework through which João contests the rigid ideations of gender and performance imposed on the black community by a patriarchal white society.

Keywords: Yoruba religion, *Madame Satã*, Karim Aïnouz, Afro-Brazilian culture, *malandro*

Introduction

João Francisco dos Santos (1900-1975), better known by his stage name "Madame Satã," earned a reputation as one of Brazil's most controversial figures of the early twentieth century. As the son of freed slaves, he is often referred to as a gangster, murderer, thief, *malandro*,¹ *viado*,² and drag

¹ "*Malandro*" in Brazilian culture refers to a person whose lifestyle involves petty crime and idleness and is a frequent theme in samba lyrics. This "bad boy" is celebrated as a sort of anti-hero in Brazilian literature, music, and film.

² In Brazilian Portuguese, "*viado*" is a vulgar term to refer to a homosexual, roughly equivalent to "faggot" in English.

queen. It becomes quite difficult to define who he was, as he managed to create different, contrasting personalities, even challenging the gender binary by displaying a fierce masculine side while exhibiting a black, exotic femininity in his art. Despite the clashing and seemingly incompatible traits, a careful analysis of João demonstrates that his race and religion played a crucial role in his personality, the way he conducted himself, and what led him to create his stage character, Madame Satã. Identity theory and critical race theory underscore the intimate and intersectional nature of gender, race, and religion in a person's identity. Race and religion, or the absence of religion, configure our enactment of self and establish how we articulate that identity. Race, religion and gender often intersect in subtle ways that could advance visibility or hinder it.

Karim Aïnouz's 2002 film *Madame Satã* offers a unique perspective on a portion of João's life, leading up to the creation of Madame Satã. Aïnouz, without a doubt, carefully read João's autobiography and used it as a major source of inspiration for the film. Working carefully with various cinematographers, musicians, costume designers, and screenwriters, Aïnouz created a film that presents the multiple sides of the enigmatic dos Santos, highlighting how he was influenced by the racial discrimination of the Afro-Brazilian community and revealing elements of the protagonist's religious heritage that shape his conception of gender.

Lorraine Leu's article "Performing Race and Gender in Brazil: Karim Aïnouz's *Madame Satã* (2002)" considers how the ideology of race and sexed bodies that are central to the Brazilian national imaginary are negotiated by an individual sidelined by the national project (Leu 2010, 91). Leu's exposition of *mulattanness* as the conduit for inclusion within this national project converges with the multifaceted and complex nature of this identity. The mulatta as João's means for artistic self-expression enabled him to enact his vision of gender and gender roles within the heterotopic context of the town of Lapa,³ utilizing his ancestral African religious beliefs in his representation of the mulatta in his performances. In a similar vein, Gustavo Subero's "Fear of the Trannies" (2008) studies the transvestite as a figure that contests both heteronormativity and machismo and aims to show the lack of on-screen transvestism in *Madame Satã*. For him, João's transvestism is not preoccupied with creating the illusion of femininity, although it is implied as his ultimate intention. Subero argues that the film is reluctant to portray João as a woman trapped in a man's body and instead presents the protagonist as a hypermasculine subject whose masculinity is not questioned.

While these analyses offer alternate ways of reading João's depiction in the film, we contend that João's interpretation of his identity could be reviewed through the lenses of his conception of gender and identity rooted in his African religion. In the first few scenes of the film, we catch glimpses of João's desire to imitate femininity; however, when João first mounts the stage in Lapa, what we see him perform is not a recycled oriental tale exoticized for a male audience, but a performance of the mulatta that links his character, Jamacy, to his African religious heritage. This essay examines the narrative and visual elements presented in *Madame Satã* to argue that racial tensions and his Yoruba

³ Most of the movie is set in Lapa, an urban shanty town in Rio's red-light district, known for its inhabitants, who were largely marginalized in Brazilian society. Lapa is also where João spent most of his adult life and gained prominence as one of Rio's most legendary *malandros*.

religious heritage shaped João into a mythical figure that challenged established gender norms and showed that masculinity and femininity can go hand in hand.

João's identity, sexuality and artistic performances all suggest a gender fluidity rooted in his Afro-Brazilian socioculture, a phenomenon contrary to the prevalent ideologies of gender and sex in Brazil of the 1930s. The protagonist's acknowledgement of both Ogun and Iansan⁴ as his spiritual progenitors invokes deep questions about his conceptualization of gender and biological sex within his Afrodiasporic Yoruba religious beliefs. Our analysis of the conceptualization of gender and identity is informed by ethnic Yoruba ideations on gender. João's portrayal as masculine and openly homosexual and his artistic performance as an Afro-Brazilian woman are contradictory to the normative Western ideology of gender. Western patriarchal systems dictate that biological sex be defined by compulsive heterosexual norms, whose political forces shape the sex of the individual in keeping that body bound and responsive to the determined societal construct of gender (Butler 1999).

As the movie portrays, João's enactment of his gender as a violent and aggressive man, and his performances on stage as a sensual Afro-Brazilian mulatta, bear witness to a marked dissonance between sex and gender and suggest a gender fluidity whose parallel is reflected in certain orisha ceremonies within Yoruba traditional religion. In fact, Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987) studies what structures in the Nnobi Igbo society allow women access to political and social power and concludes that women could play roles that were usually monopolized by men, showing that in precolonial times, these roles were not rigidly masculinized or feminized. However, João's identification with Yoruba divinities Ogun and Iansan requires a study of how his Yoruba religious beliefs and spirituality influenced the perception of his identity as well as his art. Our intention here is not to argue whether João is of Yoruba descent or not. What is pertinent to this study is that João professes a connection with two Yoruba orishas whose attributes determine to a considerable extent his identity and resistance as an Afro-Brazilian male.

Various scholars of the African diaspora have postulated that Yoruba culture was dominant among the enslaved African populations in the Americas, a forced migratory phenomenon which Lovejoy (2005) terms the "Yoruba factor." This refers to the numerical strength of Yoruba-speaking peoples among slave populations in the Americas. The commonalities of their cultures, their interrelated traditions of common origin in Ile-Ife⁵ and their worldview gave cohesive power to the

⁴ Ogun and Iansan are two of the more known deities of the Yoruba religious pantheon. Ogun is the orisha of iron and of war and was a symbol of resistance in the Afrodiasporic Yoruba community throughout the years of enslavement. Iansan or Oya-Iyansa or Iyansã, as she is known, is the mother of nine and commands forces of nature such as winds, lightning, and storms. For further good sources on orishas, see Harold Courlander, *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes* (1973); Thomas Makanjuola Ilesanmi, "The Traditional Theologians and the Practice of Orisa Religion in Yorùbáland" (1991); John Mason, "Yorùbá Beadwork in the Americas: Òrìṣà and Bead Color" (1998); Olatunji Ojo, "'Heepa' (Hail) Òrìṣà: The Òrìṣà Factor in the Birth of Yoruba Identity" (2008).

⁵ The Yoruba regard Ile-Ife, a town in the modern-day state of Osun in Nigeria, as the cradle of Yoruba culture and religion. For further reading, see Kola Abimbola's *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account* (2005); Lucas Olumide, *The Religion of the Yorubas* (1996); Jacob K. Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ife in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (2011); I. A. Akinjogbin, *The Cradle of a Race: Ife from the Beginning to 1980* (1992).

enslaved and was influential in the development of an assimilated slave culture and identity in slave societies in Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and the United States (Childs and Falola 2004).

Oyeronke Oyewumi's book *The Invention of Women* (1997) maps out precolonial conceptualizations of gender in Yoruba societies, projecting the rigid gender/biological binary as a Western ideology stamped on Yoruba gender roles with the advent of evangelization and colonization. She states that not all the orishas were thought of in gendered terms. They were simply invisible powers, and their gender was a secondary matter. Nonetheless, based on their following, there was a strong inclination to project gender onto them, a tendency that determined the moral and social qualities associated with each sex. Similarly, J. D. Y. Peel argues that the impulse to endow deities with gender follows from wanting to think of them as persons (Peel and American Council 2003). For him, it seems likely this kind of thinking influences the gender identification of powerful orishas: river deities like Oshun and Yemoja,⁶ being generally regarded as female, for their coolness and fecundity, and fierce or destructive deities like Ogun (iron and war), Sopona or Babaluaye⁷ (smallpox), Esu or Babaode (tricks and confusion), and Sango (lightning) as male (Peel 2002, 140). Thus, when João invokes Ogun and Iansan as his spiritual progenitors, it is probable that he makes appellation to the attributes of each, rather than conjuring images of a divine couple. João thus enacts an identity which draws from both feminine and masculine attributes, a phenomenon contradictory to patriarchal conceptions of gender in the Brazil of the 1930s.

This association with Ogun and Iansan informs to a considerable extent the construction of his identity as a black marginalized male, as well as his resistance to hegemonic cabaret art in a society in which the mulatta as a national figure was used to obscure the oppression of blacks in Brazil.⁸ Furthermore, as Vek Lewis explains, Ogun is “a masculine, fiery entity who is also syncretized to Saint Sebastian, patron of homosexuals, and especially associated with the poor and marginalized” (2014, 101). Given that João possesses homosexual tendencies, is a fierce fighter, and was extremely marginalized during his life, Ogun is undoubtedly a perfect orisha with which João might associate himself.

João's Religion as “No Religion.” Power Relations: Afro-Brazilian Religions and White Authorities

⁶ Oshun is the Yoruba deity associated with beauty, fertility, sexuality, and fresh waters. She is the patron deity of the Osun river in Nigeria. Yemoja is an orisha, a mother spirit, patron spirit of women, especially pregnant women, and the patron deity of fresh waters.

⁷ Babaluaye is the orisha associated with disease and healing. He is both feared and revered as he holds power to heal or to inflict disease.

⁸ Good sources for other views on the duality of Madame Satã's character with regard to race and gender are: Ari Lima, “Da vida rasgada: imagens e representações sobre o negro no filme *Madame Satã*” (2015); Cristina F. Rosa, “Between the Devil and the Deep (Blue) Queen: Historicizing Brazilian Identity through the Queer Black Dancing Body of Madame Satã” (2008); Danny Gonzalez Cueto, “Madame Sata, recreación de una leyenda urbana del Brasil del 30” (2007); Walter Mariano, “Duas faces para o filme *Madame Satã*: uma análise comparativa dos projetos gráficos de seus cartazes” (2010); Antônio Márcio da Silva, “The Femme Fatale's ‘Troubled’ Gender in *Madame Satã*” (2014).

Karim Aïnouz's *Madame Satã* does not narrate the life of João in its entirety but focuses on specific events in the 1930s that show the highly racialized tensions between blacks and white Brazilian authorities in the urban shanty district of Lapa. In lieu of a traditional biography or documentary, Aïnouz opts for a film that is more like a portrait, as it depicts a very specific time in João's life and the events that led him to become one of Brazil's most famous drag performers. This phase of his life reflects the historical context quite well, since João not only has to struggle with his rage and intense emotions; he has to fight against a society that completely shunned the Afro-Brazilian community at the time.

The movie opens with the camera fixated on the face of a bloodied African man, beaten up and handcuffed. This opening shot shatters João's mythical status and depicts him as an ordinary human being. Instead of presenting him in one of the elaborate sequin costumes that had made him famous, the scene shows a man physically beaten, being read a list of crimes he supposedly committed prior to his incarceration for murder in 1932. During the shot, he never directly looks at the camera in front of him. Aïnouz explains that the shot was composed to look like a mug shot;⁹ this image, coupled with the numerous charges, strips his character bare before any other details about his life are revealed. The voice off camera, reads out the list of charges against him. The most salient criminal accusations are that he is a *malandro* and a troublemaker, a man who cavorts with prostitutes, has shaved his eyebrows, and altered his voice to take on a more feminine tone. Like others, he is described as a man who practices no religion. James N. Green points to this opening as an episode derived from one of João's many encounters with the law (1999, 90). In order to deconstruct the authorities' perception of João as a nonreligious person, we must first examine the underlying discourse surrounding African religions in the Rio de Janeiro community. Secondly, it is imperative to highlight the presence of black antiracist movements seeking to dismantle the racial hierarchy that excluded black communities from national political and social circles.

The immediate decades following postabolition roughly coincided with the Old Republic, *República Velha*, from 1889 to 1930. During those years the nation strove to carve out its own unique identity. The motto of the new constitutional democracy was *Ordem e Progresso*; however, emancipation and the ardent desire to transform Brazil into a progressive, modern country did not imply citizenship for the African populations that were struggling to survive within the limited constraints of emancipation. According to Skidmore: "the post-1870 Brazilian elite soon fell under the influence of European and North American doctrines of scientific racism, which pointed to biologic and historical 'evidence' to justify their claims of white superiority" (2010, 82). Hence, Afro-Brazilians who had become free from slavery were not welcomed into the workplace, as employers preferred to hire white European immigrants. Furthermore, as Bucciferro notes, inequality was upheld in the workplace, where "blacks were overrepresented in the lowest paying jobs; further wage discrimination suggests that blacks earned as little as 40 % of whites" (2017, 172). Even prior to the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888, the government encouraged immigration from Southern and Western Europe in order to "whiten" the population and end a shortage of workers to harvest coffee. In the last quarter of the

⁹ All citations of Aïnouz come from the Director's Notes that accompany the DVD version of *Madame Satã*, unless otherwise stated.

nineteenth century, approximately two million European immigrants, many of Italian origin, arrived in Brazil at a rate of 71,000 per year (Levy 1974). “As the Brazilian elite began accepting scientific racism, social reality took an ominous turn.... Rio now loomed as a ‘black city’ with a raucous culture that did not fit the ideas of the Europeanizing elite” (Skidmore 2010, 83). Further immigration of whites from Europe was seen by the elites as a solution to the “problem.”

Kim Butler identifies the ways in which the *embranquecimento*¹⁰ policies of postabolition governments instituted a racially discriminatory policy that guaranteed social ascension based on race. These policies first segregated blacks and further excluded them from partaking in the identity of this new nation (Butler and American Council 1998). Nina Rodrigues’ ideas succinctly depict the intolerant perception that white Brazilian authorities expressed toward Africans and their culture as the pull-back factor in the Order and Progress agenda in the consolidation of a new national identity (cited in Serafim 2010). In other words, any linkage of Brazil to African culture was considered detrimental to the country’s identity. Eugenics theories about black people propagated notions of the congenital inferiority of people of African descent. Within this same discourse, African religions were demonized, and authorities persecuted their practitioners.¹¹

Black communities and movements fought back to dismantle this exclusionary discourse. In fact, the years between 1900 and 1938 record an elevated level of diverse Black movements in which Africans in Brazil tackled the racist discourses that excluded them from partaking in the national cake (Nascimento 2007). Black organizations like the Brazilian Black Front contested the racism inherent in Brazilian social systems that barred the participation of blacks in significant areas of national life and fought to overturn racist and segregationist policies. These and countless other manifestations of activism in the press culminated in the 1951 Afonso Arinos law and legally instituted the freedom of movement for black people within this highly divided society.

Laws like the Afonso Arinos law marked a turning point within this segregated community but did nothing to guarantee the religious freedoms of Afrodescendants, who became targets for religious persecution. African religions in Brazil have a long history dating back to the earliest years of enslavement. Until the globalization of Afrodiasporic religions, African religions and religious traditions in Brazil, under the watchful eyes of the Catholic Church, had been denigrated and associated with demon worship. In this regard, *Madame Satã* offers a window, however brief, into the limited capacity for tolerance by Brazilian authorities for African religions and the silencing mechanisms employed to discipline Afro-Brazilians whose existence and cultural identities supposedly violated the essence of Brazilian citizenship.

¹⁰ A sociopolitical policy that encouraged European immigration to Brazil in order to whiten the population and to suppress the African heritage in Brazilian national identity. For further readings, see Elisa L. Nascimento, *The Sorcery of Color: Identity, Race, and Gender in Brazil* (2007); Kim Butler and American Council of Learned Societies, *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition, São Paulo and Salvador* (1998); Francine W. Twine, *Racism in a Racial Democracy: The Maintenance of White Supremacy in Brazil* (1998).

¹¹ Nina Rodrigues’ perspectives on African religions are further elaborated in Serafim, “O Discurso De Raimundo Nina Rodrigues Acerca Das Religiões Africanas Na Bahia do Século XIX” (2010).

Foucault describes the exercise of power as the manifold relations of social institutions that consolidate, accumulate, and circulate a discourse on which the State establishes its moral, judicial and punitive rights for the establishment of law and order (Foucault, Faubion and Hurley 2000, 111–118). In *Madame Satã* the exercise of power points to the authorities' determination to erase the elements of African religiosity that the protagonist evinces. Voicing this erasure constitutes the articulation of a discourse about a minority that devalues their sociocultural systems and ignores significant aspects of their culture to promote a white-dominated agenda of nation and citizenship. Coercive silencing of Afrodiasporic spirituality by the white legal system reflects deep fears of the African past and its potential to "denigrate" the national identity that was being forged. As a direct consequence of these fears, João's African religious heritage is forcefully denied him, and his records are subjected to whitewashing, a mechanism that strips him of his ability to defend the labelling of his persona on any cultural, religious, or social basis. In a word, he is "devoided" of his cultural support system and rendered incapable of defending the accusation of a being a person who practices no religion.

As the first scene of the film makes clear, there is no space for contesting accusations such as these. Thus, the production of knowledge on Afro-Brazilians, their sociocultural practices and religions, is created and disseminated by Brazilian authorities in spaces in which Afro-Brazilians and their own thoughts about their religion and culture are missing. In fact, regarding João's subsequent performances, Leu (2010) considers the implications of this marginalization of black males in the nationalist project in a society strongly influenced by the ideology of racial democracy and argues that João, through his art, demands visibility as a way of countering hegemonic representations of Afrodescendants. His supposed delinquency and incarceration, as well as the production of discourse surrounding Afro-Brazilians, engages the complicated nexus of race, power, and the erasure of black religions within a national discourse that promotes whiteness. To a significant extent, *Madame Satã* shows a brief glimpse of the lengths authorities went to and mechanism by which black cultures and religious beliefs are erased in the process of whitewashing in order to further engrain the notion of racial democracy used to promote the idea of a multicultural Brazil. Social invisibility and segregation, racial intolerance and coercive silencing, delineate the government's capacity for law and order. This depicts a racist, monopolized discourse about blacks, showing legal and white-dominated places as spaces intolerant of racialized contestations against a discourse that legalizes white domination of black bodies.

Religion was Daily Life, not Just a Form of Worship. Religion as a Marker of Identity

The vital role of Yoruba spiritual systems in everyday lives of enslaved blacks in the Americas is documented by various scholars as a mechanism used to cope with the harsh conditions of enslavement (Bastide 1978; Falola and Childs 2005). The Yoruba belief that they descended from an orisha establishes a personal and filial relationship between the orisha and its devotee. Yoruba religious beliefs, which pointed to commonalities in origin, beliefs, and style of worship were instrumental in

the consolidation of sodalities and cabildos. Spirituality among the Yoruba was not compartmentalized but transcended daily life, and observance of orisha veneration was central to one's relationship with the orisha. Such veneration was also highly influential in helping emancipated Africans navigate racial tensions within Brazilian society. It gave them strength, hope, and spiritual respite from the ongoing discourse of racial democracy that marginalized them.

In the case of João, there are no scenes in which he is seen worshipping any religious deity; however, some aspects of religion still make their way into his daily life. For instance, he is often seen wearing a necklace of colored beads, even when he is not performing; these beaded necklaces are commonly associated with orishas, as Heather Shirley explains:

At the most basic level, these colorful beads are symbolic representations of the orixás; however, when properly consecrated with a bath of sacred herbs or blood from an offering, they share in the axé, the spiritual force that resides in all living things and impregnates the entire universe of Candomblé. They become portable containers for this powerful essence and provide the owner with a continual link to the spiritual force of the orixás as well as the community. With the appropriate offering, the beads do more than represent the divine, they become the divine. Empowerment gives beads the ability to guide and protect as well as harm their owners. Given the tremendous energy of consecrated beads, their ownership brings great responsibilities. When they become what Robert Plante Armstrong called objects of “affecting presence,” consecrated beads demand a level of interaction and devotion that ordinary objects do not. (Shirley 2012, 38)

By consistently wearing the beads, João can channel the essence of Ogun and Iansan, as both orishas are fierce and aggressive. This connection with the orishas of whom he claims to be the offspring gives him the physical strength to fight when he needs to and the emotional strength to cope with the loss of Renatinho, his white lover, and the discrimination he faces for being black.

Since orisha manifestations and their veneration are not fixatedly gendered, and spirituality transcended specific times and places of worship in the daily lives of many blacks, we can comprehend the ways in which white, Catholic Rio de Janeiro perceives João's enactment of identity and spirituality as subversive. If João can articulate simultaneously an aggressive masculinity and a sensual femininity without the need to resort to the manipulation of his hypermasculine physique, we can argue that his interpretation of feminine performance derives from the precedence that his Yoruba religion set for gender and performance of gender. In his first performance as the mulatta Jacy in the Danubio Azul club, João appears uniquely costumed in a skirt, as the camera hones in on his naked, masculine chest. He is wearing makeup, and his masculine facial features appear slightly softened and feminized, but not any less masculine. Pemberton and Drewal in their studies of Yoruba religious performance observe that the priests and priestesses of various orishas—for ritual purposes or per the wish of the orisha—donned or exhibited apparel and hairstyles of the opposite sex of their orisha (Pemberton 1982; Drewal 1992). Bascom and Drewal, who have analyzed Yoruba religious ritual behavior, both point to the gender complexity within Yoruba religious practices. Bascom (1980) describes Salako, a diviner born in Nigeria around 1880. During his infancy, a priest confirmed that he belonged to

Orishala, “a manifestation of the deity or spirit Obatala, and that Yemaya (the spirit of motherhood and the sea) was also to play an important role in his life.” Years later, when Bascom and Salako met in 1951, Bascom described him in a manner denoting a gender complexity, as a man “slight and delicate of build” with “his hair plaited like a woman’s” (Bascom 1980, 10–11). Drewal equally points to the initiates of the orisha Sango as evincing a similar gender complexity and attests to the priestess of Sango “partaking in the masculine character of her deity even in her daily life” (1992). Orisha initiates are often considered the “wives” of the deity, and this relationship is reflected in the priest’s feminine or bridal hairstyles. Such performances involving crossdressing could very well extend beyond the ritual period.

Consequently, it can be argued that such oscillation between sexes, engrained as it is in João’s religion and spirituality, could be a concept with which he might have been familiar. Subero points out that João’s transvestism is not preoccupied with creating the illusion of femininity, although it is implied that this is his ultimate intention (2008, 170). Similarly, the orisha priests and priestesses who display characteristics of the opposite gender, with varying levels of transvestism in their ritual, aim to display the character of the deity. As shown in the film, João’s emulation of the feminine does not necessarily require the excessive manipulation of his physique and features to transmit a feminine sensuality. Unlike Tabú, a transvestite who is part of his alternate family, João revels in his masculinity, while Tabú frequently engages in “concealing his lack” of feminine features by “manipulating parts of the body that are read through clothing and with which people communicate personal characteristics, including the important distinction of gender” (Subero 2008, 170). Judith Butler clearly put forth that imitation gives room for transgression. For her, if the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance (Butler 1990, 137). João’s performance is not necessarily concerned with hiding his masculinity in order to allow the female to emerge. Rather, João’s metamorphosis focuses on the character, rather than the manipulation of his masculinity to transmit an Afrofemininity that the scripted mulatta failed to evince. Such a performance of gender displaces the political and discursive notions of gender/biological sex within Brazil’s heteropatriarchal environment.

That the bodies, cultures and artistic expressions of blacks were subjected to the heteronormative ideologies of gender criminalizes articulations of the religious beliefs which had sustained cohesion in the Afro-Brazilian community over the years. João’s choice to incarnate the Afro-Brazilian woman on stage, removed from the popularity of the mulatta created for aesthetic and commercial consumption of a white male audience, could be reasons that tap into the autonomy that Afro-Brazilian women derive through their religions away from the dominant sociopolitical paradigms of inequality and discrimination. Sterling (2010) observes that an Afro-Brazilian religion like Candomblé “historically and in the present day, serves as a practice that aids Afro-Brazilian women in their negotiation of the racial, sexual, social, political, and economic hierarchies that structure the Brazilian world. She observes that through ceremonial interactions, Afro-Brazilian women connect to and restructure their African heritage to empower themselves and transcend the social discourses of

embranquecimento and racial democracy” (Sterling 2010, 79). Sterling also points out that Candomblé worship offers Afro-Brazilian women space to empower themselves through their beliefs and ritual ceremonies to transcend the social discourse of *embranquecimento* and racial democracy. Within these religious circles, men fulfilled minor roles. While most of the orisha initiates were female, their initiation and preparation as *filhas de santo* positioned them for a life of self-sufficiency and self-dependence. In fact, after the incarnation of Jamacy, the Afro-Brazilian mulatta character with deep connections to her spiritual beliefs, João refuses to sully the sacredness of the mulatta whom he himself had created. João deliberately refuses to respond with an innate violent masculine anger when the police officer insults him as a *viado*. Apparently, the image or the construct of Jamacy, connected to her beliefs is so potent that it restrains him from the violent reactive outbursts associated with his personality. It is only when he divests himself of Jamacy, after he washes off his makeup and becomes João Francisco dos Santos again, that he goes into the streets and guns down his offender. Such is the power that Jamacy wields over him.

Key aspects of João’s performance at the Danubio Azul, such as his costume and his dancing, draw on religious and performative aspects of Yoruba religious ceremonies. In the reinvention of his identity after the death of Renatinho, we witness a channeling of a Yoruba ritual ceremonial aesthetic, much in the style of the Candomblé ceremonies. His costume of an oriental- styled sarong and a bare chest draped with beads evokes a strong mix of the religious attire worn by the Candomblé priestess and the oriental costuming aesthetic prevalent in the era. Furthermore, the multiple beaded necklaces he wears during the performance are reminiscent of traditional Igbo wedding necklaces. Aïnouz explains that João’s costume was designed carefully so that it appeared handmade with inspirations from Brazilian Santeria, Hollywood glitter, and the costume that Vitória wore at the start of the film. This, reinforced by his spinning dance moves popular in the dance of Candomblé priestesses, transforms his artistic rendition of the Afro-Brazilian mulatta into a quasi religious spectacle. João’s artistic metamorphosis connects with the sacred as a source of spiritual regeneration in the wake of his lover’s death. The song that João performs was originally written about a man singing to a woman; however, Aïnouz changed the lyrics so that a man singing to another man better conveys the longing João experiences for having lost Renatinho. This modification, according to Aïnouz, not only further plays with the concept of gender; it also allows the audience to share João’s pain.

João’s second performance at the Danubio Azul is more typical of what one would expect to see at a Carnival celebration. His costume is more colorful than the attire he wore during the first show. João is completely bare-chested, which adds an element of masculinity; while the sequin cap, dress, and necklace add more feminine elements. According to Aïnouz, the original costume for the scene included a top; however, it was tied around his waist, so that it did not seem like he was dressing as a woman. Aïnouz explains: “there is a figure [João] creates during this performance that is a mix between man and woman. It’s not a drag queen. It’s not a transvestite; it’s a sort of enigmatic figure that plays with masculinity and femininity, that plays with African rituals.” In addition to the costume, African culture can be seen in certain dance movements. Margaret Drewal explains the importance of dance in West African society:

Addressing metaphysical beings or powers, it is a poetic, non-verbal expression continually created and re-created...; a primary vehicle for communicating with the spirit real, it is at the same time perceived to be an instrument of the gods through which they communicate with the phenomenal world.... This is dramatically illustrated in ritual dances associated with Ogun, the deity whose quick, aggressive actions may bring violent death and destruction or, by contrast, may bring the birth of children. (1989, 199).

João's interpretation of this orisha dance,¹² however, takes a seemingly quick, raunchy tone, with twerking movements reminiscent of the popular East African dance *Kudondoza* popularized internationally by Tanzanian artiste Diamond Platnumz in his video clip for the hit song *Nasema Nawe*. These rapid motions coupled with a fast montage of shots of João's muscles, groin, butt, and feminine face all further add to the enigmatic sexual being that João is trying to create. While the dance does not directly bring about death or destruction, at this moment João knows exactly who he wants to become, Madame Satã.

Another factor with a racial connection that adds to the enigmatic character of João is his proficiency in capoeira, a martial art developed in Brazil by African slaves in the sixteenth century. During the colonial era it was disguised as a dance because slave plantation owners would not allow their subjects to practice any forms of self-defense (Shaw 2007, 90). In one case from 1789, a slave named Adam was punished with five hundred lashes and two years of hard labor in public service for practicing capoeira ("Capoeira Outlawed" 2013). Capoeira was considered by police to be an advantage in fighting and pushed for the legislation to have it outlawed (Campos 2005, 51). Once slavery was abolished in Brazil, social conditions were chaotic, which led to an 1890 decree banning capoeira throughout the country (Brazilian Government, *Código penal* 1890). "After the prohibition, any citizen caught practicing capoeira, in a fight or for any other reason, would be arrested, tortured and often mutilated by the police" ("Capoeira Outlawed" 2013).

João, Laurita, and Tabú attempt to visit an exclusive club, The High Life. When the family is denied entry "because bums and hookers are not allowed," João quickly erupts in a fit of rage using a flurry of capoeira kicks to take down the club's bouncers. This scene, says Ainouz, is about exclusion; even though João and other Afro-Brazilians at the time were frequently denied access to places, services, and even their rights, some were willing to fight back as is the case with João. Although this scene is fictional, it is reflective of real life encounters that João endured. Nestor de Holanda, in his book on Bohemian life in Brazil, presents a story about the authorities' attempt to bring Madame Satã into custody. "It was said that five cars from the emergency unit went to Lapa just to arrest Madame Satã.... [One officer shouted to him] 'Madame, get into the car...or you will take lead.' He responded, calmly, 'You can have them send more cars. Five isn't enough to pick me up'" (de Holanda 1970, 171). According to de Holanda, three more police cars arrived to assist in the arrest, and João was tied to a handcart so that he could be taken to jail. Undoubtedly, the manliness João displays in the scene starkly

¹² To view the dances of Ogun and other orishas performed by Yusimi Moya Rodríguez, former dancer of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba at the Susanne Wenger Foundation in the city of Krems, Austria, see Cuba Contemporary (2014); Inga S, "Yemayá, Oya, Oshun, Shango @ Callejon de Hamel, La Habana 2016" (2016).

clashes with the feminine side he displays when performing in drag. James N. Green observes in his study of Brazilian homosexuality titled *Beyond Carnival* (1999) that the malandro life style and capoeira were seen as two characteristics that were incompatible with homosexuality. Thus, João's character is not limited by traditional gender roles.

Capoeira also has some ties to African traditions such as Candomblé. While the two are separate entities, they likely had some influence on each other, as some Afro-Brazilians practiced both. Matthias Assunção argues that "religion provided the basis for the spirituality expressed in capoeira.... Popular religion consisted of the intertwined worship of a Christian God, Catholic saints, deities from the emerging nations of *candomblé*, and other magical beliefs.... Capoeira was an integral part of this uneasy coexistence" (Assunção 2002, 112–113). In order to minimize the risk of rebellions, plantation owners frequently grouped slaves from different African nations so it would be less likely the whole group would band together; however, as Assunção suggests, capoeira helped the slaves have one thing in common. One concept of capoeira is *axé*, which comes from a Yoruba word that "is the energy that is emanated, the energy that is created, it's the energy that you want to bring to the environment where you train capoeira" (Delamont, Stephens, and Campos 2017, 131). The Yoruba concept *àsé* has a similar meaning to that of capoeira *axé*. According to Clarence Henry, it is "power and creative energy that are bestowed upon human beings by ancestral spirits" (2008, 3). In the case of João, these spirits would be Ogun and Iansan. While capoeira and Candomblé are two different Afro-Brazilian traditions, they share some cultural aspects, and João was likely familiar with them; both help to shape the enigmatic figure he becomes when he reinvents himself as Madame Satã, which, as Aïnouz comments, is: "*Madame*, femenino, sofisticado, delicado, importado de Francia, y *Satã*, masculino, violento, destructivo" (Aïnouz 2004, 98).

Conclusion: The Oppositional "Gaze." João's Performativity as the Carryover of Gender Norms

Madame Satã is preoccupied with deconstructing the myth surrounding one of Rio's most famous and legendary *malandros* and with reclaiming agency from the biographical viewpoint. His prosecution and incarceration on the 12th of May 1932 becomes a monumental scene in the film highlighting the power relations between the *malandro* and the system of "justice." In the face of accusations, João's defiant stare embodies what bell hooks describes as the "oppositional gaze," which describes as a site of resistance for colonized black people globally, an instance of looking that is politicized and in which lies the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating "awareness" (2014, 116). Drawing on the theory of black resistance through "gazing," the film gets its audience to see João's "gaze" at the Brazilian authorities as a way of critically perceiving the resistance of a black male within this racially turbulent time in Brazilian history. Consequently, Dain Borges' view of a more tolerant postabolition Brazilian society is not supported in the first scene of this biopic, nor in the rest of the film. This scene, characterized by an abject lack of contestation within legal

spaces, belies the somewhat tolerant view expressed in his argument.¹³ The enigmatic figure of João Francisco dos Santos / Madame Satã questions the social mores that criminalized gender fluidity norms in non-Western cultures, while they simultaneously excluded and silenced non-Catholic expressions of spirituality within the discourse of national identity. Former African slave communities whose microcosm was engulfed by the sexual and racial mores of white Brazil were constrained into acting within the conventions of the macrocosmic ideologies of gender. These intersections of racialized, gendered, and heteronormative ideologies are enacted in various interracial confrontations in *Madame Satã* in which we see a protagonist agitate against these norms using his body, his art, and beliefs to counter contrived imagery of black homosexual males within Brazilian society.

Similarly, the nationalist discourse of *brasilidade*, built upon the idea that Africans, Indians and Portuguese comprised the uniqueness of Brazilian identity, could not be corroborated in the treatment of its black citizens (Damasceno 2000, 165–199). *Brasilidade*, which elevated the mulatta as the epitome of national identity, did so with the creation of a mulatta for aesthetic consumption but failed to inscribe in this figure authentic traits of mulattanness, such as her religious beliefs or her spirituality. Afro-Brazilian artists like Madame Satã restored to the mulatta a more authentic voice and representation, tapping into her cultural and religious roots at a time when articulating any connection with an African past was “denigrating.” Lisa Shaw on the role of ethnicity in the development of the screen character of João Francisco dos Santos holds that samba’s close links to *malandros* opened space for the incorporation of samba music that boldly proclaims *malandro* identity, as well as the incorporation of samba lyrics that allude to the homosexuality of the *malandro*. Hence, João / Madame Satã not only pushes the boundaries but attempts to challenge the assumptions around Rio’s conception of masculinity and femininity from an Afrodiasporic religious dimension. In effect, João’s life and art shows that masculinity and femininity, as rigidly opposed as society has constructed each, can go hand in hand.

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¹³ Borges argues that Brazilian intellectuals between 1890 and 1940, responsive to scientific debates, reversed their evaluation of the African legacy in Brazil. He further comments that initially most intellectuals rejected African heritage as one of the many dangerous and polluting social menaces that should be isolated or smothered (1995).

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