Urban Sorcery, Segregation, and Ethnographic Spectacle in Twentieth-Century Rio de Janeiro

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In twentieth-century Rio de Janeiro, police and local authorities addressed “black magic practices” through surveillance and regulation that were related to new cartographic and discursive imaginaries of urban reform and segregation. Police raids were a common occurrence, and journalists who wrote about sorcerers and sorcery participated in a discursive mapping of Rio de Janeiro’s new urban imaginaries. This article examines a set of public health laws and policing tactics that monitored the activities of poor women and Afro-Brazilian spirituality under the assumption that their practices constituted black magic. Accusations of witchcraft represented a spectacle in which ideas adapted from eugenics and racial science to urban planning and capitalist modernity were enacted. Equally important, sorcery scenes present an important set of counter-narratives that demonstrate the ways in which urban residents deployed strategic performances as sorcerers and fortunetellers to counter police narratives that considered their bodies and activities to be heterodox and inadequate for secular urban modernity.

No Rio de Janeiro do século XX, a polícia e as autoridades locais tratavam as “práticas de magia negra” por meio da vigilância e regulação que se relacionava a um novo imaginário cartográfico e discursivo de reforma e segregação urbana. Invasões policiais eram uma ocorrência comum, e jornalistas que escreviam sobre feiticeiros e feitiçaria participavam de um mapeamento discursivo de novos imaginários do Rio de Janeiro. Este artigo examina um conjunto de leis de saúde pública e táticas de policiamento que monitoraram as atividades de mulheres pobres e a espiritualidade afro-brasileira sob o pressuposto de que suas práticas constituíam feitiçaria e magia negra. Acusações de feitiçaria representaram um espetáculo em que ideias adaptadas da eugenia e da ciência racial ao planejamento urbano e à modernidade capitalista foram encenadas. Igualmente importante, as cenas de feitiçaria apresentam um importante conjunto de contra-narrativas...
que demonstram as maneiras pelas quais os residentes urbanos empregaram performances estratégicas enquanto feiticeiros e cartomantes para contrapor-se às narrativas policiais que consideravam seus corpos e atividades heterodoxos e inadequados para a modernidade capitalista secular e urbana.

African healers and priests, often called feiticeiros (sorcerers or witches), were common in nineteenth-century Brazil. Historian João José Reis’s biography of Domingos Sodré, an African priest in Bahia, details how Black healers and priests used their knowledge of African pharmacopeia and herbs to aid slaves in “taming masters” with sedatives. Enslaved people also took herbs to develop “strategic illnesses” to reduce workloads or lower their value in manumission. Witchcraft and slavery grew into each other in the making of the Black Atlantic. The slave trade, extermination of Indigenous populations, and the witch hunt are related social processes that paved the rise of global capitalism. The Atlantic slave trade and Iberian-Catholic colonial expansion provide the necessary backdrop for understanding stereotypes like feiticeiros and feitiçaria (variously translated to English as sorcery, witchcraft, or fetishism). These racial stereotypes gain historical value when examined within shifting dynamics of global capitalism, forced relocation, and strategies of accumulation and dispossession.

Under the category “Dos feiticeiros,” the 1603 Ordenações filipinas, promulgated by King Phillip III (1598–1621), who ruled Spain and Portugal (as Philip II), regulated and controlled colonial insurrection and non-Catholic religious practices. From this point on, civil law treated sorcery and divination as Satanic offenses. The statute addressed questions of fortunetelling, soothsaying, and hydromancy such as looking into shiny or metallic objects, including “água, cristal, espelho, espada, ou em outra qualquer coisa luzente.” Other divination objects included sheep oracle bones and reading the future from a “cabeça de homem morto” or “baraço de enforcado.” Punishment for these acts included flogging, parading with a crier through the streets, and banishment to Brazil. In Brazil, a variation of these laws remained in effect until the mid-twentieth century.

With the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888, the formation of the Brazilian Republic in 1889, mass migration, and industrial modernization, the colonial racial-social order underwent restructuring. Mass migration from plantation regions in northeastern Brazil took place, and immigrants arrived from southern and eastern Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. In industrializing cities, people of diverse racial, sexual, and class identifications found communion
in Black religious and healing practices and beliefs. The growing popularity in Afro-diasporic religions like Candomblé and Umbanda threatened the authority of scientists, physicians, criminologists, and social scientists, who viewed Black religiosity as a danger to the social order.

Although the Brazilian Constitution of 1891 functionally separated church and state, the 1890 Penal Code contained a set of public health laws that joined science and medicine with theological concerns over good or bad faith. These concerns were not limited to Brazil and instead connected viewpoints among white “men of science” in the Americas, including Cuban intellectual Fernando Ortiz and Brazilian anthropologist Raimundo Nina Rodrigues who tasked themselves with formulating pseudoscientific observations to explain the nature of the Black population in their respective countries.\(^{11}\) Criminologists, sociologists, and medical authorities accepted theories of degeneration, which analogized the nation with the health of an organism.\(^{12}\) Dain Borges observes that scientific analyses of degeneration depended on creating an aesthetics of social menace in the visual arts, including painting and caricature.\(^{13}\) Science, law, medicine, and aesthetics together determined what constituted social deviants. The 1890 Penal Code made it illegal to practice sorcery, fortunetelling, and magic, and the numerous sorcery arrests that occurred during the first decades of the Brazilian Republic enforced extant ideas about degenerative social types that were circulating among European and Latin American intellectuals.

Police reports commonly categorized these “practices of black magic” as a threat to public health and mental hygiene. Articles 156, 157, and 158 in particular joined eugenics-driven pseudoscience and colonial sorcery laws that aimed at repressing African, Indigenous, and European popular and folk religiosity, and maintaining colonial racialized hierarchies between European civilization and primitive others. Historian Laura de Mello e Souza argues that sorcery stereotypes developed as part of the colonial imagination.\(^{14}\) Article 156 targeted unlicensed medical practices, including “a arte dentária ou a farmácia; praticar a homeopatia, a dosimetria, o hipnotismo ou magnetismo animal”; article 157 focused on “a magia e seus sortilégiros, usar de talismã e cartomâncias para despertar sentimentos de ódio ou amor” and attempts to “fascinar e subjugar a credulidade pública”; and article 158 criminalized “o ofício do denominado curandeiro.”\(^{15}\) The police used these laws against sorcery and magic to place Afro-diasporic healing and spiritual practices under suspicion as duplicitous acts of charlatanism, fortunetelling, and illegal medical practice. These articles remained in effect until 1940, when a new Penal Code was promulgated, ultimately ending sorcery laws in 1942.

The public health codes grouped together illegal medicine, charlatanry, and magic, which included fortune-telling (palmistry and reading cards). These activities share little in common except for how they shed light on
a social history of labor subjugation and urban segregation that occurred through sexual and gender repression, racism, and religious persecution in early twentieth-century Rio de Janeiro. The circulation of sorcery stories in print media acted as a spectacle of state power. Local authorities discursively, physically, and arbitrarily created sorcery spectacles to surveil urban laborers that they deemed to be socially unfit and morally dangerous. Sorcery arrests and accusations, under the veil of public health ordinances, shed light on the elite's attempt to control what they believed to be illegitimate labor, dangerous mixed-race and interclass relationships, and the growing popularity and power of Afro-diasporic religions among diverse urban publics.

New mechanisms for excluding and policing Black healing and spirituality formed an integral component of regulating urban labor, including female and immigrant laborers. The 1890 Penal Code carried the previous colonial category of sorcerer (non-believer) into the new secular context, recasting sorcery crimes as a public health concern that could threaten the progress of industrial urbanization and national modernization. The state's sustained investment in using the belief in sorcery to uphold public health ordinances functioned as a means of social control, and ushered in a new era of Black religious repression and religious racism. Mobilizing the ambiguity in public health ordinances regarding what constituted “magic and its sortileges,” the police and local authorities surveilled both Black religiosity, and immigrant and women's labor. Cases of police raids of Afro-diasporic places of healing and worship as well as the homes of poor women and immigrants give insight into ways that public health ordinances overlapped in efforts to restrain Black religious activities and discipline the laboring population. Newspaper stories proliferated with tales of feiticeiros and feitiçaria, which associated vice with certain neighborhoods and people whose presence and activities did not fit with images of the modern urban worker. This article examines the discourse of sorcery in police archives and print media to demonstrate the entanglement of literary cultures, public health, religion, anthropology, and magic with the urban imaginary of time and place. Sorcery stories sorted urban residents into subaltern orders of labor and health precarity, and temporal and spatial zones segregated by race, religion, and class.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Brazil's Mayor Pereira Passos passed urban reforms geared at transforming Rio into a tropical metropolis. He divided the city into distinct areas based on sectors, such as commerce and services, industries, and implemented class-based segregated residential districts. As urban planners, police authorities, and municipal leaders mapped the notion of capitalist modernity onto urban populations and zones, they came to relate Black religiosity as antithetical to the time and place of urban modernity. Police stories about sorcery activities found wide circulation in Rio de Janeiro's newspapers, fueling the dual imaginary of the urban Other and the
modern urban self. Such stories aided in racializing certain areas of the city, as tales about nefarious sorcerers paved the way for inventing the periphery and its counterpart the Zona Sul, a toponym developed in the 1920s to segregate white neighborhoods like Copacabana and Ipanema from the rest of the mixed race, Black, and immigrant population. Zoning practices and the invention of the Zona Sul aimed at residentially separating the urban population. Urban reform also included temporal zoning in which time played a central factor in regulating the intersecting categories of race, religion, and gender. Sorcery stories in the press played a critical role in urban segregation by regulating the time and place of unchristian and unproductive activities in the city. Daytime sorcery work in the Zona Sul was deemed equally, if not more dangerous, than night-time “macumba” rituals in Rio’s peripheries. Stories about urban sorcerers and vampires worked with the law and law enforcement to regulate and restrict the times and places that people of color could participate in urban life.

In police reports and the Rio de Janeiro press, stories proliferated about nefarious African sorcerers, Chinese opium dens, and Gypsy fortunetellers and diviners. Such ethnographic spectacles about the urban Other find their roots in colonial anthropology and scientific expeditions that purport to study the primitive Other, but primarily expose a discourse about western subjectivity and fantasies of nation, empire, race, and gender. Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod argues that the “Western civilized self was constituted in part through this confrontation with and picturing of the savage or primitive other.” The construction of the modern urban subject intertwined Christianity with public health ordinances to associate African ancestry and religions as morally and socially unhygienic and tainted. Nina Rodrigues, commonly regarded as a founding figure of Brazilian anthropology, did not dismiss African religions but relegated them to a primitive stage of human development, and thus outside the realm of secular modernity. He asserted, “a fé dos crentes e a credulidade dos supersticiosos são rude e proveitosamente exploradas pelos feiticeiros.” People who sought their services were not only “negros e ignorantes,” but also a large segment of the population. Nina Rodrigues was influenced by Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, a founder of modern criminology, who promoted phrenology and provided atavistic explanations for what he deemed deviant or perverse characteristics. To Lombroso, insanity, criminality, and left-handedness were characteristics of primitive brains. While Lombroso’s works have been discredited as pseudoscience, as has much of the race science of the nineteenth century, these ideas about racial hierarchy shaped the foundation of all civic institutions, including the disciplines of science, ethnography, medicine, law, and aesthetics. Medical anthropologists Ian Whitmarsh and Elizabeth Roberts argue that secular modernity relies on intertwining Christianity with medicine to produce an “idealized, secular European political subjectivity.”
During the early twentieth century, urban modernization and unemployment were growing concerns for the Republican government. The 1890 Penal Code included vagrancy laws (vadiagem), which constituted part of a larger ideologia da vadiagem and provided content for national campaigns to criminalize unemployment and homelessness. Anti-vagrancy laws largely targeted people of color, and vagrancy accusations marked suspects with “stigmas of dishonor.” Lerice de Castro Garzoni argues that vagrancy laws retained ambiguity about exactly what characteristics and activities constituted legitimate work or made someone a vagabond. Garzoni’s study of numerous male and female vagrancy arrests provides a social history about the shifting profile of the “ideal worker” whose image was constructed in opposition to the vagrant or vagabond. Gendered ideas about women’s work, honor, and proper presence in public space shaped criminal cases involving “masculine vagrancy” or “feminine vagrancy.” In the numerous police cases involving women who were arrested for “practicing black magic,” the women claimed they were engaging in legitimate work and professions. Although gendered understandings about women’s labor and leisure were not explicit in the Penal Code, these arrests show clashes in shifting social values between female laborers in the city and the police who attempted to monitor their morality, honor, and intimate relations.

Carmen Pereira was a housekeeper arrested on January 21, 1930, for practicing “macumba” and “o falso espiritismo; mais conhecido por ‘magia negra.’” Pereira lived at Rua Quintão 89 in the emerging Zona Norte neighborhood Quintino Bocaiúva. The police case did not specify her racial identity but indicated that Pereira was a thirty-seven-year-old widow from Bahia who lived “maritalmente com Rubens José de Souza.” In Souza’s description in the police record, he was listed as a single man from Rio de Janeiro, twenty-eight years old, and a public servant. Both Pereira and Souza were indicated as illiterate, a critical marker of class-based political exclusion since literacy was a requirement for suffrage until the 1960s. The 1890 Penal Code created two presumptions about Pereira’s honor and morality that made her actions suspect. She was a poor, illiterate widow living in an extramarital relationship with a single man. The law deemed women who had extramarital sex as presumed prostitutes, and, within this logic, Pereira’s consensual union made her a dishonorable woman. Markers for moral honor were often class-based. Honest, middle-class women did not live in peripheral zones, including “immoral homes” such as cortiços, squatter or tenement settlements, or form part of “immoral families” living in “consensual unions.” Sueann Caulfield’s study of deflowering laws in the 1890 Penal Code shows that “juridical definitions of honest female behavior” were unpragmatic or impossible for poor women.
Pereira’s and Souza’s domestic intimacies and religious activities made them targets for suspicion of “baixo espiritismo que também é conhecido pela denominação de magia negra,” an accusation that appeared with frequency in police raids involving the urban poor. Two witnesses from the sorcery scene were called to testify. Antonio Lins was a neighbor who resided at Rua Eduar do Teixeira 83. He was literate and originally from Sergipe. Lins may have participated in setting up Pereira and Souza in raiding the religious ceremony. He claimed that he was on Rua Quintão at about 11:30 pm on January 20 when he heard a “jazz-band, que tocava nos fundos de uma casa.” He followed the music “aos fundos, onde entrou por engano em uma pequena sala.” Once in the room, he was invited to take off his shoes and enter the oratory room. He explained that he did not know the significance of the festa and did not know the hosts. Nevertheless, he accepted their invitation to enter the house and remove his shoes. At the same moment he entered the oratory room, the police raided the house and confiscated objects they deemed as evidence of magia negra.

Night-time police raids like this one functioned within a racial-religious logic that restricted temporal and spatial access to the city for people who participated in Afro-diasporic religious and cultural practices. Pereira and Souza were arrested for hosting a gathering for São Sebastião “em rito africano que consiste em cantos e danças.” The sounds of “African rhythms” coming from their house at midnight made them socially and politically suspicious. Sorcery arrests often occurred in the evenings when the rest of the civilized city had gone to sleep. Drumming on African instruments like tambores and atabaques were common reasons for neighbors to call the police to complain about “macumba” activities and provide excuses for police to raid homes. When questioned if their activities were a practice of black magic, Pereira and Souza told the police they were celebrating the Catholic Saint Sebastian. Although religious freedom was enshrined in the law, the local exercise of power in regulating and punishing Black religiosity nevertheless proceeded. The “African rhythms” may have suggested to the police that Pereira and Souza had been performing a devotional ceremony to Oxossi, the Orixá in Umbanda and Candomblé theogony who is associated with prosperity, hunting, food, and the arts. Oxossi is the syncretic equivalent of São Sebastian, who is also celebrated on January 20, the evening that Pereira and Souza were arrested. In this case, religious syncretism could have been a practice of crypto-Afro-diasporic worship in the face of the arbitrary justice of modern policing tactics that was part and parcel of sorcery laws.

Federal District Police officers Anesio Frota Aguiar and José Antonio da Silva were suspicious of the activities at Rua Quintão. The police knew that the “referida casa há muito tempo vem se praticando o baixo espiritismo.” In Silva’s report, he claimed to have witnessed practices of spirit possession and
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speaking in tongues, “um dos consulentes que depois conseguiu fugir estava atuado com espírito de caboclo, porque falava nessa linguagem.” Among those present at the festivities, and therefore either a suspect or an undercover police officer, was Gastão Candido Gomes, a 37-year-old married man who worked as a *fiscal da guarda noturna* in Rio de Janeiro. Gomes was a *morcego*, a batman, a nickname given to the guardsmen who traversed the urban night throughout the nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Typically hired by private residents and merchants, their public presence marked a new development in the urban industrial economy—nightlife. The urban night, Amy Chazkel argues, was a sociolegal invention that “altered the material world each evening at sundown.” Night guardsmen were the city’s eyes after dusk, who served as fire alerts, provided service assistance, directions, and kept the streets illuminated. The night guard’s ostentatious presence—they typically wore elegant uniforms that kept their impoverished socioeconomic conditions out of public view—and public patrolling constituted essential features that marked the emergence of modern visible policing. Gomes worked as a night guard, in this case file he was accompanying the police in making the arrest. When the district police entered the house, “a maioria dos consulentes que estavam presentes na seção, conseguiram fugir pelos fundos do quintal.”

Maria de Oliveira, who lived at Rua Quintão, 89, in the “primeira casa nos fundos,” like Carmen Pereira was also a widow, illiterate, and worked as a housekeeper. According to the police report, Oliveira could not (or would not) specify whether the festa was dedicated to Saint Sebastian or if it was a session of “baixo espiritismo.” Her ambiguous answer to police interrogators made it difficult for the police to uphold their accusations of *feitiçaria*. Oliveira’s refusal to provide straightforward answers made clear that she did not support police attempts to pit urban space and nighttime against Black spirituality.

The officers apprehended a number of props (*apetrechos*) from the small room in the back of the house. Across numerous cases such as this one, it was a common occurrence for the police to confiscate Black sacred objects and turn them over to the Institute of Legal Medicine on Hygiene and Health to examine if the objects were used in sessions of “magia negra.” Apprehended items included a small altar or oratory and saints of various sizes. Other items included:

Seis velas de espermacete; seis chocalhos de folha; cinco charutos; um defumador; ervas; um aguidath de barro; uma bacia de ágata; três garrafas contendo Paraty [cachaça]; uma dita contendo ervas em infusão; uma imagem em oleogravura; uma imagem de Santo Antônio e uma palmatória, objetos esses que são usados nas sessões de falso espiritismos mais conhecidos por “magia negra” nas quais comparecem pessoas incautas para se consultarem sobre vários assuntos inclusive enfermidade.
In Pereira and Souza’s defense, they claimed that they annually celebrated Saint Sebastian by inviting relatives over. They denied that they practiced low Spiritism and black magic. They asserted that they did not work with caboclo spirits and did not give consultations or prescriptions for medicinal libations. Ultimately, the judge absolved them based on the lack of testimonies attesting to any practices of “magia negra” or “macumba.” While Pereira and Souza were eventually found innocent, they were fingerprinted and had to borrow a hefty 600,000 milreis ($72 USD) in bail to defend their case out of prison. Their case was dismissed nearly two years later on November 17, 1931. This case was one among many of police harassment and misconduct directed at people who associated with Afro-diasporic religious and cultural practices.

Florisbela Marta da Silva (Dona Bela) was forty-three years old when she was arrested on May 21, 1930 for practicing sorcery, spirit possession, and illegal medicine. Dona Bela was a widow from Rio de Janeiro who worked as a housekeeper. She could read and write. She lived at Rua Petrocochino, 82, in Vila Isabel, a neighborhood in the Zona Norte, which was famous for being home to numerous Black and mixed-race musicians. The police report indicates she was possessed with a spirit who prescribed herbal recipes and teas through her. In legal cases about spirit possessions, Paul Christopher Johnson argues, allegations of possession were used against supposed fraudsters who threatened to undermine the state.

The case against Dona Bela treated her religious practice and labor with suspicion. The police raid on her house restaged a well-rehearsed colonial sorcery scene in which her worship represented the practice of the primitive Other, who stood in the way of Brazilian cultural fantasies about urban modernity. The report emphasized that this was not her first offense; she had been practicing Spiritism and spirit possession for six years. She served as a medium for the spirit protector “caboclo africano judia/jundiá,” who possessed her body and performed healing work through her. Caboclo usually referred to an “Indian,” and in Umbanda theogony is represented as a feathered Indian. The police investigator used different spellings for the entity’s name in the report. In one of the investigator’s misspellings, he writes judia (Jewish woman) as part of the spirit’s name. When the police confiscated Dona Bela’s items, among the objects they listed was “um banco pequeno com sinais cabalísticos.”

This arbitrary grouping of racial and ethnic categories (Indian, Black, Jewish?) are a haunting of Portuguese colonialism, and make sense if we see that these are anachronistic classifications that were commonly used in the Portuguese colonial concept of limpeza de sangue. Blood purity was a complex caste system that established social and political control through blood lineage and ancestry. Charles Boxer notes that blood purity was an “essential qualification for Crown employment and administrative posts in Portugal and its overseas empire.” The Portuguese empire viewed “Negro or Jewish
blood” as negative and tainted. To prove a candidate was free of “defective blood,” litigants and witnesses had to prove from personal knowledge that they were free of “racial stains of Jew, Moor, Morisco, Mulatto, heretic or any other race disallowed as contaminated.” Ordination qualifications included providing judicial distinctions between “blood purity,” in which seven or eight Old Christians testified on “oath from personal knowledge” that the candidate’s “parents and grandparents on both sides” were free from “racial and religious taints.”

Arbitrary classifications and anachronisms are essential features of the ethnographic spectacle. These fluctuations are not at odds; rather, their ambivalence undermines the rule of law. In numerous sorcery accusations, the indefinite characteristics of sorcery gave unchecked power to local police. The invention of the primitive needs anachronism and imprecision to distinguish the place and time of the Other from the perpetual present of the Western self. The errors in Dona Bela’s case file stages a modern inquisitional scene of blood purity. In the twentieth-century police invention of the sorcery spectacle, Dona Bela’s case establishes a continuity between the inquisitional system of blood purity and modern inquisitional policing. Her possessed body brought together heretical religions and tainted blood lines that disqualified her from cultivating modern citizenship and legal personhood. Despite the fact that she was literate, her deemed feitiçaria activities made her culturally unacceptable in fantasies about urban modernity.

Proof of Dona Bela’s feitiçaria imitated colonial inquisitional tactics, in which witnesses had to prove from personal knowledge that Dona Bela was free of Black or Jewish religious taints. Evidence of heretical behavior depended on the word of neighbors and the police. Dona Bela embodied a spirit entity that was created within Portuguese colonial sociolegal categories, but her spirit entity also allowed her to temporarily transform herself and the world around her. In offering her body to serve as a medium for the spirit entity, she gave another significance to the caboclo africano judia/jundiá. To borrow from Kelly Hayes’s analysis of social marginalization, female morality, and mediumship, spirit possession is a form of complex ritual work (trabalho). Offerings of food, drinks, materials, praise, and the body as medium for the spirit to work through allowed devotees to transform their lives.

When Dona Bela incorporated the caboclo africano judia/jundiá spirit entity into her body, she prescribed medicine or herbal remedies, and when the police questioned her about “illegal medical” practices, she cast those actions onto the spirit. The spirit entity, not her, prescribed these remedies. She attended patients at any time, prayed for them, and performed “passes.” João José de Sampaio, a police investigator who gave a testimony against Dona Bela, argued that she had presented evidence of her “prática do baixo espiritismo, macumba ou feitiçaria.”
As for material evidence of her sorcery and illegal practices, which in fact tell us more about the police intimidation tactics used to taunt poor women, the police took her few belongings, including the dirty laundry she had been commissioned to wash, and the money she kept in her house:

Um banco pequeno com sinais cabalísticos; dois pacotes com velas; duas velas servidas; uma faca punhal; dois charutos; dois galhos de arruda e alecrim; um colar (guia\(^57\)); dois panos sujos; um par de meias pretas de homem, sujas; um copo; correspondência e a quantia de três mil reis, com a declaração de ter arrecadado tudo isto hoje, cerca das dez e meia horas, na casa número oitenta e dois da rua Petrocochicho, em Vila Isabel.\(^58\)

In Dona Bela’s defense, she claimed the allegations were not true, and denied accusations that she broke the law. On the day of the accused crime, she testified that she was at home with her relatives, not doing anything criminal. Two women testifying on Dona Bela’s behalf were submitted to a medical examination to prove whether Dona Bela’s *feitiçaria* had taken effect. Deolinda da Graça Castello Branco, a twenty-six-year-old white woman from Brazil who also worked as a housekeeper, testified that Dona Bela was at home and had just received a bundle of clothes to wash. She was in the living room when the police entered and arrested her. Branco frequently visited Dona Bela and had never seen her practice black magic or low Spiritism, and Dona Bela never told her that she practiced that profession. The witness denied allegations that she was seeking medical treatment from Dona Bela and reported that the police intimidated her with the threat of prison to coerce her into incriminating Dona Bela. The police raid and arrest included multiple levels of personal invasion. She was subjected to a medical examination. The doctors attested that her feet did indeed hurt. She had a callous on the right foot that felt sore when touched. The medical examination did not provide any evidence of Dona Bela’s sorcery, but it showcases how sorcery scenes were a spectacle of power performed by the local police, who intimidated and interrogated the bodies and psychologies of poor single or widowed women. In the eyes of the law, these women lived in morally suspect conditions.

The judge presiding over Dona Bela’s case, Mário de Souza Magalhães, reviewed the medical report and the testimonies from the police investigators and the Police Chief Antonio Augusto de Mattos Mendes. The judge ultimately discredited them under the claim that these testimonies “não merecem fé” and should be taken with skepticism. Magalhães added to the judgment that police actions and testimonies created the suspicion, “a suspeição nasce da função exercida pelas próprias testemunhas, bem como pelo manifesto interesse que sempre demonstram eles no resultado dos processos.”\(^59\) The judge also based his decision on whether the accused received financial compensation for acts
of sorcery. He claimed that in these kinds of cases, evidence of “dolo ou má fé” had to be proven. In 1915, the Criminal Court of Appeals had ruled that sorcery was a crime when a financial transaction occurred, “quando o acusado recebe qualquer vantagem pecuniária.” Based on lack of evidence and faulty police testimonies, he authorized her acquittal. The judgment over her innocence was not based on whether or not she practiced feitiçaria, but on whether she accepted financial compensation for activities deemed bad faith. Dona Bela’s alleged feitiçaria intersected an anachronistic Portuguese colonial concern about contaminated races with an emerging urban imaginary that gave local law enforcement the arbitrary power to monitor and regulate the lives and livelihoods of poor women.

Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, police cases and medical examinations dealing in sorcery laws restaged colonial histories of labor repression, and religious and racial persecution, and cast a diverse group of people, including poor women, into modern inquisitional trials, in which arbitrarily defined sorcery acts gave local authorities unchecked power to invade homes and destroy or confiscate property as a means of disciplining the activities of the urban population.

Sorcery and the Press

Journalist João do Rio often took his white readers on figurative tours to the city center to visit the bairro chinês or the homes of African priests. João do Rio, the pseudonym of Paulo Barreto, was a Brazilian journalist, translator, playwright, and chronicler. He was a writer living and working in Rio de Janeiro at the turn of the twentieth century. As a celebrated member of the Rio de Janeiro literati, he was elected to serve as the twenty-sixth chair of the Brazilian Academy of Letters in 1910. He had African ancestry, but largely hid his mixed-race background from public view. João do Rio presents his readers with a temporal and spatial reckoning of Rio de Janeiro at the cusp of urban industrialization. His Rio de Janeiro is a city of borders without walls where social stratification is built into urban planning. The alleys are full of danger and home to vices of all kinds, from opium trafficking to colonial plundering. He gives an alley-level perspective of life during the initial years of the first Brazilian republic. His Rio de Janeiro is a cosmopolitan center where the lettered city coexists with the subaltern city, and he reveals how colonial systems of racial hierarchy continued to structure the republic’s internal colonialism, exploitative industrial labor, and globalization from below.

João do Rio’s writings provide a postcolonial perspective of Rio. He invites his white lettered public to flâner with him in the morning, during the day, and at night: “flanar é ser vagabundo e refletir, é ser basbaque e comentar, ter o vírus da observação ligado ao da vadiagem.” He takes his readers to see
how the other side lives. In doing so, he gives a tongue-in-cheek commentary on his readers’ socially privileged positions, which gave them the freedom to view and invent the ethnographic spectacle. They could wander around for fun in a society were vagrancy and curfew laws incriminated men and women of color, who were frequently arrested for the act of “walking around” and “doing nothing.”63 João do Rio’s remarks create an oppositional gaze that looks back at the ethnographic gaze, and flippantly invites his readers with their “vírus da observação” to recognize that to flanar with the freedom to do nothing and wander about without fear of arrest in Rio de Janeiro, one must have class, gender, and racial privilege. Moreover, to be a flâneur is to be idly rich. João do Rio’s commentaries on the flâneur showed the arbitrariness of the categories of “vagrant” and “vagabond,” which drew clear lines across moral, class, and racial categories.64 João do Rio’s privileged wanderings pursued an aesthetic and political objective to transform the productive work of the urban masses into the art of doing nothing, and a social commentary on the socially stratified definitions of vagrancy and idleness.65

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, a fashionable kind of tourism developed among white middle class sightseers who wanted to see how the other half lived and played. Going slumming became a popular pastime in industrializing areas from New York City to Rio de Janeiro, where tenement housing and ethnic enclaves, signs of rapid and uneven urbanization, were commonly turned into urban spectacle. Mary Ting Yi Lui’s study of Chinatown slumming tours in lower Manhattan found that tourist guidebooks, sensational newspapers, and social reform reports linked vices like opium-smoking to Chinatown’s “crooked streets.”66 The term rubbernecker was coined in the 1890s to describe the gawking tourists who viewed the city from the comfort of wagons, buses, and automobiles.67 The popularity of slumming parties and rubbernecking trips turned Chinatown into a lucrative tourist site, and police officials increased surveillance to monitor the dangerous mixing of Chinese men and white women. Lui observes that police officials enforced midnight curfew laws that allowed them to forcibly remove non-Chinese from Chinatown.68 The police also targeted Chinatown residents and monitored addresses where Chinese men and white women lived together.69 They turned over the names and addresses of interracial couples to the Tenement House Department to investigate violations of the Tenement House Law of 1901 that prohibited prostitution, and treated white women who resided with Chinese men as supposed sex workers.70 All these forms of harassment were attempts to enforce racial and gender boundaries to make the area into a “strictly Chinese neighborhood.”71

João do Rio’s crônicas regularly transformed Rio’s streets into ethnographic spectacle to which he could expose thrill-seeking white gawkers: “Havéis de ver chineses bêbados de ópio, marinheiros embrutecidos pelo álcool, feiticeiros
ululando canções sinistras, toda a estranha vida dos portos de mar. E esses becos, essas betesgas têm a perfídia dos oceanos, a miséria das imigrações, e o vício, o grande vício do mar e das colônias. João do Rio describes the emergence of Rio de Janeiro as a seaport of globalized encounters where Chinese opium addicts, sinister sorcerers, and crapulent sailors comprised some of the “strange life forms.” In a chapter titled “Visões d’ópio” in the book *A alma encantadora das ruas*, João do Rio takes his voyeuristic readers to an opium den scene at house number 72 on Rua Dom Manuel. He uses common nineteenth-century anti-Chinese tropes that associated Chinese workers with vice, filth, and social decay. Like the Chinatown slumming and opium den tours that linked vice to geographical space, João do Rio recreated the image of opium dens that were circulating widely in the US press. His invention of Carioca opium dens were likely references to boarding houses where Chinese male workers resided. João do Rio refers to them as “coolies” and describes a room full of Chinese men of all ages who are living together. Through his spectacularization of a Chinese boarding house, he racializes a neighborhood in Rio where Chinese migrants had settled. His literary representations of the *bairro chinês* as a center of vice and immoral domestic intimacies were common tropes in fin-de-siècle literary production about the Chinese in Brazilian and hemispheric American cultural production. His invention of Rio opium dens and racialization of Chinese workers turns the neighborhood into a spectacle of yellowness, which reinforced hemispheric-wide representations that made Chinese migrants into a “coolie race” or “yellow race”: 

O no. 19 do Beco dos Ferreiros é a visão oriental das lôbregas bodegas de Xangai. Há uma vasta sala estreita e comprida, inteiramente em treva. [...] A custo, os nossos olhos acostumam-se à escuridão, acompanham a candelária de luzes até ao fim, até uma alta parede encardida, e descobrem em cada mesa um cachimbo grande e um corpo amarelo, nu de cintura para cima, corpo que se levanta assustado, contorcendo os braços moles. Há chins magros, chins gordos, de cabelo branco, de caras despeladas, chins trigueiros, com a pele cor de manga, chins cor de oca, chins com a amarelidão da cera nos círios.

He describes the Chinese as opium-smoking “pigs”: “Os porcos estão se opiando.” His use of the word “pig” likely referred to the “sale of pigs,” a phrase that became interchangeable with “coolie trade” to describe Chinese contract migration activities, wherein hundreds of thousands of men signed deceptive contracts that sent them into indentured servitude and slave labor throughout the world during the nineteenth century. On August 16, 1860, an article in the *New York Times*, reprinted from the *London Times*, titled “The Coolie and Slave-Trade: Horrors of the Coolie Trade a Legalized System of Free Chinese Emigration Important Dispatch from Lord John Russell,” described accounts
of the “sale of pigs” given by Chinese men who were tricked or drugged by crimps (Chinese brokers) and made to board ships that disembarked in Havana, Cuba. The article describes an “iniquitous system” in which men and women in China tricked potential laborers with “promises of work, but force was used, and no man could leave his house in open day without danger of being hustled, under false pretenses of debt or delinquency, and carried off by the crimps to be put on board ship and taken to sea, never again to be heard of.” Joao do Rio describes their “yellow” bodies as inebriated and unfit workers, and puts forth the idea that their homosocial intimacies are unfit for Brazilian dreams of modernization.

Literary inventions of Chinese opium dens and tales about sinister African sorcerers constitute connected genealogies of transpacific and transatlantic racial labor. Aesthetic production, science, urban planning, and medicine worked collaboratively to tether perspectives about vice activities and immoral domestic intimacies to the Cidade Nova where neighborhoods like Little Africa and the bairro chinês coexisted. The Cidade Nova was created by royal decree in the 1810s. Through most of its existence, it was inhabited by a mixture of African descendants, free persons, and runaway slaves, as well as immigrants from Eastern and Western Europe, including Jewish, Romani, Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish immigrants. The neighborhood was destroyed in the 1940s and replaced with the President Vargas Avenue. Bruno Carvalho argues that the emergence and destruction of the Cidade Nova sheds light on Rio de Janeiro’s intensely mixed cultural geography, and the ruling elite’s vigorous attempts at confining and eliminating undesirable social and sexual intimacies that were deemed unfit for state-sponsored modernization projects, city planning, and hygiene programs.

João do Rio’s newspaper reports reinforced the association between social ills and certain neighborhoods. In addition to consolidating an urban imaginary about Chinese opium dens, he also created numerous sorcery scenes. He took his readers on figurative visits to the homes of sorcerers who were living in Rio de Janeiro. On March 29, 1904, Joao do Rio published the piece, “Os novos feitiços de Sanin” in the Gazeta de Notícias. In this story, he wrote about Candomblé priest João Alabá, a wealthy African man whose powers were so nefarious he could kill off an entire city with a spell and some farm animals: Alabá was a “negro rico e sabichão da Rua Barão de São Félix, 76 ... João Alabá conseguirá matar a cidade com um porco, um carneiro, um bode, um galo preto.” Journalists and the police were the biggest believers of sorcery, and they paid obsessive attention to “African sorcerers” like João Alabá who had a “nome ruidoso no cadastro da feticaria.”

João Alabá de Omolu, Babalorixá (Candomblé priest), was originally from Bahia, and lived at Rua Barão de São Felix number 174. In Rio, he initiated scores of devotees to Candomblé. Among the people who associated with his
terreiro (sacred space where Afro-Brazilian religious rituals take place) was Tia Ciata, Hilária Batista de Almeida (1854–1924), Candomblé matriarch and key figure in the history of samba in Rio de Janeiro. Almeida lived at 117 Visconde de Itaúna Street, a large house located in the Praça Once square, or Little Africa. These addresses map neighborhoods where Black and mixed-race migrants from Bahia not only settled, but also created centers of religious and cultural activities that would eventually become central to Brazilian national culture and identity. Almeida held the important role of Iyá Kekerâ at João Abalá’s terreiro, where she was responsible for propitiatory offerings and directing spirit possession ceremonies. These honorable positions gave her the respected title, Tia Ciata. Almeida had knowledge of herbal medicine and was a renowned healer. Among her patients was Venceslau Bras (1868–1966), President of the Brazilian Republic from 1914–1918. Almeida closed a wound on his leg that would not heal. Spreading their knowledge of Candomblé, music, and medicine, Alabá, Almeida, and others forged a space in Little Africa where free people of color, slaves (until 1888), literati, politicians, musicians, and religious practitioners congregated.

Often depicted as a foreigner, sorcerer, criminal, or charlatan, the figure of the African priest abounded in crônicas in the Rio press throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. In an article published in A Noite on September 30, 1915, João Alabá was again implicated in a case against “vampires.” The report titled “Os vampiros do Rio: Um principe de feiticeiros” featured a photograph beneath the title showing the faces of a Black man and woman in front of a house. The caption for the photo states, “A casa na rua Victor Meirelles, n. 55, onde se realizou o sacrifício do cavalo de S. Jorge. Nos medalhões: à esquerda, o acólito do príncipe Vampiro; à direita, a sacerdotisa.”

The news story exemplifies the main issues of the period. The reporter created a dichotomy between good and evil. The police are the heroes who protect the good, yet naïve, residents from “Rio’s vampires,” “uma coletividade perigosa, que atentam contra a moral e contra a higiene, conseguindo manter a sua ação maléfica sobre uma certa classe de gente inculta e mesmo sobre uma boa parte de gente que se presume da sociedade.” The reporter tells his readers that the police have no choice but to face “malfeitores,” and they are “obrigad[os] por essas circunstancias a um feito mais energético.” Appearing in this report is the address Barão de São Felix 119, located on the same street as João Alabá’s terreiro.

The September 30, 1915 article continues with a description of the sorcerer kings’ “bruxarias misturadas com práticas.” Among them was a man named Antonio dos Santos, “um pardo, baixo, curto,” a very short, brown man with an angular face, thick lips. He had an “olhar atrevido” and moved with “gestos audaciosos.” He went by a number of names including Thomaz de Aquino, or Thomaz Velloso, Hyggino, Aquino, Thomaz, and Antonio or Velloso. On Rua
Figure 1. “The House on Barão de S. Felix n. 174, where the sorcerer João Labá lives.” *A Noite*, February 18, 1914.
Figure 2. “The House located at Victor Meirelles Street, number 55, where they sacrificed São Jorge's horse. To the left, Prince Vampire's Acolyte. To the right, the Priestess.” A Noite, September 30, 1915.
Barão de São Felix, 119, not far from João Alabá’s house, the reporter describes the scene of the crime, but what he describes are exorcism scenes, in which the sorcerer prince attempts to drive the devil out of women. The exorcisms are attended by black, brown, and mestiço masses: “a fim de fazer uma missa negra para tirar o diabo do corpo de uma mulher que se achava doente. Ali o príncipe levou um acólito o José Alves ou Manoel da Silva, crioulo esperto e sagaz que desempenhava a missão perfeitamente.”90 The reporter describes rituals that are also common in Catholicism: burning herbs, candles, and even exorcisms; however, in this case of the “missa negra” they are deemed Satanic or demonic practices. The article concludes by telling the reader that the police agent Pereira da Cunha, who knew the prince, managed to apprehend the priest, priestess, acolytes, and victims. They were taken to the 18th district of the Central Police, and the “victim Noemia” would be “submetida a exame para constatar o crime de sedução e desonra.”91 It was standard police practice to subject people accused of sorcery to medical and psychological examinations conducted by doctors at the Institute of Legal Medicine on Hygiene and Health. These state-sponsored examinations were a type of direct control over bodies and urban territories.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, stories about sorcerers, feitiçaria, macumba, and magia negra repeat across print media, police reports, and court proceedings. At times, sorcery spectacles repeated colonial relations and reinscribed the power of the colonial ethnographic gaze. In other instances, men and women of color constructed self-determined positions of sociopolitical and religious life as they worked to create communities, define and control their own well-being, and assert political and social identities that directly countered the ideologies of urban modernity. The numerous sorcery cases brought against men and women regarding the legitimacy of their labor, domestic intimacies, and religious activities narrate long and fraught sociolegal histories that intersect across gender, religion, race, class, and aesthetics in constructing the temporally and spatially segregated modern city.

Notes

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3. Ibid.


9. Ibid.


15. 1890 Penal Code, articles 156, 157, 158.


22. Ibid, 68.


31. Ibid, 46.

32. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. In Portuguese, *festa* may mean a religious or non-religious gathering of people. I use *festa* to keep the double meanings of the word in showing how the accused negotiated and blurred the realms of religious and secular spaces.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
49. Judia or jundiá is misspelled throughout the report. Florisbela Marta da Silva. “Processo” 152, Year 1930, caixa 1835, Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
55. Mesmeric strokes that change one's energy fields and put them in trance.
57. Necklaces used by mediums in Afro-Brazilian religious worship.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
65. Chazkel, “The Crônica, the City,” 95.
68. Lui, The Chinatown Trunk Mystery, 50.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid., 51.
74. Rio, A alma encantadora, 61.
75. Ibid., 62.
85. Ibid.
86. Ibid.
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid.
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