

# Maria Boa: Women, Prostitution, and the Queer Subject in Northeastern Brazil

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**Abstract:** Known as “Maria Boa,” the renowned *cabaré* owner and sex worker of Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, Maria de Oliveira Barros emerges in many local cultural productions. This article follows her navigation and negotiation of a complex nexus of race, class, gender, and sexual relations in the mid-twentieth century Brazilian Northeast. I utilize three examples—a contemporary *cordel* poem, the space of the Cabaré Maria Boa, and a *quadrilha* dance performance—to explore how queerness is expressed through traditional, rural culture that has also traveled to cities with migration. I argue that Maria Boa serves a prism for understanding articulations of queerness in the region. Her intersectional identity negotiation is at once traditional and subversive and her story paradigmatic of the complexities of queer identity in the Brazilian Northeast.

**Keywords:** LGBT+, sex work, gender, intersectionality, rural, *sertão*

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Traditional culture with rural origins is rarely imagined as a site of LGBT+/queer community formation. This is largely due to the ways in which contemporary notions of gay identity have developed in conjunction with European/North American urbanism. In the Brazilian Northeast, rural representations of the region have always predominated over urban ones, centering the desert-like *sertão* and patriarchal plantation as characteristic of a static, backwards, and closed region unwelcoming of alternative sexualities and gender expressions. In the context of conservative visions of the region, which rely on racialized and

class-based narratives, this article investigates queerness in Northeastern society and culture through an analysis of an (in)famous historical figure and her representation in contemporary cultural productions.

Known as “Maria Boa,” the renowned cabaret owner and sex worker of Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, Maria de Oliveira Barros emerges in many local cultural productions from films to history books, newspaper articles to personal blogs, *cordel* literature booklets to *quadrilha* dance performances. Born in the rural interior of the Brazilian Northeast in 1920, Maria Boa was in many ways an outcast and an outsider: a disowned daughter, a rejected lover, an unwed but sexually active woman from a poor region that national imaginaries scripted as anti-modern and “backwards.” However, she became a successful and powerful businesswoman, as well as a famous historical figure of the Brazilian Northeast. In many ways she utilized racist, capitalist, hetero-patriarchal, and imperialist structures to establish an elite cabaret that catered to some of the most influential men in Natal, as well as the soldiers stationed at the U.S. military airbase from 1943-1945. Yet if she simply replicated the structures which oppressed her by making other women’s bodies available to men for a price, why is her story so compelling to marginal groups and why is she featured in LGBT+ cultural productions today?

Asking why Maria Boa is such a popular figure, this article follows her navigation and negotiation of a complex nexus of race, class, gender, and sexual relations in the mid-twentieth century Brazilian Northeast. I utilize three examples: a contemporary *cordel* poem, the space of the Cabaré Maria Boa, and a *quadrilha* dance performance to read Maria Boa as queer based on her positionality and her representation in local cultural productions. I frame sex work as queer in line with gender and sexuality scholars who center intersectional mobilizations of queerness around what Gayle Rubin calls “hierarchies of sexual value .” I also follow the work of black feminist scholars (Crenshaw; Cohen; Johnson) to destabilize queer/heterosexual binaries and encourage an intersectional understanding of queerness to include sex work. Following complex negotiations of identity in the Brazilian Northeast, I look to how queer subjects inhabit both the margin and the mainstream, much like José Muñoz describes in his concept of “disidentification,” a performance strategy utilized by queer people of color which deconstructs the binary of assimilation/resistance by working “on and against” dominant ideologies (11). Though I have introduced

“queerness” as “marginal,” queer subjects often must negotiate the mainstream as well as the margin. I also dialogue with Natasha Pravaz’s “strategic hybridity” to analyze how Maria mobilized the tropical, sensual, and exotic ethos of the *mulata* while also distancing herself and her *cabaré* from blackness. The *mulata*, a figure gendered national narratives read as black, also relies on the privileged (white) components of *mulatice*.

My first section presents a close reading of the *cordel* poem “Maria Boa pra todos” by regional author Abaeté do Cordel to better understand Maria’s emergence as a queer subject in a story which marks her expulsion from the hetero-patriarchal family and entrance into wider society and public life. I then move with Maria from the *sertão* to the city to examine Maria’s Cabaré as a “fluctuating queer space,” a space of deviance in a prominent downtown neighborhood. I examine the brothel as a problematic queering of space: while its location reorients raced, sexed, and gendered geographies of Natal, it also replicates hetero-patriarchal rights of sexual and gendered passage. Finally, my last section analyses the *quadrilha* dance performance “Maria Boa: Uma historia junina que ninguém contou” (Roberto, “Quadrilha Junina”) to explore how queerness is expressed through traditional, rural culture that has also traveled to cities with migration. I argue that Maria Boa serves a prism for understanding articulations of queerness in the region. Her intersectional identity negotiation is at once traditional and subversive and her story paradigmatic of the complexities of queer identity in the Brazilian Northeast.

### ***Maria Boa in the Sertão***

Like many others born in the interior of the Northeast in the early twentieth century, Maria Boa migrated from the *sertão* to the city in search of opportunity and a better life. She also left her small, rural town to confront the region’s patriarchal and heteronormative structures. Understanding the regional dynamics of patriarchy, especially alliances between men of different social classes, helps to explain conservative codes of behavior regarding gender and sexuality in the Northeast and how it came to be seen as anti-modern or unwelcoming of alternative sexualities and gender expressions. This section presents a close reading of the *cordel* “Maria Boa Pra Todos” to understand how Maria moves from her status as a protected young girl to the public sphere as a queer subject.

The *cordel*, an affordable popular literary form accessible to rural and urban working-class communities, was originally sung as part of an oral tradition. It tells short stories in poetic verse which often reiterate traditional morals and norms. The *cordel* has historically functioned as a heteronormative and male-dominated genre that serves to reaffirm heterosexual practices and promote traditional values of religious conservatism and patriarchal family structures (Albuquerque; Diniz; Rowe and Schelling; Slater). The *cordel* as a male-dominated space can be seen in the lack of female authors (Costa) as well as in *cordel* themes that clearly define acceptable and unacceptable gender roles while idealizing a traditional past. Typical themes include women who are punished for infidelity, diatribes against prostitution, and adventurous tales of *cangaceiro* bandits and damsels in the Northeastern backlands. “Maria Boa Pra Todos” is not a diatribe against prostitution; in fact, it represents Maria Boa favorably. However, it does define acceptable gender roles in the Northeast and does not critique the hetero-patriarchal structures from which they emerge. While it might seem that Abaeté do Cordel is simply recounting the facts of Maria’s life, his version of Maria’s story naturalizes conventional gender roles and reproduces the hetero-patriarchal alliances that still permeate social discourses in Natal.

Abaeté relies on the conventional logic of female passivity and male chivalry to characterize Maria Boa, her father, and their relationship while re-inscribing hetero-normative and hetero-patriarchal logics. He first describes Maria as content and happy with her life, rather than recognizing the restrictions, regulations, and violence she faced as a single woman in the conservative *sertão*. He then emphasizes Maria’s traditionally feminine qualities, such as her goodness, sweetness, and beauty: “Era um doce de menina/Mais linda taperoense / Mas ela foi seduzida / Por um rapaz campinense” (4). Abaeté uses the passive “seduced by” to re-inscribe the conventional binary of active men and passive women while also erasing Maria’s sexual agency. He goes on to describe her father, “O Pedro Ferreira Barros / Era o seu genitor / Maria era protegida / Por ferrenho defensor / O pai era homem forte / Conhecido no *sertão* / Zelava por sua filha / Amavam de coração” (3). Here Maria’s father, a strong man of the *sertão*, shows his love and care as her “defender” and “protector.” This type of father/daughter relationship can be characterized by what Martha Santos calls “honorable masculinity,” a discourse of honor that gave *sertanejo* men the perceived right to control the sexuality, mobility, and even speech of women and

naturalized men's use of violence to dominate women and inferior men. As Michael Warner notes, queerness and the queer subject have "the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence" (xxvi). Maria Boa's resistance to "regimes of the normal" falls into the terrains of phobia (fear of women's autonomy) and pleasure (her non-procreative sexuality). Her refusal of the naturalization and normalization of gendered, sexual behavior for a young *sertaneja* exposes various sites of violence and marks her "coming-out:" her emergence as a queer subject.

Santos argues that tensions of modernity at the end of the nineteenth century, such as the decline of agrarian social structures, recruitment of men to war, and entry of women into the workforce, intensified anxieties regarding the place of autonomous, unattached women in the *sertão* and resulted in patriarchal alliances among men of different classes. She links socio-economic conditions of the region with cultural and gendered concepts of honor among Northeastern rural subjects. She reveals the material circumstances that underwrote culture in the *sertão* just before the time period in which Maria Boa was born. These socio-cultural gender dynamics and patriarchal alliances help explain how and why the Northeast has been scripted as rural, anti-modern, and socially conservative as opposed to regions that did not experience the instability of drought, poverty, State neglect, and declining agrarian economies.

Abaeté reveals similar patriarchal discourses and hetero-normative alliances in contemporary Northeastern cultural production as he describes what happened after Maria was "seduced by" her lover:

Maria fugiu de casa  
Para evitar sofrimento  
O seu pai descobre tudo  
Exige "separamento"  
Mostrando como se faz  
Manda chamar o rapaz  
Pra fazer o casamento

O rapaz não quis casar  
E a Maria abandonou  
A vergonha foi bem grande

Toda a família chorou  
Mulher solteira não quero  
Disse o seu pai severo  
E de casa lhe expulsou

Os amigos lhe largaram  
Sem dó e sem piedade  
Maria ficou sozinha  
Sem perder a dignidade  
Sofre no canto calada  
A moça foi renegada  
Por toda sociedade...

Sozinha e abandonada  
No bolso nenhum tostão  
Vagando pela cidade  
Sem poder comprar um pão  
A pobre mulher sofria  
Não demora e Maria  
Caiu na prostituição (5)

Here Abaeté presents Maria as a victim of an inevitable situation that leads to her “fall into prostitution” rather than critiquing the hetero-patriarchal structures that led to it. He also glosses over the fact that Maria was the only one ultimately held responsible for the social transgression. The phrase “caiu na prostituição” once again denies Maria Boa her agency as she confronts an impossible situation. As a woman who had sex outside of marriage and without her father’s permission, she was punished while her lover vanishes from the story. In many ways, Maria was already marked as a “prostitute” before she ever became one.

Maria’s resistance to hetero-normative values and expulsion from the hetero-patriarchal family mark her emergence as a queer subject—her queerness defined “against the normal, rather than the heterosexual” (Warner xxvi). She also upsets conventional hierarchies and reveals the normalization of gendered behavior as a site of violence. While Abaeté does not specifically describe physical violence, Maria is subject to structural and symbolic violence as her father attempts to

control and regulate her sexuality; structural and symbolic violence which Abaeté replicates in his *cordel*. Abaeté chooses specific verbs to characterize Maria's father: *descobre*, *exige*, *mostrando*, *manda*, *disse*, *expulsou*. These are all verbs enacted from a place of power, while Maria's actions and states are all linked to passivity: *abandonada*, *fugiu*, *evitar*, *ficou sozinha*, *sofre*, *vagando*. Abaeté's choice of words and representation of father/daughter gender roles make the relations of domination between Maria and her father appear natural. By disowning and banishing Maria, a sentiment encapsulated in the stanza "mulher solteira não quero," her father establishes Maria's social status as an "unattached woman." Santos explains how, in the absence of male kin, unrelated *sertanejos* would "invoke a language of legitimate authority" and mobilize violent, public patriarchy to keep these women in check (185-86).

The codes of honorable masculinity effectively opened single, unattached women to socially acceptable forms of physical violence in the *sertão*. The original transgression of Maria's story might have been sex outside of marriage, but following the values of honorable masculinity, the ultimate social shame lies in her father's inability to control his only daughter's sexuality and his failure to remedy the situation by attaching her to another man through marriage. In the end, however, his social shame is displaced onto his daughter. Maria Boa's story further reveals the weaknesses of honorable masculinity and exposes the continuing social anxieties around the place of autonomous woman in Northeastern society. While the tough masculinity of the *sertão* has been of central concern to critical accounts of the Northeast (Albuquerque), much less attention has been paid to forms of contestation that might be less spectacular, especially those utilized by Northeastern women. These include the political refusals and negotiations people recognize in the figure of Maria Boa, which might seem small or quiet but contribute to larger, enduring strategies of resistance and survival. The idealization of *sertanejo* masculinity as representative of Northeastern cultural identity obscures the role of *sertaneja* women as gendered subjects who enacted their own forms socio-political contestation and often bore unequal social burdens.

While the actions of Maria's father serve as attempts to shore up hetero-patriarchal power, they end up queering her: she is expelled from her home, with all of the status, protection, and oppression it affords. Abaeté's *cordel* demonstrates hetero-patriarchal alliances across time and marks the moment of

Maria's emergence as a queer subject: one in which she moves from protected domestic space into the public sphere—a space in which she is already a transgressive figure as an unattached woman “vagando pela cidade” as Abaeté tells us (5). Here she is literally a streetwalker.

Now occupying the public sphere, Maria takes agency over her future trajectory, leaves behind her rural hometown, and travels to Natal, Rio Grande do Norte in 1942. During the war, she capitalizes on the presence of the soldiers at the U.S. airbase, Parnamirim Field. It is here, in the city, that Maria makes space for herself. Despite the Northeast's characterization in national imaginaries as a closed, backwards, and static region, it developed its own diverse and nuanced modernity. Having migrated from the *sertão* to the city without ever leaving the Northeast, Maria Boa probes a tension in which traditional values co-exist and clash with more modern ones, having negotiated both to make her way in the world. In the end, Maria Boa's political refusals, resistances, and negotiations of traditional hetero-patriarchal structures represent strategies used by women and queer(ed) people to contest hegemonic power structures in the Northeast and within contemporary forms of empire associated with modernity, globalization, nationalism, and capitalism.

### ***Maria Boa in the City***

Known as the “Springboard to Victory,” the city of Natal, Rio Grande do Norte received over 15,000 American soldiers into its population of 40,000 just as the country joined the Allied Powers in 1942. Brazil allowed the United States to build airbases on its Northeastern coast in exchange for military funding and help developing its iron industry (Vieira de Campos). The U.S. military presence in Natal brought an influx of money into the local economy, resulting in intensified internal migration from the interior to urban centers and to modernization projects such as the paving of the road that led from the airbase at Parnamirim Field to downtown. Natal's integral role in Brazil's war effort resulted in unprecedented population growth, rapid urban development, and great national/international attention for the city. It also brought the rapid commercialization of sex and the emergence of brothels, specifically in downtown neighborhoods. I examine Natal (and Brazil) as colonized territories amidst the emerging imperial formations of world war, nationalism, and



globalization. I argue that Natal was a space of “imperial formation” during WWII, one in which the replication of imperialist discourses contributed to the success of Maria’s *cabaré*. To better understand Maria Boa as a queer subject, I examine the Cabaré Maria Boa as a “fluctuating queer space” that reorients raced, sexed, and gendered geographies of Natal but also reproduces white-supremacist and hetero-patriarchal structures inherent to imperial formation.

Scholars of “imperial formations” define contemporary forms of empire as ongoing practices of expansion, conquest, dominance, and exploitation that are mediated through institutions of power—such as the media, nationalism, and capitalism (Stoler et al; McClintock). The 1940s in Brazil was a time in which the civil rights advances of the 1930s, such as women’s suffrage and the establishment of the Frente Negra Brasileira were curtailed by president/dictator Getulio Vargas’ suspension of democracy in 1937, prohibition of political parties, and opposition to social movements in the name of national unity. Looking to gain a strategic military position, the U.S. allied itself with the Vargas regime by investing in Brazilian industrial development. The presence of the U.S. Armed Forces in Natal contributed to the militarization of public space, the promotion of modern consumerism, and an increased male presence in the city. In this context, Maria Boa established her famous *cabaré* in Cidade Alta—a central, middle-class neighborhood of Natal. In so doing, Maria Boa queered the urban landscape by introducing a brothel into an otherwise “respectable” neighborhood; she mixed spaces of “orderly” and “disorderly” sexuality, the residential and the commercial, the “acceptable” and the “immoral.” The central location of the Cabaré Maria Boa also presents a complicated relationship with normative discourses of sexuality. As a space in which men paid women for sex, the *cabaré* also rearticulated white, hetero-patriarchal narratives intrinsic to imperial formation and nationalist discourse. The Cabaré Maria Boa was, in essence, a fluctuating queer space—a space of racialized sexual interactions that both troubled and relied upon the city’s socio-sexual boundaries.

Most of Natal’s brothels were located in Ribeira, a lively commercial district of stores, hotels, dance clubs, public markets, and Natal’s first movie theater. Ribeira was a space of transit, commerce, and leisure in which different social groups converged. It also offered easy access from the Potengi River and the Rampa, where American soldiers disembarked (Casculo; Harrison; Prefeitura). Figure 1 shows Ribeira and Cidade Alta, along with the Rampa, the Grande Hotel

(Natal's only large hotel during the war), the popular Wonder Bar brothel, and the Carlos Gomes Theater (now the Teatro Alberto Maranhão). Often assigned peripheral geographic locations, queer, sexed, and marginal spaces are generally relegated to specific areas of the city. They are supposed to know their place.

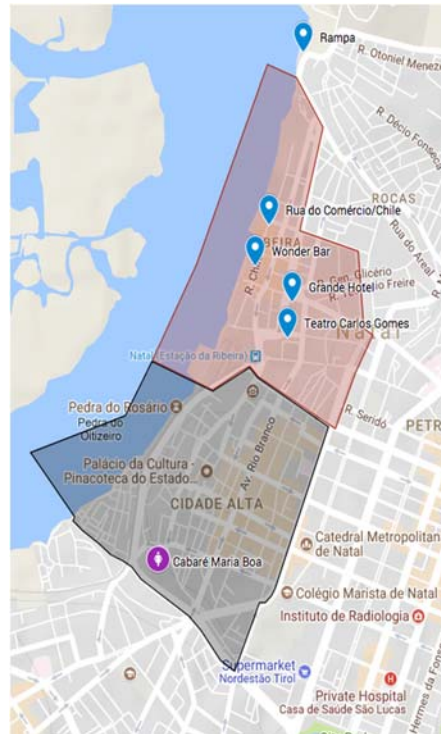


Figure 1: Map of Ribeira (red) and Cidade Alta (gray). The Potengi River meets the Atlantic at the top.

Phil Hubbard uses urban geography to discuss prostitutes as a sexually and socially marginalized group. He argues that the location of prostitution in red-light or vice districts is part of an ongoing process involving the “exclusion of disorderly prostitution from imagined sites of orderly sexuality,” such as that of the suburbs and spaces of the heterosexual family (169). Hubbard affirms that prostitution—like sex shops, clubs, and bars—is seen as “out of place” in ordered urban spaces. As such, it tends to be distanced from the “wealthier, whiter and more politically-articulate residential neighborhoods”—spaces meant to delineate acceptable forms of sexuality from the “immoral” other (56).

This was not the case of the Cabaré Maria Boa. By placing her brothel in Cidade Alta, Maria Boa disturbed sexual-spatial orders of the city and contested the boundary construction of dominant forms of sexual morality. Not only was Cidade Alta a central and visible area of the city, literally sitting atop a hill, but it was also an exclusive area. Brothels, especially those run by women of color, do not generally have such central or prominent geographical locations. Due to its topography, Cidade Alta was harder to reach by foot or streetcar. In fact, there was only one access road between Cidade Alta and Ribeira until 1935, when the paved Avenida Rio Branco was extended to connect the neighborhoods (Casculo 129, 416). Given this, the Cabaré Maria Boa was especially appealing to the wealthy and powerful men of Natal, who could visit by car without being seen by or mixing with lower-class men who were more likely to frequent riverside brothels, such as Wonder Bar (Harrison 136).

In his photographs of Natal during the WWII era, U.S. serviceman John Harrison captures the “park-like plaza” and “well-appointed homes” of Cidade Alta (199) along with a group of “young Brasileiros out on the town” in the bustling, commercial streets of Ribeira (220) (Figure 2). Introducing a commercial space of sexual deviance into a central and prominent neighborhood outside of the red-light districts, Maria Boa reoriented the geography of the marginal. She also troubled the policing of deviant sexuality, placing her business outside of Natal’s typical spaces of vigilance. In her work on race, geography, and urban space, Lorraine Leu conceptualizes “deviant geographies” as both defiant and deviant. The raced, gendered, and sexed space of the Cabaré Maria Boa challenged geographies of socio-sexual domination, and created spatialities that deviated from those sanctioned by dominant groups (Leu 182). It can be argued that Maria Boa claimed a sexual citizenship generally not afforded prostitutes by geographically contesting and redefining the boundaries of socio-spatial morality. In this way, her *cabaré* queered the urban landscape, enacting a spatialized form of resistance to overarching sexual and moral orders. Speaking to racialized and gendered sexual geographies in Brazil, Erica Williams has argued that black women and sex workers (and black women who are sex workers) in Salvador, Bahia have a “queer relationship with the touristic landscape” due to the fact that they are always already seen as sexually deviant or somehow out of place (456). She too draws upon Cathy Cohen’s argument that some heterosexuals are on the outside of heterosexual privilege because their

sexual choices are deemed abnormal or immoral, thus making them a threat to white supremacy, male domination, and capitalism (Cohen 39).

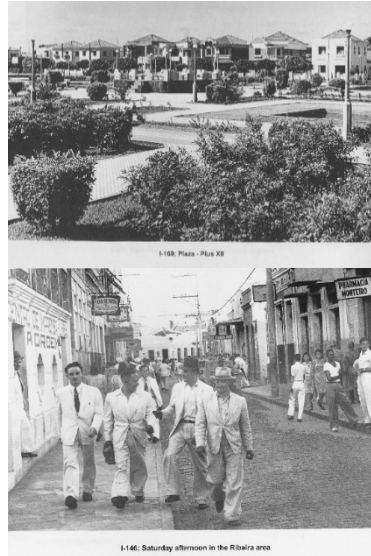


Figure 2: The “well-appointed homes” of Cidade Alta and a group of “young Brasileiros out on the town” in the bustling commercial streets of Ribeira (Harrison).

Yet the Cabaré Maria Boa presents a problematic queering of space, owing much of its success to the replication of hetero-patriarchal and imperialist structures. Queer geographies, like other marginal geographies, can “contradict, undermine, and also insert themselves into and articulate with traditional geographies that are white, patriarchal, and Eurocentric” (Leu 182). Maria distinguished her *cabaré* not only by catering to wealthy Brazilians, but also by capitalizing on the presence of the U.S. soldiers and associating her *cabaré* with the U.S. military base. She curated an image of “foreign finery,” which was necessarily upper-class and necessarily white. This posed glamour shot (Figure 3) is one of only a few photographs of Maria Boa and her principal image online and in printed texts. She wears a pearl necklace in a headshot reminiscent of the famous “Pin-Ups” of American actresses and models of the 1940s and 1950s like Betty Grable, Bettie Page, and Rita Hayworth (Vivane and Farias). In fact, Maria was known for copying the styles of famous Hollywood actresses and dressing in elegant, hand-sewn clothing. Her *cabaré*, no less elegant, was known for its chic red

furniture, immense dance floor, and vitrola music which drew in the “cadets da aeronáutica flanando pelas ruas de Natal” (Viviane and Farias). Maria established



Figure 3: Maria Boa’s portrait (Viviane and Farias)

her house within an imagined space of orderly sexuality. In the caption to his photograph (Figure 2), John Harrison describes the plaza Pius XII in Cidade Alta, not far from Maria’s *cabaré*: “this plaza was a favorite rendezvous spot of American sailors and the nubile young ladies of Natal. There were a few weddings of Natalanese girls and Americans during and at the end of the war” (Harrison 220). In this space, public expressions of heterosexuality linked to whiteness and marriage were acceptable. They drew upon the same racialized, class-based, and gendered geographies of Cidade Alta as a “non-marginal” space. The possibility of marriage tempered the transgressive, public display of sexuality by the “nubile young ladies.”

Serving as a key site of heterosexual manhood, the Cabaré Maria Boa has endured in the local imaginary and replicated nationalist discourses, such as Gilberto Freyre’s theory of racial democracy and the national Brazilian family. This is clear in online accounts of Maria Boa and her *cabaré* such as that of Walmir Chaves, who comments in the blog, “A Maria de todos os homens:”

Faz apenas alguns días, falando com um primo de Natal, relembramos a sua iniciação sexual no *cabaré* de Maria Boa. Foi levado por outro primo mais velho que era un cliente assíduo desse prostíbulo! Todos o primos menores(e são muitos!) foram iniciados ali, algunos con 13 e 14 anos...Maria Boa era um ícone

sexual dos Natalenses! O *cabaré* estava situado na subida para a cidade alta (No Balde) e a casa dos meus primos estava sòmente a uns 200 metros...Eles pernoitavam ali e cedinho corriam para casa, ninguém percebia! Eu estudei em Natal dos 13 aos 16 anos.

This description of sexual initiation in Maria Boa's *cabaré* brings to mind Freyre's descriptions of sexual activities on plantations between white adolescents and black slaves in which boys became men and patriarchal leaders. In essence, prostitutes—as racialized, gendered, sexualized subjects—are necessary to maintaining the patriarchal, white-supremacist structure of the nation because they initiate white male leaders into manhood (Arroyo; Pravaz; Smith; Williams). Here, the blog reader understands Maria Boa within discourses of sexual initiation linked to those of slavery and plantation culture.

For local men, the Cabaré Maria Boa is a fondly remembered and enduring part of Natal's urban landscape, one which has become a major icon of the city. It contributes, in part, to the persistence of the Cabaré Maria Boa in local and international imaginaries. Marcus Cesar Calvalcanti de Morais locates the Cabaré Maria Boa as a “must-see” tourist site:

Sem desmerecer os demais, existiu um [*cabaré*] que mereceu o devido registro para a memória da posteridade. Trata-se do internacional Cabaré de Maria Boa, localizada na Cidade Alta e considerado, naquela época, o melhor *cabaré* do Brasil. Uma luxosa e bem instalada “casa de negócios sexuais”, dispondo de bar, restaurante, e boate, tudo no mais alto padrão de higiene. As “meninas”, na verdade, encantadoras mulheres, que periodicamente eram submetidas a revisões médicas, se comportavam como verdadeiras damas e os clientes eram tratados como verdadeiros príncipes. A fama do Cabaré de Maria Boa, que funcionou por cerca de cinquenta anos, se espalhou pelo Brasil e até internacionalmente, tornando-o ponto de visita obrigatória para viajantes em passagem por Natal” (42).

Essential to the sexed and gendered geographies of the city, the Cabaré Maria Boa was a major icon which “imaged the city” in the minds of so many men of

the era (Lynch). As such, it queers the city's iconography, usually oriented around official buildings invested with meanings related to civic or national pride. Though the Cabaré Maria Boa closed its doors in the 1990s, the brothel has persisted in the geographical imaginary of Natal.

Maria Boa used white, hetero-patriarchal discourses to build and maintain a brothel (in a middle-class neighborhood) that stayed in business for nearly fifty years. The fact, however, that she disassociated her *cabaré* from racialized and class-based stereotypes of prostitution demonstrates how the brothel is always "out-of-place" in the city's imagined sites of orderly sexuality. In her *cabaré*, Maria built a space on white-supremacist, patriarchal, and imperialist structures directly linked to capitalism. At the same time, she also complicated socio-sexual hierarchies by valuing sex work, a practice that remains unsanctioned, marginal, and criminalized. The very fact that Maria had to "whiten" her space reflects the complex ways in which socio-sexual hierarchies are undone and re-done in sex work. Maria Boa's very existence as a single, autonomous woman in the Brazilian Northeast of the 1940s who made space for herself and founded a successful business that bore her name, was indeed resistant. She speaks to what Allan Wade refers to as "small acts of living" (25); that is, acts that exemplify daily strategies of spontaneous and subversive resistance beyond masculinized models of combat. It is important to recognize different models of resistance, especially those taken up to combat sexism, racism, and other forms of exploitation, exclusion, and discrimination inherent to systematic oppression and structural inequality (Coates et al; Wade). Maria Boa made strategic use of disidentification, hybridity, and upward mobility to negotiate a complex nexus of race, class, gender, and sexual relations that offered her, on the face of it, only limited options. In the specific context of Northeastern Brazil, this intersectional identity negotiation is at once traditional and subversive. Throughout her life, Maria Boa complicated and resisted hetero-patriarchal systems at both the local and (inter)national levels; beyond that life, she also speaks to LGBT+ communities in the Northeast that have taken up her story and made it their own.

***"Maria Boa: Uma historia junina que ninguém contou"***

Red curtains part, and the scene materializes around her. She spins around, hands on her hips, as a puff of smoke and melodic chimes mark her entrance. Like some

sort of ethereal being ready to grant our wishes, Maria Boa stands on stage, a pedestal above a crowd of kneeling soldiers, *cabaré* ladies, and high-society clients. She is adorned with flowers; her pink dress falls just above her knees. The high neckline of her dress demurely balances her thick red lipstick and dark eyeliner. She coyly asks, “Estavam me esperando?” She opens her arms wide in a grand embrace: “Se estavam só me esperando, vamos começar a festa! Podemos abrir o *cabaré*.” She sensually shimmies up through the air, reaching her arms behind her head. She exclaims, “Avisem a todos,” presenting herself to her admirers, “Maria Boa chegou!” And with this her guests lean back in a bellowing call and erupt into an impassioned dance: kicking their feet from side to side, fervently clapping to a deep drumbeat, accordion melodies flying through the air as fast the *quadrilha* dancers’ white handkerchiefs.

This scene, part of a *quadrilha* dance performance by the group Brilho Potiguar, took place during the 2015 “Festival de *Quadrilhas* Juninas” held in Monte Alegre, a small municipality just outside of Natal. Many of Brilho Potiguar’s actors and dancers are part of the local LGBT+ community, including “Maria Boa,” who is played by a trans actor. The *quadrilha* theme, “Maria Boa: Uma historia junina que ninguém contou,” tells a fictional story of Maria Boa based on the facts of her life. The *festas juninas*, the popular June festivals associated with the rural space of the Brazilian Northeast, engage a host of cultural meanings related to the harvest, fertility, sexuality, religion, and marriage. The festivals include informal social events with seasonal food, drink, and male/female partner dances as well as more formal religious processions and *quadrilha* dance competitions that interpret a traditional rural wedding and subsequent community celebrations. While the *festas juninas* may seem to be spaces of traditional cultural articulation that replicate conservative, religious, and heteronormative structures, they are also cultural battlegrounds over which social actors contest cultural meanings about heterosexual and queer identities.

Moving to Brilho Potiguar’s *quadrilha* performance, I argue that it openly presents Maria Boa as queer and inserts this queerness into a space of traditional Northeastern cultural articulation. Beyond this, it produces spaces that effectively challenge the notion that rural Northeastern culture is unwelcoming of LGBT+ culture. I support this argument through my own ethnographic observation of the 2015 “Festival de *Quadrilhas*” in Monte Alegre, Brilho Potiguar’s artistic project proposal, informal interviews, and YouTube video footage of the 2015 festival.



***Theme and Category: A Marriage in a Brothel***

Unlike other *quadrilha* groups that center their performances around a traditional rural wedding, Brilho Potiguar places theirs in the space of a *cabaré* and highlights Natal's most famous "Dama da Noite Natalense, dona de uma das casas de tolerância mais famosas do país" (Roberto, "Brilho Potiguar"). In Brilho Potiguar's artistic project proposal, they explain their choice of this potentially controversial theme, stating as their objective not a historical biography of Maria Boa but rather an artistic re-interpretation of her story as a genuinely Northeastern "espetáculo junino." While not overtly political, Brilho Potiguar states in their proposal that they seek to break free from "interpretações preconceituosas" of this history (Roberto, "Brilho Potiguar"). Brilho Potiguar chose to modify the most important element of the *quadrilha tradicional*, the "casamento matuto." This tells the story of a "country bumpkin" who has impregnated his girlfriend out of wedlock and flees the authority of family, church, and state to avoid marriage. Other characters include the parents of the couple, community members who become wedding guests, and various religious and civic authorities such as a priest, judge, and police officers. The father represents patriarchal power and authority within the family, and he is generally characterized as a coronel, mayor, or landowning farmer (Chianca 68). Despite the presence of these various social actors attempting to control and discipline this particular case of sexual deviance, the young man will not submit to their authority until threatened with violence. Once knives, guns, and sometimes even cannons are drawn, the young man gives up and accepts his destiny as a married man and father, thus upholding the honor of the young woman and her family (Chianca 68). The *matuto* wedding reestablishes social and moral order in the community and welcomes the couple into state and church-sanctioned sexual activity. After the scene, the characters become dancers in the *quadrilha*, which is part of the wedding celebration.

Brilho Potiguar plays with this story, subverting and re-signifying the heteronormative symbols, characters, and storyline. They reframe the *quadrilha* around Maria Boa's birthday party (coincidentally on the same day as São João, the patron Saint of the *festas juninas*) and a community celebration of the *festas juninas*. A wedding still occurs, but it is subsumed into the primary celebration

of Maria Boa and held in the space of her *cabaré*. The heteronormative symbolic space of the church is replaced by the queer, deviant space of the brothel. Brilho Potiguar also presents queered family relations such as Maria Boa's with her *cabaré* goddaughters. When the bride reveals she is in love with an American soldier who promises marriage, she calls Maria Boa "Madrinha." Maria is cautious, suspicious, and protective of her *afilhada*, asking, "Será mais um militar americano que jura aos céus que ama uma das minhas meninas?" (Roberto, "Quadrilha Junina"). Before arranging to speak with the young man, she warns, "Você não é a primeira nem será a última a ouvir esse tipo de promessa" (Roberto, "Quadrilha Junina"). Maria Boa then plays a pivotal role in the wedding, which is not a *matuto* wedding but rather a modern marriage between a U.S. serviceman and a *cabaré* girl. In this way, Brilho Potiguar situates the story in the transnational space of Natal during World War II.

It is in this space that Maria Boa stretches, alters, and disrupts heteropatriarchal structures of family, church, and state to make a marriage happen on her terms, in her brothel. The patriarch figure strikingly absent from this wedding, Maria Boa takes over the role of the father as she interrogates the young serviceman about her *cabaré* daughter: "Eu sei de tudo que se passa nesse *cabaré*; então o que quer você realmente com ela?" (Roberto, "Quadrilha Junina"). She insists, "Se você realmente a ama, case com ela agora, aqui" (Roberto, "Quadrilha Junina"). At that moment, Maria's friend, the priest, happens to walk into the *cabaré* for her birthday celebration. When Maria asks him to perform the ceremony, he protests the location ("se alguém souber—neste lugar..."), but Maria convinces him: "Padre, por favor, me dê esse presente" (Roberto, "Quadrilha Junina"). Maria Boa uses her charm and influence to arrange the wedding rather than the typical threat of violence employed by the father. She ultimately controls the patriarchal figures and assumes their authority: she persuades the soldier to marry, convinces the priest to perform the ceremony in the brothel, and takes over the role of the young woman's father. In this way, the staged brothel wedding queers the traditional *matuto* marriage. After the ceremony, Maria Boa addresses the audience with a speech about love: "Acredito no amor, seja ele proibido, escondido, do jeito que for! Vamos festejar e namorar. Hoje é o meu aniversário! Hoje é São João!" (Roberto, "Quadrilha Junina"). Instead of celebrating heterosexual union, Maria Boa's *quadrilha* is a community celebration of love, the *festas juninas*, and her birthday.

### *Queer Characters of Maria's Cabaré*

Some of the most obvious queer elements of this *quadrilha* are the characters, many of whom utilize stereotypical costumes, gestures, props, and body language to emphasize their queerness. While typical *quadrilhas* mimic the cis het male/female partnering of the *matuto* marriage in their couples, Brilho Potiguar cleverly queers their pairing while still maintaining the elements of the traditional style. While Maria Boa and her partner are a woman/man couple, they stand in contrast to other couples: Maria a head taller than her partner, both in bright pink, flowered outfits (Figure 4). The *amigo gay* de Maria Boa is the only queer character specifically designated in Brilho Potiguar's project proposal, and he works a stereotypical gay fashion aesthetic with sunglasses, flamboyant gestures, and a sassy runway walk. Stereotypically a gossip, he is also one of the characters with the most lines and one who peppers English throughout his speech in phrases like, "Claro que sim, baby" and by calling Maria Boa "Mary" (Roberto, "Quadrilha Junina"). His main prop, a fan, works as an extension of his body as he stops and poses, hands on his hips, throughout the performance. Two other queer characters, the *cafetina* and the *beata*, represent another queer trope as drag performers who do their own voiceovers. Many *quadrilha* groups, especially those competing in the comical category, rely on these tropes and slapstick humor for comic effect, but they often fall into gay caricatures and mockery.

Brilho Potiguar, however, brings complexity and nuance to their queer characters, who are fun but not ridiculous. They are developed, have multiple lines, and advance the plot. They serve purposes beyond comic effect. Subversively utilizing Northeastern humor, Brilho Potiguar connects with "junine" traditions and recasts the space of the brothel while also critiquing specific socio-cultural phenomena in the Northeast. For example, a central scene with the *beata* points out hypocritical religious discourse. A moralizing figure, the *beata* crashes the wedding ceremony just as the priest agrees to perform the marriage in the *cabaré*. She denounces everyone and threatens the priest: "Vou falar tudo pra o bispo!" (Roberto, "Quadrilha Junina"). During her diatribe, the *amigo gay* grabs her disguise to reveal that she is, in fact, JuJu Belinha, one of the "ex-putas" of Maria's *cabaré* (Nascimento). The scene works with different elements of costume and disguise to queer and unqueer the *beata*. The actor is a

man dressed as a religious woman who is disguised in order to morally denounce the wedding in the *cabaré*. The great “reveal” is not related to gender, but rather exposes the *beata* as an “ex-puta,” outing her as a hypocrite and dismissing her moral authority. Despite her actions, the *beata* is ultimately welcomed to join the party and celebrate with Maria Boa. Lightly masked under outward humor, the queer characters are able to make subtle but ultimately biting criticisms of religious and hetero-patriarchal structures at work in Northeastern society.



Figure 4: Maria Boa and her dance partner (top left). The gay fashion aesthetic of the *amigo gay* (top right) and the *elenco teatral* (bottom), including the *cafetina*, the *faxineira*, the *amigo gay*, and the *beata*. (Lenilson Joia)

Thus far, I have read Maria Boa as queer based on her intersectional position and her marginalization as a sex worker. I have also argued that Brilho Potiguar’s performance is queer as it centers queer characters and reframes the *quadrilha* narrative around Maria Boa’s birthday party and a community celebration of the *festas juninas* in her *cabaré*. Adding another queer layer to the performance, many of the actors and dancers are also part of the local LGBT+ community, including Maria Boa who is interpreted by a trans woman. In this way, Brilho Potiguar inserts their own LGBT+ subjectivities into the Maria Boa narrative, not as an overtly political act but as artistic performance—one that creates community and harmonizes with traditional rural culture. It is common to see the traditional, rural culture of Northeastern Brazil as backwards, anti-modern, and therefore unwelcoming of alternative sexualities and gender expressions; nevertheless, it holds space for LGBT+ identities. LGBT+ individuals and

communities have also made space for themselves within traditional Northeastern culture. This space may look different from that of the urban South. It might manifest itself in different ways or prioritize community and family life, but LGBT+ culture in the Northeast continues to exist, adapt, transform, and queer what it means to be traditional.

### ***Conclusion***

By commodifying her identity in a contact zone of unequal imperial relations, Maria Boa symbolizes the negotiation of space and identity during the WWII era. This article has investigated queerness in Northeastern society and culture through Maria Boa and her representation in contemporary cultural productions. It has discussed texts which attempt to assimilate her story into hetero-patriarchal national discourses in which sexually available women of color are necessary to maintain the Brazilian nation. However, Maria Boa's image and story appeal to marginalized groups who have used her as inspiration for traditional Northeastern cultural productions, such as Brilho Potiguar's *quadrilha* dance performance. Maria Boa and her intersectional identity negotiation are at once traditional and subversive, and her story is paradigmatic of the complexities of queer identity in the Brazilian Northeast. In seeing Maria Boa as a fluctuating queer subject, I am concerned with how race, class, gender, and sexuality are intimately implicated in imperial processes while exploring manifestations of queerness in traditional Northeastern culture. It has demonstrated how queerness can push back against moralistic and hetero-patriarchal ideologies associated with the Brazilian Northeast.

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