

## *Pas de deux: Casting Omar Sy and Charlotte Gainsbourg in Samba*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article will consider some of the implications of the casting of two of France's most renowned stars, Charlotte Gainsbourg and Omar Sy, in Olivier Nakache's and Éric Toledano's 2014 film *Samba*, the much-anticipated follow-up film to their box office hit *Intouchables* (2011). It will examine the casting of Sy and Gainsbourg both in terms of how the film imports their respective star personae and the impact this has on characterisation in the film, and in terms of the representation of Frenchness. After examining the socio-political context in which the film was made, the respective star personae of Sy and Gainsbourg will be considered through key scenes which demonstrate how these personae function.

**KEYWORDS:** Charlotte Gainsbourg, Omar Sy, Frenchness, *Samba*, *Intouchables*, national identity, immigration, assimilation, stereotype



On the occasion of the release of Olivier Nakache's and Éric Toledano's 2014 film *Samba*, the cover of French film magazine *Studio* featured the film's two stars, Omar Sy and Charlotte Gainsbourg, with the accompanying tagline: "Omar Charlotte: Le pas de deux de *Samba*." The cover image depicts Sy as tall and handsome, smiling directly at the camera with his trademark wide grin, his prominent white teeth gleaming, his large brown forearms wrapped tightly around Gainsbourg's comparatively small frame. In contrast, Gainsbourg looks away from the camera, her head tilted down slightly. She too is smiling but it is the shy, more reserved smile one usually associates with the British-French star. The photograph is one of contrasts: his openness/her reservedness, his strength/her fragility, his dark brown skin/her pale white skin. It encapsulates not only their contrasting characters in *Samba* but also the contrasting star personae of the two stars that are imported into the film itself.

*Samba* was the much-anticipated follow-up film to Nakache's and Toledano's box office hit *Intouchables* (2011) which also starred Sy in a breakout performance. *Samba*, based on Delphine Coulin's 2011 novel *Samba pour la France*, tells the story of Alice (Gainsbourg), an executive recovering from burn-out who during her sabbatical volunteers at a detention centre to assist in the processing of illegal immigrants. It is here that she meets Samba (Sy), an illegal immigrant from Senegal who has been living and working in France for the past ten years and now is threatened with being repatriated back to Africa. The film is ostensibly about the collision of two worlds, or more precisely two "Frances," something which is neatly established in the opening credit sequence via the long travelling shot that takes us from the glamour of a gala event at a swish Parisian venue through the back corridors of the hotel, past wait and kitchen staff to finally rest on the lowest rung in this social ladder, Samba at the sink washing the grimy dishes of the haute bourgeoisie.

*Samba* was written with Sy in mind for the title role, the actor having already appeared in three other films by the French directorial duo. As for the part of Alice, Nakache and Toledano had a precise idea in mind: "Charlotte Gainsbourg was the perfect actress [for the role] because France practically grew up with her; she's touching, she's like that, hesitant, shy. For us, it was really her that had to face Omar, to try to find humanity there."<sup>1</sup> As Nakache explains, the pair cast Gainsbourg because she is "very different; she comes from another universe than Omar. It is the

contrast between the two that interested us; to clash these two personalities to create a new film couple and to surprise.”<sup>2</sup>

This article will consider the implications of the casting of Gainsbourg and Sy in *Samba* both in terms of how the film imports their respective star personae and the impact this has on characterisation in the film, and in terms of the representation of Frenchness or of what it means to be French. After outlining the theoretical framework and methodology for this article (star studies) and examining the socio-political context in which the film was made, the respective star personae of Sy and Gainsbourg will be considered through key scenes which demonstrate how these personae function.

## I. STARDOM AND STAR PERSONAE

Before considering the star personae of Gainsbourg and Sy, we want to provide a brief outline of what constitutes a star. According to Richard Dyer, generally credited with having founded star studies, star images are “always extensive, multimedia, intertextual.”<sup>3</sup> For Dyer, a star’s persona is comprised of his or her films along with the concomitant promotion of those films such as “pin-ups, public appearances, studio hand-outs ... as well as interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star’s doings and ‘private’ life.”<sup>4</sup> Dyer’s seminal book, *Stars*, was a major influence on Ginette Vincendeau, particularly his tripartite analysis of the star as a “social phenomenon,” an “image,” and a “sign.”<sup>5</sup>

In the star theories of Edgar Morin and Ginette Vincendeau, a distinction is drawn between star and actor: while a star is always an actor, an actor is not necessarily always a star. For Morin, the star is “more than an actor incarnating characters; he incarnates *himself in them*, and they become incarnate in him.”<sup>6</sup> Morin also makes a distinction between who can be considered a star and who an actor: to be a star, an actor must in some way *play him or herself*. A character actor, whose roles change, often dramatically, with each successive appearance, is not necessarily a star, no matter how well-known. Unlike an actor, a star possesses a certain persona which is not simply reducible to the sum of the roles he or she plays, but which is nonetheless infected by these roles.<sup>7</sup> For Guy Austin, too, stars “are not ‘just’ people, they are also commodities, brand names whose capital is their face, their body, their

clothing, their acting or their life style.”<sup>8</sup> Following Vincendeau and Morin, Gainsbourg and Sy are not just actors but stars. As we will discuss, aspects of Gainsbourg and Sy’s star personae are imported into the characters of Alice and Samba respectively and we are aware as audience members that we are watching Sy and Gainsbourg as much as the characters they are playing.

Significantly, Gainsbourg and Sy are what Austin calls “modern” French stars; that is, they belong to a period of French cinema in which stars were becoming a distinct and influential phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> Prior to the 1960s there was no star system in France comparable to that of Hollywood: “This relative absence of a star system in France is due primarily to the distinctive nature of its production system and the less developed form of capitalism of which that in turn was a symptom.”<sup>10</sup> However, Austin argues that since its modernisation into a capitalist consumer society following the 1960s, France subsequently developed a star system of its own in which the power of stars began to influence the production and financing of films.<sup>11</sup> French stars also began to be commodities and their images were used in extra-cinematic discourses such as advertising and fashion. The absence of a rigid studio system in France, however, meant that French stars had more control over the creation of their star personae, and they brought more of their own personalities to the characters they played.<sup>12</sup>

Writing within a specifically French context, Vincendeau argues that stardom is determined by diverse criteria, “which follow a rough division between the box-office ... and cinephilia.”<sup>13</sup> For example, Vincendeau claims that two of France’s biggest stars, Brigitte Bardot and Jeanne Moreau, did not rate highly in terms of cumulative box-office records, which are mainly dominated by male film stars; however, if we turn to “cinephile-dominated historiography, one indeed finds that women have a much greater presence.”<sup>14</sup> A similar distinction—between box office stardom and cinephilia stardom—can be drawn between Sy and Gainsbourg. On the one hand, Sy’s rise to stardom has been to a large extent dependent on the success of his films at the box office; Gainsbourg’s popularity, on the other hand, is due much less to her box office credentials than to extra-cinematic considerations, such as her status as “*fille de*,” or “daughter of,” and style icon and subsequent coverage in the

popular and fashion press.<sup>15</sup> Like other star systems, for Vincendeau the French star system reflects the prevailing values of the society from which it emerged:

men are more prominent than women (in lead roles, box-office rankings, and salaries), heterosexuality is the norm, stars are able-bodied and generally correspond to classic canons of beauty, and the well-connected are favored—as in the phenomenon of the ‘fils de’ and ‘filles de,’ that is sons, daughters, and close relatives of those in positions of power within the film industry ... whiteness dominates.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the marginalisation of “non-whites” has for a long time been a dominant and much criticised feature of French cinema. Over the past decade however, an “increasing number of actors from immigrant, and non-privileged, backgrounds have not only found film roles, but they have reached the pinnacle of the star system,”<sup>17</sup> among them Omar Sy who rose to prominence embracing stereotypical roles which also have a self-reflexive, critical purchase.

While Sy is often characterised as “doudou national” or “national comforter,” the “*ex-banlieusard*” from an immigrant background and Gainsbourg is described as “French royalty” and the quintessential “bobo,” what the two stars share is wide public appeal. As Guillaume Gendron remarks: “In a fragmented France ... Omar Sy is loved. Madly. From the bobo to the masses.”<sup>18</sup> The same can be said of Gainsbourg: she is liked by indie-leaning and popular audiences alike, the result of the fact that she makes films across both arthouse and mainstream genres. Moreover, the two stars have an international profile through their work in films with a global reach: *Intouchables* was nominated for Best Foreign Film at the Golden Globe Awards, leading to Sy being cast in minor roles in Hollywood productions *Jurassic World* (2015) and *Inferno* (2016), while Gainsbourg has appeared in European and American indie cinema as well as the Hollywood blockbuster *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016) and most importantly, in the films of Danish auteur Lars von Trier.

## II. THE CHANGING FACE OF FRENCHNESS

*Samba* was released at a time when France was grappling with notions of what it means to be French, and in the wake of a ‘debate’ on national identity launched by then President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2009. According to Nesbitt and Rust:

the mere existence of such a debate and subsequent media coverage reflects the burning preoccupation with questions of national identity in contemporary France, a preoccupation that has only intensified with the increasing racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and sexual diversity of the nation.<sup>19</sup>

For Robert Zaretsky, France is “increasingly at war with itself over the meaning of secularism and these two conflicts, deeply entwined with one another, are dramatically reshaping France’s sense of national identity.”<sup>20</sup> According to Faïza Guène “hidden behind this debate on national identity is the recognition that being French, and a practicing Muslim are incompatible, and so if you have the misfortune to be black as well, you can only imagine.”<sup>21</sup> Yet Sy, who is both black and Muslim, has found himself the most popular actor of his generation. In recent years, against this backdrop, the actor has consistently been voted one of the most popular French personalities in public polling.<sup>22</sup>

Despite being a nation of immigrants, in its national discourse France tends to efface this aspect of its history and culture. According to Vanessa Schwartz, despite roughly twenty percent of the French population being of immigrant origin (a statistic which allows for at least one non-French grandparent), until the late twentieth century, immigration has had a “marginal impact on French collective identity.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, the arrival of immigrants—the result of industrial development, imperialism, political persecution, decolonisation, and globalisation—represents a significant demographic fact.<sup>24</sup> However, since the Revolution, Frenchness has been fashioned out of “collective mythic origins” (reinforced by schoolbooks which taught “Nos Ancêtres les Gaulois”) and based on the belief that “permanent residents need to assimilate into a distinctly Gallic form of French culture.”<sup>25</sup> While Schwartz argues that in recent times this “myth has begun to be revised,” it does however persist in various forms.<sup>26</sup> For example, in 2016 Sarkozy stated: “If you want to become French, you speak French, you live like a French person ... We will no longer content ourselves with an integration that no longer works, we will require assimilation. As soon as you become French, your ancestors are Gallic.”<sup>27</sup>

The modern French state has functioned with an unwavering understanding that difference jeopardises the unity of the nation, an idea which can be traced back to

the French Revolution's ideal of a unified republican culture. Assimilation has been motivated by the belief that the Republic was comprised of one people and one language under one set of laws. Since the Revolution, the French state has preserved a cautious mistrust of *communautarisme*, a French term which is employed to negatively evoke the drive for the special recognition of religious and ethnic communities that in other societies might simply be called "ethnic pluralism."<sup>28</sup> As Schwartz points out, the "conception of a unitary French state dedicated to advancing an idea of 'humanity' while effectively integrating difference remains one of the singular challenges and missions of modern France."<sup>29</sup>

This is a debate that Sy has entered, although somewhat reluctantly. He has stated that he does not want to be the "spokesperson for the *banlieues*" or the "nouveau Balavoine"—a reference to singer and musician Daniel Balavoine who was politically outspoken and known for his infamous confrontation with French presidential candidate François Mitterrand on French television in 1980.<sup>30</sup> It is almost inevitable however that Sy invariably makes statements on Frenchness when speaking in interviews. For example, in a famous interview on French television focussing on his reaction to the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015, a visibly emotional Sy remarked: "The French practice of naming origins, whether ethnic or religious ... I think we need to stop doing this; we are all French and we should all just be called French."<sup>31</sup>

Sy, instead, prefers to let his politics speak through his choice of films, notably those made with the Toledano-Nakache duo and Roschdy Zem's *Chocolat* (2016). As Gendron remarks "his choice of films ... says enough."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, there is an implicit critique of assimilation in *Samba* which manifests itself in one key scene in particular when in an attempt to make himself "invisible," Samba is forced to efface his identity by removing his clothes and replacing them with more European modes of dress. Most notably, he is told to remove his ring, a symbol not only of his ethnicity but also of his "marriage" to homeland and people. This critique points towards the film's espousal of a more pluralist form of identity for the French nation rather than the unitary one propagated since the Revolution.

In fact, Sy's popularity on both a national and global scale can also be traced back to what William Kidd identifies as the attempt to "develop more diverse and pluralist forms of French identity," particularly in a "market-led world" in which

France's younger generation is more aware of Coca-Cola and Adidas than of figures from its own cultural history.<sup>33</sup> While in general public polls Sy tends to rank alongside French personalities Jean-Jacques Goldman and Dany Boon as the most popular French personality, youth polls rank Sy alongside Will Smith and Barack Obama, indicating that Sy's popularity is due in part to a growing preference for African-American culture in general among French youth.<sup>34</sup> African-American ghetto culture is imported directly into *Intouchables* most notably through Driss' proclaimed musical preferences for Earth Wind and Fire and Cool and the Gang, a montage sequence featuring Driss (set to George Benson's "The Ghetto") and the famous scene at Philippe's birthday party when Driss dances to "Boogie Wonderland." Moreover, Philippe's assistant Magalie (Audrey Fleurot) even refers to Driss as looking like Obama when dressed in a suit.

Within the context of the changing face of Frenchness it is worth considering briefly the faces of Gainsbourg and Sy as they play a significant part in these stars' respective personae. Gainsbourg's face, in spite—or because—of its somewhat unconventional beauty, has been used to promote the image of quintessential Frenchness, particularly through her work with fashion labels like Balenciaga, Yves Saint Laurent and Louis Vuitton. The advertising campaign for the fragrance "Balenciaga L'Essence," used a close-up of Gainsbourg's face, establishing her as the worldwide face of French femininity. In the Balenciaga campaign, Gainsbourg wears a distant, contemplative expression signifying the underlying mystery and intellectual sexiness which is part of her persona as well as a seriousness which is reflected in her choice of film roles. The Balenciaga, Louis Vuitton and Yves Saint Laurent campaigns draw on and reinforce Gainsbourg's status as "true French royalty."<sup>35</sup>

While with Gainsbourg we are dealing with the face as a totality which is more than the sum of its parts (the strong nose, the jaw which juts out defiantly, the distant, haunting eyes, the thin, often taut lips—in short, everything which equals the descriptor *jolie laide* or "ugly pretty"), with Sy we discover a devolution of the face onto a single aspect: the smile. Indeed, articles or interviews with Sy invariably contain reference to his smile. In an article on *Intouchables* which appeared in *The Guardian*, Ryan Gilbey writes: "A hefty share of the \$269m raked in by *Intouchables* must be attributable to [Sy's] smile";<sup>36</sup> writing in *The Los Angeles Times*, Steven



Zeitchik describes Sy flashing his “million-euro smile”;<sup>37</sup> and Neely Swanson claims of Sy’s smile that it “would light a city in a power outage.”<sup>38</sup> Others relate the phenomenon of Sy’s smile directly to questions of race. Writing on *Intouchables*, Alec G. Hargreaves and Mark McKinney argue that “in real life, the juvenile delinquent on whom Sy’s character was based was of Algerian origin, whose ‘Arab’ appearance might perhaps have been less easy to sell to majority-ethnic audiences than Sy’s smiling ‘black’ persona.”<sup>39</sup> Lorenza Muñoz writes “He smiles frequently and with joyful sincerity, and his raven-colored skin is unblemished and taut.”<sup>40</sup> The treatment of Sy’s smile in the press and his casting alongside Gainsbourg in *Samba* is further evidence of Richard Dyer’s claims that “racial imagery is central to the organisation of the modern world.”<sup>41</sup> In spite of her non-Gallic ancestry, it is Gainsbourg’s whiteness that above all qualifies her as French, whereas Sy’s popularity hinges on his white smile which breaks through and tempers the blackness of his skin to appeal directly to the public: its function is that of reassurance. While *Samba* is a serious role for Sy, it nonetheless draws on the comic aspects of his persona to establish the character of Samba as a benign and even desirable presence in modern France—this is in contrast to the character of Jonas (Issaka Sawadogo), whose face is more severe, closed, and even lightly scarred and whose singular mode of expression, in contrast to Samba’s disarming smile, is aggressive laughter.

### III. OMAR SY POUR LA FRANCE

The growing popularity of Omar Sy in France demonstrates a changing understanding of what it means to be French. However, increased visibility of actors such as Sy is not unproblematic. *Samba* depicts the problems associated with the rise of ethnic actors in French cinema in two ways: by bringing into play the different stereotypes of “black” actors and through the juxtaposition of the “good” and “bad” immigrant.

Sy, the son of a Senegalese father and Mauritanian mother who immigrated to France, grew up in the *banlieues* of west Paris. He first came to the attention of the French public in the cult series *Omar & Fred*. However, Sy shot to both national and international fame with the surprising hit *Intouchables*, which received nine César (the French equivalent of the Oscars) nominations and won Sy a César for best

actor.<sup>42</sup> The film, loosely based on the true story of Philippe Pozza di Borgo and Abdel Sellou, tells of the relationship between the wealthy, white quadriplegic Philippe (François Cluzet) and Driss (Sy), his black personal carer from the *banlieues*. As well as launching Sy's career, *Intouchables* raised a number of key issues surrounding the portrayal of ethnically diverse characters in French film. There was much critical disapproval both in France and the US over the perception that the character of Driss managed to painfully fulfil many of the stereotypes connected with black men in cinema.<sup>43</sup> Despite defenders of the film pointing to its warmth and genuine sincerity,<sup>44</sup> it nonetheless contains a problematic depiction of its black characters. This complex relationship between French cinema and non-white actors has indeed shaped Sy's own place in the French star system. Many of the characters played by Sy including Driss, Samba and Knock (a retired criminal-turned-qualified doctor in Lorraine Lévy's 2017 film *Knock*) all follow the same narrative trajectory, that of a black man, found to be 'good' by the white characters he encounters.

Sy is clearly aware of the connection between the characters he plays and his own star persona, stating: "if I am not the black guy, I am the guy from the banlieue."<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the line between Sy's star persona and the characters he plays continues to be blurred in an often-problematic manner. Both *Intouchables* and *Samba* demonstrate this blurring. Like Driss, Sy comes from the *banlieues*; thus, his transition as the *banlieusard*-turned-good can be seen as mirroring Sy's personal life. Samba, the immigrant-made-good, also reflects the popular image of Sy, the son of immigrants who has become both a national icon and international star. This highlights the wider problem of the limited roles for ethnically diverse actors in French cinema. Although, as Will Higbee notes, some actors of ethnically diverse backgrounds are able to move beyond roles characterised by their ethnic identities such as Gad Elmaleh, Danny Boon and Sami Bouajilah,<sup>46</sup> many are restricted within the wider understandings of their ethnicity and cultural background.<sup>47</sup> According to Vincendeau, many actors who have made their way into the star system have done so through the "Trojan horse" of comedy.<sup>48</sup> Sy, who is no exception to this rule, has almost exclusively played comic roles. Although the character of Samba can be considered a more serious role than that of Driss,<sup>49</sup> it still contains scenes in which Sy is required to act the buffoon, one of the three stereotypes commonly assumed by

black characters in cinema.<sup>50</sup> In a review of *Samba*, Nikola Grozdanovic notes that the film's protagonist is "a jokester prone to looking at the positive side of life."<sup>51</sup> While Sy's popularity is part of a growing shift in the French acceptance of diversity in cinema, nevertheless the roles he is given are still ethnically, socially and culturally defined.<sup>52</sup>

The medium through which the audience is introduced to, and indeed comes to know, Samba is that of a romantic relationship with the white, affluent Alice, a professional woman on sabbatical after a mental breakdown. It is through the context of this relationship with a white woman that the audience is able to create a fantasy in relation to Samba, accepting him on the grounds of well-worn tropes in relation to black immigrants. The most uncomfortable of these is the way in which Samba's *exoticness* is fetishized throughout the film, particularly through the medium of the white, female gaze. After accepting his case, both Alice and law student Manu (Izïa Higelin) accompany Samba to a court hearing which will determine his eligibility for a residency visa. While waiting in the court lobby for the hearing to commence, Alice ogles Samba as he changes out of his 'lucky' but 'inappropriate' Senegal soccer jersey into a more 'appropriate' white, collared dress shirt.<sup>53</sup> The camera cuts between Alice and her point-of-view, allowing the audience to also take part in the spectacle. This objectification is awkward not only because it is out of step with Alice's character (although it is later revealed she may be more sexually aggressive than first appearances may suggest) but also because of the power differential between the white gaze and the black object. A certain level of subjectivity is taken away from Samba as he becomes an object of eroticisation, compounded by the literal stripping of his national identity in the removal of his national soccer team's jersey.

The relationship between Alice and Samba contains a fundamental imbalance of power based on privilege, wealth, and social standing. The photograph of Samba as a child, which Alice becomes attached to, works as a symbolic representation of this power imbalance. Unable to sleep, Alice discovers the photograph while leafing through Samba's personal file. She removes the photograph from the file and places it on her bedside table. The scene invites an unsettling parallel between the photographs of the young Samba and those provided by charities of an African sponsor child. Although it would be wrong to suggest that this creates a tangible power struggle

between the two characters, there is nevertheless the distinct feeling that Alice views Samba at least in part as a charity case; the purpose her life seems to gain through him is comparable to that which the middle-class westerner may feel when sending money to a stricken African child. Furthermore, it is Alice who ultimately hands Samba the visa which she discovers in the deceased Jonas' jacket pocket. As a white affluent woman, it is Alice who holds the key to Samba's acceptance within France. That we are also watching Gainsbourg and Sy adds a further layer to the sense of inequality in their respective roles: Gainsbourg, who grew up in the French public eye, is considered a child of France and the poster-girl of ideal Frenchness; while Sy, the son of immigrants and an *ex-banlieusard*, represents a newer France, those of immigrant backgrounds who consider themselves French.

Perhaps the most problematic element of *Samba* is the distinction drawn between the "good" deserving immigrant Samba and the "bad" undeserving Jonas. The comparison of good and bad immigrants is a common one that has been aggressively used by the media in the West.<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Keyes notes that although this dichotomy has changed in relation to the targeted people group, a key idea remains prevalent, that of equating some "bad" immigrants with criminals or terrorists while seeing "good" immigrants as blameless, hardworking people seeking to make a decent future for themselves.<sup>55</sup> According to Keyes, this works to dehumanise some immigrants in order to justify harsh policies.<sup>56</sup> The idea of Samba as a "good" immigrant is developed from our first encounter with him. The opening scene depicting him working in a restaurant positions Samba not only as a representative of the other France but also as a hardworking "citizen." This is followed by a scene in which Samba is shown handing in his papers at immigration. This scene and those which follow, show not only Samba's willingness to work within the system but also the way in which this system can still deny him the right to live and work in France. While in detention he explains to Alice and Manu that although he has a steady job in a restaurant with the offer of a permanent contract he had already been denied a resident visa. The film goes to great pains to establish Samba as the "good" immigrant. When Alice visits Samba's uncle to collect some of Samba's possessions, the uncle tells her that his Samba is a decent boy who has been seeking a visa for many years.

Samba's situation is justified by shifting any blame from him onto the injustices of the system. In the same way as Manu responded to his situation, calling immigration officials "fuckers," so too are the audience encouraged to view Samba as a victim. This situation is juxtaposed with Jonas', who fled civil war in his home country to set up residence illegally in France. The fact that Jonas was arrested in the metro, presumably for not having a valid ticket, as well as his attempt to escape from the detention centre, further reinforces the illegality of his presence in France. When Samba tries to prevent Jonas from attempting escape, telling him he will go to jail for real, Jonas becomes violent, pushing Samba up against the wall.

This juxtaposition of Samba with Jonas will continue to the film's climax. Samba is on his way to a date with Alice when Jonas approaches him in the street. The stark contrast between the two is reinforced visually: following his uncle's advice, Samba has "Europeanised" himself completely (suit, trench coat, dress shoes, etc.) while Jonas appears dishevelled, wearing a fisherman's sweater and a shabby parka. Abigail Andrews explains in her work on the good/bad immigrant dichotomy that a concerning element of the distinction is the way in which "correct" behaviours are linked to attempting to become more white and abandoning behaviours that would link an individual to their cultural background.<sup>57</sup> Samba reluctantly agrees to accompany Jonas for a drink, and after a tense and awkward exchange, a drunk Jonas finally accuses Samba of having slept with his girlfriend. When Samba evades the accusations, Jonas once again becomes violent. A struggle ensues and soon the police arrive. Realising the imminent danger, Samba flees and is pursued by Jonas to a swing bridge over the Seine. The scene concludes with both men falling into the river. In the following scene, we learn Jonas has died and that Samba must flee to Senegal. The development of the conflict between the two men sits uneasily within the wider context of the film and seems to serve no other purpose than the convenient removal of what has now developed into the "problem" of Jonas.

#### IV. CHARLOTTE GAINSBOURG: *FILLE DE FRANCE*

Like Sy, Gainsbourg is from an immigrant background. Her father, Serge Gainsbourg was the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants and her mother Jane Birkin is British by birth. Schwartz remarks that the French policy of assimilation has helped to "integrate

European immigrants in France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—if by success one means being recognized as French despite familial national origin.” She argues that “few recall that Yves Montand was born to Italian immigrants or that Serge Gainsbourg was the son of Jewish Russian immigrants.”<sup>58</sup> While Gainsbourg’s immigrant background may not have been a factor in her casting in *Samba* it does complicate the binary notion of the French and the Other.

Gainsbourg was born in London in 1971 and raised in Paris. She made her screen debut at the age of 13 and subsequently made several French-language films, including Miller’s *L’effrontée* (1985), for which she won the César Award for Most Promising French Actress. She made her first English-language film *The Cement Garden*, directed by her uncle Andrew Birkin in 1993. Since then, Gainsbourg has appeared in several English-language films while continuing to make films in French, particularly with her long-term partner actor/director Yvan Attal. She appeared in the Italian-language film *Incompresa* (Asia Argento 2014) and the German, Canadian and Norwegian co-production film *Everything Will Be Fine* (2014) directed by Wim Wenders before making her Hollywood debut in *Independence Day: Resurgence* (Roland Emmerich, 2016), and this is in addition to the three films she made with von Trier, all in English.

What Gainsbourg’s film career demonstrates is a foray into transnational productions, the ability to make films in French and English, and the interconnection between her film roles and her famous family. Indeed, much of her star persona is connected to her famous family, not only in terms of her status as a *fille de* or “daughter of” but also in terms of her association with family members in the film roles themselves. Gainsbourg also appears in a number of films in which she plays a character named “Charlotte,” demonstrating an ongoing predilection for blurring the line between character and actor in her films.<sup>59</sup> This connection between her family or personal life and her film roles facilitated not only the blurring of her star persona with her characters but also the fluidity of her persona in terms of an ability to transcend borders and notions of nationality. As well as traversing national borders, Gainsbourg also works across a range of genres, including art cinema and popular entertainment. Her expanding oeuvre includes French romantic comedies,

international art house films, American independent cinema, horror, historical dramas and thrillers.

Gainsbourg's visibility in French culture informs the way she is written about in the popular press. She is described in the media as a "French national treasure,"<sup>60</sup> a "French star,"<sup>61</sup> a member of the "Boulevard Saint-Germain style aristocracy,"<sup>62</sup> and one of the "latest crop of stylish Frenchies."<sup>63</sup> However, Gainsbourg is in fact rather easily displaced from an exclusively French context. Indeed, Gainsbourg is also sometimes described as "Franco-British," "British-French," and "Anglo-French." These varied appellations, along with the cosmopolitanism of her star persona, complicate notions of nationality. In his discussion of French actresses in English-language films, Mick LaSalle argues that Gainsbourg is a special case, remarking that the daughter of Gainsbourg and Birkin is "as English as she is French."<sup>64</sup> Moreover, a cursory glance at Gainsbourg's filmography suggests that her stardom developed outside strictly French contexts. The settings and locations of her films, their country of production, and the nationalities of casts and crews, firmly locate Gainsbourg within an international and transnational film context.

In *Samba*, two key scenes in particular play on the cultural ambiguity of Gainsbourg's persona. In both scenes this ambiguity is used for comic effect as a way to endear us to Alice but also to reinforce the fact that it is not so much Alice that we are watching but Gainsbourg herself. In the first of these scenes, Gainsbourg's accent in particular becomes the subject of comic treatment in *Samba*: when told her English accent is "too BBC," she is encouraged to add an almost burlesque French inflection to her spoken English: "Do yoo 'av an accoont at ze bank?" According to Martin Shingler, in many instances the voice is often "the distinctive and defining feature of the star's persona."<sup>65</sup> Gainsbourg's voice plays a significant role in establishing her star persona as international or cosmopolitan, particularly in press articles. Amy Larocca notes that Gainsbourg's accent is "almost British, except for the inflections, which are entirely French—it makes perfect sense, given that she's the daughter of Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin."<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Zee and Bullock remark that Gainsbourg speaks "in her soft English-schoolgirl diction."<sup>67</sup> Hunter-Tilney claims that "Gainsbourg's spoken English—refined, softly spoken, composed—evokes the Chelsea bohemia of her mother's youth. But a Gallic sheen and the occasional stumble

for a word are reminders that French is her first language.”<sup>68</sup> Pulver, too, notes that Gainsbourg gets her “surreally plummy English accent” from Birkin and that “even though she grew up in Paris, and still lives there, she doesn’t seem to have a trace of a French accent.”<sup>69</sup> Gainsbourg herself accounts for her accent with reference to the fact that she grew up speaking French at home and first really learnt English while working with a language coach on the set of *The Cement Garden*. The fascination commentators have with Gainsbourg’s voice prompts consideration of how it operates in her film roles, particularly in terms of its ramifications for characterisation, and more broadly, questions of or as a signifier of national identity. Depending on the particular requirements of her English-language films, Gainsbourg can use her own accent or, as she is often required to, manufacture French-inflected English. For example, in *I’m Not There* (Todd Haynes 2007) in which Gainsbourg plays a French artist living in the US, the perceptive viewer will notice that she occasionally slips in and out of her accent.

The second key scene which imports Gainsbourg’s star persona to the role of Alice and which makes explicit reference to the star occurs mid-way through the film. In this scene Alice and Samba find themselves at a cafe at three o’clock in the morning. They discuss her burnout, and when Samba presses her for details, Alice explains she was given leave from work after breaking a colleague’s mobile phone over his head. She then goes on to outline the possible side effects of burn out, which include overeating, alcoholism, and sex abuse. An intrigued Samba asks: “And with you it’s what?” to which a deadpan Alice replies: “With me, it’s sex ... When I let myself go it’s a real carnage.” After an awkward moment, she reassures Samba she is joking and that she cannot “say ‘yes’ to excess.” These references to sex addiction and excess evoke Gainsbourg’s daring and controversial performances in von Trier’s *Nymphomaniac* and *Antichrist*. The ambiguity of the scene (both for Samba and for the audience) derives in part from the obvious instability of Alice’s character but also from a central ambiguity in Gainsbourg’s star persona. Indeed, this persona is built on an inherent and critical contradiction which is not resolved but intensified in her performances. The two sides of this dialectic might be called the proper and the perverse. Nowhere is this contradiction more greatly intensified than in her collaborations with Danish auteur von Trier.



*Samba* also blurs the line between character and actor through certain visual cues which link the character of Alice with Gainsbourg the actor. These include Gainsbourg's physical appearance and personal style which can best be described as "bobo" or "Left Bank chic." For her film roles, Gainsbourg frequently wears clothes picked from her own wardrobe and that conform to her own personal style. While in *Samba* she alters her appearance slightly for the role of Alice—she wears skirts and heels, items rarely seen on Gainsbourg in other films or in "off-duty" paparazzi shots—there are still discernible elements of Gainsbourg's style in the film: the loose-fitting grey and charcoal long-sleeve t-shirts, skinny jeans and oversized collared shirts with the top few buttons artfully undone. She also wears her own watch, a small Cartier mini *baignoire* yellow gold watch with black alligator band, a personal item she often wears in her films and is frequently photographed wearing. The watch is not only a signifier of Gainsbourg the star but also Alice's class and wealth. As Alice, Gainsbourg also has her same trademark long brown hair, either worn down or tied loosely back to reveal her swan-like neck. However, perhaps most important in terms of Gainsbourg's appearance, is her face. Indeed, the individuality or uniqueness of Gainsbourg's face always comes through in her film roles, somewhat overpowering the character. As Angelique Chrisafis remarks: "The thing about Gainsbourg is that whatever the role, however wonderfully she acts, she's not physically a chameleon: it's still always her face, her features that you're looking at, her father's jaw, the boyish smile, the quirky look."<sup>70</sup>

In blurring the lines between character and star, Alice is endeared to us through her embodiment of Gainsbourg's star persona. The choice of Gainsbourg was deliberate in that it permits Alice to emerge as a relatable character for a middle-class French audience. For this audience, *Samba*'s situation is mediated through Alice; but only insofar as they are also aware they are watching Gainsbourg.

## V. CONCLUSION: SOMETHING ROTTEN IN THE STATE OF FRANCE?

Like *Intouchables*, *Samba* is a thinly veiled allegory for the unification of France in which the two characters stand in for the two sides of contemporary French society: Alice/Gainsbourg is the "old" France but she is burnt out and exhausted, seeking to connect with her humanity through the acceptance of the immigrant Samba/Sy who

stands in for the new France in which ethnic identity is becoming more diverse. In the final scenes of the film, it is Alice who assumes Samba's identity by accepting and wearing his 'lucky' soccer jersey. It is this gesture which restores Alice to her old life, albeit with a newfound confidence and optimism about the future. For Samba, having adopted the identity of the deceased Jonas, he secures work as a chef, ironically for the Garde Républicaine. There is no clear sense that Alice and Samba continue to see each other at the end of the film. Rather, their meeting and liaison was more a fleeting moment with mutual benefit: Alice encourages Samba to assume Jonas' identity; Samba helps Alice regain her life.

The utopia of this ending, however, is haunted by the necessary exclusion of a third term: the "bad" or unwanted immigrant, the political asylum seeker in the figure of Jonas. The economic migrant is privileged in western democracies because of his or her willingness to take part in the economy of a country as a citizen and tax payer (the idea of "making good"). The very choice of the name "Jonas," a term used primarily among sailors to indicate a passenger on a ship who brings bad luck or who endangers a voyage, is apposite: the asylum seeker is precisely viewed as the outsider who threatens the ostensible economic union of a nation state with the "good" economic migrant.

One of the reasons the film is problematic is because its glossy look, romantic narrative, and generally light mood seem to undermine whatever critical purchase it may have, particularly when compared with other films about illegal immigrants such as Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne's *La Promesse* (1995) with its gritty realism. Nonetheless, it might also be argued that *Samba* employs these devices in a way which draws attention to them. It is the casting of Sy in particular which awakens the viewer to the humanity of the immigrant, in much the same way that Alice's humanity is awoken when she comes into contact with Samba. Indeed, Alice has been described as "an entry point for viewers who sympathize with the plight of migrants, or harbor crushes on them."<sup>71</sup> The viewer's capacity to empathise with Samba is in large part due to the fact that they are watching Omar Sy, the embodiment of the "good" immigrant through the eyes of Gainsbourg, the white, middle class French woman. This leaves the unresolved problem of the film; that which remains or persists even after the narrative achieves closure: the unrelenting image of the bad immigrant, Jonas.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Press kit for *Samba* (Gaumont), October 2014. My translation.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–3.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Edgar Morin, *The Stars*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove, 1960), 38.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Guy Austin, *Stars in Modern French Film* (London: Arnold, 2003), 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Colin Crisp, *Genre, Myth, and Convention in the French Cinema, 1929-1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 224–5.

<sup>11</sup> Austin, *Stars*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ginette Vincendeau, *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* (London; New York: Continuum, 2000), 24–25.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>15</sup> Vincendeau, “From the Margins to the Center: French Stardom and Ethnicity,” in *A Companion to Contemporary French Cinema*, ed. Alistair Fox, Michel Marie, Raphaëlle Moine, and Hilary Radner (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 547.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Guillaume Gendron, "Omar Sy, héraut malgré lui," *Libération*, December 5, 2016. [http://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/12/05/omar-sy-heraut-malgre-lui\\_1533139](http://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/12/05/omar-sy-heraut-malgre-lui_1533139).

<sup>19</sup> Travis Nesbitt and Val Rust, "Reimagining brotherhood: republican values and representations of nationhood in a diversifying France," in *Reconstructing memory: textbooks, identity, nation and state*, ed. J. H. Williams and W. D. Bokhorst-Heng (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016), 219.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Zaretsky, "Challenge to the soul of France," *The Australian Financial Review*, April 22, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Faïza Guène, "In search of Frenchness," *The Guardian*, Australian ed., January 28, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Alain Ruello, "SOCIETE : Omar Sy Reste La Personnalité Préférée Des Français," *Les Echos* (Paris), 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Modern France: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 81.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Le figaro.fr and AFP agence, "Pour Nicolas Sarkozy, « dès que l'on devient Français, nos ancêtres sont Gaulois »,» *Le Figaro*, September 19, 2016. <http://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-scan/2016/09/19/25001-20160919ARTFIG00393-pour-nicolas-sarkozy-des-que-l-on-devient-francais-nos-ancetres-sont-gaulois.php>. My translation.

<sup>28</sup> Schwartz, *Modern France*, 82–83.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>30</sup> Gendron, "Omar Sy."

<sup>31</sup> Le figaro.fr, "Omar Sy : « Quand la France est touchée, je le suis aussi »,» *Le Figaro*, December 21, 2015. <http://www.lefigaro.fr/cinema/2015/12/21/03002-20151221ARTFIG00057-omar-sy-quand-la-france-est-touchee-je-le-suis-aussi.php>. My translation.

<sup>32</sup> Gendron, "Omar Sy."

<sup>33</sup> William Kidd, "Frenchness: constructed and reconstructed," in *Contemporary French Cultural Studies*, ed. Siân Reynolds and William Kidd (London: Arnold, 2000), 159.

<sup>34</sup> LePoint.fr, "Omar Sy devance Obama et Will Smith dans le cœur des jeunes Français," *Le Point*, April 27, 2016. [https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/omar-sy-devance-obama-et-will-smith-dans-le-coeur-des-jeunes-francais-27-04-2016-2035363\\_23.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/omar-sy-devance-obama-et-will-smith-dans-le-coeur-des-jeunes-francais-27-04-2016-2035363_23.php).

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- <sup>40</sup> Lorenza Muñoz, “‘The Intouchables’: Omar Sy on the Movie and His Success,” *The Daily Beast*, May 25, 2012. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-intouchables-omar-sy-on-the-movie-and-his-success>.
- <sup>41</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- <sup>42</sup> Emine Fisek, “Rethinking *Intouchables*: Race and performance in contemporary France,” *French Cultural Studies* 29, (2018): 190–201.
- <sup>43</sup> Raphaëlle Moine, “Stereotypes of class, ethnicity and gender in contemporary French popular comedy: from *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* (2008) and *Intouchables* (2011) to *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au Bon Dieu?* (2014),” *Studies in French Cinema*, no. 18 (2018): 35–51.
- <sup>44</sup> Vincendeau, “From the Margins to the Center,” 559.
- <sup>45</sup> Gendron, “Omar Sy.” My translation.
- <sup>46</sup> Will Higbee, “Beyond Ethnicity or a Return to Type? *Bande de Filles/Girlhood* and the Politics of Blackness in Contemporary French Cinema,” in *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France*, ed. Kathryn Kleppinger and Laura Reek (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), 166–182.
- <sup>47</sup> Vincendeau, “From the Margins to the Center,” 559.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>49</sup> Sy’s recent casting in *Chocolat* (Roschdy Zem 2016), a French drama based on the story of Rafael Padilla, France’s first black celebrity, further marks a shift in genre from purely comic to

more serious roles.

<sup>50</sup> Moine, “Stereotypes of class.”

<sup>51</sup> Nikola, Grozdanovic, “TIFF Review; Samba Starring Omar Sy, Tahar Rahim and Charlotte Gainsbourg,” *IndieWire*, September 6, 2014. <https://www.indiewire.com/2014/09/tiff-review-samba-starring-omar-sy-tahar-rahim-charlotte-gainsbourg-272798>.

<sup>52</sup> Vincendeau, “From the Margins to the Center,” 550.

<sup>53</sup> That Samba seems to be haunted by bad luck makes the naming of his soccer jersey ironic; however, it also points to the good-humoured outlook of Samba in the face of ongoing trouble, which is an essential part of his character.

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Keyes, “Beyond Saints and Sinners: Discretion and the Need for New Narratives in the U.S. Immigration System,” *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* 26 (2012): 216–256.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Abigail L. Andrews, “Moralizing regulation: The Implications of Policing ‘good’ versus “bad” immigrants,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 4 (2017): 2–19.

<sup>58</sup> Schwartz, *Modern France*, 84.

<sup>59</sup> These include Elie Chouraqui’s *Paroles et Musique* (1984), Claude Miller’s *L’effrontée* (1985), Serge Gainsbourg’s *Charlotte Forever* (1986), and Attal’s *Ma femme est une actrice* (2001). In addition to this, Gainsbourg’s characters tend to have names which are of personal significance for the actor: Lucy (her middle name) in *The Golden Door* (Criales, 2006); Joe (her daughter’s name) in *Nymphomaniac Volumes 1&2*; and Alice (her other daughter’s name) in *Samba* (Nakache and Toledano 2014).

<sup>60</sup> Maggie Bullock, “Rock of Angels: Women in Music 2010,” *Elle*, June 2010. <http://www.elle.com/culture/music/a11246/women-in-music-2010>.

<sup>61</sup> Tim Murphy, “In Charlotte Gainsbourg, Indifference and Whispers Prove Alluring,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/10/fashion/charlotte-gainsbourg-up-close.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Jess Cartner-Morley, “Nicolas Ghesquière brings joy to Louis Vuitton at Paris fashion week,” *The Guardian*, March 5, 2014.

<https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2014/mar/05/nicolas-ghesquiere-louis-vuitton-paris-fashion-week>.

<sup>63</sup> Natasha Fraser-Cavassoni, “Secrets of French Style,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, no. 3513 (2004).

<sup>64</sup> Mick LaSalle, *The Beauty of the Real: What Hollywood Can Learn from Contemporary*

*French Actresses* (Stanford: Stanford General Books, 2012), 91.

<sup>65</sup> Martin Shingler, *Star Studies: A Critical Guide* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 80. Shingler gives the examples of James Stewart, Orson Welles, Judy Holliday, and Marilyn Monroe, among others.

<sup>66</sup> Amy Larocca, "62 minutes with Charlotte Gainsbourg," *New York Magazine*, May 17, 2010. <http://nymag.com/news/intelligencer/encounter/65899>.

<sup>67</sup> Joe Zee and Maggie Bullock, *The Elements of Personal Style: 25 Modern Fashion Icons on How to Dress, Shop, and Live* (New York: Gotham Books, 2010), 202.

<sup>68</sup> Ludovic Hunter-Tilney, "'I like being manipulated': Charlotte Gainsbourg discusses her music, her father, and her work with Lars von Trier," *Financial Times*, January 15, 2012. <https://www.ft.com/content/97796e0a-3bb2-11e1-bb39-00144feabdc0>.

<sup>69</sup> Andrew Pulver, "Confidence trick," *The Guardian*, June 16, 2007. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/jun/15/1>.

<sup>70</sup> Angélique Chrisafis, "'I prefer to anticipate the bad side rather than get a slap in the face later,'" *The Guardian*, September 29, 2011.

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/sep/28/charlotte-gainsbourg-melancholia>.

<sup>71</sup> Nicolas Rapold, "Review: 'Samba,' About the Travails of an Illegal Immigrant in France," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2015.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/24/movies/review-samba-about-the-travails-of-an-illegal-immigrant-in-france.html>.