

UCLA

Thinking Gender Papers

Title

Jogo Bonito: a Study of Brazilian Soccer as a Modern Spectacle of Races

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4zp5s4nm>

Author

Rosa, Cristina F.

Publication Date

2010-04-01

Jogo Bonito: a Study of Brazilian Soccer as a Modern Spectacle of Races

Bio: Cristina Rosa is a PhD candidate at the World Arts and Cultures department. In her doctoral dissertation, whose title is “Moving Scripts: A Study of *Ginga* within Choreographies of Gendered and National Identification in Brazil,” Rosa argues that the aesthetic and philosophical knowledges enacted in body-centered practices such as samba, capoeira and soccer-art have recuperated-cum-invented in Brazil an epistemology beyond colonial languages, whose scope exceeds or differs from Eurocentric thought.

It’s been said that through soccer, Brazilians have turned the world, the harsh reality we experience daily, into a playful, pleasurable, and fruitful joke. They have, in so many words transformed the precision and curacy of this colonial English field of action into a wiggle room. The sport plays such a central role within the nation’s socio-economical and political life that one could easily organize its history as a series of four-year rehearsal intervals, between World Cups spectacles. In an attempt to decipher the “riddle of Brazilian soccer,” the literary scholar Jose Miguel Wisnik (2006) has gone one step further to suggested that, every four years, “Brazilian soccer, and by extension, the country, is experienced as a *pharmakon*, a poison-cure, an inebriating and potentially lethal drug that oscillates with disturbing ease between plenitude and emptiness” (199).

Rolland Barthes (1961, 2007) suggests that modern sporting spectacles have assumed the primary social role theatre once had in Greco-Roman antiquity, gathering diverse groups of people under a shared experience. He draws a direct relationship between sporting spectacles and national communities. In the case of Brazil, soccer does the trick. Brazil is the only country to have played in every World Cup, winning the championship five times. In the next 10 minutes, I will run across the span of 70 years, juggling between the chronology of the sport with a series of benchmark events surrounding the history of Brazil’s political black movement. We begin with the Abolition of Slavery in 1888, and conclude with the country first victory in the 1958 World

Cup, gesturing towards future discussions. In between, I will historicize the (late) process of inclusion of visibly black males on national soccer teams in the 1930s, stirring up a dramatic revolution within the image Brazilian had of themselves.

The personalized ways of articulating ideas that players such as Pelé and Garrincha have improvised on local soccer stages, have set them apart, despite the stigmas associated with blackness and brownness. Additionally, the apparently unproductive expenditure of resources of their artful swings and uncanny fairs, their *ginga*, has produced a surplus of pride and joy amongst working-class citizens. Finally, when appointed to represent the nation on global stages, their non-hegemonic rhetorical strategies became secret weapons against the European nations. Redressed in national flag-waving uniforms, I conclude, at World Cups their improvised performances have contributed to the compilation of a converging nation-building discourse, anchored on black and *mestiço* aesthetic knowledge. Ultimately, these exceptional individuals have performed scripts re-cognized internationally as *choreographies of national identification*.

My analysis of the Brazilian style of playing soccer function as a case study to the following argument: As a performative field, soccer represents an unique arena in which the idea of Brazil as an harmonious mixed-raced nation makes perfect sense. However, the spectacularization of the country's identification with soccer has not been able to surpass the asymmetrical negotiation of power relations daily experienced within that geo-political territory. In other words, Brazil's dazzling performances as the #1 soccer nation had failed, as one should expect, to revert the raced division of labor that continues to strike the majority of the population with a determinist sense of defeat. To borrow Wisnik's metaphor once again, Brazil's process of identification has oscillated between a self-prescribed medicine and a poisonous opiate,

conjuring up what I have entitled, in my own scholarship, a pride-and-shame conundrum. This is how Brazil has come to imagine itself as a soccer-nation.

On 13 of May of 1888, two benchmark events took place in Brazil: the Abolition of Slavery and the foundation of the first national sport's club, the Sao Paulo Athletic. Similar to most elitist European-aspiring spaces, however, team sports in these clubs such as cricket and soccer, were vetoed for blacks and mestiços. Anchored on the XIX century discourse of scientific racism, during Brazil's First Republic (1889 -1930), blackness in general, and miscegenation in particular, are imagined as a symptom of degenerative (social) disease. At the turn of the century, for example, Medical scholars stage two "performative solutions" to the problem of "race degeneration:" they either prescribed the "hygieneization and civilization" of urban centers to eradicate blackness, a social and moral illness or "whitening" of races to cure the "diseased" (Schwarcz, 1993).

In the 1930s, a new paradigm would emerge. First, in 1930 president Getulio Vargas institutes a populist government that, among others, grants a series of legal rights to working-class citizens, as we know them today. In the following year, black activists found the Black Brazilian Front, a political organization with hopes to become the first black political party, in 1936. This is also the period when local soccer players identified as Black gain national visibility, first within segregated clubs, and eventually within national mixed-race teams. Among them, exceptional players such as Leonidas da Silva, would become iconic and beloved figures in Brazil, despite his race and class.

At the same time, but on the other side of the political game, modern scientists such as the sociologist Gilberto Freyre's, begin to argue that miscegenation is a positive outcome of colonization. Contrary to the scientific racism of the XIX century, under Freyre's pen,

mestiçagem - once understood as a (shameful) social illness – as well as the mestiço, a symbol of racial monstrosity, are idealized as a source of national pride. Inspired by the performances of players such as Leonidas, for example, Freyre imagines the emergence of a “Dionysian” style of playing soccer in the country, identified as a “refinement” of the aesthetics found in Afro-centric practices (i.e. samba and capoeira). Perhaps more than in any other fields, within soccer matches, the efficiency of “Dionysian players - over the Eurocentric “Apollonian style” of playing – functioned as tangible evidences of the accuracy of Freyre’s theories.

In 1937, Vargas dissolved all political parties including the Black Front, and instituted a totalitarian dictatorship that would last till the end of WWII. Following nationalist ideologies that emerge in Europe in the years leading to the war, Vargas’s dictatorship, or “New State”¹ appropriates Freyre’s innovating ideas into a “modern” discourse of national identification that could unify the country towards “order and progress.”

In 1938, Leonidas is elected the top scorer of the World Cup in France, where he was nicknamed “rubber man.” Within the nationalistic arena of the time, I would argue, soccer becomes a field, perhaps the only realm, in which Freyre’s theories and Vargas’ policies - today commonly known as “democracy of races” ideology - made perfect sense. Hence, following Brazil’s spectacular performance during the World Cup of 1938, when the national team scores a glorious third place, Brazilian popular media would be collectively produce patriotic eulogies toward their mixed race athletes. Taking advantage of this “open door,” furthermore, both the media the state would incorporate the afro-Brazilian aesthetic of ginga in their discourses as a apparatus to manipulate the crowds towards patriotism.

¹ Modeled after A. O. Salazar’s New State, Portuguese authoritarian regime (1933-1968) that enforced nationalist and Catholic values on the population. Exalting the five centuries Portuguese maritime expansion, the regime resisted the process of decolonization accelerated after WWII.

For black intellectual-activists such as Abdias do Nascimento, however, this notion of “racial democracy” was highly problematic. For Nascimento, The New State celebration of racial harmony invariably excluded, the contributions of black males in the socio-cultural formation of the country, making them either invisible or impotent. Indeed, once blackness became a floating signifier disassociated from black (and brown) citizens, they remain as marginal (auto-exotic/erotic) objects of study or sources of inspiration. During Vargas’ dictatorship, furthermore, black movement receded mostly except for in theatre. Committed and restless, in 1944, Abdias do Nascimento found Teatro Experimental do Negro to raise Black (negro) consciousness and fight against racial discrimination. In 1947, furthermore, Mario Filho publishes a compelling study, in which he historicize the Brazilian way of playing soccer as the result of a as a series of carefully constructed negotiations of power based on racial relations.

In the 1950’s, the acrobatic nation-building archives and repertoires would continue to oscillate between pride and shame. Brazil’s exceptional idolatry of black and mulatto soccer players would backfire in the retroactive tragedy on 1950, when country both hosted and lost the World Cup title. In a lethal act of unimagined misfortune, the defeat of the Brazilian team in their home land inside Maracana stadium, a modern coliseum, dragged the entire country back into a shameful black hole of colonial pessimism. In the wake of such highly publicized tragedy, mainstream society would reveal its true colors, singling out few black players as scapegoats. On a brighter side, in 1950, black activist institute the First Congress of Black Africans, followed by the foundation of the Black Cultural Association in 1954.

In 1958, as the country prepares to win the 1958 World Cup, the journalist and playwright Nelson Rodrigues began staging a series of dramatic sport chronicles where Black and mulatas are held as heroes of a Shakespearean drama. Rodrigues has coined expressions

such as “the Ethiopian Prince,” and “street-dog complex” that related, respectively, to the majestic power of exceptional citizens such as Pelé and Didi, and the country’s “paralyzing” sense of inferiority (shame) as a mixed-race nation. After Brazil’s victory in that World Cup, Mario Filho publishes an expanded edition of his historical book (1964), where he states that in 1958 Pelé performed “an act of emancipation,” symbolically freeing the country from the stigmas associated with slavery. Using compelling language and dramatic figures of speech, writers such as Rodrigues and Filho acknowledge the innovative humor, productive leisure, pleasurable expenditure, and rhythmic grace that these artful individuals choreographed, as alternative role-model puppets* of a nation-building dream.

From 1964 to 85, a new military dictatorship censored all manifestation centered on race or black pride. In a context of political repression and police brutality, freedom of speech was reduced quite often to passionate screams to goal. As a profitable and hypnotizing opiate, the incredible performances of the Brazilian teams, especially during the 1970 World Cup, is appropriated as a tool of state control.

Scholar Joseph Roach (1998) has recently suggested that modern sporting events in the Americas follow a genealogy of performances in the circum-Atlantic World, shaped by the triangular trafficking in money, property, and flesh. Informed by the raced division of labor, for Roach, the commodification of laboring flesh in the Americas, for example, connects modern sporting events such as NFL to colonial slave auctions. Today, the World Cup expands this genealogy of performance towards both global capitalism and auto-exotic patriotism. The State, media, multinational corporations, and soccer institutions profit on these players’ physical imagery of health and will power as well as their performative discourses. But that is the topic of a different match.

Works Sited

- Barthes, Roland. *What is Sport?* Yale University Press, (1961, 2007)
- Freire, Gilberto. *Casa-Grande & Senzala: Formação da Família Brasileira sob o Regime da Economia Patriarcal*. Rio de Janeiro: Maia & Schmidt, 1933
- Nascimento, Abdias do. "Teatro experimental do negro: trajetória e reflexões." *Estud. av.* [online]. 2004, vol.18, n.50 [cited 2010-01-22], pp. 209-224 . Available from: <http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0103-40142004000100019&lng=en&nrm=iso>. ISSN 0103-4014. doi: 10.1590/S0103-40142004000100019.
- Roach, Joseph R. "Slave Spectacles and Tragic Octoroons." *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*. University of North Carolina Press, 1998
- Rodrigues Filho, Mario. *O negro no Futebol Brasileiro*. São Paulo: Civilização Brasileira, (1947, 1964)
- Rodrigues, Nelson. *À sombra das Chuteiras Imortais: Crônicas de Futebol*. São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1993
- Schwarcz, Lilia Moritz. *The Spectacle of the Races: Scientists, Institutions, and the Race Question in Brazil, (1870-1930)*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1993
- Wisnik, Jose Miguel. *Veneno remédio: O Futebol e o Brasil*. Companhia das Letras: Rio de Janeiro, 2008