

Same Field, Different Skin Colors: The Performance of Race and Colorism in Brazilian Football

Mesmo campo, diferentes cores de pele:
A performance da raça e do colorismo no futebol brasileiro

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates how processes of racialization and the ideology of colorism operate in the football games played in the city of São Paulo between teams of Black Brazilians against teams of White Brazilians from 1927 to 1939, and in a 2003 match recorded by the documentary *Preto contra branco*. It builds on interpretations by authors who studied the news articles about those matches, arguing that the games embody political narratives that counteract the ideology of colorism. They also invoke a racial division similar to the one drop rule in the United States and subversively reenacted it, which destabilizes the myth of racial democracy in Brazil. In defiance of a colorist discourse that at once favors limited national integration and reinforces racial hierarchy, those games represent a critique against racism and the myth of racial harmony. They also contest Gilberto Freyre's reductive notion that Afro-Brazilians practice football as an "arte de songamonga."

KEYWORDS: Racial Democracy; Race; Gilberto Freyre, Brazilian Football; Colorism.

RESUMO: Este artigo investiga como processos de racialização e a ideologia do colorismo operam nos jogos de futebol disputados, na cidade de São Paulo, entre times de brasileiros negros contra times de brasileiros brancos de 1927 a 1939 e em uma partida de 2003 registrada pelo documentário *Preto contra branco*. Com base em interpretações de autores que analisaram textos jornalísticos sobre essas partidas, ele argumenta que esses jogos encarnam narrativas políticas que se contrapõem à ideologia do colorismo. Essas disputas também estabelecem uma divisão racial semelhante à regra da gota única nos Estados Unidos e subversivamente a reencenam para desestabilizar o mito da democracia racial no Brasil. Desafiando um discurso colorista que promove uma integração nacional limitada enquanto reforça uma hierarquia racial, essas partidas representam uma crítica ao racismo e ao mito da harmonia entre as raças. Eles também contestam a noção redutora de Gilberto Freyre de que os afro-brasileiros jogam o futebol como "uma arte de songamonga".

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Democracia racial; Raça; Gilberto Freyre; Futebol brasileiro, Colorismo.

INTRODUCTION

Between 1927 and 1939, teams of Black and White Brazilians played football matches to commemorate the official end of slavery in the state of São Paulo. In these two decades, an amateur football league always scheduled the games on May 13th, the day in which the Lei Áurea abolished slavery in the South American country in 1888. Brazil was the last nation in the Americas to prohibit the enslavement of Black people. In these games, players divided themselves according to their races. Some of them were able to self-identify the color of their skin. At that time, Arthur Friedenreich was the most important Brazilian football player. Friedenreich played for the team of White footballers on the May 13th games.¹ He was mixed-race, born to a German father and a Black mother. Friedenreich was a chameleonic player.

The purpose of these matches was to celebrate a new era in Brazil, in which an incipient project of national identity strived to subdue Black people in a color-blind society. Authors who analyzed news articles from that period claim that, by being regarded as original, “essa iniciativa reforçava um discurso proclamado de que o brasileiro seria um povo avesso ao preconceito racial.”² After the teams of Black players have accumulated victories in some of the May 13th competitions, these authors asserted that the news articles about the games, which were published between 1927 and 1939, praised the athletic, bodily, and technical performance of the Afro-Brazilians, who were able to play in “a clima de cordialidade”.³ The essentialist compliments would set the tone for a future consensus about the supposed innate aptitude of Black sportsmen for playing football and interpret that sport as an opportunity to include Black people socially and economically.⁴

¹ ABRAHÃO; CALDAS; SOARES. O ex-jogador de futebol Arthur Friedenreich em museus da cidade de São Paulo, p. 96.

² ABRAHÃO; SOARES. O futebol na construção da identidade nacional: uma análise sobre os jogos “pretos x brancos”, p. 51.

³ ABRAHÃO; SOARES. Raça e civilidade nos jogos “preto x branco”, p. 1138.

⁴ ABRAHÃO; SOARES. O elogio ao negro no espaço do futebol: entre a integração pós-escravidão e a manutenção das hierarquias sociais, p. 6.

This idea reinforced the perception of racial inclusiveness in Brazil, which would later be hegemonically proposed as the myth of racial democracy.⁵ Gilberto Freyre deemed Brazilian football a creative and unique reinvention of a European sport for which the contribution of Afro-diasporic people was fundamental.⁶ Freyre would keep stressing this argument from the late 1930s forward, a period in which racial integration in Brazilian professional football had already started. For him, Brazilian players of African descent turned an English invention into a sport more spontaneous, similar to a dance with Dionysian moves. In an article published in 1938, Freyre defined Brazilian football as the enemy of “formalismo apolíneo e amigo das variações; deliciando-se em manhas moleironas, mineiras a que se sucedem surpresas de agilidade. A arte de songamonga”.⁷ Like *capoeira*, football played by people of African descent in Brazil became for Freyre the manifestation of *malandragem*.⁸

The same practice of organizing games of Black players against White players resurfaced in São Paulo in the 1970s. However, contrary to the matches that took place from 1927 to 1939, which commemorated the abolishment of slavery and the supposed inclusion of formerly enslaved people and their descendants into Brazilian society, the games from the 1970s onward were *jogos de várzea* within a spontaneous, amateur, and unofficial competition organized by poor, working class people.⁹ Directed by Wagner Morales, the documentary *Preto contra branco* (2004) narrates the complex history of the football tournament composed of two racially divided teams that started in 1970s. It focuses on the 2003 game, and registers how players negotiate perceptions of skin color for the *jogos de várzea* of that unofficial competition. The games took place in São João Clímaco, a peripheral and proletarian neighborhood in the city of São Paulo, in the week before Christmas, a holiday popularly associated with fraternity and forgiveness.

Self-identified White Brazilians from São João Clímaco play against self-identified Black players of the neighboring slum of Higienópolis. In interviews for

⁵ ABRAHÃO; SOARES. O elogio ao negro no espaço do futebol: entre a integração pós-escravidão e a manutenção das hierarquias sociais, p. 14.

⁶ FREYRE. Prefácio à primeira edição, p. 24.

⁷ FREYRE. Foot-ball mulato, p.4.

⁸ FREYRE. Foot-ball mulato, p.4.

⁹ ABRAHÃO; SOARES. Uma análise sobre o “racismo à brasileira” através dos jogos “preto x branco”, p. 2-3.

Morales' documentary, organizers and players in the yearly football game explain it as a celebration of color blindness.¹⁰ Nonetheless, what the documentary registers is a temporary permission for self-identified White players, organizers, and fans to shout racist slurs at Black people during the matches, without feeling shame or expecting punishment. That temporary permission operates as an instance that destabilizes the enduring myth of racial democracy by making racism in Brazilian society more explicit. When players chose to self-identify as Black people, their decision challenges the argument according to which football is a sport in which reactions against racism always have to be disguised and "infrapolitical," as Richard Follett argues in an article that focuses on the intersection between football and race in Brazil.¹¹ As Follett affirms, "black Brazilian football proved to be a crucial political and social site ... [for] celebrating the roguish *malandro*, a figure from the slave quarters and urban slums who pitted his wits against authority and who challenged his former masters by cunning, contrivance, and uncontrollable spontaneity".¹² Follett contends that race in the realm of Brazilian football has been a disguised, infrapolitical subject matter.

According to David Scott, infrapolitics is not what it seems to be. As Scott proposes, "[e]ach of the forms of disguise resistance, of infrapolitics, is the silent partner of a loud form of public resistance. ... No public claims are made, no open symbolic lines are drawn. All political action takes forms that are designed to obscure their intentions or to take cover behind an apparent meaning".¹³ They impose different logic of political action. Marked by infrapolitics, the games played in São João Clímaco seems to avoid any direct denunciation of racist discourses or acts from most of the players and organizers. The exceptions are chameleonic players like Preguinho, who chose to play for the team of Black players.

Scott defines "dissimulation" as a form of infrapolitics practiced by subaltern groups. For Freyre, Brazilian football's "arte de songamonga" was imbued with the practice of dissimulation.¹⁴ When Freyre proposed "flamboyant" e "malandro" as

¹⁰ PRETO contra branco.

¹¹ FOLLETT. *The Spirit of Brazil: Football and the Politics of Afro-Brazilian Cultural Identity*, p. 84.

¹² FOLLETT. *The Spirit of Brazil: Football and the Politics of Afro-Brazilian Cultural Identity*, p. 73.

¹³ SCOTT. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, p. 199.

¹⁴ SCOTT. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, p. xiii.

essential characteristics of the Brazilian football player, he assured that this definition “está hoje em tudo que é afirmação verdadeira do Brasil,” as an “arte que não se abandona nunca à disciplina do método científico mas procura reunir ao suficiente de combinação de esforços e ao mínimo de efeitos em massa a liberdade para a variação, para o floreio, para o improviso”.¹⁵ In Freyre’s view, the African ancestry of Brazilian players explained the successful performance of the national football team in the 1938 World Cup, which took place in France. He interpreted the unprecedented achievement of the national team, which reached the 1938 World Cup semifinals, as the result of “coragem, que afinal tivéramos completa, de mandar à Europa um time fortemente afro-brasileiro”.¹⁶ Freyre regarded that success as the accomplishment of Brazilian society as a whole.

This article investigates how processes of racialization and the ideology of colorism operate in the football games played in the city of São Paulo by Afro-Brazilians against White Brazilians from 1927 to 1939, and in the 2003 match recorded in *Preto contra branco*. By dialoguing with authors who analyzed the news reports about the racially segregated matches, published in the 1920s and 1930s, this article argues that these games can be perceived as microcosms of Brazilian society.¹⁷ Not only inside the four lines of the football fields, but also in daily life, social interactions in Brazil are hypothetical examples of the idea of color blindness toward race. However, as this article claims, the athletic and social performances of those footballers depend on the ideology of colorism, which incessantly reinforces racial hierarchy and problematizes the recalcitrant tendency to minimize the significance of race in a society as miscegenated as the Brazilian one. As Alessandra Devulsky states, colorism is an ideology that establishes a racial hierarchy comprised of “um sistema de valoração que avalia atributos subjetivos e objetivos, materiais e imateriais, segundo um critério fundamental eurocêntrico.”¹⁸ In Devulsky’s definition, colorism “incorpora ... dados históricos, culturais, estéticos e

¹⁵ FREYRE. *Foot-ball mulato*, p.4.

¹⁶ FREYRE. *Foot-ball mulato*, p.4.

¹⁷ According to Abrahão and Soares, “o ritual do ‘Preto X Branco’ condensa as relações raciais na cultura brasileira reproduzindo-as e colocando-as em destaque através do futebol.” ABRAHÃO; SOARES. *Os jogos de futebol “preto x branco” e a dramatização da questão racial no Brasil*, p. 12.

¹⁸ DEVULSKY. *Colorismo*, p. 29.

biológicos, nos quais a proporção de pigmento epidérmico é somente um dos elementos definidores de raça”.¹⁹

This article contends that those games, performed according to racializing divisions, embodied political narratives that counteract the colorist and historical reading of “miscigenação como uma prova ocular da ausência de racismo”.²⁰ Those matches invoke a racial division similar to the one drop rule in the United States and subversively reenact it to contest the idea that race may be considered irrelevant or a fabricated problem in Brazil, given the different hues of skin colors observable in Brazilian society. In defiance of a colorist discourse that silences the political voices of Afro-Brazilians while reinforcing a racial hierarchy, those games represent an critique against racism and the myth of racial harmony. They also destabilize the reductive and racialized notion that Afro-Brazilian players, for supposedly being “flamboyant” and “malandros,” essentially practice football as the “arte de songamonga”.²¹

FOOTBALL AS A CELEBRATION OF RACIAL INCLUSIVENESS

As other popular cultural manifestations, football has historically become a crucial symbol for constructing national identity in Brazil. Football has contributed for the subjugation of discussions about race in favor of an integrationist discourse.²² Edward Telles interprets racialization in Brazil as a process that encapsulates opposite, incompatible views. As Telles notes, recent scholarly research tended to address the effects of exclusion, while past studies privileged the stance of racial mixture. In his study, Telles focuses on the persistence of an idea that links miscegenation to racial inclusivity, as if inequality and discrimination, both products of slavery, are transitory. Telles asks why “an ideology of racial inclusion” was acceptable historically in Brazil: “What is it about the Brazilian system that supported arguments about racial inclusivity? And if there is any support for them,

¹⁹ DEVULSKY. *Colorismo*, p. 41.

²⁰ PIRES. Ruídos raciais: A experiência sonora e violenta da miscigenação em O som ao redor de Kleber Mendonça Filho, p. 33.

²¹ FREYRE. Foot-ball mulato, p. 4.

²² ABRAHÃO; SOARES. O elogio ao negro no espaço do futebol: entre a integração pós-escravidão e a manutenção das hierarquias sociais, p. 14.

how can inclusivity coexist with exclusiveness? For me, this remains the enigma of Brazilian race relations”.²³

The story of the games of Black players against White players at two different historical moments in Brazil problematizes “the enigma of Brazilian race relations.” In Brazil, categories of race that depend exclusively on skin color apparently tend to be malleable as if race is in the eye of the beholder. Besides skin color, Brazilians base their racial judgments on the ideology of colorism: other physical and social characteristics, such as hair’s texture, and facial forms, and apparent material status of a person, render how processes of racialization structure advantages and privilege in Brazilian society.

Although Thomas Skidmore compared Brazil to the United States to affirm that the South American country avoided categorizing people according to the “descent rule”— in which it is ancestry rather than phenotypical elements that define race —, ancestry represents a prominent racial standard in Brazil.²⁴ As Alessandra Devulsky states, mixed-race people worry about their family backgrounds, knowing that their origins may threaten their possibility for social mobility.²⁵ The restrictions on the ascension of a *miscigenado* to a better social position “depended upon his exact appearance (the more ‘Negroid,’ the less mobile) and the degree of cultural ‘whiteness’ (education, manners, wealth) he was able to attain”.²⁶ In a supposed color-blind social scenario, Brazilians are sensitive to racial categories. The understanding of race in Brazil relies on the assumption that there is a conditional ability to make skin color seem less visible and to promote a limited inclusion which, nevertheless, also derives from racial criteria. The racially divided teams and their chameleonic players, like Friedenreich, manifest the tension between racial differentiation/sameness and social/body performances. The myth of racial democracy and the ideology of colorism have historically masked this tension.

²³ TELLES. *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil*, p. 6.

²⁴ SKIDMORE. *Black Into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought*, p. 40.

²⁵ DEVULSKY. *Colorismo*, p. 24.

²⁶ SKIDMORE. *Black Into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought*, p. 40.

SEPARATE BUT EQUAL: RACISM IN BRAZILIAN FOOTBALL

Racial integration in Brazilian football was an incipient and fraught process when the first matches of teams of Black players against teams of White players took place in the 1920s to celebrate the abolition of slavery. The games represented an officially authorized attempt to commemorate the abolition on May 13th after two decades of governmental unwillingness to remember the end of slavery in 1888. Although the authorities in the city of São Paulo repressed the celebrations of May 13th, formerly enslaved people, freed Black people, and their descendants were able to observe with music and dance, during the 1890s, the date of the implementation of Lei Áurea.²⁷ From that decade onward, labor and immigrant organizations began to interpret the abolition of slavery as the end of the impediment to the massive arrival of European immigrants in Brazil. The most radical labor militants, with anarchist tendencies, treated the date as a chance to denounce a new form of servitude: wage slavery.²⁸ They focused on the similarities between owning and renting a person.

However, according to George Reid Andrews, more important than the participation of the newly constituted working class in the May 13th celebrations in São Paulo was the continuous performance of Black civic and social organizations in the three decades after the end of enslavement of Black people.²⁹ The Black movement proposed a more formal commemoration, which included poetry readings, public processions, and speeches about emancipation.³⁰ The more ostensive observance of the holiday can be read as a reaction to the prejudice of White elites, which viewed the popular celebrations of May 13th with dance and

²⁷ ANDREWS. *Blacks and Whites in São Paulo, Brazil, 1888-1988*, p. 213.

²⁸ ANDREWS. *Blacks and Whites in São Paulo, Brazil, 1888-1988*, p. 213.

²⁹ ANDREWS. *Blacks and Whites in São Paulo, Brazil, 1888-1988*, p. 213.

³⁰ Andrews writes that “festivities usually centered on such ‘civilized’ activities as speeches honoring emancipation (often by local political figures), poetry readings, music, and, in the evening, ballroom dances. By the late 1920s, observances in the state capital included a march by representatives of the various black organizations from center city to the tomb of black abolitionist Luis Gama in the Consolação cemetery. Following ceremonies at his grave, they would then visit the offices of newspapers and radio stations to impress on the media the importance of May 13 in Brazilian history.” According to Andrews, the events sponsored each year by black social clubs around the state of São Paulo (many of them named in honor of May 13) were harder to dismiss. ANDREWS. *Blacks and Whites in São Paulo, Brazil, 1888-1988*, p. 213-214.

music as an proof of the supposed barbarism and inferiority of “a childish *povo*, which would seize on any opportunity for a party”.³¹ Andrews noted that the *preto-branco*, the so-called games of Black against White players, was an additional attempt to make the festivities of May 13th appear more civilized. As Andrews states, in the 1920s

segregation of soccer teams had only just begun to break down in Rio de Janeiro and was firmly entrenched in São Paulo. The city’s top black and white players were thus confined to separated leagues, with no opportunity to play each other save in informal scrimmages. In an effort to circumvent this segregation and give blacks greater exposure, in 1927 several black leaders came up with the idea of an annual black-white game, to be played on Abolition Day. These games received extensive coverage in the local media, which was astonished to find that the black players, who have been relegated to the “secondary” division of the local league, consistently victorious over the white.³²

The racially divided games took place in São Paulo between 1927 and 1939. The Black movement took on the organization of the football matches on May 13th from 1929 onward.³³ That fact problematizes the reductive notion that football is a sport in which Brazilians could only defy racializing hierarchies—as Richard Follett contends—in disguised and “infrapolitical” forms.³⁴ It also complicates Follett’s statement that “black Brazilians situated ideological and cultural concerns above more fundamental structural, economic, and class issues”.³⁵ As Andrews argues, “the black-white game” was one of the tactics adopted by the Black movement to make Afro-descendants more visible in the public sphere while they struggled for a broader political participation in Brazilian society.³⁶

In the first edition of the clash between racially segregated teams, Liga dos Amadores de Futebol proposed a game without monetary rewards and whose winners would receive a trophy with the name of Princesa Isabel, who promulgated Lei Áurea. In 1927, the then president of Brazil, Washington Luís, attended the first match, which took place in the most prestigious stadium in the city of São Paulo.

³¹ ANDREWS. *Blacks and Whites in São Paulo, Brazil, 1888-1988*, p. 213.

³² ANDREWS. *Blacks and Whites in São Paulo, Brazil, 1888-1988*, p. 214.

³³ ABRAHÃO; SOARES. O futebol na construção da identidade nacional: uma análise sobre os jogos “pretos x brancos”, p. 48.

³⁴ FOLLETT. *The Spirit of Brazil: Football and the Politics of Afro-Brazilian Cultural Identity*, p. 84-85.

³⁵ FOLLETT. *The Spirit of Brazil: Football and the Politics of Afro-Brazilian Cultural Identity*, p. 89-90.

³⁶ ANDREWS. *Blacks and Whites in São Paulo, Brazil, 1888-1988*, p. 214.

According to authors who investigated the new articles about those matches, the official aim of the racially divided games was to promote confraternization and fraternity after the abolition of slavery, an initiative that also included the donation of part of the tickets' revenue to Black organizations.³⁷ Black footballers performed alongside White players in the same field, but not on the same team, a concretization of the “separate but equal” notion in the history of football in Brazil. The press in São Paulo deemed the sports event an opportunity to advance the ideology of meritocracy by confirming that Brazilians supposedly did not judge themselves with racial criterion.³⁸ They only honored individual excellence. From the first game, newspapers started publishing articles that complimented the performance of the Black players after they won the matches. These pieces emphasized the sportsmen's cordiality and the games' impressive technical quality, except for the 1929 match, which ended with an ordinary tie.

The statements acknowledging that Brazilians of African ancestry could show discipline and civilized manners would reach their apogee within two decades. In the 1940s, Gilberto Freyre asserted that football was able to sublimate the irrational instincts and violent impulses of Brazilian society (24). As he claimed, “O desenvolvimento do futebol, não num esporte igual aos outros, mas numa verdadeira instituição brasileira, tornou possível a sublimação de vários daqueles elementos irracionais de nossa formação social e de cultura”.³⁹

Freyre regarded football as a national institution that was able to transcend irrational issues that arose during the historical formation of Brazil, such as the racist view that Black Brazilians had animal instincts. It is crucial to note that he presented this statement eleven years before the national team won in 1958 the first of its five World Cups. Pelé, Didi, and Garrincha, Black and mixed-race players, were considered the best players of the unprecedented victory in the most important football championship. According to Freyre, that is the reason why the conservative elites in Brazil accepted the proposal of a racially integrated sport. For them, “the

³⁷ ABRAHÃO; SOARES. O futebol na construção da identidade nacional: uma análise sobre os jogos “pretos x brancos”, p. 50.

³⁸ ABRAHÃO; SOARES. O futebol na construção da identidade nacional: uma análise sobre os jogos “pretos x brancos”, p. 48.

³⁹ FREYRE. Prefácio à primeira edição, p. 24.

game tornou-se o meio de expressão, moral e socialmente aprovado pela nossa gente — pelo Governo, pela Igreja, pela Opinião Pública, pelo Belo Sexo, pela Imprensa — de energias psíquicas e de impulsos racionais que sem o desenvolvimento do futebol ... teriam provavelmente assumido formas de expressão violentamente contrárias à moralidade em nosso meio”.⁴⁰

However, the Brazilian elites’ acceptance of football based on moral reasons, which Freyre stressed in his interpretation, was not totally settled and evident in the first three decades of the twentieth century. In 1930, the year when Liga dos Amadores de Futebol ceased its operations, Associação Paulista de Esportes Atléticos began to control the organization of the event. That association highlighted the racially divided games as a display for the meritocratic integration of Black footballers in the incipient professionalization of football in Brazil.⁴¹

FROM WHITE AMATEURISM TO MULTIRACIAL PROFESSIONALISM

One of the top scorers of the history of football, the best Brazilian player of his time, and a mixed-race man from São Paulo, Arthur Friedenreich symbolized the transition from football amateurism to professionalism between the 1910s and 1930s. To make the May 13th celebratory matches more appealing, Friedenreich played on the team of White people. José Miguel Wisnik associated the skin color of Friedenreich and his importance for the emerging professionalized football with the enigma and ambiguity of racial relations in Brazil. In comparing the mixed-race footballer to a figure of heroic dimension, Wisnik states that Friedenreich

dispôs da fama ambivalente do herói que ao mesmo tempo se mostra e se oculta, através do protagonismo inequívoco e discreto com que disfarçava a condição, nem inteiramente admitida e nem inteiramente rejeitada, de jogador mulato em plena era do amadorismo elitista e branco. A sua entrada no futebol é possibilitada, aliás, pela condição social de classe média, dada pela origem do pai, um alemão radicado no Brasil, graças à qual começou a jogar pelo clube paulista Germânia e onde começou a se firmar pelo talento, transferindo-se depois para o Ipiranga e mais tarde para o Paulistano. A cor e o cabelo “ruim” indicavam a

⁴⁰ FREYRE. Prefácio à primeira edição, p. 24-25.

⁴¹ ABRAHÃO; SOARES. O futebol na construção da identidade nacional: uma análise sobre os jogos “pretos x brancos”, p. 48.

ascendência materna (a mãe era uma lavadeira negra) e a marca atávica do escravismo brasileiro, que, segundo se conta insistentemente, ele tentava atenuar (pelo menos no começo da carreira) usando gorro e alisando o cabelo.⁴²

Being a middle-class and light-skinned man, according to Wisnik, allowed Friedenreich to play football in the 1910s and 1920s, decades in which the sport was an elitist hobby of White Brazilians.

Although Afro-Brazilians did not play for Brazil in international tournaments, Friedenreich integrated the first national team, which was created in 1914. One of his colleagues on the national team, the goalkeeper Marcos de Mendonça, embodied the White elite amateurism of the Brazilian football of the 1910s. Mendonça defined the transitional period of the 1920s as *amadorismo marrom*.⁴³ One of the few authors to write a book about the history of Black people in Brazilian football, Mário Filho identified in the 1940s the nostalgia for the supposed superior quality of amateur football. As Mário Filho noticed, White people were nostalgic because in the amateur era of Brazilian football “[s]abia-se quem era o preto, quem era o branco, o branco e o preto não se confundiam”.⁴⁴ The professionalization of football theoretically blurred the racial boundaries between White and Black peoples, while some scholars, such as Gilberto Freyre, started complicating the ideology of whitening by celebrating Brazilians with African ancestry. The racially integrated football teams reinforced the view of Brazil as a miscegenated country, in which race allegedly had played a more negligible role.

Nonetheless, as Mário Filho suggested, the nostalgia was not a simple sentiment for a better and idyllic past; it also revealed a recurring anxiety about the decline of the whitening ideology and the presumed invisibility of race in Brazilian social relations. This notion of a presumed process of whitening for the Brazilian society, the belief that the African heritage would be erased by contact with an alleged superior race, remained strong among members of the White elite until the mid-twentieth century. As Skidmore argues, the “early 1950’s marked the end of the

⁴² WISNIK. *Veneno remédio: o futebol e o Brasil*, p. 222.

⁴³ Literally translated as “brown amateurism,” *amadorismo marrom* is a reference to the skin color of mixed-race people who started playing soccer in professional leagues in the 1930s.

⁴⁴ FILHO. *O negro no futebol brasileiro*, p. 29.

era when the Brazilian opinion-makers were able to use the whitening ideal both to reassure themselves about their racial future and to establish claim to a morally superior solution to the race problem”.⁴⁵

THE UNOFFICIAL REAPPEARANCE OF THE RACIALLY DIVIDED GAMES

Preto contra branco, a documentary by Wagner Morales, presents a series of interviews with organizers, fans, and players in the annual tournament that takes place in a dirt field in São João Clímaco, a peripheral and poor neighborhood in São Paulo. These players are not professionals. They play *futebol de várzea*. The documentary records the interviewees’ points of view and behavior in two consequential situations: during informal meetings at a bar and during the game that occurred in 2003. Abrahão and Soares associated the visibility of this racially divided game in the 2000s to the adoption of affirmative action in academic settings during the same period. According to them, “a especificidade desse jogo, para além do inusitado, se relaciona com o tema das relações raciais na cultura brasileira e estava naquele período reacquecido em função da adoção de cotas em algumas das universidades brasileiras”.⁴⁶ The documentary’s interviewees explain that the idea of teams divided according to the footballers’ skin color was a casual decision. Previously, team selection was based on the criterion of marital status, in which teams of single men played against teams of married men. The emphasis on the accidental nature of the standard of racial separation functions as a defense mechanism for the participants, who can allege that racism does not exist in the annual competition, because the game is only a pastime in the week before Christmas, a holiday marked by the idea of confraternization. However, the celebration of fraternity obscures the ideology of colorism and the underlying persistence of racial categories, which the interviews reveal as a short-circuit of the myth of racial harmony.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ SKIDMORE. *Black Into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought*, p. 209.

⁴⁶ ABRAHÃO; SOARES. Futebol e diversidade cultural: Uma análise sobre a idealização dos jogos “preto x branco” em São João Clímaco/SP, p. 357.

⁴⁷ Abrahão and Soares argues that the “adoção do critério racial para diferenciação dos times e a composição do jogo “Preto X Branco” ajuda a reforçar os valores antirracistas, caros à

Already at its beginning, *Preto contra branco* shows how sensibility to racial categories and the ideology of colorism are a day-to-day experience in Brazil. The director asks the interviewees to choose a skin color that represents them the best. The choices were varied. Most of the time, the respondents avoided being direct and instead presented brief reasonings, such as the following:

Eu acho que sou da cor branca.
 Mais para preta.
 Não muito preta, meio clara.
 Minha família é da raça indígena.
 Eu me considero negro, apesar de ter umas características de pessoas tipo branco: nariz mais afilado, cabelo mais liso.
 Eu acho que não existe um branco, branco mesmo.⁴⁸

After asking the interviewees to describe their skin color, the director invites them to decide which color they were more comfortable with when appearing in the movie. Although some of them stuck to unusual, arbitrary colors, such as green and blue, all of them requested that their image should be lighter, an example of their preference for representation with fairer skin.⁴⁹

Preto contra branco also registers interviews and conversations at the Bar do Medião. While drinking beer, founders, organizers, fans, and players explain the origin of the games of Black against White. There are two versions: one, already mentioned, is that before the establishment of racial division, teams were organized according to the marital status of the players; the other refers to Tipiu as the man who supposedly invented the competition. This version emphasizes the personality and influence of Tipiu, a now deceased Afro-descendant man who was very popular and charismatic among Black and White people in São João Clímaco. At the bar, Pneu also remembers the score of the first game in 1971: it was a victory of 3 to 1 for the team of Black footballers. However, as proof that the participants did not want to

constituição, à vivência e ao ethos do povo brasileiro.” However, they do not elaborate on the infrapolitical strategy employed by the participants regarding processes of racialization. ABRAHÃO; SOARES. Futebol e diversidade cultural: Uma análise sobre a idealização dos jogos “preto x branco” em São João Clímaco/SP, p. 360.

⁴⁸ PRETO contra branco, 00:01:25-00:03:01.

⁴⁹ Among the seven mentioned answers, only one was peremptory. This categorical answer was from the interviewee who said that his race was Amerindian. Vagueness marked the other answers. In a country like the United States, where the one drop rule prevails, it would be uncommon to hear people giving answers such as “I think my color is White” or “I think that there is no such thing as a pure White person.”

acknowledge the superiority of one race over the other, they affirmed that nobody registers the statistics of the games. They only remember the result of the previous year's match.

SKIN COLOR AND THE IRIDESCENT EFFECT

Preto contra branco also presents the views of the organizers, players, friends, fans, and relatives on three mixed race persons who participate in the annual competition. They are Reginaldo, Marcelo, and Preguinho, chameleonic players who can to a certain extent choose their team by self-identifying their skin color. Described by his colleagues as the son of a mixed-race mother with light skin and a *mulato* father with dark skin, Reginaldo explains that he considers himself White. He only played for the Black team once, in his first time at the competition, because there were not more spots available on the team of White players. As Marcelo declares, he is *moreno*: “Falam que moreno não é cor, ou é preto ou é branco. Só que eu fico ali em cima do muro,” he says.⁵⁰ When other football players demanded that he decide the team to which he belongs—since he already played for both—he chose to be White. Marcelo considers his father White and his mother Black, but his mother views herself as “*marronzinha*.” She regards her son as “*queimadinho de sol*” and her husband as “*furta-cor*”.⁵¹

Despite the resentment of his father, a self-identified White, Preguinho has been playing for the team of Black players. The only professional football player who participated in the annual competition, he refused to be perceived as a White person. Preguinho could have self-identified as a White person by employing “the iridescent effect” available in the perception of racial categories in Brazil. In an interview for the documentary, a Black player whose racist nickname is “Pneu” explains that some of the mixed-race competitors of the annual games are “chameleons,” because they choose to be on the team of White players one year and then integrate the team of Black players in the next match. That is not the case of

⁵⁰ PRETO contra branco, (00:18:32-00:18:43).

⁵¹ My translations of *marronzinha*, *queimadinho de sol*, and *furta-cor* into English are, respectively, “brownish,” “tanned,” and “iridescent.”

“Pneu,” whose phenotype is identified as African, according to the ideology of colorism. As Devulsky states, after the end of slavery, “a sociedade brasileira tratou de conservar a gradação racial entre negros claros e escuros como instrumento para mantê-los distintamente apartados do que se compreendia como sociedade civil”.⁵²

The Portuguese word *pneu* is an abbreviation of *pneumático* and it means “tire” in English. The derogatory nickname derives from the black color of the vulcanized rubber from which tires are made. Pneu, a dark-skinned man whose real name is Wilson, that his nickname was given to him at a very young age. As a child, the father of one of his teammates was a truck driver and lived in a house with a backyard full of tires. He alleges that every kid on his team was called Pneu. Since Wilson did not like the nickname, because he had “a radical streak,” it stuck. Wilson affirms that in Brazil a nickname usually sticks to people when they show clear disapproval of it. Wilson tellingly avoided mentioning the racism intrinsic to his nickname, although, as he said to the director, he had “a radical streak.”

Contrary to Preguinho’s attitude, a player who chose to be identified as Black, both Reginaldo and Marcelo make use of this effect to be included on the team of White footballers. Emanuelle Oliveira-Monte reads the stance of Preguinho on race in *Preto contra branco* as an example of a slight alteration in the racial relations in Brazil. She argues

that, although the whitening ideology still permeates the Brazilian collective unconscious, the promotion of a system of racial self-representation, the so-called *auto-denominação*, is gradually provoking a shift in the Brazilian racial paradigm: the black subject starts to reaffirm himself or herself as “black,” consequently placing the black subject at the center of identity politics.⁵³

However, it is crucial to note that Preguinho had a particular and different social positioning in comparison with Reginaldo and Marcelo. He was a professional football player. In Brazil, the so-called *país do futebol*, football is one of the few opportunities for social mobility by Afro-Brazilians other than menial and precarious jobs. The self-identification of Preguinho as a Black person in the annual

⁵² DEVULSKY. *Colorismo*, p. 48.

⁵³ OLIVEIRA-MONTE. Emanuelle. Blacks versus Whites: Self-Denomination, Soccer, and Race Representations in Brazil, p. 83.

competition of São João Clímaco occurred after some adjustments in the perception of race in Brazilian football. As mentioned before, the tendency to accept the Black body as innately constituted to play football began to emerge in the 1930s during the first racially divided games. Freyre interpreted that tendency as the central characteristic that would make Black footballers more magical, “flamboyant” and “malandros”. For Freyre, players of African ancestry in Brazil essentially practice football as “*arte de songamonga*”.⁵⁴

In opposition to that essentializing definition, Wisnik uses the word *prontidão*, the ability to be ready and improvise, to criticize the notion that Black people possess special body intelligence for sports and music.⁵⁵ The notion of *prontidão* may also be marked by racism and paternalism to the extent that it advances the idea that Black people have only an innate tendency to react instantly with their bodies when facing challenges in the practice of sports, dance, or music. In those occasions, they manifest this ability, which is associated with a physical, rather than an intellectual, dimension.

The culmination of affirming the superior physical ability of Black people occurred in 1958, when the Brazilian national team won its first World Cup. The poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade asked Brazilians to publicly praise the unprecedented victory, in which Pelé, a seventeen-year-old Black player, performed at a level that virtually everyone considered extraordinary. As Andrade claimed, the final victory in the most important football championship revealed how poor, mixed-race, and Black players could correct the deficiencies of Brazilian society. Although Andrade was hyperbolic in his assertion and emphasized class exclusion, he implicitly celebrated African ancestry as a positive feature of Brazilianess. As he stated in “O Divino Caneco, Suécia,” “[o] futebol trouxe ao proletário urbano e rural a chave ao autoconhecimento, habilitando-o a uma ascensão a que o simples trabalho não dera ensejo”.⁵⁶

Arguably the best player of the history of football, Pelé was associated with the perception that Brazil would eventually be a great nation. Brazilians glimpsed in Pelé

⁵⁴ FREYRE. *Foot-ball mulato*, p.4.

⁵⁵ WISNIK. *Veneno remédio: o futebol e o Brasil*, p. 226-229.

⁵⁶ ANDRADE. *Quando é dia de futebol*.

the accomplishment of the promise of becoming “the country of the future,” an alias attributed to Brazil. As Decio de Almeida Prado declared in “Fotos de Pelé,” football

[...] começa como um esporte, uma exibição das potencialidades atléticas do homem: corrida, salto, golpe de vista, resistência, reflexos. E termina como um poderoso símbolo da vida social. Nunca o Brasil foi mais triste do que em 1950, ao perder o título mundial para o Uruguai. Ou mais alegre do que em 1958, ao ganhá-lo da Suécia. Eram sessenta anos de aspirações coletivas, de sonhos de grandeza nacional que se tornaram realidade.

Pelé foi perfeito até nisso: coincidiu com a glória do seu país.⁵⁷

Prado described Pelé as a synthesis of cerebral and physical players who are able to be traditional and improvise at the same time. Also, in his commentary, he makes clear how gendered the nationalist project and racial categories are in both Brazilian football and society, a problematic subject that demands an in-depth study that is beyond the scope of this article.

In the Brazilian historical context, the specific case of Preguinho reveals the limitations imposed by the ideology of colorism on the understanding and practice of football. In deciding to be a self-identified Black person, Preguinho negotiates a specific belief on the body of Black people associated with the practice of football in Brazil and reacts to an emotional conflict with his self-identified White father, a family feud that the documentary does not discuss in depth. In this sense, and notwithstanding the risk of being racially stereotyped, Preguinho embodies a representation of a football player who in a complex web of meanings has a positive element, which is the identification of a person of African ancestry gifted enough to have a career as a professional in the so-called *país do futebol*. In defiance to the notion that in Brazilian football racism will always be “infrapolitical,” Preguinho makes his Blackness hypervisible. In 2003, Preguinho did not want to mask his mixed-race origin to be a footballer, as Friedenreich would have done in the 1920s. Nonetheless, the visibility of Preguinho’s skin color outside the sphere of his career as a professional sportsman makes him the target of racist insults, such as “monkey,” when performing as an amateur for the team of Black players in the annual competition of São João Clímaco.

⁵⁷ PRADO. *Tempo (e espaço) no futebol*.

CONCLUSION: MAKING RACIALIZATION VISIBLE

As authors who analyzed news articles about the football games between teams of White and Black players in São Paulo have asserted, the organization of these matches had had as its primary political aim to promote the inclusion of formerly enslaved people and their descendants in Brazilian society in the 1920s and 1930s. During a transitional period in which a racially integrated professionalization of football replaced the White elite amateurism, Black and White people were able to play in the same field, although on different teams, a symbolic representation of the separate but equal rule in Brazilian football. In *jogos de várzea* of the annual tournament in São João Clímaco from the 1970s onward, some mixed-race footballers could choose their teams. Their preference was for the team of White players, although one of them decided to be on the team of Black footballers, a decision that confronts the ideology of colorism. Moreover, a black-and-white perspective makes visible processes of racialization in Brazil based on skin color.

This article argues that these games decenter the interpretation of racial harmony as an official discourse whose intention is to mask instances of racism in Brazil. They also short-circuit the reductive notion that Afro-Brazilians practice football as “*arte de songamonga*” and always adopt “infrapolitical” stances regarding racial discrimination. By assessing “the enigma of race relations” in Brazil through football, this article approaches the ideology of colorism as a fundamental element for the organization of the matches. It also claims that these games destabilized the myth of inclusiveness that obscures the persistent production of racial difference in Brazilian football after the official end of slavery.

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