

Article

Mário Filho's *O Negro No Futebol Brasileiro* (*The Black Man in Brazilian Soccer*) under and beyond the Shadow of Gilberto Freyre

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Abstract: This article aims to provide the reader with a brief introduction to Mário Filho's *O negro no futebol brasileiro* (*The Black Man in Brazilian Soccer*). While emphasizing the importance of this classic book, I will discuss a few of its central ideas, the context in which these ideas were produced, and how they came to shape the perception of sports and race in Brazil. Furthermore, in the last sections of this article, I will examine how issues of genre classification regarding Mário Filho's book have affected the way it has been read and interpreted over the years.

Keywords: Brazilian soccer; sports and race; textual genres

Lendo este livro sobre futebol, eu acredito no Brasil, nas qualidades eugênicas dos nossos mestiços, na energia e na inteligência dos homens que a terra brasileira forjou com sangues diversos, dando-lhes uma originalidade que será um dia o espanto do mundo. [As I read this book about soccer, I believe in Brazil, in the eugenic qualities of our mixed-race people, in the energy and intelligence of men that Brazilian land has forged with diverse blood, while providing them with a sort of originality that one day will be the awe of the world.]

—José Lins do Rego

Preface to *Copa Rio Branco*, 32 by Mário Filho (1943)



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1. Introduction

Published in 1947, Mário Filho's *O negro no futebol brasileiro* (hereinafter referred to as *NFB*) stands out as the most revered and influential work in the vast bibliography on the social history of Brazilian soccer. Also, Mário Filho's nuanced and discerning approach to the intricate relationship between race and sports positions *NFB* as an indispensable text for comprehending modern Brazil.

While not academic to the core, *NFB* paved the path for the appearance, in 1982, of *O universo do futebol* (*The Soccer Universe*), edited by Roberto DaMatta. This groundbreaking work encompasses four essays that, for the first time in Latin America, analyze soccer through the lens of social sciences. The growing interest in the sport that *O universo do futebol* ignited within departments of social sciences eventually gave rise in Brazil to a novel academic sub-discipline in the field of sociology: the sociology of soccer (not to be mistaken for the general sociology of sport, which has been present in Europe since the early 20th century). The inaugural seminar of the first-ever sociology of soccer course took place at the State University of Rio de Janeiro in August of 1994.

In 2018, in an HBO co-production, *NFB* was made into a four-episode documentary that has been (and still is) streamed worldwide.

More recently, in 2021, despite the countless difficulties that the original text presents, because of its peculiar style, which is heavily based on Brazilian oral dialects, *NFB* received a well-crafted translation into English, published by a prestigious American university press (Rodrigues Filho 2021). This edition will certainly open new pathways for researchers from the English-speaking world to explore.

Today's state of affairs shows that courses on the sociology and social anthropology of Brazilian soccer have been taught in various colleges and universities in Brazil and abroad. Defenses of theses and dissertations on this topic happen every year. And the number of publications (books, articles, academic journals) in Portuguese and other languages dedicated to the study of Brazilian soccer impressively abounds.

The bottom line is that this highly productive scenario has *NFB* as its starting point. Since its appearance, Mário Filho's book has become a powerful center and a paradigmatic model that has continuously fed the prolific production of researchers on the social history of soccer and its multiple and complex relationships with race in Brazil.

2. Seminal Work

Still on the influence and legacy of *NFB*, Mário Filho's book has also established a three-part approach to the history of soccer in Brazil that has, since its publication, been repeated, or tacitly considered, in every study on the topic. Let us outline each segment of this three-part account so we can comment on them in the next sections of this article.

Part one, or soccer as an elitist, imported product. After its arrival in Brazil, in the last years of the 19th century, soccer is practiced by white European and white Brazilian Europeanized elites. The amateurism that dominates the sport functions as a barrier to prevent working-class individuals, meaning people of color, from practicing it.

Part two, or amateurism versus professionalism. During the 1910s, soccer becomes widely popular. As a consequence, clubs and associations are founded and begin organizing leagues and tournaments. It is the period when amateurism is gradually pushed toward professionalism. This is not a peaceful transition, though. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, wealthy white amateurs do everything in their power to prevent soccer professionalization, which would entail opening the sport to Black and mixed-race players.

Part three, or the democratization of soccer. At the beginning of the 1930s, professionalism eventually prevails over amateurism. As a result, Black players come to definitively occupy a space in soccer. This change, however, does not derive from upper-class people acting graciously toward players of color; this change, instead, is the net result of two intertwined factors: (1) the then-ever-growing rivalry between clubs that forces them to always be on the lookout for better players in conjunction with (2) the perseverance of Black men who resiliently overcome all sort of difficulties in order to play soccer. Ultimately, professionalization paves the way for the racial (and social class, which is basically the same) democratization of soccer. And here is *the* key point in Mário Filho's claims: as a consequence of this racial democratization in soccer, Brazil *invented* a new, flamboyant style of playing, the Brazilian style—later referred to as *jogo bonito* (beautiful game) and *futebol arte* (art soccer). Soccer, then, became a genuine manifestation of Brazilian culture with which Brazilians could (and still can) identify themselves. In other words, the racially diverse, de-Europeanized soccer, with its unique features—*ginga*, *malandragem*, and artful tricks—turned out to be, for Brazilians, an authentic expression of Brazil's national identity.

3. Seminal Works of the Seminal Work

As already mentioned, *NFB* prepared the ground for the emergence of modern soccer studies in Brazil, or the sociology of Brazilian soccer, and established the paradigmatic racial interpretation of how soccer became a cultural manifestation that helped shape a collective, national consciousness in the first decades of the 20th century. Now the question is, in the genealogy of *NFB*, which work set the stage for Mário Filho's book to appear? Three works, at least, should be pointed out. The first two provide the conceptual framework for Mário Filho to write *NFB*. The third one is less likely, or less obvious, but not less central, according to the arguments of this article. Let us briefly examine each one of them.

4. Genealogy of *NFB* (I)

Mário Filho's historical account of Brazilian soccer, from its European roots and practice to its eventual racial democratization and nationalization, has a direct link with the

concept of *racial democracy* as put forward by Gilberto Freyre in his classic *Casa-grande & senzala*, published in 1933, and translated into English as *The Masters and the Slaves*. NFB, in this regard, has been often and rightly deemed to have developed a Freyrean interpretation of the history of soccer in Brazil.

5. A Few Words about Racial Democracy

Freyre's defense of Brazil as a "racial democracy" is one of the most debated ideas in Brazilian history. After sparking much controversy, the concept became paradoxically famous for what it claims (racial harmony and integration) and infamous for what it hides (racial discrimination and exclusion). After decades of discussion, scholars tend to conclude that, by making such an assertion, Freyre aimed at one target and eventually hit another.

As facts and data show, Brazil has never been a racial democracy, or more specifically, not the one proposed by Freyre. Nevertheless, the culture produced by this multiracial society (soccer included) has undoubtedly proven that the practice of interraciality, as occurs in Brazil, is a form of ethnic enrichment, without being racially or biologically degenerative as 19th-century (pseudo)scientists repeatedly boasted. Ethnic enrichment, in this context, means a social system where distinct cultures and traditions are permeable forces that can establish a dialectic exchange of views to merge into a creative and culturally diverse object. Freyre, in this regard, was right, and even prophetic, in arguing that Brazil plays a pioneering role in the irreversible process of the gradual fall of racial and ethnic barriers in societies ruled by liberal-democratic principles; however, he appears to be wrong about overidealizing this process and its social results.

6. A Brief (but Necessary) Digression

Also, it is worth remembering (in fact, we *must* not forget) the somber irony behind the concept of racial democracy. Freyre's claim that Brazilian society, by reason of its historical formation, was capable of embracing and integrating people from different races and ethnicities appeared, as already mentioned, in 1933. That same year, Adolf Hitler ascended to the chancellery of Germany. What happens next, we all, unfortunately, know. Brazil, however, has long shown the world—more than any other nation—that its racially diverse society, even imperfect as it is, can function (and *does* function) as an antidote to racism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination and exclusion. In other words, if Brazilian racial democracy failed, or rather, never fully existed, its principles, as postulated by Freyre, are more alive than ever. And these principles, in one way or another, have guided communities all over the world toward the challenging but imperative goal of becoming more tolerant, inclusive, and creative.

7. Racial Democracy and *Estado Novo*

Getúlio Vargas' *Estado Novo* (1937–45) made political use of Freyre's ideas to promote the notion that Brazil had overcome racism by creating a multiracial society, not just equal for all but also proud of its non-Western (i.e., Indigenous and African) roots and cultural legacy. This legacy would manifest itself through the hyper-sexualization of mixed-race Brazilian woman, turned into a national muse, as well as samba, *capoeira*, *feijoada*, Carnival, and... soccer, by then already recognized as the national sport of Brazil.

Two questions might be asked here: (1) As the concept of "national sport" is a crucial one for the variety of implications it carries with it, when did Brazilians finally assume that soccer was their national sport? And (2) why, against all evidence, did Brazilians buy the *Estado Novo*'s propaganda about their country being racially equal and just for all?

Let us start by addressing the latter, whose answer is far more complex. Two factors, among a number of others, contributed to convincing Brazilians under the *Estado Novo* regime that Brazil was a racial democracy. The first was Freyre's argumentative strategy of comparing racial issues in Brazil and the U.S. When one compares these countries in terms of how they have historically dealt with race, it *appears* that racism in Brazil is "lighter" than that in the United States, due in large part to a lack of institutional segregation in Brazil in

comparison with Jim Crow laws in the U.S. Freyrean arguments create the illusion that there are such things as good and bad racism, which is blatantly false: all forms of racism are equally bad and should be equally rejected. Yet the concept of racial democracy was fairly convenient for *Estado Novo*.¹ Vargas' regime aimed to construct a notion of national identity predicated on a multiracial and multicultural narrative, where Western and non-Western values were both recognized as parts of the whole idea of *Brazilianess*.

The second factor for Brazilians to have believed in the concept of racial democracy was...soccer. After all, if the soccer field is a symbolic representation of society, what Brazilians saw in the 1930s, and from then on, was a racially diverse community, where Black and white (all ethnicities, to some degree) and rich and poor players share the same "social" space, supposedly with the same rights and duties. Within the soccer field, differences between players disappear—despite the fact that referees tended to be more rigorous toward Black players—and each one of them is meant to be, and could eventually end up being, a hero. And if one decides to write a history of Brazilian soccer, as Mário Filho did, they will have to provide us, inevitably—again, as Mário Filho did—with an account based on Black heroes. Soccer is thus posited as a racially democratic space whereby Black players *might potentially be, were indeed, and have still been* national heroes.

Let us try to connect this answer with the first question asked above: when did soccer become the national sport of Brazil? As you may imagine, there is not a specific date. However, we can confidently state that, by 1938, when the national team traveled to France to participate in the third FIFA World Cup, soccer had already become a shared sentiment, a major intangible force that united the nation around one sport. By then, the national team had two extraordinary players who drew huge crowds when they entered the soccer field: Domingos da Guia, perhaps—or at least according to press reports from that time—the best defender of all time, and Leônidas da Silva, nicknamed *Diamante negro* (Black Diamond), the best forward of his generation. Two Brazilian Black heroes.

8. A Brief Anecdote on Leônidas da Silva

Leônidas da Silva was not the first Brazilian soccer hero. He was the second in this noble lineage after a striker, the mixed-race (born to a German father and a Black Brazilian mother) Arthur Friedenreich, who played from 1909 to 1935. Leônidas da Silva, however, who started playing in 1930, was the first phenomenon of popularity to cause wild commotion among soccer fans. He received, in this regard, tons of letters and signed thousands of autographs every week. If his picture appeared on the cover of a paper, as it regularly did, the paper's circulation would quickly rise. If Leônidas said publicly, as he once did, that he only ate a certain brand of guava jam, the sales of the product would immediately skyrocket. Every company wanted Leônidas as its adman. And one company—Lacta—in 1939, paid Leônidas royalties for the commercial use of his *Diamante Negro* nickname for a chocolate bar, which people can still find in Brazilian stores.

In *NFB*, Mário Filho narrates a revealing anecdote about Leônidas' reputation, which is worth transcribing:

It was the moment [late 1930s] in which he [Leônidas] could do whatever he pleased. Even running people over in the middle of the street. He ran a man over in the Mangue neighborhood while racing along and blowing through a signal; the crowd made the Ford stop, shouting "Lynch him", "Lynch him", but when they saw that it was Leônidas, the talk of lynching stopped. "Leônidas, Leônidas, run for it, Leônidas!" Even the traffic cop didn't note down the number of his car. (Rodrigues Filho 2021, p. 203)

This anecdote illustrates the level of prestige Leônidas then enjoyed in Brazil, which may remind readers of another one involving Ludovico Ariosto, the Italian poet from the Renaissance and author of the epic *Orlando furioso* (*The Frenzy of Orlando*). In 1522, Ariosto was traveling alone to take up the position of Governor of Gafagnana, a mountainous region in central Italy, when he was attacked by road bandits. Forced to hand everything over to them, Ariosto gave the gang an edition of *Orlando furioso*. One of the thieves asked Ariosto if he knew the author of that poem. Upon revealing his identity, Ariosto was not

just liberated with all his belongings back but also effusively lauded with words of high praise for his poetic work (Ghirardi 2004, pp. 13–14).

Despite their distance in time and space, both anecdotes serve to illustrate what sort of “protection” fame can bring to artists (a soccer player and a poet) who are loved by the people they please. The protagonists of these stories, however, are painted with distinct moral colors. While Ariosto is protected from the violence of road bandits, Leônidas is given protection for violence (albeit accidental violence) he allegedly committed. The image of Ariosto, then, emerges as a real hero. In the case of Leônidas, it comes out as a kind of antihero, or rather, a bratty hero—provided that he slightly wounded and did not kill the person his car ran over; Mário Filho is not clear about this—spoiled by society, represented in the anecdote by the anonymous passersby who allowed Leônidas to escape.

9. Genealogy of *NFB* (II)

Let us go back to the year 1938. The million-dollar question is now who was the top scorer and best player at the 1938 FIFA World Cup in France? The answer is (drum-roll, please). . . Leônidas da Silva (seven goals scored in three matches)! And why did Brazil not win that tournament? For a series of events, the main one being that Leônidas was in no physical condition to play the semi-final against Italy, where the Brazilian squad was defeated 2-1. Brazil finished the 1938 Cup in third place after beating Sweden (4-2) with Leônidas back on the field.

In 1938, as already mentioned, soccer had become the national sport of Brazil. As such, the World Cup in June mobilized the country and created a chain of solidarity among Brazilians, who passionately identified themselves with the national team, comprising both white and Black players (with Domingos da Guia and Leônidas da Silva being the Black stars on whom Brazilians pinned all their hopes). Also in June of 1938, during the World Cup, therefore, Gilberto Freyre published an influential article entitled “Futebol mulato” (“The Afro-Brazilian Soccer”), in which he claims that Brazilians had, at that point, “de-Europeanized” soccer by forging their own “nimble, improvised, elastic” style: the Afro-Brazilian style, closer to dance (a “Dionysian dance”) than to a sport (Freyre 1938, p. 4).²

To a significant extent, *NFB* is the product of Freyre’s interpretations of race, national identity, and soccer. Both Freyre and Mário Filho saw the racial democratization of soccer, which gradually occurred in Brazil in the 1920s and 30s, as clear evidence that the country, as a society, was moving, or at least could move, toward developing a racial democracy, which, again, has never been realized. Both Freyre and Mário Filho, in this respect, can be viewed as social *utopian* thinkers. Their racial utopia, however, seems to be less a promise than a reality when it comes to soccer fields. There, Brazil has formed successful multiracial teams since at least 1919, when the Brazilian national squad won the South American Championship in Rio de Janeiro before nearly 30,000 spectators, with a goal in the last game against Uruguay being scored by a player of color, Arthur Friedenreich.

10. Mário Filho beyond the Shadow of Gilberto Freyre

The connections between Mário Filho and Gilberto Freyre are mainly established at the conceptual level. From that point on, Mário Filho takes a sharp turn in other directions. In this respect, it is worth recalling that Mário Filho dedicated his professional life—as had his father, Mário Rodrigues—to journalism. As a sports journalist for four decades, from 1926 up until his death in 1966, Mário Filho revolutionized press coverage by radically changing the style of reporting on soccer. Before Mário Filho, the news was reported in a stiffly conventional language that focused on sports as an opportune moment for elite gatherings, as well as a symbol of great refinement, elegance, and modernity, according to European standards. Following the social changes in soccer, wherein the sport moves gradually from the center (amateurism) to the periphery (professionalism), Mário Filho breaks the old conventions by introducing two innovative points: (1) purging the reporting language of artificial, calcified expressions and turning it into a more conversational, colloquial register;

(2) bringing to the forefront of the news the human side of soccer players. Mário Filho, in other words, naturalizes the style of reporting on soccer while emphasizing the subjectivity of the players, or what they think, where they live, and what their daily life looks like, besides their professional activities. With Mário Filho, therefore, the sports press left behind its role of being a defense of an elitist way of enjoying and interpreting soccer in order to become a more *democratic* form of communication about a sport that was then experiencing a process of racial *democratization*.

As with Mário Filho's other less well-known books about soccer, *NFB* was initially born on the pages of newspapers. Thus, *NFB* encompasses the typical, unique style of Mário Filho. The practical result of this style, full of lyricism, irony, and empathy toward lower-class Black players, is twofold: on the one hand, the dramatization of the players' lives, conveyed in a colloquial language, enables readers to relate intersubjectively (i.e., at a subjective level) to the glories and sufferings of these athletes; on the other hand, the effect of intersubjectivity, or feeling what others feel, is possible because *NFB*'s stylistic accomplishments allow, or rather, require, the account of the history of Brazilian soccer to be read as a novel.

The problem is that reading *NFB* as a novel sullies its value as a historical study. But is *NFB*, after all, an accurate account of the origins and development of soccer in Brazil? Is the founding text of the sociology of soccer a sociological text in a rigorous sense? Does *NFB* lean more toward social science or more toward art and myth? What is more important in the anecdote about Leônidas da Silva, for example, its symbolic meaning or its historical dimension? In order to address these questions, we need to examine two points: the primary sources and the methodology used by Mário Filho to write *NFB* (Gilberto Freyre's works, it is quite clear, are secondary sources).

11. Mário Filho's Primary Sources

To write *NFB*, Mário Filho mostly consulted two primary sources: on a smaller scale, old newspapers (particularly the famous Marcos de Mendonça's album, a vast collection of news reports on the goalkeeper Marcos de Mendonça amassed by himself in the 1910s), and, to a greater extent, the many players whom he, as a journalist, interviewed for his news report or simply talked to as a sports reporter. Interviewing players in Mário Filho's columns was a regular practice, for it facilitated his project of humanizing the image of players, or exposing the man along with the professional, so readers could experience an intersubjective connection with these athletes.

It is, thus, fair to say that the majority of the "documents" consulted by Mário Filho to write *NFB* were oral sources. And here is one point that generates debate: is it possible to compose a credible and accurate historical account based on primarily oral reports? Is there such a thing as *oral History* (with a capital H)? Or can historians avail themselves of oral sources as long as they are able to check those sources against written, official documents? Back, again, to the motif of the Leônidas anecdote: considering that there is no police or other report on the event, should we place our trust in the story and the fact that every witness, including the traffic cop, helped Leônidas escape from the crime scene? Or should we read this anecdote as a revealing symbol, true in its essence, but not necessarily in its particularities, because its original source is irreclaimable and unverifiable due to its oral nature?

Here it is important to underscore that the methodology of oral history as a tool of research emerged in the 1960s—subsequent, therefore, to *NFB*—"as part of a wider move toward social history and *history from below*" (Adams and Cronin 2019, p. 1131, emphasis added), or "history from the bottom up", as it is also referred to. Nevertheless, oral history applied to sports starts being practiced a little later; and even so, regarding the United States at least, "with some surprising gaps and missed opportunities to generate new historical knowledge about issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender" (Cahn 1994, pp. 597–98). These claims, with the exception of those on gender issues, show how far Mário Filho went in terms of creating a unique, seminal work.

It is also worth recalling on this matter that, structurally considered, *NFB* is an enormous mosaic of anecdotes—some epic, some lyrical, some comic, some tragic—about Black players and how they “Brazilianized” (i.e., de-Europeanized; decolonized) European soccer through their inventiveness and ability to improvise. So, again, how should we read these countless stories to which Mário Filho, in accordance with *Estado Novo*’s ideology, ties the concept of national identity?

12. How to Read *NFB*?

Obviously, there is not one way—a correct way—to read *NFB*. The complexity of Mário Filho’s work opens a number of avenues for readers to take in terms of a hermeneutical approach (i.e., the how-to-read issue). In this article, I will just point to one avenue: the rhapsody avenue. But before we get there, we need to draw a timeline and pinpoint a few events. Let us begin in 1840, more than a century prior to the publication of *NFB*.

In 1840, the then-recently inaugurated Brazilian Historic and Geographic Institute offered a prize for the best essay that outlined a plan to write the history of Brazil. The winner was a German naturalist named Karl Friedrich Phillip von Martius. His essay, entitled “How the History of Brazil Should Be Written”, was published in 1844. In this work, von Martius proposed, for the first time, the idea of a racial history of Brazil. “Whoever takes on the task of writing the History of Brazil”, von Martius states, “must never lose sight of those elements that converge there and that are part of the development of man”. He continues,

These are, however, very diverse natural elements that have been brought together for man’s formation of three races, namely, the copper-colored or American, the white Caucasian, and finally the black or Ethiopian. Out of the encounter, the mixture, out of the mutual relations and the changes in these three races, today’s population was formed, which is why its history has a very particular hallmark. (Green et al. 2019, pp. 187–88, emphasis added)

At the time when von Martius wrote his essay, Brazil’s intellectual elite was putting great effort into establishing a concept of national identity for the recently independent country (Brazil had become independent from Portugal in 1822). Nationalism, or an anti-Lusitanian sentiment, pushed writers to create a national mythology linked to the heroic image of native Indians. By then, against von Martius’ claim, Black individuals and their historical contributions to the making of the nation were simply out of the equation that formulated the idea of a national identity.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, fictional literature started addressing more complex issues of race associated with Afro-Brazilians (I am thinking of *O mulato* [1881] by Aluísio Azevedo, *Bom-crioulo* [1895] by Adolfo Caminha, and *Clara dos Anjos* [1922] by Lima Barreto). These issues, however, were still not related to the ethnic and racial formation of the country. Von Martius’ visionary prediction will hibernate for almost one century until it finds a substantial response in two works from the late 1920s and early 1930s. Let us begin with the last one.

As already mentioned, in the 1933 *Casa-grande & senzala*, Gilberto Freyre studies Brazil’s historical formation by analyzing it as a result of three distinct racial-ethnic forces: Indigenous, African, and European. For Freyre, therefore, Brazil is European as much as it is Indigenous and African. Freyre, in this regard, adopts and develops, with his own arguments, von Martius’ postulation that any account of Brazilian history must include these three foundational elements.

Five years before Freyre, however, in 1928, Mário de Andrade published *Macunaíma*, the most representative work of Brazilian Modernism. As an artistic movement with strong political views, Modernism made every effort to rediscover Brazil and re-found the nation by redefining Brazilianess, which the Romantics had failed to do, according to the Modernists. The Modernist (and modern) Brazil acknowledges and praises its non-Western roots, both Indigenous and African, while reviewing, from a critical and usually humorous

perspective, its Western heritage. This Modernist (and modern) Brazil is synthesized in Mário de Andrade's character Macunaíma.

His story begins with him being born jet-black ("*preto retinto*") in the depths of an Amazon virgin forest, where the Tapanhumas Indigenous tribe was settled. Macunaíma, "the hero of our (i.e., Brazilian) people", is, thus, both Black and Indian. At one point in the middle of the narrative, however, Macunaíma becomes magically white after swimming in an enchanted lake, halfway through his and his brothers' trip from the Amazon to São Paulo. From that moment on, Macunaíma is made to embody the *three races* that constitute the basis and richness of Brazilian culture.

Already in São Paulo, Macunaíma invents... soccer, which the narrator refers to as a "plague", given the enthusiastic popularity that the sport had already reached in Brazil during the 1920s. The invention of soccer by Macunaíma is just one among a series of etiological tales the epic novel contains. Mário de Andrade's book, as a mythical tale, is about origins and symbols. And symbols are tied to reality. Macunaíma, in this regard, did invent a new sport—not soccer, but Brazilian soccer. In other words, the multiracial, playfully mischievous, deft and slippery, full of swing and charisma Macunaíma created a sport that replicates the image of its creator; that is to say, like Macunaíma, Brazilian soccer is also multiracial, playfully mischievous, deft and slippery, and full of swing and charisma.

With *Macunaíma*, in 1928, Mário de Andrade came to be the first writer to complete von Martius' 1844 premise according to which any history of Brazil, even a mythical one, ought to be recounted from the perspective of the three races that met and mixed to form the Brazilian people and nation under colonialism and its racial tenets. Mário Filho, therefore, owes Gilberto Freyre as much as he owes Mário de Andrade. Brazilian modernists, by the way, are the ones who, before Freyre and Vargas, championed the cause of multiracialism and multiculturalism as core elements of Brazil's national identity. In the case of *Macunaíma*, however, the multiple connections between *NFB* and Mário de Andrade's epic rhapsody have usually been overlooked by scholars in studies about Mário Filho's book.

13. Genealogy of *NFB* (III)

In this genealogy, Mário Andrade's *Macunaíma* counts as the third work with which *NFB* exhibits close ties. Both narratives are linked in various ways. Let us go over a few of them.

In *NFB*, every hero depicted by Mário Filho, from Friedenreich to Pelé and Garrincha (especially Garrincha, who appears along with Pelé in the chapters penned for the 1964 edition of *NFB*), every epic and tragic character whose name is engraved in the history of Brazilian soccer—all of them resemble Macunaíma to a degree. All of them capture and encapsulate the Brazilian spirit, either for their discipline or laziness, generosity or cupidity, authenticity or dissimulation, trickery or naiveté. These (and other) binaries in *Macunaíma* are not morally oppositional; on the contrary, they are morally complementary. In the case of *NFB*, just to stay in one example, think of the "brat" Leônidas da Silva, who accidentally hit someone while driving his car and, in response to his misdeed, was coddled by the witnesses regarding his wrongdoing.

This morally indulgent anecdote is, as already mentioned, part of a mosaic of anecdotes that form the narrative structure of *NFB*. In this regard, *NFB* repeats the structure of *Macunaíma*, which is also composed of a constellation of anecdotes that Mário de Andrade collected from the popular, *oral* tradition and later sewed together to create his epic novel. *Macunaíma*, therefore, is a collection of folk tales, stylistically preserved in their orality (with the notable exception of the chapter "Letter to Icamíabas", whose style parodies the hollow and inflated utterances typical of Brazilian *Belle Époque* elites) and rescued from oblivion by the artifice memory of the author/narrator. Mário de Andrade, in this respect, acts like a rhapsode—like a modern Homer. The same could be said of Mário Filho, who also collected the stories of *NFB* in his wanderings through soccer fields, kept these stories

in his memory, and retold them (so as not to let them fade into oblivion) in the same oral tone they were originally uttered.

The method and style employed to compose both *Macunaíma* and *NFB* were, thus, those of a rhapsode. That is the reason why Mário de Andrade, aware of this, classified the genre of his work as rhapsody. And that is also the reason why Nelson Rodrigues used to call his brother, Mário Filho, “the Homer of Brazilian soccer” (Silva 2006, p. 211).

14. The Common Enemy

Modern rhapsodies, such as *Macunaíma* and *NFB*, are also epic narratives, which means that they are war stories. In this regard, there should be one hero (protagonist), one enemy (antagonist), and a series of battles. In Mário de Andrade’s rhapsody, *Macunaíma* (the protagonist) engages in a long-running battle against the “Peruvian riverboat peddler”, “of frankly Florentine descent”, Venceslau Pietro Pietra, who is also “Piaimã the Giant, eater of men”. Venceslau Pietro Pietra, therefore, is a Spanish-American businessman (and an anthropophagus giant) with European roots. In fact, Venceslau Pietro Pietra is very much European. He descends from an Italian (Florentine) family, and his name has Slavic (Venceslau) and Italian (Pietro) origins. He travels to Europe to recover from a serious wound caused by *Macunaíma* in one of their combats. He is an entity (giant) deeply tied to European folklore, and his demise is depicted in a stereotypical Italian way, as he dies by falling into a pot full of boiling pasta, his last words being, “It needs cheese. . .” (Andrade 2023).

To a significant extent, the fight between *Macunaíma* and Venceslau Pietro Pietra allegorically represents the political (but also ethnic) strife between modern Brazil and Europe, or rather, the struggle of Brazil to define its identity against, or in relation to, the European colonizer. In *Macunaíma*, Brazil wins this warfare.

Warfare, by the way, is a recurrent metaphor applied to soccer in Mário Filho’s *NFB*. There, readers also find a symbolic battle between modern Brazil and Europe (i.e., English soccer), whereby Brazil fights to assert itself before the European colonizer and determine its own cultural identity. With its Black heroes, soccer in Brazil gradually evolves from a foreign, imported, and elitist (white-only) product into a national (multiracial) one. In both cases (*Macunaíma* and *NFB*), Europe is the enemy to be beaten off.

15. The Dream of Soccer

In 1925, three years before *Macunaíma* was released, Oswald de Andrade, another indelible name associated with the Brazilian avant-garde Modernist movement, published the following poem:

Europe Bowed Down Before Brazil

7-2

3-1

The injustice of Cette

4-0

2-1

2-0

3-1

A half a dozen on the Portuguese’s head (Andrade 1925, pp. 76–77. Translation is mine.)

In this Modernist, peculiar style, Oswald de Andrade’s poem alludes to Club Athletico Paulistano’s tour of France, Spain, and Portugal in March–April 1925, the first ever by a Brazilian team in Europe. During this tour, Paulistano lost just one game to Olympique de Cette (0-1). In the other seven matches, Paulistano scored 27 goals (11 by Friedenreich) and conceded just 6 (in the last game, Paulistano won by 6-0 against a combined Portuguese team).

The title of the poem—“Europe Bowed Down Before Brazil”—implies the existence in the 1920s of a national and nationalistic sentiment that blends, in different degrees, competition, revenge, and inferiority on the part of Brazil in relation to Europe. It may be said that this is a natural, even predictable feeling for a former colony to experience

toward its colonizer. (In this case, Europe as a continent plays the role of the colonizer. And Paulistano, a team from São Paulo, represents Brazil, before whom Europe bows down.).

If the sentiment Oswald de Andrade's poem captures is historically accurate, then soccer would constitute one viable way for Brazil to build up its self-esteem and self-image. If Brazil, in other words, had a dream of overcoming its 'creator', of defeating it in some way, through soccer this dream would likely come true—as it has indeed come.

Soccer also allows Brazilians to nurture another dream, that of seeing their nation replicating, in a larger social space, the opportunities lower-class, Black, and mixed-race people have had within the limits of the soccer field. On a symbolic level, in this regard, Arthur Friedenreich, Leônidas da Silva, Domingos da Guia, Zizinho, Didi, Djalma Santos, Nilton Santos, Vavá, Pelé (the King), Garrincha, Jairzinho, Júnior, Romário, Ronaldo Fenômeno, Rivaldo, Ronaldinho Gaúcho, Cafu, Roberto Carlos, Dida, Adriano, Neymar, Vini Jr., Formiga, Marta (the Queen), and so many others, all redeem and compensate—symbolically at least—the life of millions who have built the Brazilian nation with their blood, sweat, and tears. For each one of the Black and mixed-race heroes and heroines listed above, literally millions of Black men and women have been sacrificed in the name of something they could not experience or benefit from.

However, despite the undeniable fact that Brazil, as a nation, was established over countless bodies of unknown heroes and heroines of color, and despite the fact that this process of sacrificing individuals of dark skin has unfortunately not ended, soccer continues to be a beacon of hope for many Black boys and Black girls throughout the country, who have the dream of overcoming poverty, oppression, and shame.³ In the end, this dream will come true for a tiny few. But it will, after all, for soccer fields remain democratically open for any player to pursue their dream, regardless of their social background, ethnicity, or race. The dream of soccer is not over.

16. Last Words

The classic *NFB* is a book too complex to fit into one textual genre. The frequent comparison between Mário Filho and Gilberto Freyre has pushed it toward the social sciences. Mário Filho's method and style, however, deny such affiliation and move *NFB* closer to the borderline territory of literary non-fiction. The indisputable fact is that *NFB* was written by a man passionate about soccer who, throughout his four-decade career as a journalist, devoted his energy to the sport.⁴ In *NFB*, therefore, Mário Filho chronicles the history of Brazilian soccer, not as a historian seeking objectivity, not even strictly as a journalist, but rather, as a passionate soccer fan.

And every soccer fan (the author of this article included) is a type of a rhapsode. That is to say, every soccer fan is a repository and guardian of myriads of stories and anecdotes about the team they root for, and they are always willing to tell and re-tell in a lively, vibrant fashion those stories and anecdotes they proudly keep preserved in their memories. Some of these stories, they have witnessed; some, they have heard from their parents and friends. Once their memory is equipped, the soccer fan-rhapsode is able to pass these stories on to their children, friends, and whoever wants to hear them. After all, these are *true* stories about their favorite team and players—even though the raconteur never went to any archive to check on contracts, letters, minutes, or any document that may possibly deny those *true* events.

How, then, should we listeners/readers/viewers take the soccer fan-rhapsode's stories, such as those recounted in *NFB*? If we are looking for historically rigorous accuracy, we should take them cautiously, as the storyteller does not present correspondent documentation about what is stated as truth. But if we are searching for other dimensions of truth, those that come embedded in affection and are true because the affection is true, those that come from the voices of memory that wish to keep alive a tradition, then we should drop our internal scientific processor and dive deeply into the stories and weep and laugh with their characters, as the sentiment these stories provide and we feel, the enjoyment they bring to us—all of this is absolutely true.

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Notes

- ¹ Curiously enough, Freyre's arguments about race and multiculturalism also served another *Estado Novo*, namely, the Portuguese dictatorial regime led by António de Oliveira Salazar from 1933 to 1968 and continued by Marcelo Caetano until 1974. During this period, Portuguese political leaders used Freyre's ideas, particularly the concept of Lusotropicalism, which is contiguous with the notion of racial democracy, to justify and maintain Portuguese colonies in Africa.
- ² It is worth mentioning that, back in the 1930s, the term "mulato" had no derogatory connotations. Nevertheless, scholars have recently shown decolonial limitations in Gilberto Freyre and Mário Filho's language. Linking Black players, for instance, to "malandragem", or a lack of discipline, without remarking on the deep tactical understanding of the game they had to have in order to improvise and catch their opponents by surprise may sound like a racist argument. By the same token, Freyre and Mário Filho argue that Black and mixed-race players are *naturally* or *spontaneously* irreverent, with irreverence being described as a quality contiguous with primitivism and irrationality. This claim collides with what Brazilians expect from their politicians, educators, and physicians. Brazilians wish their politics, education, and health care system to not be associated with characteristics such as irreverence, "malandragem", or a lack of discipline.
- ³ Although soccer fields in Brazil continue to be a beacon of hope for Black boys and Black girls, the colonial legacy keeps "playing" against them. Ongoing racial economic disparity, for instance, pushes people of color toward social marginalization. The haunting question, thus, that hovers above the country is as follows: how many of these marginalized individuals could have lived their dreams on a soccer field?
- ⁴ As a posthumous recognition, Maracanã Stadium, inaugurated in 1950 and internationally known as the Soccer Sanctuary [*o Templo do Futebol*], was renamed Journalist Mário Filho Stadium in 1966, one month after his death.

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