

## Why do hungry people like football?

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Omar is a certified member of the Triple-B, the Black Bourgeoisie of Brooklyn.<sup>1</sup> (This Brooklyn exists in a somewhat different universe than the white hipster Williamsburg Brooklyn of the HBO show “Girls.”) The Triple-B instils new life into the practice of diaspora so right now Omar is in Brazil, home to the largest population of African descendants outside the African continent. He is lying on the beach next to me, his hands clasped behind his head, his toes reaching towards the roaring waves.

In the shredded shade of the thatch-covered barraca behind us, the bartender turns up the volume and the ubiquitous bikini-clad booty girls dutifully begin to shake their barely-concealed derrieres at frenzied speed to the latest pagode hit. Omar, however, does not even throw them a glance. They represent the Brazil of countless commercials and global cliché, the mythology Brazilians sell not only to the world but to themselves. Omar is not interested in this bogus image of incessant revelry in an eternally sunny paradise. He is here in search of the Brazil that exists in a somewhat different universe.

Right now, he is fixated on the point where the sea is lapping at the beach. Every time the tide rolls in and then coyly pulls back, a zig zag line of seaweed and foam is left behind, only to be erased again a moment later.

“You know what?” he says. I am not really paying attention to what he is doing because I am lying on my belly, watching the girls. Although they’re not really throwing down, I am still trying to perfect my own samba. It’s a very tricky dance since your feet and hips move at different tempos. “What?” I say.

Omar bites his lip, pensive, moody. “Those cats are lean. Every one of them has a six-pack!” I prop myself up on my elbow to look back at the group of young

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed to protect the innocent.

men playing football at the edge of the sparkling Atlantic. Their torsos are taut as a drum.

Samuel returns from the barraca with a large sweating bottle of ice-cold beer. "They are not lean," he says decisively, as he sits down in the shade of the umbrella, his floral shirt hiding his 56-year-old abdominals.

"Dude," says Omar feelingly, "they're *lean!*" He sounds kind of envious but I don't know why. Omar is a good twenty-five years younger than Samuel. Every time he inhales, muscles ripple across his back because he is a formidable capoeirista who moves with the dainty-toed grace of a fastidious cat. Before coming here he had studied Portuguese language, Brazilian history and music, candomblé – the Yoruba-based religion brought by captured Africans, quilombos – the communities established by run-away slaves who defended themselves with capoeira – the musical martial art developed by the enslaved. He makes regular visits to Mãe Rita, a famous mãe de santo who spends part of the year here in her native Bahia and part of the year in Brooklyn consulting for the increasing numbers of the Triple-B who practice candomblé. Omar, in short, believes he has a superior understanding of Brazil.

But Samuel does not back down. "Yeah, when I first came down here, I thought so too. I was like 'how come everyone here's so fit?' I need to get in shape, I said to myself. But then I realized. Hey, want some more beer?" He removes the sweating bottle from its insulated sleeve and tops up Omar's glass. He takes a long gulp and then smacks his lips, "I mean they're always playing sports. If it's not soccer, it's volleyball, if it's not volleyball, it's badminton or whatever they call that game with the racquets. But then I realized, I mean, what are they doing? It's Wednesday afternoon. 3 p.m. Why aren't they at work? Those cats are not lean, they're hungry."

For a long while, Omar contemplates Samuel's words and we all turn to watch the young men. The tallest one kicks the ball too hard and the sea greedily tries to snatch it away but the one with sun-bleached locks dives after it and rescues it just in time.

Omar doesn't like Samuel much. Whilst Omar is in Bahia to attend Afro-Brazilian dance classes and marvel at how the drummers sing in Yoruba, a language they no longer understand but whose lyrics have been passed down to them through the generations, Samuel is here for altogether different reasons. Although an African American "brother" like Omar, he could care less about Salvador da Bahia's pantheon of orixás. Just like the Swiss and Italian middle-aged men who have made a little money in their home countries, Samuel is here for sex. He makes bi-annual trips to Bahia for Carnival, caipirinha, and Claudinha, his 23-year-old girlfriend.

Since Samuel's Portuguese is so-so, I often end up translating for them so I know that for Samuel, she is the love of his middle life but for Claudinha, Samuel is merely one of her boyfriends but certainly the richest and the most reliable. Claudinha is a PEF (professional ethnic female), one of hundreds of nubile young Baianas who go out with a series of foreigners. Unlike her jobless Brazilian boyfriend, Samuel can drive her and her friends around and buy them dinner and drinks in return for the feted Brazilian carinho (affection). He pays for her younger siblings' school fees, household repairs and clothes.

Omar finishes the rest of his beer and hands his empty glass to Samuel, "If they're hungry, how do they have enough energy to play soccer?"

"They're not starving," drawls Samuel knowingly, "they're under-fed, under-employed, under-informed. No, they're not starving. They're just hungry. Most everyone in Brazil is hungry."

Omar turns to me for support, "Why would they waste their precious energy playing soccer if they are so under-fed?" I don't want to get in the middle of another Candomblé-Capoeira Diaspora Tourist versus Carnival-Caipirinha Sex Tourist battle. Besides, this is a much larger question. I shrug, "Why does anyone care about football at all?"

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People who don't like sports tend to glare at the television with contempt, "For God's sake! Why are we watching grown men chasing after a ball as if their lives depended on it?" They denigrate not only the athletes but the spectators: "How ridiculous is this! They attacked the opposing team's fans? What is wrong with these people?" For many intellectuals, sports have replaced religion as the "opium of the masses." Critics of rabid nationalism disdain sports as a proxy for war and claim it evokes "primitive" and dangerous us versus them passions that result in hooliganism or even homicide.

Some people just find all sports plain boring and don't get why chasing a ball can become a matter of not only physical but political, emotional and spiritual life and death for so many people. I understand this continuum of attitudes because I like some sports (tennis) but detest others, especially golf. It shouldn't even be considered an athletic sport considering my grandfather played it. Generically, it's more akin to a board game like chess.

But understand it or not, football is the most globally dominant sport. World Cup 2014 in Brazil is being watched by almost half the world - literally, nearly 3.5 billion people are expected to tune in. More countries are members of FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) than the United Nations. 209 to 193. That's why the corrupt and contemptible Sepp Blatter, head of FIFA, acts like he is King of the World. He is.

But this time around, it's a world whose primary concerns have come under intense and often critical scrutiny with thousands of Brazilians, who supposedly love their football more than their mothers, taking to the streets to protest what they see as their government's warped priorities: why build stadiums when they need schools and public transport?

World Cup 2014 in Brazil has garnered much of the same criticism as World Cup 2010 hosted by South Africa, another hungry country, but the Brazilian government is estimated to have spent US\$11 billion to host this year's World Cup, the most expensive ever. The disgruntled protesters are wondering why so much money is being "wasted" on football when groups like the Borgen Project estimate that it would take an annual budget of US\$30 billion to end world hunger. If

football money could provide a third of what's needed to have a hunger-free world this year, according to the UN, it would take only US\$3.2 billion to at least feed the 66 million hungry school children in the world.

So why does the world invest so much energy, time, and limited resources in global sporting events like the World Cup? Well, the answer is very hard to find but it is related to who owns the world that sets "global" priorities and paradoxically, it has everything to do with hunger.

The national elites who run the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) are making a bid to become bigger players on the global stage in a world historically owned by the West. The BRICS are hungry for more geopolitical power and global sporting events are their ticket hence, China hosted the 2008 Beijing Olympics, India hosted the Commonwealth Games the same year South Africa staged World Cup 2010 and Russia will host the event in 2018. Brazil is hosting not only this year's World Cup but the 2016 Summer Olympics whilst Russia had the honor of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi.

But if it is obvious why the elites are hungry to host global sporting events even though great swathes of their populations still lack basic necessities like adequate food, clean water, electricity, education, health care, why do hungry people like football? Why do they play?

Football doesn't require expensive equipment like tennis or a particularly elaborate course to play on like golf (the non-sport) with its sumptuous sculpted hillocks and man-made ornamental ponds. Poor kids with a patch of land or an empty alley can make a ball from plastic bags and old newsprint and kick it around. But why do hungry people watch football with such intensity even when they can't afford to buy tickets to go to the stadium? The touching documentary "Meanwhile in Mamelodi" recounts the story of a South African family struggling to get by in the informal settlement, Mamelodi, during World Cup 2010. Although their daughter receives a ticket to attend one match in a stadium from an NGO that works with school children, for the most part the family, just like many in Brazil, can only watch the matches along with their neighbors on an ancient television fueled by filched electricity. But they do watch. Roberto DaMatta, a Brazilian anthropologist who

chronicles Brazil's obsessions from Carnival to football, writes that "in Brazil – and, indeed, throughout the Third World – football has become an unparalleled focus of the emotions." Why?

Scholars who write on sports typically share the same point of departure. They assume that there is something more happening on the field than 22 bow-legged men running after a ball. They claim that sports matches must always transgress the literal spectacle. Sports operates on the level of metaphor. It is about politics, (anti)nationalism, race and racism for Grant Farred who writes in *Long Distance Love: A Passion for Football* that being a fan of Liverpool transported him as a boy from the apartheid-era coloured township in which he was confined. His love of Liverpool allowed him to travel affectively, leaving Cape Town behind in order to become a global citizen.

Charles Korr writes that when anti-apartheid activists were imprisoned on Robben Island for decade upon decade, they organized football matches to keep them in touch with their own humanity but also to learn the administrative skills essential to running a country. According to Korr's *More Than Just a Game*, Dikgang Moseneke, the Deputy Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, got his first experience writing constitutions for Makana FA, the football association on Robben Island. Sports is about building character and instilling grit, learning to work together in a team effort, inculcating endurance and mental toughness. The stakes are high, not just for gamblers and big business, but for all of us, amateurs and professionals, players and spectators, because sports is about mind over matter, soul over body. We marvel not just at the superior physical skills demonstrated by athletes at the peak of physical fitness but at their intensity, their thorough being-aliveness. A match at its very best is not poetry but epic, reflecting humanity's struggles in an evolutionary telos – man against nature, man against predator, man against man.

Sports is humanity on steroids. But we are disappointed when athletes like Lance Armstrong actually do take steroids because we want to believe that it is not just drugs that power their bodies over the finish line. We want to believe it is their

spirit that has propelled them to the win. Sports should elevate man from the physical to the spiritual.

Even though there are more and more professional female athletes now, sports in the popular media and imaginary is still largely a story about men. It is about homosociality (all that same-sex hugging and kissing), male aggression and testosterone. But these games between men always have to represent something more than the game, something greater, something bigger, something deeper. This type of argument can be seen in Mac Margolis who draws on Roberto DaMatta's anthropological work: "Brazilians love [football] because it is fair, has transparent rules and is played on a level playing field. What counts on the pitch is how you play, not who you know. It's a scale model of a better world." Really? Match-fixing, diving, faking injuries, poor refereeing etc. plague a host of matches. But there is a curious insistence among sports writers that the game is mere symbol, it is superficial, it must cover up what is really happening below it, the game is a cipher, a conversation-starter, the game is everything except the game.

Even intellectual heavyweight Roland Barthes, writing on wrestling, claims that is really about "justice" and the fans supposedly "experience a kind of intellectual pleasure at seeing the perfect functioning of the moral mechanism." Furthermore, humanity is "raised for a while out of the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and installed in a panoramic vision of univocal Nature, in which signs finally correspond to causes without obstacle, without evasion, and without contradiction." But isn't this sports as ideal not reality? Most matches, whatever the sport, are impacted by fickle nature (rain and wind), human error, ambiguous calls, arbitrary and heavy-handed chance. The relationship between sign and cause is often as clouded as in real life.

Sports functions as metonym, metaphor and symbol. On one hand, it is humanity stripped away of the veneer of civilization – cavemen battling it out for pure dominance using sometimes spurious methods in a precarious world where fortune plays an unpredictable role. On the other hand, it is also about man as supremely civilized when he demonstrates what is typically called great sportsmanship. Have you seen tennis number one, Rafael Nadal, the greatest clay

court player of all time, apologize to his vanquished opponents with such empathy and graciousness that he almost seems to regret winning? But when he loses, he can also congratulate the victor with equal sincerity and humility. Sports is both a stripping away of civilized behavior during the match and an intensification of it at the end of the game when the loser must gracefully accept defeat.

Whether we think of sports as a microcosm of life or of life as a game of somewhat arbitrary and unfair rules, unlucky calls, and poor refereeing, a match in which triumph or defeat will be determined by not only sleight of hand but also serendipity, we are all hungry to find the meaning we desire. Just as we all come to our favorite sports with our different wants, Samuel and Omar have come to Brazil with their different needs. They're just trying to feed themselves. But the holes of the soul are sometimes harder to fill than an empty stomach and we're all hungry in our own way.

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