

EMISFÉRICA

Race, Fútbol, and the Ecuadorian Nation: the Ideological Biology of (Non-)Citizenship

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Whether new or old, cultural or biological, what ... racisms have in common is their dependency on, and ultimate reduction to, a belief in the biological separation of the human population into visible and discrete groups; that is “race.” With the widespread belief that it is an open, autonomous and meritocratic arena, sport is fundamental in informing people’s perceptions about the naturalness and obviousness of racial difference. ... The world of sport has thus become an image factory that disseminates and even intensifies our racial preoccupations.

(Carrington and McDonald 2001: 4-5)

Participation in international sports competitions often provides “national populations”—and particularly their elites—with occasions to enact the official understanding of “national identity,” or sometimes also to reflect upon and revisit what and who is included in, or excluded from, the “national character,” and why. Such events can also give a special stage to victorious athletes from subaltern groups or excluded peoples. This essay is focused on the comments published in the press and on the internet about the performance of the almost entirely black Ecuadorian national team at the 2006 FIFA World Cup—the biggest global sports arena there is. On 9 June 2006, the Ecuadorian team won 2-0 against Poland in their first match of the tournament in the *Gelsenkirchen* stadium in Germany. Two Afro-Ecuadorian players, Carlos Tenorio and Agustín (Tin) Delgado, marked the goals. They gave national pride to fans of a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds in Ecuador, and to Ecuadorian migrants in Europe, the United States, and numerous other locations (see figure 1).



Figure 1: Carlos Tenorio and Agustín (Tin) Delgado at the 2006 Mundial after an Ecuadorian goal (www.diariopeoca.com/2006/06/15/fotos/ecuador.jpg).

The black Ecuadorian players' global visibility as a result of their victories in the qualifying rounds for the 2006 World Cup and in their first two games in Germany¹ shook, for a little while, the Ecuadorian racial order and the foundation of conventional understandings of national identity and their attendant construction of Ecuadorian blacks as ultimate Others (Rahier 1999b, 1999c, 2003a). It opened up a space in Ecuadorian society—particularly after the second victory, this time against Costa Rica, on 15 June 2006—to talk about race, anti-black racism, and national identity. Black players were representing a national population that elites have usually defined as fundamentally *mestizo* since the beginning of the 20th century, and that many outside of Ecuador view as overwhelmingly indigenous. As I and others have discussed elsewhere, *mestizaje* is polysemic: it means different things in different national, and even local, contexts (See Rahier 2003a, Hale 1996, Stutzman 1981). In Ecuador, indigenous peoples are seen by the elites as deserving special communal rights more than black communities (see Rahier Forthcoming; see also, for other national contexts, Hooker 2005, Ng'weno 2007, Greene 2007a and 2007b). Moreover, the official notion of national identity, which I call “the ideological biology of national identity,” somewhat incorporates indigeneity into *mestizaje* while keeping blackness at bay: blacks are not part of official *mestizaje*!²

This points to the Ecuadorian elites' historical imagining of a non-black racialized national body and identity despite the evidence of a black presence in the country since the early colonial period. Black exclusion from the dominant Ecuadorian understanding of the nation is reproduced in today's official multiculturalism, which appears as a re-inscription of the hegemonic social and racial ordering of people and things that existed before its advent, and which is now formulated in a somewhat different political configuration with the help of a “new” vocabulary. Charles Hale emphasizes the links between neoliberal economic reforms and multiculturalism in Central America (Hale 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006). His remarks are pertinent for Andean South America, particularly when he writes that neoliberal governance has included a

limited recognition of cultural rights, the strengthening of civil society, and endorsement of the principle of intercultural equality. When combined with neoliberal economic policies, these progressive measures have unexpected effects, including a deepened state capacity to shape and neutralize political opposition, and a remaking of racial hierarchies across the region (Hale 2005: 10).

Most relevant for this essay is the work of Barnor Hesse (1999, 2000) who differentiates between the “multicultural” and “multiculturalism” (see also Hall 2000). The latter refers to particular discourses and social forms that attempt to incorporate visible cultural differences and distinct ethnicities into one single national formation; in that sense, “multiculturalism can be named, valued, celebrated, and repudiated from many different political perspectives” (Hesse 2000: 2). The former, the *multicultural*, is constitutive of that political configuration and signifies the unsettled meanings of cultural differences in relation to multiculturalism. In this conceptual framework, multiculturalism is the attempt to fix the meaning of cultural differences in national imaginaries. The multicultural is therefore always embedded in a context characterized by a dichotomy

between the West and the Non-West, the global north and the global south, the “civilized” and the “savage,” which shapes the cross-cultural processes that establish the meanings of the often (if not always) racially marked instances of contested cultural differences. The multicultural is thus central to the transnational processes that diasporic formations constitute and which deeply unsettle the idea of self-contained, culturally independent, and self-sufficient nationalist identities. The multicultural always involves processes of cultural entanglements often called creolization (see Rahier 1999a), which question the notion that national forms are coherent and tidy. Thus, the dynamic of the multicultural is to unsettle supposedly well-established modern societies through processes of what Hesse calls “transruption”:

A multicultural transruption is constituted by the recurrent exposure of discrepancies in the post-colonial settlement. *It comprises any series of contestatory cultural and theoretical interventions which, in their impact as cultural differences, unsettle social norms and threaten to dismantle hegemonic concepts and practices.* Transruptions transcend or overcome any initiative to dismiss their relevance, and continually slice through, cut across and disarticulate the logic of discourses that seek to repress, trivialize or silence them. In the absence of effective or satisfactory resolutions, multicultural transruptions are simply recurrent. (my emphasis, Hesse 2000: 17)

I argue that the performance of the almost entirely black Ecuadorian team at the 2006 World Cup was “transruptive,” bringing multiculturalism into contested political focus.

In this essay, my brief analyses of the commentaries about the black players’ performance during Ecuador’s participation at the 2006 World Cup show that in Ecuador black success in sports functions as a “transruption” of racialized national discourse. My analyses point to two major strategies adopted by Ecuadorian white and white-mestizo middle and upper classes to downplay the impact of the black players’ success, with the objective to limit the unsettling of social norms and to counter the threat to hegemonic concepts and practices of “national identity” that this success could lead to. The first strategy consists of silencing the significance of the now global Ecuadorian black visibility by avoiding altogether the mention of blackness when reporting about the World Cup. That silence can be observed at work in numerous articles in the media, in postings on the internet, and in the five-volume scholarly collection about Ecuadorian soccer edited by Fernando Carrión shortly after the 2006 World Cup (2006). The latter barely mentions the issue of race and blackness by simply reporting the increased participation of black players since the late 1990s (it does so in its fifth volume: *Fútbol y sociedad*). The second strategy has consisted of racializing the Ecuadorian black players in order to re-inscribe and re-affirm both the inevitability of racial differences and of black Otherness despite the official multiculturalist line, and the centrality of the white-mestizonez of the nation. Although contradictory at first glance, both strategies combine to reify the ordinary ideological biology of national identity.

According to the 2001 general census,³ only 271,372 people (2.2%) self-identified as *Negros (Afro-Ecuadorianos)* (“Blacks [Afro-Ecuadorians]”) and 4.9% self identified as either *Negros* or *Mulatos*, out of a national population of 12,156,608, and only 830,418 (7%) as *Indígenas*. Meanwhile, the overwhelming majority of the national population (9,411,890 or 77.4%) is counted as mestizos (see figure 2). Obviously, the numbers for

indigenous peoples and Afro-Ecuadorians are underreported, and a critical reading of the statistics is necessary (Izquierdo 2007). It is well known, for example, that for political reasons, the Ecuadorian state—controlled by various sectors of the white and white-mestizo national elite—has tended to underreport or underestimate the size of both the Indian and black populations. This tendency has continued despite the adoption in 1998 of a new Constitution that for the first time declares Ecuador to be a multicultural and multi-ethnic country (see Rahier forthcoming).

TOTAL POPULATION	12.156.608
INDIGENOUS PEOPLES	830.418
BLACKS (AFRO-ECUADORIANS)	271.372
MESTIZOS	9.411.890
MULATOS	332.637
WHITES	1.271.051
OTHERS	39.240

Figure 2: Ecuadorian Population by “Ethnic Self-Identification” in the VI Population Census of the year 2001 (http://www.inec.gov.ec/cpv_indigenas/cpv_in_t09.htm).

Black Players, the Press, and the “Evidence” of Racial Particularities

Serious scholarship in the humanities, the social sciences, and population genetics has for decades accepted that “race” is a socially and culturally constructed concept, without scientific value to justify the division of the human population into distinct and separate categories. Nonetheless, sports have provided popular and privileged stages for the reification of the concept. This process has involved both the general public and sports journalists, as well as some poorly conceptualized scientific research that plays upon the general public’s love affair with genetic determinism (see Mirza 2000). Moreover, as I show below, ideas about biological races still underpin informal belief systems about the strengths and limitations of black athletes to the point that “self-evident” truths are the mode in which sporting opinions are lived. These beliefs taken as “truths” still frequently pop up among self-declared “experts,” coaches, media pundits and “knowledgeable” members of the public (see Ismond 2003). To the extent that these discourses circulate unquestioned, the epistemologies of classification through which the notion of race emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries remain socially powerful.

In the specific case of Ecuador, these common-sensical beliefs about race have the function to re-inscribe and re-affirm the inevitability of racial differences and of black Otherness. The spontaneity with which these views emerge, here and there, in everyday conversations and in the media, is nothing but a confirmation of their widespread nature. As Carrington and McDonald indicate in the epigraph of this essay, racial thinking about sports is based on the illusion or premise that sports provide level playing fields where only meritocracy (physical ability, hard work, etc.) prevails. This, then, only reinforces popular discourses “explaining” why certain sports are dominated by certain “races” with the use of physical, biological, and genetic particularities. In this way, when

commentators invoke the presumed authority of “science” to bolster the weight of their claims, pseudoscientific notions of racial difference are perpetuated.

On 18 June 2006, three days after the second Ecuadorian victory in the World Cup, a journalist wrote:

The Ecuadorian players have won two soccer matches [on] their merits. These players, even if they are representatives of the broadest and most humble classes of society, respond to a meritocracy in their sport, unlike the [political] representatives who call themselves “authentic” to hide the lack of clean play in the process that chooses them and consecrates them at compulsory intervals. We are sick and tired of those who want to control our political representation for the next four years. Can you imagine if we had to elect the players of the national soccer team for four years? When there is true meritocracy in soccer, when those who know how to play are in control, then there are positive results: meritocracy can be and is democracy. One cannot be a member of the national team if one received three million from a corrupt banker to get the presidency, nor if he is a daddy’s boy who inherited a banana fortune. To be selected for the national team, kinship or complicity with the owner of the country does not open doors. (Salazar 2006: 4)⁴

Two days later, in an article entitled “The National Team and the Market” (*La Tri y el libre mercado*), another journalist explains why Ecuador has not been able to replicate the success of the national team in other areas of society by referring to the laws of the market economy:

First of all, we reward merit. The members of the national team are chosen on the basis of their individual capabilities, so there is no room for discrimination and cronyism, practices that are so extensive in Ecuador; only the best players end up representing the country independently of their family relationships, their economic status, or their skin color. Let’s imagine the deterioration that our national team would suffer if, as happens in other Ecuadorian institutions, entry were forced for the sons of the leaders of the Ecuadorian Federation of Soccer, or the sons of the President of the Republic’s friends, or if the social movements demanded quotas for mestizos and Indians arguing that dark skinned players have a disproportionate representation in our World Cup team. (Hurtado Pérez 2006: 5)

Meritocracy is thus a fundamental premise to the racialist thinking about sports, and the racialization of black athletes—and of black people in general—has been the stuff of ordinary commentary in Ecuador. At the same time, the coverage of national and international sports events in which black athletes won a medal have usually featured stereotypical representations of Afro-Ecuadorians. These stereotypical images become linked to notions of meritocracy in the context of critical discourses on national politics. This recourse to the “higher authority” of science, while intended to advance a critique of political corruption and cronyism, actually ends up reinforcing reified notions of racial difference.



Figure 3: Liliana Chalá: *La Negra de Oro*, from an article Publisher in the Ecuadorian magazine *Vistazo* (Vistazo, 1986: 87)



Figure 4: Italo Estupiñán, *El Gato Salvaje*, from an article published in the Ecuadorian magazine *Vistazo* (Harrington 1978: 92). The journalist writes: “An exuberant television sport journalist nicknamed him “the savage cat” because when he gets in the field of action, he does it without squeamishness, bayonet in hands with fire and blood (*a sangre y fuego*). Italo Estupiñán is one of those who gives and takes without joking. ... He never complains and when the Argentine goal-keeper elbowed him viciously and broke his nose, ... the black guy (*el Moreno*), coiffed with the ‘African-look’ brought his hand to his face and stood up on his own to be seen by a medical doctor.”



Figure 5: “The Gazelle of the National Football Team,” from an article published in the Ecuadorian magazine *Vistazo* (Paredes 2006: 70).

Historically, journalistic coverage of Afro-Ecuadorian athletes has often highlighted race with adjectives such as *negro*, *moreno*, or *de ébano* (“made of ebony”). In the 1980s, the female sprinter Liliana Chalá was often referred to as the *negra de oro* (“the golden black woman,” or the black woman who got gold) (see figure 3). In the 1970s, the soccer player Italo Estupiñán was often called *el negro Italo Estupiñán* or sometimes also *el gato salvaje* (“the savage cat”), in part because he wore an afro hairdo (see figure 4). While these articles made references to black athletes’ alleged “superior physical disposition” for certain sports and evoked the usual stereotypes about the physicality of black peoples that can be found in many other global contexts, similar metaphors appear in more recent journalism. In an article published in April 2006, a *Vistazo* journalist focused on Néicer Reasco, an Afro-Esmeraldian who plays defense for the national soccer team and who was to travel to Germany for the World Cup a few weeks later. The title that journalist gave to his article (see figure 5) refers to the athlete as *La Gacela de la Selección* (“The Gazelle of the Selection”) (Paredes 2006), which obviously contributes to his racialization by evoking the African savanna and animal physical abilities for speed. Despite the redefinition of Ecuadorian nationhood as “multicultural” in the 1998 constitution, then, the vocabulary used to qualify black athletes in the press continues to replicate impressions of black alterity rooted in physical traits.

The belief of many Ecuadorians that Afro-Ecuadorians and blacks in general are in fact physically superior and well suited to play soccer arises repeatedly in the press and everyday talk. Conversations I recently had with Ecuadorians in Ecuador, in the United States, and in Spain echoed the statements made by the journalists I quote above: many people invoked the logic of meritocracy whereby only the best are selected independently of any kind of corruption or personal preference, or even of anti-black racism that would leave for black people sports and entertainment as the unique possibilities for upward mobility. In another article entitled “Ebony Podium,” the journalist Aurelio Paredes racialized black athletes in the following way (see figure 6):

Experts in physical preparation have indicated on numerous occasions that the black race has an advantage for sports thanks to their physical conditions of

strength and power and to their aerobic and anaerobic capacities, which give them more resistance to physical efforts. (Paredes 2001: 60)

After citing the authority of “experts,” he then goes on to list as evidence the Afro-Ecuadorian athletes who have brought medals to Ecuador from participation in international sports events in the past few years.



Figure 6: “Ebony Podium: The black race gave to Ecuador seven players of the football national team and various international triumphs,” from an article published in the Ecuadorian magazine *Vistazo* (Paredes 2001: 60).

A notorious medical doctor, Dr. Rodrigo Fierro Benítez, wrote in his column in *El Comercio*, the major Quito-based daily, an article entitled “Biopathology and the Tri,” that the reason that most black players of the national soccer team were from El Chota (see figure 2) was because there, the black population has never missed access to iodine: “That is how the people of the Chota Valley have not suffered the effects of iodine deficiency. Afro-Ecuadorians from Imbabura Province have kept the attributes of a race superlatively well endowed for sports” (Fierro Benítez 2006: 4). He, like many commentators before him, never writes about the striking poverty, unemployment and structural racism that have played a role in the “over-representation” of blacks in the national team, when compared to the percentage of blacks in the national population.

The same medical doctor reproduced devastating images of Africa in an article entitled “The Africanization of Our Country,” published in the same daily in the year 2000, in which he laments the political instability of the country at the end of the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s.

The Africanization of our country is an issue of extreme connotations. For the past few years, the realities that have been emerging have led numerous national and even foreign social commentators to interpret them as indicators that a process of retrogression has begun, which would bring us to situations quite similar to those of a great many African countries, that is to say the Fourth World (*Cuarto Mundo*). In this column, I made reference to all this when I wrote on mother-child mortality, malnutrition, coastal deforestation, juridical insecurity, and the corruption of the political leadership. With respect to human

development, we find ourselves with Haiti at the bottom of Latin America, very close to Africans, that is to say to the “wretched of the earth” (Fierro Benítez 2000).

Here, again, the slippage between political critique and scientific discourse leads, as it does in discussions of meritocracy, to the reification of black racial Otherness. As Fierro Benítez performs a verbal diagnosis of the ills plaguing the national body, at stake is the marginality of the nation within the world.

Various social scientists commented upon the sociological phenomenon that the *Tri* and its victories in the 2006 World Cup represented for the country, emphasizing that most players emerged from spaces associated with socio-economic marginality within the nation (de la Torre 2006b, Polo 2006). Felipe Burbano de Lara, a white or white-mestizo professor in the Ecuadorian campus of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (Latin American Faculty of Social Science, FLACSO), who is also the ex-editor of *Íconos*, a well-respected Ecuadorian social sciences journal, wrote:

The National Team shows the persistent drama of the way we Ecuadorians relate to ourselves and to the country. The best expression of that drama is still the shouted motto, “*Si se puede*,” which condenses both the attitude of national defeat and the anxiety to overcome it. The magic of the contemporary moment is that the Selection allows us to look at ourselves from a different perspective: not like the defeated that we’ve always been, but as a country capable of triumph.... [T]he team stopped being that space where our feeling of national impotence, our condemnation to defeat was ratified. It has become the counter-image of a country entangled, fragmented, Manichaeian, not united... [In addition,] that representation of Ecuador is offered by a group of Afrodescendants directed by a Colombian. Those excluded from the nation are capable of producing another relation of Ecuadorians with themselves and with their own country. Despite all the racism and the rejections they have suffered, it is surprising that *Ecuadorians* identify with *them* (my emphasis; Burbano de Lara 2006).

Burbano de Lara’s comments validate a decisive opposition between an Ecuadorian *nosotros* or “we,” which he understands as fundamentally white-mestizo, and “them,” the black peoples from marginalized spaces within the Ecuadorian nation, with whom the Ecuadorians (read “white-mestizos”) could surprisingly identify following the success of the national team. His comments naturalize Ecuadorian blacks’ outsidership vis-à-vis Ecuadorian national (white-mestizo) identity instead of attempting to reduce or even eradicate it. They are quite indicative of what happens in many Ecuadorian publications in social sciences and the humanities, which—as I explore in the last section of this essay—are no different from mainstream Ecuadorian common-sense in marking Ecuadorian blacks as ultimate Others.

I end this section with comments from Alexandra Ocles, an Afro-Ecuadorian woman, mother, intellectual, and activist. In contrast with Burbano de Lara’s comments, her notion of “Ecuadorianness” does not exclude Afro-descendants:

...the Ecuadorian national soccer team, composed of 90% of Afro-descendant players, has given joy and glory to *Ecuadorian men and women*, from the beginning of the World Cup. Did you read the

newspapers? There are news, shouts, commentaries: “golden blacks”; “Blacks are the best of the Tri”; “Beautiful black men”; and others like this: “how strong the black players are.” Everything is part of the euphoria of the moment. What would have happened if we had lost these two matches? Maybe racism would have emerged again and we could have heard calls for the whitening of the team, as was the case a few years ago. What doesn’t change is the reality that Afro-descendants face in Ecuador: for many, we continue to be the thieves, the social predators, the prostitutes, or the simple domestic employees. What doesn’t change is that we don’t have access to a quality education that reinforces our identity; what doesn’t change is that my daughter doesn’t want to be black anymore because it causes her too many problems in school... What doesn’t change is that if three or four of us are doing nothing more than talking at a street corner, policemen come and ask for identification, while abusing us in passing. These and many other issues are also what we should comment upon (my emphasis, Ocles 2006).

Understandably, Alexandra Ocles’ Ecuadorian “we” is the product of a political move aimed at destabilizing Ecuadorian, dominant multiculturalism by proposing another reading of—to borrow Hesse’s vocabulary (2002)—Ecuador’s *multicultural* situation, grounded on a more inclusive understanding of Ecuadorian citizenship that gives Afro-Ecuadorians a comfortable and respected position within the nation and its narrations.

The 2006 World Cup and the Common-Sensical Conceptualization of the Ecuadorian Nation

On 15 June 2006, in the FIFA Stadium in Hamburg, Germany, Ecuador beat Costa Rica 3-0, with goals from Carlos Tenorio, Tín Delgado, and Ivan Kaviedes. The first two players are black, while the third is white or white-mestizo. This victory made Ecuador the “biggest surprise” of the 2006 World Cup. The euphoria shared globally by Ecuadorian fans left traces on the internet. Dozens of June 15 and 16 Internet postings on a blog about Ecuadorian soccer echoed this enthusiasm:⁵

What a beautiful thing! Of course, Ecuador can (*Ecuador puede*)! How I would like to be in Ecuador right now, to celebrate this event that fills every Ecuadorian with pride. ¡ARRIBA ECUADOR!!! ¡Q VIVA MI PAIS!!

I hope that these triumphs in European lands will serve as examples for our country to get ahead, and that we don’t drown under corruption. Let’s go further, Ecuador, yes we can!

Excellent! Congratulations for the professionalism you have shown on the field, and I hope that your objective is not only to go to the next round. Everything will depend on what you guys set yourselves to do, and I’m not talking here only about physical strength, but also about mental will. Yes, we can. *Arriba Ecuador*.

At first, as illustrated by the preceding comments, the blogs I consulted did not mention the race of the majority of the successful players. This rather spontaneous silencing of an

obvious aspect of the reality of Ecuadorian soccer must be understood in light of the virulence of ordinary Ecuadorian anti-black racism (see de la Torre 2002; Rahier 1998, 1999b, 2003b). It must be identified as a strategy that consists in attempting to limit the unsettling of dominant notions of Ecuadorian national identity in terms of official mestizaje brought about by the transruptive global visibility of Ecuadorian blackness, in the very moment when the Ecuadorian nation is publicly and joyfully celebrated.

The blogs I refer to were, for the most part, created for the occasion of the Ecuadorian participation in the 2006 FIFA World Cup. They were visited and received postings from mostly Ecuadorians at home and abroad, with occasional interventions from other Latin Americans who congratulated Ecuadorians for “their success.” They provided a space for textual interfaces where ordinary Ecuadorian racial categories were reified, and where a default “universal” Ecuadorian white-mestizoneess was assumed to be the normal and normative identity shared by all users, in a move that reproduced non-white-mestizo marginality/invisibility. This assumption is not surprising and denotes the existence of patterns in the functioning of race in cyberspace, where digital and racial divides that duplicate societal hierarchies are simply taken for granted (see Kolko, Nakaruma and Rodman 2000; Nakamura 2002). Of course, the epistemologies that reproduce whiteness as normative are the same ones that construct blackness as Other.

Some of the comments posted on the blogs did mention the players’ race. When they did, they usually confirmed—“silently,” as to universalize it as the norm—the white or white-mestizo identity of the speakers, and racialized the black players either by suggesting their potent physicality or by ordinarily infantilizing them. And the mention of the black players’ “physical power” did nothing other than evoke the surviving strength of stereotypes about black men⁶.

You go my beautiful black guys, I love you⁷, and you’re getting interesting. Keep fighting with *fighting spirit and strength*, put your heart into it for your country. Here in Ecuador, we are all proud of you, and from here we send you strength, because it is us who marked the goals. Strength, humility, perseverance, tranquility, forward. Put it in, put it in, put it in, put it in..... Goaaaaaaaaaall. (my emphasis; posted on 15 June 2006)

I’m an Ecuadorian woman who resides in Spain, and I feel very proud of my country. I’m sorry that I’m not home now to celebrate the victory the proper way. I miss my country a lot, and its beautiful people. They are my little Ecuadorian blacks!!!!!! Thanks a lot *negritos*. I hope that you continue like this. Kisses from Spain. ¡¡¡Viva Ecuador!!! (my emphasis, posted on 16 June 2006)⁸

The blogs’ nationalist and emotional comments reproduced common stereotypes and contemporary relations of power. They can also be found in a letter to the Quito-based daily *El Comercio*, obviously written by a white or white-mestizo reader who, unaware but apparently “well intentioned,” continued to see blackness as an outside to Ecuadorianness and assumed the space provided by the written media and by the internet as evidently white or white mestizo, that is to say as non-black, as did the previously quoted commentators:

This is all well, but *we* are and always have been racists: but in spite of this most professional soccer players are and have been black. Couldn't this be, I wonder, the time to ease the lives of *this* people, to recognize *their* true value within the social context? ... This could be the occasion to concede to *them* the merit that *they* have shown to have, not only as athletes, but as protagonists of exemplary histories thanks to *their strength* and tolerance (my emphases, Tarré Andrade 2006).

On June 16, the comments of an Argentine ex-soccer player turned amateur sports journalist nicknamed *el Loco* Gatti published on his blog provoked the passionate reactions of many Ecuadorians, and forced them to deal with race in relation to national identity. Gatti wrote:

The Ecuadorians are not a surprise, at least not for me. They have played in two World Cups in a row, and in the South American competitions they classify easily and relatively close to Argentina and Brazil. They play good football, without mysterious or strange things, and on top of that they have put together a team of nationalized Nigerians... But weren't Ecuadorians Indians like me? Well, not at all, now they are almost all *negritos*. Where did they get that skin color? If I were working for the FIFA I would investigate this, because these banana farmers (that's how we call Ecuadorians in Argentina), they are cheating... (Gatti 2006)

Some people defended the Argentine soccer commentator and explained that he was obviously making a joke, that his writing style in that piece was humoristic, that he had not written anything that was really offensive.⁹ Others—also obviously whites and white-mestizos, as indicated by the contents of their commentaries—were outraged by these statements and reacted by, in a nationalist outburst, not so much including the black players inside Ecuadorianness but rather simply mentioning—with a touch of paternalism—their region of origin (the Province of Esmeraldas and the Chota-Mira Valley) within the national racial-spatial ordering of the nation (see Rahier 1998), ignoring the growing urban black populations in Guayaquil, Quito, and elsewhere (see Redacción Guayaquil 2006a and 2006b):

I only found out today about this. A friend sent it to me by e-mail. What could I say about this unfortunate being who wrote these lines and who calls himself *Loco* (“crazy”)? A petty spirit? A small mind? That sluggish, greenish, and stinking thing called envy? All that and more!! Apart from the notorious ignorance of this pseudo-journalist who for sure doesn't even know the provinces or states of his own country, he doesn't know that we have Esmeraldas and the Chota Valley which is where the majority of our best soccer players and athletes in general come from. We do not need to go find them in Africa or anywhere else.¹⁰

Other comments took advantage of the discussion to express reflexive thinking about ordinary white and white-mestizo Ecuadorian anti-black racism, emphasizing the irony of the comments such as the preceding one that suddenly and loudly acknowledge blacks—even if only for a moment—as a separate group “within” the fabric of the Ecuadorian nation:

We must do a *mea culpa*: no one among *us* could say that he or she has not had racist attitudes with blacks, even if it was to only hold one's purse or wallet tighter when seeing one. I think that *we* must make an effort to abandon these prejudices and recognize once and for all what *they* have brought to the country not only in the field of sports, but also culturally with all the intellectuals and artists that *they* have given [to the nation]. Furthermore, as far as I can remember, none of the corrupt politicians who have *us* now so messed up is black. (Ibid.)

Here, again, the assumption is that the online community is fundamentally white or white-mestiza, and again the reification of racial categories is tied to a critique of political corruption.

It is in this context that an Afro-Ecuadorian intellectual and political activist, Juan Ocles Arce, intervened and had this to say about the Loco Gatti's comments. The Africa that emerges in Ocles Arce's intervention contrasts greatly with the Africa depicted in the Fierro Benítez piece on the "Africanization" of Ecuador (see above):

For the first time we don't need to say that there are also black people [in Ecuador], because the images were more forceful than words, to the point that the "Loco Gatti" said that we were a team of nationalized Africans. Thank you, Gatti, for reinforcing our old request: Afro-Ecuadorian men and women ask that the Ecuadorian government sign a treaty with the African Union so that we can have double nationality, which is to say the true Afro-Ecuadorianness. This would allow us to move around freely in African countries to look for our ancestors and to strengthen our identity with real images and not with these truncated images that the television gives us daily, trying to generate in us a feeling of shame about the "black continent." (Ocles Arce 2006)

As I complete the revisions to this essay, I am struck by an article from the Quito-based daily *Ultimas Noticias*. It is entitled *Una sanción en 100 años de racismo* ("One sanction in 100 years of racism"). It reports on a soccer match that took place in Guayaquil between two Ecuadorian teams, Barcelona and Deportivo Quito, during which Barcelona's fans repeatedly shouted monkey screams every time black players from the Deportivo Quito played the ball. The article's title comes from the fact that it is the very first time in the history of Ecuadorian soccer that a referee has punished a club for not controlling its fans and for not preventing them from hurling racist insults against black players, despite the referee's attempts to do so. The idea here is not that this is the first time that such insults have been made by fans, but that it is the first time that a punishment has been applied. Barcelona's management will have to pay \$2,000.00 to the *Comisión Disciplinaria* of the *Ecuafútbol*. For Ximena Chalá, a representative of the Centro Cultural Afroecuatoriano who was interviewed by the journalist, what happens in the soccer stadiums only reflects what happens in the society at large: "People's mentality hasn't changed, this has been happening for a long time. To make this monkey sound every time a black player has the ball is the same thing as if they were screaming 'lazy nigger' or 'black thief'."¹¹

Conclusions

I have shown that two strategies that appear, at first glance, as diametrically opposed—the silencing of the presence of black bodies in the triumphant national soccer team's

performances, and the blatant racialization of black players grounded on the belief in the inevitability of racial differences and of black Otherness—do in fact work together to re-affirm the dominant understanding and practices of “national identity.” Both of these strategies function through notions of “common sense” and “expertise” based upon the authority of science, which as a quintessentially powerful form of knowledge is often invoked in conversations about the sociopolitical “health” of the nation. Such a re-affirmation of normative identity is aimed at fighting and controlling the effects of the transruptive black players’ success and is a safeguard for the dominant ideological biology that both constructs citizenship in terms of whiteness and white-mestizonez and imagines blackness as a kind of non-citizenship, an Otherness “within.” As scholars of nationalism have shown, the construction of national identity would not be possible without the attendant construction of Others within and without the national borders.

If they want to one day have—unambiguously—the comfortable place they deserve within the Ecuadorian nation, Afro-Ecuadorian activists have no other choice but to continue their transruptive noise.

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Endnotes

1. See the videos posted on youtube.com, which celebrate the Ecuadorian goals. Among others:

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=E180v11u3aE>

http://youtube.com/watch?v=mC_jOnWn5gs&mode=related&search

http://youtube.com/watch?v=XHe7zB3yi_w

In this article, the expression “Tri” is used following its meaning in Ecuador. “Tri” comes from “tricolor,” for the three colors of the national flag; it is also used to refer to the national soccer team and is synonymous with *Selección*.

2. Ted Gordon has made a similar point when writing about Nicaragua (Gordon 1998).

3. http://www.inec.gov.ec/cpv_indigenas/cpv_in_t09.htm

4. Translations of quotes from print journalism are the author’s.

5.

http://www.futbol.ec/ecuador/mundial/futbol_mundial_ecuador_1_costa_rica_0_1t.html (accessed 9 April 2007). This blog entry is quoted as it appeared originally, in English; I have translated all the others.

6. I will never forget the comments of the husband of a white-mestiza friend of mine who told me, in the late 1990s, that when he walked in Quito's streets, he would always change sidewalks if there was a black man coming towards him. When I asked him why, he responded that he was intimidated by their height and apparent strength: *¡Son tan grandes!*...

7. Here, the author of the note is a woman. In the original, she wrote *los amos*, which in Spanish was an expression used to refer to slave owners. If she actually meant to place an "s" at the end of "amo," the use of the expression would suggest that she thinks that as a result of the victories, blacks now have the power that slave owners once had... I personally think that she meant to say "los amo," which would mean "I love you." The beginning of her statement is: *Arriba mis negros bellos, se estan poniendo interesantes...* In any case, the lapsus is interesting.

8.

http://www.futbol.ec/ecuador/mundial/futbol_mundial_ecuador_1_costa_rica_0_1t.html (accessed 9 April 2007).

9. <https://www2.blogger.com/comment.g?blogID=11802698&postID=115153349840830674&isPopup=true> (accessed 10 April 2007).

10. <http://memoriasdeuncordel.blogspot.com/2006/06/nigerianos.htm> (accessed 10 April 2007).

11. http://www.ultimasnoticias.ec/noticiaUN.asp?id_noticia=9543&id_seccion=8 (accessed 8 April 2008).

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