
White Supremacy versus Gangsterism on the Small-Goal Football Field

Dylan Kerrigan

In Trinidad, “sweat” is the local name for taking part in a small-goal football (a form of soccer) game. “Small-goal football” is a distinct form of football where the goals are about three feet tall by four feet wide. In Trinidad many people—mostly men but some women too—can be found playing small-goal football every afternoon in parks, back yards, driveways, at the beach, in the street, and on the savannah.

At Athletico Rehab, a large expanse of land reclaimed from the sea and covered with grass on the outskirts of “town,” sweat is a daily ritual. On one side of the field are coconut palms and tamarind trees. They line a large open storm drain that backs onto the garden walls of a middle-class suburb. On the other side is a large fence that separates the field from a four-lane highway. Rocks and refuse protrude out of the ground and make an uneven and accident-producing playing surface that usually results in “white men”—the local term for scrapes that peel off a slither of skin to reveal white flesh under black, brown, or tanned skin.

From what people said, I learned that the Rehab began around 1987. No one seemed to know a precise date, and some said it was not until 1989. However, all agreed it began

when a group of male, middle-class young adults got together after work to do three things: play football, smoke marijuana, and laugh. Over time this social gathering attracted others, those of various employments (as well as persons not working), classes, ethnicities, races, and sporting abilities—until a routine and a form became established.

For those who come to watch and not play, sweat also provides a place for talking, storytelling, and laughing—what is termed locally as “liming.” This laughing is often directed at the players themselves. When not laughing, those not watching—a group that numbers from one to more than twenty and is labeled “the bench”—referee the game too. The bench are the supposed arbiters of fair play on the field, and their jocular ribbing is a constant reminder to players that ridicule for a bad shot, missed pass, foot slip, or other on-field mistake is never far away.

The games on the Rehab field are seven versus seven. When there are more than fourteen players, the games are timed to a maximum of 20 minutes, with the first team to score staying on. If no one scores in that time, the winner is decided by penalty shootout, and the players on the sidelines take their turn against the winners. Occasionally losing players try their luck to stay on, but the weight of the rule and members’ support for it mean it is respected. Mostly.

Today there is a standoff. Roger refuses to leave the field. Because the numbers are uneven, the next game cannot begin with him still on the field. Many don’t take him seriously at first and expect him to come off. He remains. Expletives are now exchanged. Roger still won’t budge. He stands there.

Dylan Kerrigan

White Supremacy versus Gangsterism 7



Some members of Athletico Rehab pose at annual family day.

Motionless. He thinks his tactic will work, and someone will buckle to give up their sweat for him. It can happen. Today it won't. Convention, rules, and the weight of the other members of the Rehab are having little effect on Roger leaving the field. One of the longest standing members of the Rehab, Sky, storms off the pitch. He throws his shirt on the ground and shouts,

If allyuh allow this crap to take place, man, I'm done with allyuh! This is not how we do things. Roger yuh doing shit man!

Sky is shaking. He takes a seat on the sidelines, muttering, and puts his hand to

his forehead. Others are walking off the pitch too. Some hurl more expletives at Roger as they come off. Others simply shake their head. Still others laugh at the absurdity of the situation of no football due to one man's behavior. The day's football looks like it is over. A voice rises above the rest.

"Yuh see this white supremacy bullshit Roger, we not on that man. This is Trinidad. That doh work here. Take your white supremacy home with yuh man!"

Among a multi-racial and multi-ethnic group of men where white is a distinct minority with great social power, Roger's

whiteness and its historical social power is seized upon by others.

"Yeah dat is bullshit man. Iz white supremacy fuh real boy! We don't want dat here!" Arms start to motion and flap as many more men start to accuse Roger of white supremacy.

Another says, "Yuh feel yuh special. That yuh cud do what yuh want? Nah man. We not on that. Move from the field. Come off man!"

The emotional shouting—what people in Trinidad call "grand-charging" and "cussing"—turns toward an air of male aggression. Roger is offended. He resents being separated and isolated from the multi-hued group. He walks toward the person who started the white supremacy jibe. He is clearly upset about the accusation. They are now nose to nose. Roger reaches to grab the man in a neck hold. Tension rises. The attention of the on-looking crowd focuses in on the potential altercation. At the same time the accuser adds, "If it not white supremacy, den its gangsterism, and that jus as bad!"

The extra wording seems to change everything. Colloquially gangsterism is something everyone with power in Trinidad is accused of or complicit in. As the Trinidadian author Lloyd Best once described it, it is a local ethos, one at the heart of "getting ahead" socio-economically through such opportunism as nepotism, corruption, violence, and proposition in a post-colonial nation. The two men begin to laugh with each other. What looked as though it was going to be an aggressive neck hold becomes an arm around each other's shoulder. Laughter replaces aggression. The mood changes immediately. The jokes—normal

everyday currency of life on the Rehab field—start to flow again from the sidelines. These include both jokes about Roger's sense of privilege and also the ridiculousness of his behavior. The football starts back up and Roger asks for a quick second of everyone's time. He apologizes for his behavior and takes a seat on the sidelines waiting his turn to play.

Every Creed and Race Will Find an Equal Place

Political, economic, and social power in local society is related to the historical realities of transplanted populations and the racial and ethnic hierarchy of colonialism these diverse populations encountered on arrival in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. The historical relationship between racism, white supremacy, Creole nationalism, post-colonialism, and social structure in Trinidad has had a direct impact on the levels of access to respectable institutional and individual power for different ethnic and social groups. Although the issue of slavery and colonialism disintegrated, the stratification it influenced has left a legacy to this day.

Historically, race and ethnicity determined the social strata and class to which one may be drawn, be associated with, or be allowed into. It was also the basis for the distribution of production factors, which then allowed for the possession of power and wealth within society. Colonialism and post-colonialism transformed the standards of living in Trinidad for some more than others. Racial hierarchy laid the beginnings of inequality in Trinidad, and success was al-

ways premised on the adoption and assimilation into white British upper-class, cultural values.

As such, a post-colonial situation of structural inequality—as is the case in most former colonies—was produced. Access to social, economic, and political power in Trinidad has always been, and still is today to a lesser degree, connected to discourses of whiteness and the ability to fit into white British ideals, whether these be the use of standard English language over non-standard English in local education, politics, and business, or the levels of decorum expected in local politics, to take just two examples.

Everyday intersections of race, ethnicity, history, privilege, and class define modern Trinidad. It is a country comprised of many different transplanted cultural groups who trace their ancestry to India, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas, but who are all “Trinis”—as locals affectionately call each other—at the same time. Music, food, dress, religion, and language in Trinidad, due to history, have many different faces depending on whom you are talking with, and a cultural knowledge of each other’s culture, even if rudimentary, is normal for many. The Rehab players are similar. The playing field and bench reflect all the different races, ethnicities, religions, and nationalities of the country. That all these different cultures have met and mixed in wider Trinidad society over the past 160 years is another statement of history and one buried in Roger’s story.

Now, while the idea of multiculturalism in Trinidad and Tobago is enshrined in its national anthem of “every creed and race

will find an equal place,” and on the national coat of arms—“Together We Aspire, Together We Achieve”—multiculturalism has not been legislated. Instead what has emerged is a living version of multiculturalism that “works.” It is a version that contains both the positives of multicultural acceptance and the negatives of ethno-racial prejudice. By “work,” we can say ethnic and racial violence is rare in Trinidad; however, this does not mean there is no racial inequality. There most certainly is inequality across the country; wealth and power have not been distributed equally.

On the Rehab field humor and ethno-racial nicknames are two local prisms through which to view this living version of multiculturalism “at play.” At play is a better analogy than “at work.” In the informal local context, in most general terms, Trinidad is a playful society. The government recognizes this playfulness with more cultural festivals and public holidays representing different cultural groups than do the vast majority of nations.

In Trinidad, ribbing and ridicule are quite normal, seen and heard every day, and termed “picong.” This common local cultural practice refers to light comical banter,

Colonialism and post-colonialism transformed the standards of living in Trinidad for some more than others. Racial hierarchy laid the beginnings of inequality in Trinidad.

usually at someone else's expense. It is the way Trinbagonians heckle and mock each other in a friendly manner. Picong is seen and heard across Trinidad in workplaces, the family home, school, on vacation, in the supermarket, on the football field, and elsewhere. The line between humor and insult is fine and constantly shifting; however, the convivial spirit of picong rarely degenerates into more heated debate and physical altercations. This is because the ability to engage in picong without crossing over into insult is highly valued in local culture. The high status of Calypsonians and storytellers in Trinidad culture is often suggested as evidence of this. Verbal wit is prized over physical strength. On the Rehab field, participation in and acceptance of picong provides social acceptance with those around. Picong in this sense can be read as a mechanism of integration and, as in the context of Roger's story, when deployed correctly, a safety valve to maintain integration.

Nationally, picong is often based on ethnic and racial stereotypes of the various cultural groups found in Trinidad. Picong does not erase the intercultural tensions that exist in Trinidad and Tobago. Rather, it is a mechanism—as in the face-off with Roger—that can deflate ethno-racial tension. As an older member of the Rehab told me when I said to him that people there don't seem to be racially offended at ethno-racial names:

Doh be fooled. Ethnic and racial tensions are always under deh surface. People see white, black, Indian, and the rest. They jus keep it under control here. It isn't that it's not there. It's buried. Not everyone can call everyone certain names. It depends on

who yuh are, who dey are, where yuh are, and what de situation is. It's like that across Trinidad. Some people, at some times will get offended but not all people all the time.

People's nicknames on the Rehab field reflect this statement, and the space allows a level of ethno-racial name-calling that, for the most part, once you follow unspoken rules, isn't considered offensive but would be elsewhere. So on the field, names such as "mamoo" (the East Indian word for "uncle"), "yellow man," "chinee," "rasta," "redman" (light-skin mixed), "dougla" (Afro/Indo mix), "Creole," "nigga," "Alladin," "rastaman," "Syrian," "chindian" (Chinese/Indo mix), "English," "terrorist," and "red nigger" (light-skin black) are not uncommon. It should also be added that on the Rehab field, non-ethno-racial nicknames linked to surnames, professions, physical features, and notoriety, like "kid chocolate," "the rat," "big man," "stones," and "model" are also common. Again not everyone can use all these labels and nicknames in identical ways, but some people of different shades and backgrounds on the Rehab field have earned the required social and cultural capital to be allowed such freedom. However, as the voice that called Roger a white supremacist found out, there are always contextual limits to what people will take before getting aggressive.

Many of the jokes spoken on the Rehab field—the size of body parts, references to alcohol, narratives about business acumen, denigration about laziness, privilege, and much more—are based on ethnic stereotypes. Away from the Rehab, some people I spoke to took offense to this type of humor

and saw it as “racial.” Obviously, this is not to say there is a complete absence of racial and ethnic ideologies and hierarchies on the Rehab field, as the story of Roger demonstrates. Rather, it means that mostly, on an average day on the Rehab, racial and ethnic tension is subsumed and submerged by group solidarity in a fully functioning multicultural football community where football ability—not race, class or ethnicity—is the hierarchal ethos. In other words, on the “field,” a cross-class and multi-cultural space, people are actively able to deal with difference and privilege.

As one member described the Rehab to me:

It’s an institution more than a team. The regularity and the liming create community and the camaraderie extends off the Rehab too. Like when Harry [one of the Rehab’s best strikers] went to play in the semi-pro league, and when he scored, Silver Fox [a Rehab regular] would scream “Rehab” and everyone in the crowd who was from the Rehab would join in. And when Syrian [another regular] was in the car crash we raised funds through the Rehab for his surgery and organized to go to the church every night to pray for him. So while the name Rehab comes out of arse-ness [ridiculing] ... meeting regularly for football made everyone close.

Understood as an “institution,” Athletic Rehab can be read as providing socialization to its members. As many of its members have been playing there for over 20 years it suggests they have been “brought up” and educated in the social context—one of mul-

ticultural and class difference—that governs behavior there. Hence when Roger was accused of white supremacy he did not like it because he was being called out on a form of behavior in opposition to the norms of the field and against the nature of the institution itself.

White Supremacy on the Rehab Field

The story of Roger breaking the rule of coming promptly off the field and subsequently being accused of white supremacy is a small glimpse into the way race and ethnicity play out in this multicultural nation. Racial language was used to discipline a member of a small group of multi-ethnic footballing men for asserting a perceived racial privilege. Humor and picong functioned as a valve to release the pressure created by such discipline and can be described as a local cultural mechanism developed for this function. By turning the accusation from white supremacy to gangsterism—the latter being an ironic and humorous put down to describe the attainment of power locally—the larger historical point about the social power of whiteness and Roger’s possession of privilege was addressed publicly and used to embarrass him for breaking the ethos of the multi-racial space. At the same time, Roger was also allowed a humorous way out of the perceived racial situation and did not need to be excluded from the group as punishment. The accusation of white privilege was a weapon deployed to deflate the individual’s sense of importance. It was accepted that the white supremacy label was not true,

Mostly, on an average day on the Rehab, racial and ethnic tension is ... submerged by group solidarity ... where football ability—not race, class or ethnicity—is the hierarchal ethos.

but its implication lingered. This point is important to digest. It alludes to the social situation produced from the history of colonialism and then post-colonialism. It also demonstrates how potential negatives of such social situations can be overcome in particular ways and in particular spaces. That some people are the recipients of unspoken privilege and belief that others should come off the football field for them to stay is a reflection of handed-down colonial inequalities in the wider society. That such privilege can be tackled in a reasonable manner is central to the story. It demonstrates how culture moves, changes, and can tackle local racial inequalities.

On the Rehab field, to be accused of white supremacy is to be cast as an outsider, as not local, as “matter out of place”—as someone that has privilege that others do not. It is an allusion to the evils of colonialism and the power it gave all white people over all non-white locals—that they should be treated differently because they are white. Gangsterism is the colloquial way locals achieve wealth and power. Gangsterism is the way some Trinians—of all classes—took back power from white society and are still more generally asserting themselves

Dylan Kerrigan

against whiteness and privilege more globally. To be accused of white supremacy is to be cast out of the group and become part of the colonial other—part of a rejected order. To be accused of gangsterism is to be included in the local form of speaking back to power—it is to get “what is yours” by force and violence. *It is in the anti-colonial sense an opposing technique to white privilege.*

On the Rehab field, the historical negatives of colonialism, which a mostly transplanted population endured, have delivered a space in which the automatic solidarity of football and the lime that takes place around it—for the most part—produces a functioning, non-legislative, multicultural space. Such a situation may only exist in spaces like that of the Rehab, where class and wealth play only a small role, and movement, competition, initiative, and conflict all unfold within a framework where individuals are not hierarchically differentiated by their race, ethnicity, class, or career but by their particular football abilities. If this is this case, then in an echo of how C.L.R. James looked upon cricket in his classic 1962 book, *Beyond the Boundary*, we might see that the symbolic and structural violence perpetuated by the colonial and post-colonial social system is being tackled on the Rehab small-goal football field and elsewhere in Trinidad.

Suggested Readings

Best, Lloyd. 2001. “Race, Class and Ethnicity: A Caribbean Interpretation.” Lecture delivered at *The Third Annual Jagan Lecture*, York University, March 2, 2001.

White Supremacy versus Gangsterism 13

Crowley, Daniel J. 1957. "Plural and Differential Acculturation in Trinidad." In *American Anthropologist* 59:817–824.

Gramsci, Antonio. 1994 [1918]. "Football and Scopone." In *Antonio Gramsci: Pre Prison Writings*. Virginia Cox, trans. Richard Bellamy, ed. 73–75.

James, C.L.R. 1963. *Beyond a Boundary*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Khan, Aisha. 1993. "What Is 'a Spanish?': Ambiguity and 'Mixed' Ethnicity in Trinidad." In *Trinidad Ethnicity*. K. Yelvington, ed. London: Macmillan.

Ortiz, Fernando. 2003. *Cuban Counterpoint, Tobacco and Sugar*. Duke University Press.

Dylan Kerrigan is a lecturer in anthropology at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad and Tobago. He received his PhD from the American University and his masters degree from Goldsmiths College, University of London. His work examines present-day power relations, their connections to social history, and the cultural processes that connect colonialism and capitalism.