

Kingdom Risen, Kingdom Fallen:

England's Football and Stoking Culture Wars

Oscar Guardiola-Rivera

I. Personal matters.

In history, an era that is ending tends to transform into a farce of itself. Each event turned into a travesty. Each tragic act presented as a joke with lines of light comedy. The spirit of life deserts the living and actors hang around an empty stage, suspended between a dying past that refuses to let go and a future that wishes to be born but isn't yet.

The creative spirit jumps from what's known and familiar to what's unheard or secret, using imagination to illuminate the dark rooms of history. But in times like these, it would seem that only what is familiar can satisfy common sense. A is A. Brexit means Brexit. Sport is sport. Only circus, no bread.¹

Gone is the spirit of truthfulness in play, mythic poetry and storytelling, making it difficult to distinguish myth, playful images and ideas from titbits and

¹ See René Ménil, 'Introduction to the Marvelous', in *Black, Brown & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, ed. by Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), p. 82, and 'Evidencias relacionadas con el espíritu y su velocidad', in *Las Antillas Ayer y Hoy* (Mexico: FCE, 2005) pp. 167-175, for the sources paraphrased and borrowed in this and the previous paragraphs.

opinion. Thus, when a British politician answers journalists' questions about racism and the consequences of empire by saying that there's no such thing; arguing that other peoples merely recognised the cultural advances of our society, the superiority of our values, and gravitated towards it, one might be forgiven for thinking the politician is joking. And surely, it's also a joke when an MP responds to the news of football fans booing their home team because its players took a knee saying it was simply a gesture, politically insignificant, young players importing an Americanism.

They may laugh at booing fans in football matches and the stoking of so-called culture wars. But for those of us who grew up in the shadow of colonial violence, in the Caribbean and elsewhere, this is no joking matter. For these farcical forms can turn deadly at the flick of a switch.

Recall, for instance, the 1981 New Cross fire in south-east London. As revellers raved on the dancefloor and reggae rocked, feet lifted off the ground as the dark fixity of the corrupt ideas of the mainstream exploded around them. Spirit caught fire at the speed of dancing. But then it rained lead and heavy metals.

What followed has been masterfully told by Steve McQueen and James Rogan in their docu-tale *Uprising*. 'These were not just national events that got brushed under the carpet, these were personal events for me', McQueen observes.²

In *Uprising*, we hear Peter Bleksley, at the time a police constable in Peckham, telling us his colleagues joked that 'New Cross should be renamed Blackfriars'. He

² Steve McQueen, cited by David Woode in 'Uprising: The New Cross fire and its 40-year Legacy as an Outrage that Mobilised the UK's Black Community', in inews.co.uk, posted 20 July 2021, available at <https://inews.co.uk/culture/uprising-new-cross-fire-true-story-40th-anniversary-london-black-community-steve-mcqueen-1110516>.

adds: 'There was no ... sympathy ... no shock'. Just business as usual. But what business is this? Then it hits us, like a petrol bomb exploding, like someone falling from the ledge of an upper floor window at 439 New Cross Road to escape the fire below. Racism and empire are business as usual.

McQueen is right. This is a personal matter. It means that what remains darkened, veiled or unconscious about our individual biographies and memories is also the seat of a public secret. The veiled past that must be made visible.

II. Stoking fires.

The question arises: Why are these wars, cultural and otherwise, being stoked?

The Caribbean poet Pierre Yoyotte saw this all before, witnessing the rise of fascism in Europe:

'When certain sentiments were provoked by military defeat, these produced a national inferiority complex, and the beginnings of a proletarian movement. The only way out was satisfaction. But compared to material satisfactions, the emotional or mystical ones ... have the advantage of a long history. Their infantile victories over primary desires endow them (as in war) with the appearance of a paradise'.³

³ Pierre Yoyotte, 'Antifascist Significance of Surrealism', in Black, Brown & Beige, p. 43.

Stoking culture wars, fanning the fire of sports (as in war), declaring that booing the national team's players when they take the knee to make present the social struggle, to make black lives matter (unlike those lives lost in New Cross and swept under the carpet), is just a matter of personal free speech, or to dismiss such acts as insignificant gestures or an Americanism, is, cynically, good business. It's emotionally satisfactory.

This speaks to history; the virtue of colonial war and a defensive mentality always already in denial. In other words, the manifest morals, destiny and manners of the settler colonial condition. The white world.

In the white world, memory and remembrance take the form of a line of succession. Often represented in marble statues, monumental art, the martial architecture of walled-castles and fortresses built to conserve what has been conquered – the enclosures and the group. The latter is equivalent to conquered space appropriated by a royal family and its subjects once and for all, incarnated in the body of the monarch or his/her endless line of succession.

This is the contract described by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, in the seventeenth century, and re-imagined in the nineteenth century by Thomas Carlyle in his argument against the agency of anti-slavery and emancipation.

We're witnessing its third reinstatement, a not-so-new social contract for Little England-and-post-Brexit-Britain; a kingdom once risen, now fallen, broken from the inside, that perceives itself surrounded on all sides by enemies, the brutes of his-story.

That's the long story Yoyotte speaks of. A memory device that forecloses the future, imagined in the likeness of Graeco-Roman tragedy. But an unlikely likeness,

turned coercive, farcical at least twice: first, during Europe's baroque period and, second, under the concrete conditions of twentieth-century colonisation.

The current attempt at a third reinstatement takes place under the aegis of an empire-philia that does not dare speak its name. Call it the globalisation of a late settler colonial condition. In it, those who stoke wars cultural and otherwise don't seek to bring about a better society, to replace another judged unsatisfactory.

They merely attempt to maintain the reign of terror that satisfies the conditions under which plunder may be renewed or continue over there and over here. They try to impose and maintain the homogeneity of the group presumed to be the basis of the social contract. That's the darkness at the heart of their enterprise. This business of stoking wars and scapegoating peoples, enemies always at the gates that need to be defeated.

III. Molecular literatures.

If we understood this first and better than others, it's only because the Greater Caribbean has been for as long as we can remember a laboratory of plunder and terror, masking the resulting tragedy as farcical nonsense. Just a matter of masks to forget the money battles, emotionally. Emotions survive on masks, not realities.

Our entire literary subterranean canon and art testify to this. From the pictographs of native Books of the People reimagined from oral history after the

conquest to the surrealist writings of the African diaspora and the neo-baroque of the real marvellous and the magical fantastic.⁴

Writing deeply humorously about play and sport has been part of that trans-continental trajectory. From depictions of the ball game, *el juego de pelota* among the Mexica to the musings of ‘adjacent Caribbeans’ like Julio Cortázar and Eduardo Galeano waxing lyrical about football.⁵ It couldn’t be another way. After all, the iconic footballer in the Americas is a trickster.

When Cortázar was asked by a Paris Review interviewer if his support for various liberation struggles in Latin America helped ‘bring the real and the fantastic closer for you, and made you more serious’, he responded by comparing fantastic literature and liberation to playing football:

I don’t like the idea of ‘serious’ ... For me, literature is a form of play. I’ve always added that there are two forms of play: football, which is basically a game, and then games that are profound and serious. But when children play, though they’re amusing themselves, they take it

⁴ The term ‘Books of the People’ refers to the trans-continental genre of oral history, pictographs, hieroglyphs, and khipu, among others, that help created and gather indigenous systems of seeing, knowing and being. Harking back to pre-Columbian and conquest times, these systems have had considerable impact on contemporary poetry, prose, visual art, legal philosophy, political activism and environmental thinking. Examples include the Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace, the Mayan Popol Vuh, Aztec codices and legal texts, and sixteenth century Quechua chronicler Guaman Poma de Ayala’s *El Primer Nueva Coronica y Buen Gobierno*. See on this Edgar Garcia, *Signs of the Americas* (University of Chicago Press, 2019).

⁵ The term ‘adjacent Caribbeans’ was coined in Tricontinental, conceptualist, and black surrealist circles to refer to writers of so-called Latin or South America whose artistic practices and ethical-political activism brings them closer to their Greater Caribbean neighbours. Examples include South American writers such as Leon Damas, Ernesto Guevara, Julio Cortazar and Eduardo Galeano.

very seriously. It matters. It's just as serious for them now as love will be ten years from now.⁶

Here Cortázar opposes the playfulness of children's imagination to the seriousness of the adult's imagination of the children's imagination. This distinction's value follows from the fact that children love games and gift-given games. They also love secrets, which they take for games. Above all, they love to reveal them. Let's say that they dispense with secrets while revealing them, just like American natives love to dispense with the things their wannabe chieftains love to accumulate. To act in this way is to free themselves from the fetishist lure of objects, the good in the goods that's the kingly chieftains' drive, deified in capitalism. It's an act of liberation. Similarly, the young footballers' act demonstrates what Michel Leiris called *dépense*, a culture's way of spending excess energy.

Consider the English footballers, Marcus Rashford, Raheem Sterling, Jadon Sancho, and Bukayo Saka – all subjected to online racist abuse after England's defeat in the final of UEFA Euro 2020. As black and brown people they're expected to play for queen and country, to entertain in modern circuses or stadia, and win contest after contest against opposing nations. If they do, credit will go to their captains, the team owners, and the kingly leaders of the Football Association. But if they fail, and further, if they dare speak truth to the nation, they'll be sent back to their default position as outsiders within. And if they don't like it here, in this gracious country where they've found the fame and fortune, they can go back

⁶ Julio Cortázar, interviewed by Jason Weiss in 'Julio Cortázar, The Art of Fiction No. 83', *The Paris Review*, issue 93, Fall 1984, at <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2955/the-art-of-fiction-no-83-julio-cortazar>

'home'. Their speech-act liberally dismissed as mere gesture, politically inept or foreign. A minor Americanism.

Instead, let's understand their act as what it is: part of a trans-continental and untimely sequence that also includes children's truth-saying, native survivance and *dépendance*, and the light-speed of the spirit-fire.

As a game and a gift.

IV. Americanisms of football rebels.

When Colin Kaepernick took the knee for the first time during the national anthem at the San Francisco 49ers final preseason game of the National Football League in 2016, his protest was neither the first nor purely symbolic, caused by excess emotion or intemperance. It was a carefully thought communicative, self-critical act, following his social media response to the police shootings of Alton Sterling, Charles Kinsey, and Philando Castile.

Few noticed Kaepernick sitting down as 'The Star-Spangled Banner' played during the games of previous weeks. Following a dialogue with fellow NFL player and military vet Nate Boyer, Kaepernick decided to kneel, while still protesting, recognising the role played by members of the military. In the Americas and elsewhere the military tend to recruit disproportionately among black and brown members of the working class.

Kaepernick's act was the equivalent of Latinos singing the national anthem in Spanish during the 2006 immigration protests. At the time, President George Bush Jr. said the anthem should only be sung in English. Kaepernick's illustrious precursors include Muhammad Ali refusing to go to Vietnam, Tommie Smith and

John Carlos each raising a black-gloved fist in the Olympic Stadium of 1968, and Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play in Major League Baseball in the modern era, and a civil rights activist. Further, the act of kneeling down recalls the imagery designed by Josiah Wedgwood for – wait for it – the British Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. An Americanism?

Cultural racism has taken a clever form of passive aggression among Europeans. When a white US academic or humanitarian speaks, white Europeans listen. When activists of colour such as Kaepernick and Alicia Garza do so, many white commentators reject their views as ‘an Americanism’. As Lewis Gordon observes, the ruse involved in ‘that’s an Americanism’ is manifold. First, to particularise a speaker of colour in such negative way is violent. Second, it’s exemplary of bad faith and denial about European history. Third, black, brown, and beige peoples haven’t been oppressed because of their race. The opposite is true: after Africans and Caribbeans were colonised (lands were plundered and their labour force taken over for capitalist global expansion) they became Black, Brown, Beige and Red Indian. Such names have no real signifieds. They’re masks and simulations. Race is a white European import.

White commentators love to bandy around words such as ‘minority’, ‘universal’ or ‘mainstream’ (as in ‘our mainstream values’). The use of such terms is another colonial ruse, this time applied to the fields of philosophy, literature, and communication. ‘Mainstream’ is a metaphor for whitestream, ‘a stream set up with standards to exclude other streams’.⁷

⁷ Jayne Cortez, ‘Mainstream Statement’, in *Black, Brown & Beige*, pp. 305-6.

The acts of the young English footballers inspired by Kaepernick and other activists become a slur, a matter of masks to forget the money battles after the hurrahs and the kisses. This is how, through a sleight-of-hand, whitey manages to defer, once more, the affective aspirations of newer generations and to evade historical-political responsibility while he shoots up into space in his penis-shaped rocket.

Sing it with Gil Scott-Heron. The Kingdom has fallen, the police's killing us, but Whitey's on the moon.

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Oscar Guardiola-Rivera is the author of such critically acclaimed books as *What If Latin America Ruled the World?* (Bloomsbury, 2010) which was a winner of the Frantz Fanon Award, and *Story of a Death Foretold: The Coup Against Salvador Allende* (Bloomsbury, 2013), which was shortlisted for the 2014 Bread & Roses Award, and was selected among the best non-fiction publications of the year.

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A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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