Latin American Research Review (2023), **58**, 519–538
doi:10.1017/lar.2023.24

LARR Latin American Research Review

ARTICLE

Exposing Fascism: The Rise of Bolsonarismo and the Naked Politics of Brazil's First Trans Men's Football Team

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(Received 10 February 2022; revised 12 January 2023; accepted 18 January 2023; first published online 22 May 2023)

Abstract

From 2016 to 2019, the backlash in Brazil against so-called gender ideology framed gender dissidence as a reason for the country's perceived decline, playing a central role in the rise of Bolsonarismo, a movement increasingly identified as fascist. In this gender-hostile environment, I examine Brazil's first trans men's soccer team, the Meninos Bons de Bola (MBB), and its use of nudity as a response to the political shift rightward and to tell a story about the precarity of minoritized groups across the Americas. The team's changing approach to trans representation exposes the period as a watershed in Brazilian politics. The MBB's naked protest during this time of governmental change reveals resistance to the machinations of Brazilian fascism, including censorship, backlash, and shaming. By asserting that the MBB were never just about *futebol*, the team uses the national sport to enact trans politics and to claim belonging beyond the bounds of normative citizenship.

Keywords: trans; football; Brazil; Bolsonarismo; fascism

Resumo

De 2016 a 2019, a reação no Brasil contra a chamada ideologia de gênero enquadrou a dissidência de gênero como uma razão para o declínio percebido do país, desempenhando um papel central na ascensão do bolsonarismo, um movimento cada vez mais identificado como fascista. Nesse ambiente hostil de gênero, examino o primeiro time de futebol masculino trans do Brasil, os Meninos Bons de Bola (MBB), e seu uso da nudez como resposta à mudança política para a direita e para contar uma história sobre a precariedade de grupos minoritários nas Américas. A mudança de abordagem da equipe para a representação trans expõe o período como um divisor de águas na política brasileira. O protesto nu dos MBB durante este período de mudança governamental revela resistência às maquinações do fascismo brasileiro, incluindo censura, reação e vergonha. Ao afirmar que o MBB nunca foi só futebol, o time usa o esporte nacional para decretar a política trans e reivindicar pertencimento além dos limites da cidadania normativa.

Palavras-chave: trans; futebol; Brasil; Bolsonarismo; fascismo

Disclosing my flesh exposes the flesh of the world; perhaps that is the obscenity.

—Rocío Pichon-Rivière, "Nudes and Naked Souls," 2021

Our bodies on the pitch are art, activism, and resistance.

—Tagline of the Meninos Bons de Bola, Brazil's first trans men's soccer team

On August 28, 2016, a group of soccer players came together to form the Meninos Bons de Bola (MBB, or Soccer Star Boys), Brazil's first trans men's football team.[1] Just a few days later, Dilma Rousseff, Brazil's first woman president, was impeached, signaling a loss of support for the progressive Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores or PT) she represented.[2] The right-wing power grab that Rousseff refers to as a constitutional coup marked a dramatic change in the trajectory of Brazilian democracy, and in many ways the MBB's formation and visibility campaigns parallel the shifts that were occurring in the government.

From 2016 to 2019 in Brazil, conservative backlash against so-called gender ideology framed gender dissidence as one reason for the country's perceived decline and played a central role in the rise of Bolsonarismo, a movement increasingly considered fascist. Seizing on the decentralization of power in the wake of Rousseff's impeachment, ultra-right-wing groups sought influence in realms they perceived to fall under the umbrella of culture, such as gender norms and artistic expression. Conservative "cultural warriors" drew on vast resources to roll back decades of progressive policy and hard-fought rights for marginalized Brazilians, including those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual, and other (hereafter LGBTQ+). At this watershed moment in Brazil's political history, the naked bodies of queer and trans people appeared at the center of a number of high-profile debates: demands for punishment and censorship following a performance piece involving nudity at the Art Museum of São Paulo and the closure of the QueerMuseum in Porto Alegre are just two examples. In response, LGBTQ+ activists staged their own naked protests against what they identified as the resurgence of fascism. This article reads activists' defiant disrobing as both a form of resistance on its own terms and as a diagnosis of larger transformations in power (Abu-Lughod 1990). To analyze this pivotal time in the culture wars, I examine the naked politics of the MBB.

The MBB's use of nudity in two photographic series from 2017 counters the political Right's growing demand for policies that oppress LGBTQ+ people in ways that include erasure. This article extends our knowledge of 2016–2018 by moving between the photoshoots (micro) and political (macro) shifts. Writing on the value of such an approach, Lilia M. Schwarcz (2021, 13) notes that "it is possible and desirable to paint smaller portraits as a means to understand the larger picture" of Brazilian politics, especially during this period of upheaval, as struggles are still playing out and overarching trends can be difficult to discern. The MBB provides a novel vantage point from which to analyze the larger political picture because of the team's timeline as well as its members' identities as trans men. The timing of the team's creation, growth, and representational choices coincides with macro-level administrative changes. Days after the Meninos' first practice on August 28, 2016,

[1] A note on terminology: the MBB originally referred to themselves as transexual men, and the founder and captain Raphael H. Martins still prefers this term. Some players also use the terms *transgender* or *trans*. Although Meninos Bons de Bola more directly translates to "Boys Who Are Good at Ball," the team's preferred translation is "Soccer Star Boys."

[2] Rousseff's impeachment was surrounded by religious fervor, with Evangelical congressmen voting for impeachment in the name of God and family values.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Rousseff's then vice president Michel Temer took executive office and remained in power, effectively as a placeholder, until Jair Bolsonaro was elected on October 28, 2018.[3] Despite his limited power, Temer instituted policies that departed significantly from the PT's progressive agenda and laid the political groundwork for Bolsonaro's brand of fascism.[4] For instance, among its many cuts and freezes on government spending, the Temer administration shut down community pharmacies, where many of the Meninos obtain their gender-affirming hormones. Funding for anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia programs was also cut. In the lead-up to the 2018 presidential election, former president Luiz "Lula" Inácio da Silva was imprisoned, which undermined the authority of the PT in the eyes of the public. Amid the surges in right-wing governance from 2016 to 2018, marginalized groups were experiencing life-altering changes and mobilizing on-the-ground, grassroots efforts to counter these effects. Given the population's general distrust of and increasing disengagement from electoral matters, measuring the political climate requires looking beyond official representatives to examine the cultural politics playing out in the everyday life of activists (Junge et al. 2021). The 2017 photo series represent the team in this time of political transition, as right-wing forces were gathering power.

Given the simultaneous targeting of trans people by the Right and the particular forms of invisibility trans men face, the MBB and their politics of representation matter (Green 2006). Raphael H. Martins founded the Meninos Bons de Bola in 2016, shortly before we met.[5] At the time, he was working in São Paulo's Reference Center for Defense of Diversity (Centro de Referência e Defesa da Diversidade, or CRD) as a socioeducational counselor. While working there, Martins noticed that even in a center dedicated to gender and sexual minorities, services and opportunities for people like him—identifying as the *T* in LGBTQ+—were largely absent. There are around three thousand trans men in Brazil, according to a survey conducted in 2016 by the trans activist João Nery together with the Empresa Brasileira de Comunicação.[6] The lack of representation, low numbers, minimal rights, and invisibility of trans men contributes to their marginalization not only in the arena of medicine but also in circles that discuss gender and human rights, and among LGBTQ+ communities. Responding to a lack of support for trans masculine members of the LGBTQ+ community, and hoping to counter their invisibility, Martins turned to the most Brazilian of solutions: he formed

[3] Temer took office with an extremely low approval rating (one poll measured his approval at 7 percent) and was facing his own corruption charges. In June 2016, Temer was issued an eight-year ban on running for office, making him effectively a placeholder.

[4] On his first day in office, Temer infamously replaced Brazil's most diverse cabinet heads with white men over the age of fifty-eight (Robinson 2016).

[5] A note on positionality: I met Martins while conducting fieldwork in São Paulo, interviewing Afro-descended non-conforming and women-identified players (Snyder 2018). Since 2016, we have communicated regularly during my visits to Brazil and via WhatsApp, and we have developed what can now be called a friendship. In our conversations, he shared both personal and team-related victories and struggles. These range from the small victories at his job to networking and funding opportunities for the team. Examples of challenges are difficulties with medical providers and growing tensions between him and another member of the team, Thiago, a cocaptain of sorts. Martins has asked me for advice and to help the team where possible, by reading and translating documents and applying for grants, for instance. Because of my many privileges (as a white, non-trans, English-speaking North American researcher) and our very different life experiences, my relationship with Martins has frequently required me to reflect on the ethical navigation of our differences in power. Our relationship is built on mutual support, a fact that Martins has reiterated: I use my position to help the team in ways that are possible from my location and with my linguistic skills, and the MBB, in turn, shares experiences that help my research. Martins's goals for the MBB are centered on visibility for trans men, and so he welcomes "outsiders" who share that goal. I write about Martins with his explicit consent to do so and about the team with the permission of team leadership (the team membership fluctuates, with Martins as the captain, founder, and constant).

[6] João Nery was the first trans man to undergo what he refers to as reassignment surgery in Brazil, more than thirty years ago.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a soccer team. From the outset, the team captain imagined the MBB community not only as a team that would gather once a week to play but also as a support group that would help players navigate a world largely hostile to their gender identities, particularly while many undergo medical transition. Today the MBB has around thirty-two active members who play recreational soccer and compete in "alternative" and LGBTQ+ amateur competitions, mostly in São Paulo. Intervening in a traditionally hegemonic (cisgender masculine, heteronormative) national pastime, the MBB advocates for rights and recognition via Brazil's most beloved sport, *futebol*.

In 2017 the team staged its first nude photoshoot as a form of protest. The photographs marked a significant departure from the team's previous images, which featured the Meninos fully clothed, often uniformed. The 2017 photos suggest that the MBB responded to the right-wing cultural politics of censorship and erasure by refusing shame and embracing vulnerability. Rather than conceiving of conservative and queer movements in opposition, the relationship between them is dynamic: the well-funded Right targets LGBTQ+ movements, simultaneously shining light on issues that often struggle to gain visibility and shaping the LGBTQ+ response (Fetner 2008). The athlete activism of the MBB offers insight into the struggles of minoritized groups amid a growing Right whose adherents argue that the very existence of the MBB does not matter.[7] The MBB's protest exposes how dissident bodies get caught in the crosshairs of the culture wars and also become tools to navigate such forces.

In this article, I first describe the connections among gender, sport, and the resurgence of fascism (political and body) leading up to the 2018 elections in Brazil. I then explore the meanings of nude protest in Brazil, emphasizing the need to understand what they mean for gender dissidents. For trans activists and athletes navigating precarity, nudity can be both a reaction to fascism and a form of healing. Both motivations become evident through a visual analysis of the MBB's two photo series, *#MeuKooPraCensura* (#CensorshipMyAss) and *O Vestiario* (the locker room). The images, captured in 2017, expose the machinations of fascism in this moment of its upturn. I conclude by emphasizing the importance of trans and gender-dissident activism in the struggles against repressive governance.

Gender, sport, and the resurgence of fascism in Brazil (2010–2018)

The political turmoil that began in Brazil in the 2010s peaked in 2016, setting the stage for polarization and extremism (for more on the multiple crises that began around 2010, see, e.g., Slovik 2019; Safatle 2016). Although a comprehensive history of the transitional period between 2016 and 2018 has yet to be written (Taylor 2020, 599), the period's chaos was clearly a confluence of multiple factors, including macroeconomic and social conditions. Macro contributors to the period's instability include volatile global financial markets, corruption, a crisis in Brazil's party system, manipulation of voters, and social media platforms that run on algorithms shown to have polarizing effects (Taylor 2020). Given that Brazil hosted various sporting mega-events under the leadership of the country's first woman president, it seems likely that issues related to sport and gender also contributed to the period's volatility.

Futebol in particular was at the center of civic unrest leading up to the crises that unfolded beginning in 2013. Sporting mega-events, such as the 2013 FIFA Confederations Cup, the 2014 FIFA World Cup, and the 2016 Olympic Games, seem to have fomented the building resentment over government spending and corruption. The protests that began in

[7] For instance, Bolsonaro stated that "minorities" should conform to the will and patterns of the majority, an assertion that is part of the current right-wing regime's larger attack on LGBTQ+ people, Afro-Brazilians, indigenous communities, poor people, and women.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2013 were initially responses to police brutality against protestors, rises in the costs of public transportation, and general discontent with the lack of investment in public services. Government disinvestment in public services stood out in sharp relief against the ostentatious budgets allocated to sporting events, which became a target for demonstrators. As the 2014 election approached, however, the protests turned rightward and displayed a growing fascist bent. At the national level, 2014 was an awful year for *futebol*: most infamously, Brazil's men's team lost 7–1 to Germany in the 2014 FIFA World Cup semifinals—and on home soil. But at the local level, a number of "alternative" and LGBTQ+ amateur teams were born in these years, including the MBB.[8] Ultimately, the discontent surrounding the national sport was about how politicians were using it to embezzle money, not *futebol* itself. Still, national and professional teams were not immune to scrutiny. Some LGBTQ+ teams, like the BeesCats (a gay men's team from Rio among the creators of LiGay, the first LGBTQ+ soccer league in Brazil), even frame their style of "fair play" as a response to the pervasive crookedness in mainstream *futebol*. Thus, *futebol* was a field on which reactionary forces and the movements against them were playing out.

Pervasive and deep-rooted sexism also played a significant role in political battles for domination. Specifically, misogynist gender dynamics undergirded the 2016 impeachment proceedings against Dilma Rousseff, in what she and her supporters refer to as a constitutional coup. In the perfect socioeconomic storm leading up to the coup, the conservative elite drew on deep-seated sexist discourses to oust Rousseff, Brazil's progressive first woman president, and the Workers' Party she represented. The imprisonment of former PT president Lula da Silva, preventing him from running, solidified the effects of the coup and opened the field to the right wing, which laid the groundwork for the 2018 election of the ultraconservative Jair Bolsonaro (Snyder and Wolff 2019). As the scholar Jay Sosa (2019, 719) writes, sexism was not the singular cause of Rousseff's removal, but it "catalyzed deep conservative cosmologies that allowed a cultural space for Brazil's rightward turn." This rightward turn played out through the 2018 elections. Bolsonaro's campaign was full of hateful comments about LGBTQ+ people (and other minoritized groups) that pushed political discourse to newly violent extremes. Misogyny, transphobia, and homophobia were central to the unfolding of Bolsonaro's political career; his move from the political margins to the center evinces the period's reactionary shift.[9] The period's battles over contested cultural spaces, aptly termed *culture wars*, were a galvanizing force in the rise of political fascism in the form of Bolsonarismo.

Indeed, fascism is experiencing a resurgence in Brazil. In his book *Brazilian Fascism: How Integralism, the Largest Far-Right Movement in the Country's History Came to Be, and What It Illuminates about Bolsonarismo*, the author Pedro Doria (2020) advocates for a political approach to fascism that remains attentive to time and place but that emphasizes commonalities across what movements evoke—the affect and effect of a particular form of ideology and governance. For him, the shared ethos of fascists includes "a belief society is in decline, a feeling of humiliation, and a perception of being a victim of the system. Fascism strikes back with nationalism, arms its militants, worships unity and demands total fidelity. It believes in violence and disregards legal and ethical restrictions when it has acquired the strength to do so" (Doria 2020, 253).[10] Ultimately, Doria concludes,

[8] For instance, the Brazilian LiGay (a gay-identified soccer league) was created in 2016 by three teams comprising cis gay men. Just a year later, the league had grown to include more than thirty teams and as of 2022 included more than seventy. "Alternative" teams that are anarchist, communist, gothic, and LGBTQ+, as well as those that represent labor unions, also blossomed following the 2013 turmoil. Many of these teams, like the anarchist Rosanegra, explicitly identify as antifascist.

[9] Trans and *travesti* activists in Brazil have been tireless in responding to Bolsonaro's hate, as described by Jarrín (2021).

[10] All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

if we adhere to a political definition, Bolsonarismo—named after Brazil's current President Jair Bolsonaro—is decidedly fascist.[11]

The followers of Bolsonarismo believe that Brazil's perceived decline is due in part to what right-wing cultural warriors dub "gender ideology"—used by conservatives to mark any movement that promotes equality for women and LGBTQ+ people as a ploy to undermine traditional heteronormative family values and promote immorality. For instance, during his visit to the White House in 2019, Bolsonaro gave a public statement that highlighted his and Donald Trump's shared commitment to "traditional family" and opposition to "gender ideology." According to this logic, to challenge a gender order that defines women and men in opposition and that confines women to certain traditional roles is to challenge the societal order writ large (Cowan 2016).

During this same visit, the official gifts exchanged between Trump and Bolsonaro were men's soccer jerseys, signaling the lasting association between Brazil and *futebol*. The men's jerseys are a reminder that the national sport, like national politics, remains largely articulated along masculine lines, and specifically cisgender, heterosexual masculine lines. The jersey exchange, against the backdrop of this public commitment to the language of "traditional family" and "gender ideology," suggests that the maintenance of Brazilian *futebol*'s hegemonic masculinity is part of a conservative project to reify conventional gender roles. Queer and trans people in general and athletes in particular are thus imagined as a threat to the gendered social order.

How do these cultural politics play out on bodies, specifically on the bodies of athletes? In his book *Body Fascism: Salvation in the Technology of Physical Fitness*, the philosopher and queer sport theorist Brian Pronger (2002, 109) builds on the works of Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault, which understand fascism not only as a historical movement but also as something within us that inspires us to "love power," to want "the very thing that dominates and exploits us." This orientation to power manifests in our thinking and everyday comportment. In this sense, sport is a key site for understanding where political fascism and body fascism meet. Pronger (2002, 110) argues that wittingly or unwittingly, our modern urge to "order, organ-ize [*sic*], control, repress, direct, impose limits" on our bodies signals a "fascist *will* within us to desire . . . a life of domination." We see this urge in the cult of fitness that aims to control the ways bodies look, move, and feel as they engage in sport and physical culture. Although Pronger's critique describes an obsessive fitness culture characteristic of late capitalism, this reactionary turn in Brazil also affected the ongoing process of body fascism as a growing right-wing movement increasingly targeted queer and trans bodies.

Pronger defends his use of the term *fascism* to name such a prevalent force by comparing it to feminism: a term that describes how patriarchy manifests in multiple registers, both personal and political. Naming oppression is an important step in transforming it. The term *body fascism* was born of Pronger's commitment to root it out, in all its manifestations, and discover ways to live outside such oppressive ideologies. We must identify

[11] In the wake of Brexit and the US presidential election of Donald Trump, scholars have paid increasing attention to populism. Bolsonaro's campaign has much in common with those of other populist leaders, including his references to his military background, romanticization of historical periods, use of crisis and resentment, and self-framing as an outsider to mainstream politics. But *populism* is not the best descriptor for Bolsonarismo. Brazilian and Brazilianist scholars have not taken up this term because it oversimplifies the complex social, economic, and political terrain as well as voters' motivations leading up to the 2018 elections. In casting their ballots, citizens were neither homogeneous nor "duped subjects," stripped of agency (Junge et al. 2021, 6). Furthermore, any concept that could apply to both the democratic-socialist Lula da Silva and the far-right Jair Bolsonaro is clearly too broad to be analytically useful. Given Brazil's history of military dictatorship, *fascism* is the term used more frequently to describe Bolsonarism. Or, as Alex Hochuli (2018) states: "It is this stated intention to smash the Left, to conduct civil war in lieu of politics, to outlaw and if necessary, annihilate internal enemies, that makes debates about whether Bolsonaro's election is a victory for a 'populist' or 'hard' or 'far' or 'extreme' right seem like sophistry. Words matter. Bolsonaro is a neofascist."

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fascism to become antifascist. And if antifascist bodies are liberated bodies, then perhaps markers of liberation can be found in refusals to conform to the beauty norms of fitness culture (e.g., cisgender, white, heteronormative) and in nakedness.

Meanings of dissident nakedness in Brazil: Toward a trans politics of resistance and liberation

As Pichon-Rivière (2021) has noted, disclosing one's flesh reveals a great deal of information about the time, place, and values of a given society. Fascists in Brazil arm themselves with suits, uniforms, religion, whiteness, and masculinity (as in Trump's and Bolsonaro's jersey exchange). The opposite of donning a uniform is disrobing, which is a process of exposure. Baring the body may leave one defenseless, unguarded.[12] If aggressive self-exposure can be understood as a universal gesture, "it is also one of the most highly context driven modes of dissent and vulnerability," according to Naminata Diabate (2020, Kindle 15), author of *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa*. To understand the MBB's use of nudity, one must grasp the racialized and gendered politics of naked protest in Brazil.

Ideas about exposure today are influenced by histories of colonialism. Writing about these histories, Maria Lugones (2008) argues that European colonization inflicted a new system that differentiated the gender configurations of white bourgeois colonizers from those of the people they colonized. Extending Lugones's analysis, the trans feminist scholar Talia Mae Bettcher suggests that this racist gendered system has persisted, and it awards greater dignity to bodies that are more fully clothed—that is, European bodies. Colonizers identified the Indigenous American and African people they dominated as naked, whether or not they actually were, and therefore as less dignified (Bettcher 2017). Black feminist scholars including Patricia Hill Collins (2009) have shown how colonizers forced the nakedness of Black and enslaved women to rationalize white men's sexual violence. These histories must be accounted for when unpacking racialized and gendered reactions to naked bodies.

Clearly, nudity is not always liberatory. And yet it is also dangerous to unequivocally correlate clothedness with dignity and bareness with shame. To be naked can be revolutionary, liberatory, or even healing (Pichon-Rivière 2021), as we will see in the context of the MBB and repressive regimes. Certainly, as Diabate (2020) reminds us, there are contextual considerations that might shift the meaning of baring one's body: it can, for instance, be a form of dissent.

Currently, naked protest is on the rise. Writing on women's defiant disrobing in the Brazilian context, Barbara Sutton (2007) observes that unclothed bodies, especially those of women, are pervasive: in the media, on the beach, and during carnival, for instance. However, she argues, baring the body in protest or for political reasons is often condemned and punished under the label of obscenity (Sutton 2007, 144). Sutton concludes that it is the act of protest that conservatives take issue with rather than the nudity, although, due to social conventions, nudity often pushes protest into the realm of the punishable. Defiant disrobing is risky, prompting Diabate (2020, Kindle 4) to ask which sociopolitical climates and arrangements incite this form of revolt. Diabate develops the concept of *naked agency* to describe "the dynamic cycle of power and vulnerability that involves women and their targets" (Kindle 2) as they use nakedness as a political tool in multiple African contexts. Both Sutton and Diabate characterize women's intentional nudity as a remarkable form of dissent because it defies traditional gendered expectations.

[12] There are notable exceptions to the idea that baring oneself is a necessarily unguarded gesture, reinforcing the idea that context matters. For example, the image of bare-chested Russian President Vladimir Putin riding a horse through the countryside was widely interpreted as a sign of masculinity, whiteness, and fascism.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In this way, feminist and LGBTQ+ resistance can be understood as an expression of solidarity against heteronormative regimes.[13]

Whereas the naked bodies of presumably cisgendered women, and especially Brazilian women, have been theorized extensively (see, e.g., Pravaz 2008; Bennett 1999; Williams 2015), there is relatively little scholarly work on the nude rebellion of queer and trans people. As discussed earlier, unclothed protest can be used to read a climate and interpret a political dialogue. In an environment where right-wing politicians are targeting trans people for ridicule and violence, the naked protests of gender dissidents are a form of resistance.

The milieu in Brazil from 2016 to 2018 was turbulent, especially for queer and trans people, who found themselves in the crosshairs of the culture wars. The MBB contends that the very existence of its members' trans bodies is a form of protest: one of the team's taglines, for example, declares, "Our bodies on the pitch are art, activism, and resistance." Trans contributions to LGBTQ+ activism are often sidelined (Fetner 2008), and trans men in particular have been historically invisibilized even within LGBTQ+ movements (Romero and Mendieta 2022). Thus, even though the MBB team is small in numerical terms, its members are significant representatives in the struggle for equality.[14] If the act of inhabiting and performing gender dissidence is a form of resistance, then the MBB's undress is a reaction to right-wing movements that marks an escalation in the stakes of the struggle.

Beyond protest, self-exposure for queer and trans people can be a form of healing, according to Pichon-Rivière (2021). The double bind of exposure is that in making visible experiences of oppression, one may risk losing dignity (per Bettcher's aforementioned theorizations). (For more on the double bind of trans visibility, see Gossett, Stanley, and Burton 2017.) But if one hides oppression from the public to save face, how will collective healing happen? The idea that baring one's body is shameful and undignified represents a "scarcity model" of dignity. This model, understood as a contemporary manifestation of colonialism's "racist nudity enforcement," interprets nudity as punishment (Pichon-Rivière 2021, 445). Without ignoring or denying the antagonism that often accompanies exposure, Pichon-Rivière ultimately argues that a scarcity approach to nakedness must be dismantled. In its place, we should turn to abolitionist and transformative justice approaches that provide more liberatory ways to imagine self-exposure and its transformative potential. In choosing to get naked, trans activists like the MBB met the rising tides of hate with the sort of transformative vision Pichon-Rivière proposes.

Specifically, if what the Brazilian right demands is censorship, it is conceivable that a cultural response is to expose one's nakedness. With the understanding that conservative and LGBTQ+ activists influence one another's political strategies, I turn to gender-dissident *futebolistas* to understand how they navigate this hostile environment and what their forms of resistance might signal about the operation of power. Specifically, I examine photographs taken of the Meninos Bons de Bola soccer team. The MBB has hosted two naked and seminaked photo shoots, both in São Paulo. One was shot by Rapha Canobra at Estúdio NU in November 2017, and the other was shot by Isabel Abreu in a locker room in July 2017 and released to the public in September 2018. In the years and months leading up to the 2018 election, the MBB used strategic nudity to various ends, including public protest, community building, and self-realization.

[13] Such solidarities may be more common in Latin American social movements (Vidal-Ortiz, Viteri, and Amaya 2014), as, for instance, in Norma Mongrovejo's (2010) conceptualizing of *disidencias* (sexual dissidents), a term that describes the multiple groups who stand together against obligatory heterosexuality.

[14] Nery and the EBC's aforementioned study (2016), which estimated three thousand trans men in Brazil, is the most recent accounting of trans masculine people in Brazil. Given the lack of updated and available statistical information, I am not necessarily making a quantitative argument. However, when we take this number into account (while certainly questioning it), the MBB's membership of more than thirty is significant.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The MBB gets naked to say #CensorshipMyAss

The photo series *#MeuKooPraCensura* (#CensorshipMyAss) is a direct response to right-wing efforts to censor queer art and queer people during the period between Rousseff's impeachment and the 2018 presidential elections. The full title of the shoot, and the event it advertised, is Corpo Livre é Cura: MeuKooPraCensura (The Liberated Body Is the Cure: Censorship My Ass). Organized by the Revolta da Lampada (Lampost Riot) collective, the event countered efforts to censor a piece of naked performance art by Wagner Schwartz displayed at the Modern Art Museum (MAM) in São Paulo. During the performance, a child who was accompanied by their parent touched the hand and foot of the naked artist. Only a month before (September 2017), an exhibition in Porto Alegre titled *Queermuseum: Queer Tactics toward Non-Heteronormative Curating* was shut down as a result of pressure from conservative groups like Movimento Brasil Livre (Simões 2018). Protestors compared the works to pornography and pedophilia, and the curators—Gaudêncio Fidélis and Felipe Chaimovich—were called to testify before Congress. MAM, however, remained open as conservative and LGBTQ+ groups held opposing rallies in the street outside the museum entrance. In the cases of both the Queermuseum and MAM, the naked, queer body was at the center of the controversy, with right-wing movements pushing for bans.

Countering attempts to silence and shame, many LGBTQ+ activists and artists responded by disrobing. Certainly, the artists at Estúdio NU (Naked Studio) and the photographer Rafa Canobra (@rafacanobra) imagined a connection between nudity and liberation in conceiving of the project *#MeuKooPraCensura*. The Facebook page describing the photoshoot and the events where it would be showcased stated:

> The link below contains free bodies, without censorship:
>
> https://MeuKooPraCensura.tumblr.com
>
> All nude! We're all naked and there's even those who are naked without even taking all their clothes off. [the casting was droolworthy]. We invited an army for two Saturdays in the estúdio NU to scream: LIBERATE THE BODY! These photos illustrate the fight and fervor that we want to bring to the streets this year to shock people along the way with our beauty, *kyridã* (honey)! THE LIBERATED BODY IS THE CURE! #MeuKooPraCensura[15]

As the description makes clear, the organizers rejected the idea that queer bodies should not be seen. Refusing to engage in respectability politics, they insisted on visibility.

The "artivists" (artist-activists) involved in the shoot responded to suppression by showing their asses. The *#MeuKooPraCensura* series captured twenty-five LGBTQ+ activists from São Paulo, including six of the MBB, in color shots on the roof of a building. Two images from the shoot show the MBB in various states of (un)dress. They conceive of nakedness as a political stance, as illustrated in the assertion that nakedness does not require disrobing, and in the images, the participants are unified in this stance. Terms like *army*, *fight*, and *fervor* suggest that the photos are part of a cultural war. The body is what is being contested, and the queer activists assembling the event understand exposure as liberation, as an antidote to repression. Against charges associating queer art with pornography—which signals obscenity and perhaps disgust—the organizers flaunt their beauty. If right-wing surges are part of a backlash against progressive governance, members of the *revolta* respond to the retaliation indignantly, without cowering or backing down.

[15] Revolta da Lâmpada, "#MeuKooPraCensura," 2017, Facebook, November 25, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/events/352025345258459.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 1. Photo used with permission from Rafa Canoba, Photographer and Artist, @Rafa. Canoba. Taken November 2017 at the Estúdio Nu (São Paulo, Brazil).

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 2. Photo used with permission from Rafa Canoba, Photographer and Artist, @Rafa. Canoba. Taken November 2017 at the Estúdio Nu (São Paulo, Brazil).

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Taken together, the color and composition in Figures 1 and 2 suggest defiance. The artivists pictured are united in their stances: in the first one, they appear to be shouting in chorus; in the second, they are subdued yet strong. The light in all the photos is a soft evening glow, and the colors are tender. Canobra's renderings are beautiful, countering the conservative message that the subjects in the photograph are aberrant. The angle is also intentionally off-kilter: the shots do not conform to convention, and the images are stunning. Furthermore, both images represent a range of queer and trans bodies, from fit to fat, from dark to light skinned, and in different stages of transition (some players have had top surgery, some have not; some have recent scars and others show nearly no signs of surgery). Yet these bodies are rebellious and joyful in unison, which implies that no one is excluded based on appearance or gender performance. Against the body fascism that disciplines bodies according to rigid beauty norms, everyone queer and trans belongs, and no single body norm is imposed.

In Figure 1, four of the Meninos are in front and three other models in back. They appear to be screaming at the camera, their defiance evident not only through their lack of clothes but also in their wild facial expressions. Their bodies are frozen in a fight stance, with raised and clenched fists. To return to Pronger's definitions of body fascism, antifascism can be read in the images' lack of repression, control, and limits, rendered visual through the presence of queer and trans bodies that demand to be seen.

In Figure 2, five team members pose for the camera. Their bodies are relaxed, their faces hard. Rodrigo (a pseudonym), at far left, sports an MBB shirt with the team's logo. The MBB team members are naked both with and without clothes on. Nakedness, then, is not only an embodied state. It is a politics, an orientation to one's own body and the bodies of others that refuses invisibility (for writing on refusal, queerness, and navigating shame, see Sedgwick 2003). Liberated bodies may or may not be without clothes. But according to the series description, naked is a state of freedom that is the cure for an ever-encroaching censorship.

The MBB's approach to disrobing can also be interpreted as part of a strategy of opacity (Snyder 2019). For the MBB and for many queer and trans activists, representation involves selective sharing and not necessarily full exposure. Visibility, after all, does not always confer rights and recognition. There is always risk involved. In the case of the MBB, hegemonic gazes and epistemologies—those that center cis, male, Euro-descended, heterosexual, thin, and able bodies—are disciplining (Silva 2022). Such ways of seeing and knowing often constrain and rank differences. For the MBB, there is much about their existence that simply cannot be translated. The Meninos' stances of coverage and nudity are part of their practice of representational refusal. I read the team's participation in the photoshoot as consistent with their demand to be seen on their terms.

Amid a cultural struggle against so-called gender ideology, the MBB's approach to being seen acknowledges the double-edged nature of visibility. Team members make their dissident bodies visible in ways that go up against white supremacist, patriarchal control, mobilizing their nakedness and coveredness depending on safety and circumstances. Counter to the efforts of right-wing culture warriors to frame dissidence as synonymous with moral depravity and perversion, the MBB plays with visibility and opacity, controlling the narrative in its own way.

Strategic and opaque forms of exposure also speak to the political moment. Read as a litmus test for the state of the culture wars during this period, *#MeuKooPraCensura* rejects the shame and invisibility that right-wing groups (like those protesting the MAM exhibition) were calling for. Yet the strategic covering in the photos might also suggest recognition from LGBTQ+ activists of the growing danger of conservative groups. Wars, be they cultural or otherwise, are perilous. In a country with recent histories of military dictatorship—where dissident activists were tortured, disappeared, and murdered—fears of violent repression are justified. In the following photoshoot, the *vestiario* (locker room) series, we see such tension building as the right surges.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Locker-room exposures: Antifascism in the humanity, vulnerability, and healing of *O vestiario*

The MBB did another naked photo shoot in July 2017, and the images were released to the public weeks before the October 2018 presidential election, a year after *#MeuKooPraCensura*. The tensions in Brazil during this period were palpable. Writing on the tumultuous years between 2013 and 2018, the authors of *Precarious Democracy* assert that the buildup to the elections was marked by "ambivalence and disenchantment" as well as ideological ambiguity (Junge et al. 2021, 5, 3). Still, the mobilizations that began in 2013 against corruption, governmental mismanagement, and financial crisis were promoted by elite media and conservative institutions in ways that fomented right-wing movements. By 2018, the buildup was reaching a fever pitch. Capturing the deep fractures across political spectrums, Junge and colleagues (2021, 9) write: "Some Brazilians are struggling to redefine their national community in ways that do not violently exclude certain members of society. Afro-Brazilians, LGBTQ+ Brazilians, and Indigenous Brazilians are making claims to the nation that are simply incompatible with the far-right principles embraced by Bolsonaro, and their resistance is organizing against Bolsonaro in innovative ways." Naked politics are one such way of resisting. Amid the national turmoil, the photographer Isabel Abreu photographed some members of the team in the changing room of the workers' union in the city center of São Paulo, where the Meninos gather every Sunday to train.

O vestiario, the Portuguese term for locker room, is a place where people get naked. Because of this, *o vestiario* evokes a mix of emotion: fear, excitement, pleasure, anxiety. For many people in Brazil (and around the world), the locker room is a mysterious, slightly dangerous place.[16] Mainstream understandings of the locker room conceive of it as a mostly cis-masculine place, as in the US American phrase "locker-room talk." Certainly, it is a place where gender is increasingly policed along binary lines, although it is also charged with (homo)erotic potential. What, then, can the locker room reveal about the ways people, and especially gender-dissident people, navigate body fascism?

Compared to *#MeuKooPraCensura*, the goals of the *Vestiario* shoot were less explicitly related to electoral politics than to the MBB's trans politics of representation at the time. The two series can be theorized in different ways because they were responding to different political moments. *#MeuKooPraCensura* was a reaction to the attacks on queer art and community. *O vestiario* was shot in July 2017, a moment of political uncertainty but not necessarily one in which the MBB felt directly targeted or threatened, beyond the everyday transphobia team members endure. The *Vestiario*'s 2018 release, however, can be understood as a direct response to the preelection climate of anti-LGBTQ+ hostility. The series were shot by different photographers with distinct objectives: Canobra was gathering LGBTQ+ activists like the MBB to respond to censorship, whereas Abreu's series is one of many she shot during several years of work capturing the beauty and humanness of the MBB team. *#MeuKooPraCensura* includes twenty-five activists, while the *Vestiaro* series features five players. The intimacy on display in the locker-room images is rare for the MBB, and it signaled a deviation in their representational strategy.

Although the *Vestiario* shoot is in many ways consistent with the MBB's approach to visibility—insofar as the team wishes to showcase the existence and normalcy of trans men—the series is exceptional in its vulnerability. In the locker room, the MBB team members are alone, and so the shoot reflects discreetly the team's approach to trans visibility. The Meninos' mission is focused on both outward and inward forms of visibility. Outward-facing goals are to show that trans men exist in São Paulo, in Brazil, and within LGBTQ+ circles and to show that they too have a right to *futebol*. By making themselves

[16] Gilberto Perin, *Camisa brasileira—Ensaio fotográfico de Gilberto Perin on Vimeo*, 2019, https://vimeo.com/253123331.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

publicly visible, the MBB have become a homing device to gather trans men and build community. For instance, after the team's very first practice, Martins recalled: "After the first game, we sat in a circle and each one of us shared a little of our story. It was really strong. We are still invisible and we have the need to speak. Today, if one of us shares negative feelings, we embrace them. We get mad, we celebrate, we incentivize. We have become a family."

The team members also want to reflect inward, to themselves and to other trans men, their beauty and sense of brotherhood. Abreu, who worked with the team from 2016 to 2018, shared this commitment to visually representing the MBB's humanity. Still, the series is an outlier for the MBB. After months of trying to photograph the locker room, the Meninos chose July 2017 to allow access to Abreu and September 2018 to share images with the public. Why then? In part, they chose these moments because during her time working with the players, Abreu had built trust with the team. Over this period, the team members established rapport with one another. The timing of the photos' publication in 2018 coincides with the presidential elections; Bolsonaro's hate speech directed toward LGBTQ+ citizens motivated media coverage of these groups. The vulnerability of the images illustrates how the naked politics of gender dissidents responds to the historical moment of uncertainty in that it counters the violent condemnation of right-wing politicians.

The *Vestiario* photos attest to Pichon-Rivière's (2021) ideas about nudity as reparation. Figures 3 and 4 are more subdued and straightforward than the *#MeuKooPraCensura* images in Figures 1 and 2. Five players participated to varying degrees. There are few superfluous details in these images; the focus is on the plain, beautiful subjects. The defiance of these pictures, then, is that viewers must see the players as they are. Furthermore, the black-and-white renderings are unforgiving; they expose everything. The pictures in this private space reveal a nakedness that seems vulnerable. By giving the appearance of classic portraiture, the use of monochrome evokes an earlier era. Against the idea that trans is something "new," this visual representation suggests that gender dissidents have always existed (for more on visual representations of transness in historical context, see Snorton 2017). By simply being themselves in the photos, the MBB team members expose the Right as responsible for politicizing gender. The Meninos simply exist—and their existence is not the promotion of "gender ideology" or a plot to destroy the traditional family. The nostalgia of the grayscale images tugs at the viewer's heartstrings and communicates an unequivocal beauty.

In Figure 3, Raphael H. Martins, the MBB's founder and captain, is looking straight into the camera, grinning as he lathers up. His stare is brave without the need to intimidate. Martins is bare from the waist up, skin covered in droplets, which signals that he is in the shower and presumably disrobed. He is handsome and luminous, with smooth dark brown skin and a glowing, magnetic smile (for more explicit discussions of the MBB's racial politics, see Snyder 2019). Martins shared this image on his personal Instagram with text reading: "In this day and age, a fundamentally wrong concept has settled into many people's minds: to be sexy, you must be thin. Don't get hung up on this concept! Sensuality is about attitude, looks, behavior and not about a body that follows standards established by the media."[17] Here, Martins's celebration of his fat body resists the standards of Brazilian fitness culture that describe an "ideal" body as one which "possess[es] low body fat, and light skin, [is] gender-conforming, [and] heterosexual" (Silva 2022, 25). Martins told me that when he looks at this and other images of himself, he feels empowered. Abreu's photographs make him feel seen. If fascism is motivated in part by feelings of humiliation, this photo plays no part in supporting it.

[17] Raphael Martins, @Fazfavor_, "Nos dias atuais, estabeleceu-se um conceito fundamentalmente errado na cabeça de muitas pessoas: para ser sensual, você deve ser magro(a)," Instagram, July 16, 2017, https://instagram.com/p/BWoZmnxgc0W/.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 3. Raphael H. Martins. Used with permission from Isabel Abreu, @isabel_spbr. Taken July 2017 at the Sindicato dos Bancários (São Paulo, Brazil).

Figure 4 also depicts masculinity without violence. Four players stand in a circle and show their biceps. The pose is a familiar masculine trope: to be a man is to be strong and muscular. The smiles that tug on the corner of the players' mouths, though, suggest they are mocking this version of masculinity. Here, the Meninos appear playful and flexing, in the multiple senses of the word. To flex is to literally tense one's muscle, but informally, to flex can be to ridicule or boast. Ridicule demonstrates the athletes' confidence in their gender; there is no hint of fragile masculinity in this image. Fragile masculinity and other

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Figure 4. MBB in the *vestiario*. Used with permission from Isabel Abreu, @isabel_spbr. Taken July 2017 at the Sindicato dos Bancários (São Paulo, Brazil).

toxic versions of manhood are touted by Bolsonarists, who react to perceived societal degradation by arming militants (among other escalations). This image, though, presents a jocular take on "arming." The players are in their boxer shorts, with their hair still wet from the shower, yet even in this private environment they stand close to one another, bodies touching. While the MBB family is not the traditional (i.e., heteronormative) one revered by conservatives, the Meninos refuse to be less than. These images instead reveal joy and love.

Pedro Vieira, who participated in the shoot, reflected on the series years later: "It was an interesting experience to think about what it was like to use the men's locker room. Of course at that moment of the photo, we were among 'us' [other trans men], so the experience of being photographed in that intimate moment becomes much more positive. And Isa's rendering of the message of the photo is beautiful" (Interview with Pedro Vieira, August 24, 2022). When I asked him to elaborate on what he meant by "the message of the photo," he shared: "For me, it has a very positive meaning, it shows a possibility that did not exist before, because we are in an environment that was always denied to us, where we were harassed, and we were afraid . . . . But that click was so beautiful, and it says to us, we can, too! That's when we also started to understand the urgent need for our bodies, both in these spaces and in others that trans people don't access either. I'm moved whenever I look at this photo."

In these mediations, Vieira illustrates the courage of the MBB; team members recognize manifestations of body fascism—via the harassment that seeks to keep them out of the locker room, for instance—and then they put their bodies in those spaces anyway.

As is the case for any image, however, the interpretation may say more about the desires of the viewer than about what is actually there (as Sturken and Cartwright, 2018, point out, all viewers use situated "practices of looking"). Also, much is left unseen (for more on reading the silences in images, see Campt 2017). Speaking about the *Vestiario* series, Abreu reiterated that she worked with the MBB for over a year before she was allowed into the locker room. She explained that it was her positionality as an elderly

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

woman—she believes the MBB view her as a sort of desexualized grandmother—that allowed her to work with the team in this intimate space. As Pedro described, locker rooms are politically charged spaces, especially for trans individuals. I mention this not because nudity is the ultimate measure of liberation—it certainly is not—but to highlight how important the *Vestiario* series was. Although the censorship of nudity might be a dangerous signal of oppression, the presence of naked bodies does not necessarily mean liberation. In fact, the photographer does not describe the shoot as liberatory, or even as good in a technical photographic sense, but she does recognize its importance in relation to her large body of work with the team. To open this space was a vulnerable act, and capturing its beauty modeled the type of healing Pichon-Rivière (2021) proposes. The locker room is fraught, even for the MBB family, which is why this opening, however small, was a grand gesture.

We can conceive of the locker room and its photographic renderings as types of technology that can both oppress and liberate, in line with Pronger's understanding of body fascism. The camera is a technology that holds various potentials. It is liberatory to see oneself as beautiful, as human. It is difficult, however, to read gender in ways that are not normative or oppressive.[18] The trans activist and former MBB team member Bernardo Gonzales describes the risk of such readings: "the violence [of transphobia] isn't in us [trans people], it's in the other [cis] people who perceive us and get uncomfortable. The violence is having to wear a super tight top to restrain our chest because it would make someone else uncomfortable to see our chest bouncing *and* our beards. *We* [trans people] understand our bodies, it's the onlookers who do not understand."[19] In protesting and making themselves vulnerable via photographic technologies, which have the capacity to harm or heal, the MBB resisted erasure despite the peril. In its resistance, MBB members show that powerful forces are attempting to discipline dissident bodies.

Multiple possibilities—oppression and liberation, shame and healing—are at work in the *Vestiario* and also in the *#MeuKooPraCensura* series. Reading these two series together requires accounting for their context: 2017 was a moment of political uncertainty. Canobra's shoot took place after over a decade of PT policies that, while imperfect, ushered in certain civil rights for marginalized groups. Bold, naked proclamations of freedom may have felt more imaginable while riding the pink wave (for more on the pink wave and its relationship to LGBTQ+ groups, see Friedman 2019). It is even possible to read the nakedness as an urgent assertion of freedom, an attempt to counter a looming, growing suppression.

The *Vestiario* series, though, circulated in mainstream news media in the weeks leading up to the presidential election.[20] Perhaps the tension Abreu and Martins describe hints at

[18] I am aware of at least two other photographers who had wanted to shoot the team in the locker room, and the players refused. Clearly the MBB is savvy and strategic about the team's image. Team members understand the camera as a tool that can both oppress and liberate. But Abreu's goal has always been to show the MBB team members their beauty and power, and their allowing her into the vestiario demonstrates their trust in her renderings.

[19] Midia Ninja, "#AoVivo FESTIVAL NINJA: Coletiva de Imprensa Pós Jogo—Entrevista aberta com o coletivo 'Meninos Bons de Bola,' homens trans que jogam futebol," Facebook. 2019, https://www.facebook.com/MidiaNINJA/videos/559151708245236.

[20] My focus is on the goals of the shoot, not its reception. For informational purposes, however, audience reception of the *Vestiario* was mixed. For instance, in one article, Martins discusses how their images "break down barriers and prejudices" and garner support, but that they "still have people who show prejudice towards [them]" (Boon 2018). Both reactions are evident in the Facebook commentary responding to an article by Mídia Ninja that features the shoot (Abreu and Utida 2018). Many comments are affirming, but others (many of which were removed) were transphobic observations about the MBB's appearance. In June 2020, Martins deleted the MBB Facebook account. Increasingly, the MBB refuses to engage transphobia. Rather than providing a scholarly tracking of negative and right-wing responses, I read the MBB's decision to delete the Facebook account as a form of accounting, akin to marking silence in an archive (McGlotten 2016). Conversely, I would like to account for affirming responses the MBB have received via the partnerships and press that the team chose to make visible. For instance, leftist publications, the team's own social media, FARE, Open Society Foundation, and Nike have covered and supported the MBB at various moments.

https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the toll that Brazilian fascism, realized in Bolsonarismo, takes on the body. It is my intent to focus on the relationship between naked protest and the growing political right; it is not my intent to reflect here on the MBB's shifting relationship to visibility from their formation to today (Snyder 2019). I do, however, note that this was the first and only shoot held in the locker room, and the two series analyzed in this article are for now the only naked and seminaked ones. Since the series, right-wing violence has continued to escalate, culminating in events such as the assassination of Marielle Franco, the exile of Jean Wyllys, and the illegal incarceration of former president Lula da Silva. A return to progressive politics will not necessarily be accompanied by nudity, nor would such nudity be unquestionably desirable. But in fascist Brazil, it is more difficult, and certainly riskier, to get naked.

Conclusions

The photography series *#MeuKooPraCensura* and *O Vestiario* illustrate one way that oppression and resistance can play out on the body. The defiant disrobing of gender dissidents like the team members of the MBB resists fascist demands to control, normalize, and hierarchize bodies. But baring the body is a perilous move for groups that are targeted for repression. Examining cultural politics in this moment of governmental transitions rightward sheds light on the intimate effects of such shifts.

The MBB's naked protest signals a turning point for LGBTQ+ people between 2016 and 2018. During the years of PT governance (2002–2016), Brazil's most marginalized citizens achieved considerable economic rights, and Brazil seemed to be moving toward a greater recognition of civil liberties. Writing on the protests in June 2013 as evidence of a broad-based social rights movement, Lilia M. Schwarcz and Heloisa Starling (2018, 584) noted: "One of the greatest recent developments has been the demand for civil rights, for the 'right to be different,' defended by movements of feminists, black people, quilombolas and members of the LGBT community. For many Brazilians, citizenship is no longer defined by the right to equality, but includes the right to be different within that equality." But starting in 2016, and certainly by 2018, difference became a target for right-wing backlash. The MBB's changing approaches to naked protest mark the period's transitions.

Defiant disrobing evinces at once the relative safety of this period and the desperation that strikes when such safety may be lost. Baring one's body in this volatile context was a Hail Mary pass: a bold assertion of liberation that perhaps has not felt possible since. As this article demonstrates, at the same time that MBB and LGBTQ+ groups were mobilizing for visibility, right-wing groups were mobilizing to enact conservative agendas and roll back rights.

This article is a call to pay attention to dissident bodies as a site where repressive governance exposes itself. In baring their skin, the MBB team members made visible this newest wave of oppression and the resistance to it. At a moment of governmental transition away from the relative openness of previous times and toward greater suppression of difference, trans people and trans athletics have become targets. As the MBB's tagline *nunca foi só futebol* (it was never just about soccer) makes clear, the team's struggle for rights and recognition in and through the national sport is also a struggle against fascism.

Acknowledgments. First and foremost, *obrigadão* to Rapha H. Martins, Pedro Vieira, Isabel Abreu, and Rafa Canobra for sharing their thoughts and art. Much gratitude to Anna Browne Ribeiro for her writing partnership. I appreciate my co-fellows at the Commonwealth Center for the Humanities in Society at the University of Louisville who helped with revision: Brandon Harwood, Carrie Mott, Kalasia Ojeh, Megan Poole, Lucian Rothe, Mary P. Sheridan, Janna Tajibaeva, and Sid M. Williams. I acknowledge invaluable feedback from multiple people at LASA and NASSH conferences where I presented early drafts of this work. Finally, thanks to editors Dr. Carmen Novo, Pavel Shlossberg, and the anonymous *LARR* reviewers for their incisive comments.

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Cite this article: Snyder, Cara (2023). Exposing Fascism: The Rise of Bolsonarismo and the Naked Politics of Brazil's First Trans Men's Football Team. *Latin American Research Review* **58**, 519–538. https://doi.org/10.1017/lar.2023.24