

Sports migrants in ‘Central’ and ‘Eastern’ Europe: beyond the existing narratives

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Abstract

Outside of Europe’s top football leagues, migrant athletes are often subjected to short-term contracts, poor housing conditions, isolation and the ever-present risk of premature career termination due to injuries. This paper is part of a current multi-sited ethnography on Brazilian futsal and football migrants in Central and Eastern Europe. It is based on life-history interviews with migrant players and uses transnational lenses to approach sports migrants’ movements in these regions. The study conceptualises futsal and football as an *ethnographic continuum*. Football and futsal players participate in similar processes of early professionalisation. However, at the ages of 16 or 17, athletes become professionals in either football or futsal, seeking specialisation. The role that borders, families, injuries and emotions play in the lives of sports migrants are also analysed. The current study presents a diversified narrative of contemporary sports migration movements.

Keywords: Borders, Central and Eastern Europe, futsal migration, football migration.

Atletas migrantes na Europa 'Central' e 'Oriental': para além das narrativas existentes

Resumo

Longe das principais ligas de futebol da Europa, atletas migrantes são frequentemente submetidos a contratos curtos, condições precárias de moradia, isolamento e o risco de interrupção prematura de suas carreiras devido a lesões. Este artigo faz parte de um projeto etnográfico multi-situado com jogadores brasileiros de futebol e futsal que atuam na Europa Central e Oriental. O presente estudo conceitua o futsal e o futebol como um *continuum etnográfico*. Jogadores de futebol e futsal participam em processos semelhantes de profissionalização precoce. No entanto, aos 16 ou 17 anos, os atletas se tornam profissionais no futebol ou no futsal, buscando uma especialização. O artigo também analisa o papel das fronteiras, famílias, lesões e emoções na vida dos jogadores migrantes. O presente estudo tem como objetivo mostrar uma nova narrativa sobre os movimentos contemporâneos de migração esportiva.

Palavras-chave: Fronteiras, Europa Central e Oriental, Migração esportiva, Futsal, Futebol.

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Now and then I felt overwhelmed by all I did not know, by the number of things still to find out, and by the awareness that there was much I could never learn – Hortense Powdermaker, Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist, 1966 [1987].

Introduction

Is there a more suitable research methodology for studying sports migration in “Central” and “Eastern” Europe?¹ What are the difficulties and challenges these regions present to researchers? These are the questions I address in this paper. This paper is thus an attempt to reflect on the use of some methodological “tricks” of our “trade” (Becker 1998, Brownell 2006, Descola 2005). I will make use of a hermeneutical tradition that is the basis of anthropological knowledge through a multi-sited ethnography to present a broad understanding of Brazilian sports migrants’ lives and careers. My current study reflects on the lives and careers of Brazilian football and futsal players in Central and Eastern Europe. While Brazilians are often seen as a “global football workforce” (Poli, Ravenel and Besson 2019), there is still much to be learned about the specificities of Brazilian sports migration to “Central” and “Eastern” Europe.

In this sense, I will confront some “research gaps” that stem from previous ethnographers’ methodological choices. Most of the literature about Brazilian sports migration has tended to focus on highly successful football players. These footballers can easily move family members, commodities and resources across borders (Rial 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014, 2015, Damo 2008, 2014). As I had difficulty gaining access to football stars, I shifted my research interests to less “successful” migrant athletes. Less prestigious sports migrants have been more or less ignored in previous ethnographies with Brazilian migrant athletes. Furthermore, as I discovered in the course of my research, there is no ethnographic account that focuses on how migrant Brazilian athletes’ families access public education and health care systems for themselves and their children, the struggles athletes face in dealing with serious injuries, learning languages, or living temporarily apart from their families.

¹ The term “Central Europe” must be specified. Central Europe, as a geographical characterisation, has a complicated history. In the nineteenth century, the term Central Europe was used to indicate a superiority of German culture in comparison with Hungarian, Romanian, and Slavic cultures. The assumption in the usage of the term was that German culture should be the dominant one. World War II and the Cold War led to an end to use of the term. The dualistic division between Western and Eastern Europe became prominent. In the 1990s, Central Europe was used to distance Visegrad countries (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Slovenia) from other countries that were supposedly more unstable and marked by Orthodox Christianity. With the European Union’s expansion, the use of the term Central Europe as a region striving to catch up with the West is still quite common (Cervinkova, Bikowski and Uherek 2015). As with “Central” Europe, some countries included under the term “Eastern” Europe, such as Kazakhstan, could be classified as “Central Asian”, or even part of “Eurasia.” I include these countries in “Eastern Europe” because they participate in UEFA, and Kazakh futsal clubs can challenge Western European ones in the UEFA futsal champions leagues. Recent efforts have reconsidered the separation between Europe and Asia and the validity of the concept of Eurasia (see also Halpern and Kideckel 1983, Berdahl 2010, Tlostanova 2012, Hann 2015, 2016, Testa 2015, 2017).

Throughout this paper, I will approach Brazilian sports migration in Central and Eastern Europe by focusing on sports migrants in both football and futsal². In this sense, I present one main argument: football and futsal³ should be conceptualised as an *ethnographic continuum*. While football and futsal are separate global sports (Moore, Ramchandani, Bullough, Goldsmith, and Edmondson. 2018; Moore, Bullough, Goldsmith, and Edmondson 2014), the relationship between them is much less known. In this study I pay attention to athletes' career trajectories to analyse the specificity of Brazilian players. Brazilian migrant athletes practice both futsal and football, throughout their apprentice years. Throughout their lives and careers, athletes actively use both the skills and opportunities provided by both sports to pursue professionalisation and specialisation in either futsal or football.

Football and futsal: Methodological considerations

To understand futsal and football migrations in “Central” and “Eastern Europe”, I adopted a multi-sited ethnography as a methodological tool. In announcing the rise of multi-sited ethnography, George Marcus (1995) sought to connect the emergence of interdisciplinary studies with the guiding principle that world-system analysis may no longer be easily applicable for understanding the contemporary world. Multi-sited ethnographies constitute an attempt to analyse current cultural formations, that is how world inequalities and cultures have become enmeshed (see also Hannerz 2003). In searching for justifications for multi-sited ethnographies, Marcus warned ethnographers about some of their potential risks, such as the loss of “subaltern⁴ voices” (Marcus 1995, 114) and a distancing of ethnographers from specific local contexts (see also Candea 2007).

To construct my fieldwork with futsal and football players, I sought to highlight the “subaltern voices” of footballers and futsal players working in “Central” and “Eastern” Europe. The following approach should open new understandings of sports transnational diversity and power relations. By focusing on lower-division footballers and futsal players, I both follow Marcus, and try to more explicitly include “subaltern” voices in this multi-sited ethnography. While Marcus has warned ethnographers about the risk of erasing “the subaltern”, he did not offer a precise proposal about how to construct multi-sited ethnographies that focus on both “the subaltern” and the most mobile occupations.

In this sense, my analysis focused on both localised challenges athletes face in their professionalisation processes, their struggles to maintain their current positions, and constant transnational movements (Glick-Schiller and Çağlar 2009, Agergaard 2018). I have used life-history interviews as the main method for data collection.⁵ This paper is based on 16 life-history interviews with Brazilian migrant athletes and informal conversations with migrant athletes, one futsal coach and one football agent. Life-history interviews build

2 Futsal is a variation of association football, played on a court, and usually indoors. Futsal dates back to the 1930s and 1940s in South America. There are two main narratives about the origins of futsal. In one, the sport was invented in Uruguay and the other in Brazil, by YMCA members. In the 1980s, tensions arose between FIFA, under João Havelange's presidency, and FIFUSA, an international futsal federation created in Brazil. FIFA unified futsal rules and promoted it globally. FIFUSA changed its name to Asociación Mundial de Futsal, AMS, and is still responsible for organising some futsal competitions, especially in South America (for a critical understanding of FIFA's recent history, see Tomlinson, 2018. For a brief historical account of the incorporation of futsal by FIFA, see Salles and Moura 2004).

3 There is a research gap in futsal migration, as I will demonstrate. In my fieldwork, I have come closer to futsal players while considering literature about football.

4 “Subaltern” is a term used by George Marcus in his analysis of the emergence of multi-sited ethnography. In this paper, “subaltern” refers to lower-division football players, and futsal players. The sportsmen I have met and interviewed were far from the usual footballer interviewed in sports migration studies. In football migration, preference has been given to footballers playing in top-leagues. While I discussed George Marcus' ideas of multi-sited ethnography, I nonetheless had Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira's (1999) analysis of Brazilian anthropology in mind. The distinctiveness of Brazilian anthropology, he argued, was a focus on the most marginalised groups and peoples of Brazil.

5 I have also tried to follow migrant athletes' career trajectories after I conducted interviews with them. Brazilian athletes' constant transnational movements were a fruitful source of inspiration for this paper.

upon the presupposition that people tell stories to construct meaningful experiences. These narratives allow researchers to understand both the patterns of interviewees' narratives and the contradictions of personal stories (Cardoso 1986, Debert 1986, Kofes 1998, Atkinson 2014, Messner 1992, Connell 2010).

In Brazil, futsal and football players participate in the same process of early athletic professionalisation. Most athletes interviewed in my study tend to practice both sports in their childhood and early adolescence, and at around the age of 16 or 17 specialise in one of these sports. In this sense, it is possible to establish an *ethnographic continuum* between these sports. Football and futsal clubs, private and public schools and universities, local and regional sports associations, sports agents and families participate in this *continuum*, and condition players' professionalisation in one or another of these sports.⁶ However, these sports subject players to different market demands and imagined geographies. While the leading football leagues are in Western Europe,⁷ futsal provides players a route to Central and Eastern European clubs, in leagues considered prestigious in the futsal world, such as the Russian, the Ukrainian or the Kazakhstani and Azerbaijani leagues. The prestige of these leagues is associated with certain clubs' numerous UEFA Futsal Champions League titles, and that they pay higher wages.⁸

In the next section, I will analyse the relationship between football and futsal. The relationship between these two sports has emerged from the analysis of sports migrants' career trajectories in Central and Eastern Europe.

Football and futsal as an *ethnographic continuum*

While Brazilians are often referred to as a "global football workforce" (Poli, Ravenel and Besson 2019), there is a research gap in studies about Brazilian sports migration in Central and Eastern Europe. This research gap is even more pronounced in futsal. The only studies about Brazilian sports migration in futsal are by Dimeo and de Vasconcellos (2009, see also de Vasconcellos and Dimeo 2009) and Tedesco (2014). In football, Carmen Rial has done extensive fieldwork with football stars in the world's largest football leagues.

An attentive reader will find no relationship between futsal and football in most of these scholarly works. Only Tedesco (2014) documents a relationship between football and futsal. However, he does not incorporate an empirical study of futsal and football migrants in his research design. During my fieldwork, I slowly began to realise that futsal and football cannot be thought of as isolated sports in Brazil. As my fieldwork developed, I understood that I would have to see football and futsal as an *ethnographic continuum*.⁹

For instance, football players begin playing futsal either in their childhood or adolescence, when they play both sports. Eventually, a series of factors conditions their professionalisation in one or another sport. As Miguel,¹⁰ a footballer currently playing at Red Bull Salzburg told me:

6 Futsal players are able to have longer careers than footballers. Some futsal players might extend their careers until their late 30s, and early 40s, which is very rare in football.

7 Rial's works, for instance, have been marked by a decisive focus on Western European and US leagues. See Rial, 2009, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014, 2015.

8 Rial (2012b) has recognised that her use of the concept of transmigrants (see Basch, Glick-Shiller and Blanc-Szanton 1994, Glick-Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1995) to characterise highly-successful footballers' is based partially on her interviewees' high salaries, and their capacity to move family members and commodities and establish a variety of plans across borders. However, when referring to less successful footballers, Rial conceded that they may have experiences closer to high-skilled Brazilian migrants. In shifting my lenses to often unseen Brazilian migrant players, I argue, as other researchers already have, for a *transnational perspective* (Carter 2011, Rial 2008, Aggergaard 2018). By looking at footballers and futsal players' life-histories, I gained a more diversified understanding of the different modalities of transnationalism these sports open to professional athletes.

9 Carmen Rial, in a personal communication, has confirmed to me that the footballers she has done fieldwork with have begun their athletic careers in futsal.

10 I have changed all athletes' names to preserve their identities.

Me: Did you play futsal too?

Miguel: Yes, I played for many years. I guess I played futsal until the age of 14, 15 more or less. I always played futsal and football together. Because when I was playing football, I didn't play every weekday. So I could play other sports too. So I could play futsal. Later on, when things started to get serious, when I needed to work and train all the time, I had to quit futsal. I only played football later. But I played futsal since I was 6. I spent quite a good time playing futsal.

The conceptualisation of an *ethnographic continuum* between football and futsal must understand sports as influenced by various institutional actors: families, sports clubs, local and regional sports associations, and private and public schools and universities - which provide youth with scholarships so that they can study and play on school futsal teams - physical education teachers, coaches and sports agents. Let me tell a few stories of the sports migrants I have met in "Central" and "Eastern" Europe to illustrate my points.

The story of Pedro, a footballer currently playing in the first division in Israel, is revealing. He told that me he played futsal for his school. He was later spotted by Flamengo staff, at a futsal championship. When Flamengo accepted him, his training routine began to interfere with school. Pedro came from a family of military men. His early career success in football did not persuade his mother to fully support his football career. Instead, she insisted he quit Flamengo, one of the richest football clubs in Brazil, and finish high school.¹¹ He was preparing for a career in the military after high school and a series of unsuccessful attempts to restart a career as a footballer, when he was spotted by a sports agent at an amateur football tournament in Rio de Janeiro, the Favelas Cup. He then resumed a professional path in football in Bulgaria, and later in the Czech Republic and Israel.¹²

Roberto's case is another that illustrates my point. Roberto has been a migrant player in the Czech Republic for many years, he is married to a Czech woman, and has one son. He began his career at the Santos FC futsal team. After a period of futsal training, he turned to the football pitch [fui para o campo]. However, he only trained in football for one month. Roberto told me that at the time he reached the Santos FC football team, two of the most highly talented players of his generation were also training there: Diego Ribas and Robinho. These circumstances made Roberto decide to come back to futsal. At a club such as Santos FC, Roberto could easily transition from futsal to football and back.

Another player, Antônio, told me that he began his career at the Corinthians FC futsal team. When he turned 18, Antônio decided to try a career as a footballer on a third-division club in São Paulo state. He told me that after one year, he decided to go back to futsal. "There are simply too many people in football. You have to know people in the football business. I already had connections in futsal. With futsal, I became a migrant player". In Antônio's words, migration becomes an achievement, hard won through a continuous attempt to build a career in both futsal and football.

In this sense, one of the most important aspects of understanding the relationship between futsal and football is to build an ethnographic account to grasp the specific process of production of players in contemporary Brazil. Football and futsal should be seen as related industries. However, they have different characteristics, and Central and Eastern Europe present themselves differently than other regions to sports migrants in these

11 Futsal has been present in Brazil since the 1940s and has been incorporated into official physical education curricula. According to Salles and Moura (2004), the first attempts to institutionalise futsal in physical education classes date back to the 1960s in Brazil. The role of private schools is particularly prominent in futsal. These private schools are partially responsible for organising local and state-level futsal championships. These schools also offer scholarships for lower-class students who are promising futsal athletes. The BBC recently identified at least 10 players on the Brazilian national squad at the 2014 World Cup who began their careers in futsal (see BBC 2014).

12 Van der Meij and Darby (2017) have found that depending on family aspirations, careers in sports appear to offer more or less desirable futures for youngsters. In some instances, families try to discourage youngsters from seeking a career in sports because they have different plans for the social ascension of the youth, with white-collar jobs seen as more desirable.

sports. For instance, futsal seasons last between eight to ten months, and depending on their migrant status, health, family and contractual situation, futsal athletes might return to Brazil and wait for another offer from a Brazilian or a foreign club. These offers depend both on their agents and transnational networks.

Furthermore, futsal also allowed me a closer contact with the athletes themselves, which assisted in understanding how they deal with the risks associated with athletic careers, such as the risk of injury (Roderick 2006, Donnelly 2004). Futsal clubs might have weaker means to help players in case of injuries. As we will see next, some futsal players cannot find adequate treatment through the public health care systems in host countries. In this sense, despite participating in the same process of early professionalisation as footballers, futsal players might face *different* working conditions in Central and Eastern Europe, with shorter contracts and more precarious conditions than footballers.

Denis' story

I met Denis at the end of a futsal match in which his team let a victory escape. The match ended in a draw and fans were holding their breath until the last minute. Denis' team almost let a nearly certain victory become a loss. A bittersweet result for the fans, and himself. Denis was the only Brazilian futsal player on his team, an unusual situation in the Czech Republic, where futsal teams tend to hire more Brazilians, so they can help each other in the "*adaptation process*."¹³

As Denis and I sat together for the first time, I introduced myself in Portuguese, and told him my name. We shook hands, and I began my usual presentation. I said I was studying at a university in Prague and asked if he would like to be interviewed for my Ph.D. project. His reaction was to compare me with previous researchers that had already approached him in Lebanon. He told me "I didn't know there were such projects in the Czech Republic. There were lots of projects in Lebanon." It was his way of agreeing to participate in "my project." In the course of our first informal conversation, he told me that he had been a migrant player for 12 years. He had played in Georgia, Serbia, Macedonia, Ukraine, and Lebanon and was now performing in the Czech Republic. I also learned that he had never had a serious injury. Wherever he went, except for Lebanon and the Czech Republic, he learned the local language to be able to manage his daily life. He was largely using English to communicate with other players in the Czech Republic, except with the coach. They spoke in Serbian which Denis had learned during his experience in Serbian futsal.

After a while, I decided to ask him about his family. It seemed like a "natural" question. After all, he had been away from his home country for 12 years.

Me: Do you have family in Brazil?

Denis: Yes, I do. I recently married. We have a kid now, a boy. He is three-years-old. They [his wife and kid] are not with me now. They stayed with me the whole time in Lebanon. My wife told me I should finish this contract alone.

When the conversation shifted to his family affairs, Denis suddenly changed his tone. He told me he had been a champion in Lebanon. He was calculating this Czech team's chances of success, and the prospects for him to return to his family as soon as possible. He added:

I'm already 32. I'm glad I made it this far in my career. I miss them and I want to go back. This is my last season as a professional futsal player. After this season, I will rest and retire.

¹³ Adaptation is an emic category. I have never heard Brazilian athletes use other terms such as "integration."

I confess that I was surprised to hear such a statement. I had been following footballers' and futsal players' lives for a year. In the course of my fieldwork, I had learned about the sacrifices players make in case of injuries, and possible unpredictable career terminations (Roderick 2006). Having met some transnational families, I found it puzzling to hear Denis talking about retiring. I thought that we should meet again so I could try to understand his story. During the 2018/2019 futsal season, we met three times. Denis has always been accessible. However, by responding to Denis's question about my migration story, I was able to understand better his wish to end his futsal career. He asked me,

Denis: What about you? What are you doing here?

Me: Well, I had studied in Sweden, and then found a job here in the Czech Republic. I was working at a call centre. It was quite tough, you know. People would call, and they would yell at me. So I decided to quit my job, and I was thinking about going back too [to Brazil]. But I decided to try to get accepted to a Ph.D. program in Prague.

Denis: I see what you mean. I also worked at call centres in Brazil.

Me: Really? The literature on football says that players don't do anything else. They only play because they start too young.

Denis: Not my case, I started to play futsal and work quite young. I had a career outside futsal. I worked at call centres, and I worked at retail shops too, before I turned pro.

Denis' previous work experiences were key factors for him to imagine a career transition before age would not allow him to continue playing, or before any decisive event, such as a serious injury, may occur. When I asked him about his plans, he revealed that he was negotiating with a private university in Brazil to play on the university's futsal team in exchange for a scholarship. He was about to begin his studies online, and he would later move back to Brazil, and study in this university's classrooms. He wanted to pursue a business administration degree.¹⁴

Edward Said entitled his memoir "Out of Place" (2000). "Out of place" is both a reference to Said's Palestinian background and an epistemological idea. Knowledge, Said wrote, is constructed out of one's place. The experience of exile, displacement, confrontation with new worlds, and reinvention of one's past is abundant in Said's work. I invoke Said to call attention to the fact that he was a fierce critic of "area studies". "Orientalism" (1979) offers attentive analysis about how American military interests were connected with academic routes. Said's major works, "Orientalism" and "Culture and Imperialism" (1994), cannot simply be described as works of a specialist in French and British literature. Said's erudition takes us around the globe, presenting the pain of the Palestinians' mass displacement. As Said wrote (2003, 173):

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.

14 When I asked Denis if he thought that his previous experience in futsal would help him in a business career, he answered "Of course, in sports and business, you have to motivate people." Investments in higher education seem to be more common among futsal players than footballers. Denis did "retire" from professional futsal to play for a scholarship in Brazil. The last time we talked through an instant message application, he told me he was glad he could be closer to his family, and vividly narrated his travels with the new team around Brazil. Other futsal players and coaches in Portugal and the Czech Republic, such as Aristóteles and Bernardo, have also been enrolled in physical education courses while building a professional career in futsal. Aristóteles even told me he misses going to classes, and that he would like to finish earning his degree in physical education by the age of 33.

The experience of being out of one's place does not come without costs, risks, and emotions. Exile constitutes a "terrible" experience, as Said portrayed in his unique work on migration. I would argue that scholars of sports migration could engage more with this "essential sadness" and the "loss of something left behind forever". If these experiences are certainly more present in the lives of refugees, when I listened to sports migrants' narratives, such as Denis', I heard similar remarks.

In the next section, I will analyse the spatiality of migration, and the challenges and opportunities for sports migration scholarship in Central and Eastern Europe.

The spatiality of migration: Central and Eastern Europe in Sports Migration

Sports migration scholars have either turned their lenses to sports academies (Damo 2009, 2014, Esson 2013, 2015a, 2015b, Ungruhe 2016) or faced the challenge of interviewing migrant athletes in the receiving countries.¹⁵ In sports academies, professionalisation and a systematic form of sports discipline are articulated through young apprentices' bodies. Sports academies provide researchers with a fertile social context in which issues of nationalism, race, class and gender are prominent. In this context, Alan Klein's (1991, 2014) influential scholarly works have combined a rich use of qualitative methods to construct a multi-sited ethnographic account of the lives of both professional players, key participants in the baseball industry in the United States and the Dominican Republic, and the everyday life of baseball academies in the Dominican Republic.

Much like the early work by Linda Basch, Nina Glick-Schiller and Cristina Blanc-Szanton (1994) that sparked a series of questions about migrants' cross border activities, and fomented the emergence of a transnational perspective, Klein has escaped traps of methodologies with overly narrow nationalist scopes by framing his ethnographic project in dialogue with Wallerstein's world-systems analysis (Wallerstein 1990, 2000, Basch, Glick-Schiller and Blanc-Szanton 1994, Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002). Although Klein's ethnographies are rich in the detailed analysis of the hierarchical world of athletic careers, he seems to have inspired a series of qualitative studies that have left the context of sports academies and a long-term ethnographic fieldwork behind. These studies focus on sporadic contacts between athletes, through interviews. In studies by Elliot (2012, 2014), Elliot and Bania (2014), and Molnar (2006, 2007, 2011, 2015, Molnar and Maguire 2008), the consequences of an overly simplified application of world-systems analysis to football migration become more evident.¹⁶

The main concerns of these researchers are to understand the motivations of migrant footballers that lead them to play in Central and Eastern Europe. Without a profound dialogue with a historical sociological perspective, these scholars define Eastern European leagues as football's semi-peripheries, according to Wallerstein's world-systems analysis. As such, these researchers interpret footballers' discourses about Eastern European football leagues accordingly. Leagues in "postsocialist" countries such as Hungary or Poland appear as "stepping stones", places to start one's career, or as "places to retire" and end one's productive life in football.¹⁷

¹⁵ According to Klein (2014: 48), a sports academy "has the same characteristics as any educational institution: It is hierarchical, and designed to educate, evaluate, and elevate those who go through it. It matters little whether what is being taught is [sports] skills or language. The overwhelming direction is toward the resocialization of those who go through it."

¹⁶ Richard Elliot and Gyozo Molnar have both been supervised by Joseph Maguire. In this sense, Maguire's work has inspired both Elliot's and Molnar's studies. I argue that Elliot's and Molnar's engagement with world-systems analysis has been based on a dialogue with Alan Klein's (1991, 2014) pioneering ethnographic works. My current discussion aims to highlight that Klein's work is much richer in detail than Molnar's and Elliot's.

¹⁷ Carmen Rial (2008) has done an extensive analysis of Brazilian footballers currently working in Western Europe and the United States. Brazilian footballers' discourses about retirement never mentioned Central and Eastern European countries as attractive destinations for retirement. Brazilian footballers would, at first, seem to figure as a counter-examples to Molnar's and Elliot's works. The inclusion of futsal and football aims to provide an empirical option to this model. Because futsal's geography is more fragmented than football's, I at first argued that Brazilian futsal players saw Central and Eastern Europe as "stepping stones" or "places to retire". However, as my fieldwork developed, I was able to problematise the place of "Central" and "Eastern" Europe in sports migration scholarship.

In my fieldwork, however, I noticed that some migrant footballers did not necessarily refer to Central and Eastern Europe in these terms. In addition, when I tried to reconstruct the career trajectories of Brazilian futsal and football players, their narratives about migrating to Central and Eastern Europe involved issues that Gyozo Molnar (2006, 2007, 2011, 2015) and Richard Elliot (2012, 2014) have left behind, such as injuries, the role of families, players' gendered identities, and religious affiliations.¹⁸

For instance, I met Joaquim after waiting two-months for an opportunity. He was playing in Czech football's second division. Before coming to the Czech Republic, he had played in Brazil, Kosovo and Germany. The reason I had to wait so long to meet him was that he had gone to Brazil for surgery. Joaquim was the first footballer I tried to contact, and he inadvertently opened my eyes to the importance of injuries in footballers' careers. In telling his story, Joaquim detailed for me how an undiagnosed thyroid issue prematurely terminated his career.

He had a friend who was a medical student who, along with his professors, had helped Joaquim diagnose his condition. After he had begun his treatment, Joaquim went to a pitch where he knew former players would meet to play informally. He knew sports agents could spot him there. At the end of one of these matches, a German sports agent approached him, with a "European offer". Since the legal transfer window was closing, this agent told him he had managed to find a club interested in him in Kosovo. At the next transfer window, his agent would try to sell him to a German fourth division club. Once in Germany, Joaquim told me:

In fact, when I arrived in Germany, my agent couldn't find me a good team, it was January. So I had to play on a quite amateur team. This team belonged to my agent's friend. They played in the 9th or 8th division. So I stayed there, at this team waiting for the next transfer window to open. On this team there were three other Brazilians. We trained during the week at a fourth division team, but during the weekends, we would play for an 8th division team. When everything was more or less settled, so I could come play on this 4th division team, the team was relegated to the 5th division. So it was better for me to come here [to the Czech second division].

Joaquim did not refer to Central and Eastern European leagues as either "stepping stones" or "places to retire." As seen in Connell's (2010, 62-67) analysis of Michael, a financial sector manager, Joaquim's chronic disease allowed him to think about his football career in broader terms. His conception of "success" was closely connected with his concerns about the limits of his body, since he could clearly see that the continuation of his career depended on medical assistance from the Czech club.¹⁹ Because of his thyroid condition, Joaquim needed constant treatment, and the surgery in Brazil sought to provide a more or less permanent medical solution, compatible with his athletic career.

It seems that in studies by Molnar (2006, 2007, 2011, 2015) and Elliot (2012, 2014), sports migrants are always seen as rational actors in search of maximizing their economic gains. Migration research has deconstructed the view of migrants as rational actors, but this view seems to have remained in sports migration scholarship.²⁰ There seems to be very little room to understand how emotions also play a role in sports migrants' careers (Svašek 2005). In this sense, both Joaquim and Denis were able to relativise financial success. In their stories, the view of Central and Eastern Europe did not directly relate to the idea of moving to Western football or futsal leagues. In the case of Joaquim, his ideas about career progress were often combined with his religious views, and could not be easily subsumed to a one-dimensional interpretation.

¹⁸ Maguire (1999) has criticised world-systems analysis for not being able to capture the specificity of sports economies and migration (see also Maguire 2004, 2015).

¹⁹ I have found that "success" is often evaluated as a multi-dimensional side of athletes' lives. Being "successful" involves, above all, a work ethics, very close to the ethics of sacrifice for one's family that Rial (2008) has examined.

²⁰ The exception in sports studies is Alan Klein's (2000) attempt to rethink the concept of machismo in Mexican baseball. Klein worked with the sociology of emotions, developed by Arlie Hochschild, and the analysis of machismo by Mathew Gutmann and Alfredo Mirandé. See also Martes (2011) for a perspective that problematises the view of migrants as merely "rational economic actors".

While Joaquim was able to receive the medical treatment he needed to continue his career, Antônio, a futsal player in the Czech Republic, was not able to count on assistance from his Czech club. I met Antônio at the training centre of his Czech futsal club. He told me he was about to leave the Czech Republic to travel to Portugal, with his family, because of an injury. Antônio told me he could not get the treatment he needed in the Czech public health care system, and his current team did not provide further medical assistance. He was already in his thirties, but unlike Denis, Antônio was accompanied by his family. Antônio insisted his injury would heal easily, and he did not see himself as fully responsible for this situation. I met Antônio twice, once before he broke his contract with the Czech team, and another time at the Prague airport, when he was leaving for Portugal with his wife and daughter.

After interviewing Antônio, I kept in contact with him through an instant message application and a social media platform. The predictions of his recovery turned out to be true. With appropriate medical support, Antônio was able to quickly recover from his injury and play in the Portuguese futsal league. Antônio told me that his salary in Portugal was lower than in the Czech Republic, possibly because of his injury. He did not provide details of the amounts. Despite earning less, Antônio recognised the advantages of Portugal²¹. There is a sizable Brazilian migrant “community”, his daughter was able to access the public education system without a lengthy language learning process, and his wife was able to find a more “busy life” than in the Czech Republic²² (see Margolis 2013).

In this sense, I advocate for a multi-sited ethnography in Central and Eastern European regions because, following Marcus (1995), multi-sited ethnographies offer new ways for researchers to follow the global diffusion of meanings, objects and identities. I argue that, given the limitations faced by multi-sited ethnographers, researchers should follow players’ career trajectories as much as possible. In this way, researchers would be able to leave the binary framework that considers Central and Eastern Europe as either “stepping stones” or “places to retire,”²³ and build methodological strategies that capture the variety of athletes’ perspectives on their migration experiences in these regions.

Final thoughts

In this paper, I have tried to argue that multi-sited ethnographic works substantiate approaches to sports migration in Central and Eastern Europe by leading to a broader understanding of the difficulties and possibilities migrant athletes face in these regions. In this sense, Denis’ and Joaquim’s cases should be contrasted. While at first glance it appears that Denis has “retired” in the Czech Republic, he nevertheless constructed his whole career as a futsal player in “Central” and “Eastern” Europe and the “Middle East”.

21 Despite deep colonial and postcolonial ties, Portugal is rarely analysed in studies about Brazilian sports migration. Rial (2009) has admitted the relative absence of Portugal in her studies. Portugal still remains the top destination for Brazilian football players.

22 Under the notion of “precarity of masculinity”, Besnier and his team of researchers have been advocating for a gendered lens to approach sports migration (Besnier, Guinness, Hann, and Kovač 2018). However, because of their methodological choices, these researchers have mostly been interacting with young aspiring athletes. The fact that most of these athletes do not have families of their own makes some of Besnier and his team’s claims somewhat vague. One of the principal claims they make is that sports serves as a way for men in the global south to play the role of provider. I would argue that this “politics of the provider” that Besnier and his team defend, must be further elaborated. As the cases of Denis and Antônio show, they needed to stay close to their families, otherwise they could not see the point in simply assuming the role of provider. I argue that ethnographic research in sports migration needs to go beyond simple statements about masculinities to understand the gendered negotiations in players’ private lives.

23 Bourdieu (1992: 223) reminded us in one chapter of his “Language and Symbolic Power”, there are no natural borders: “Nobody would want to claim today that there exist criteria capable of founding ‘natural’ classifications on ‘natural’ regions, separated by ‘natural’ frontiers. The frontier is never anything other than the product of a division which can be said to be more or less based on ‘reality’, depending on whether the elements it assembles show more or less numerous and more or less striking resemblances among themselves.” (see also Okley 1996 for a discussion on borders and regionalisation in social anthropology).

Joaquim, on the other hand, even if he eventually considered moving back to Germany, expressed when I interviewed him that an experience in the Czech first division was already a good step forward in his precarious career, which had been punctuated by his constant battle with a chronic disease.²⁴

The career trajectory of Roberto, a long-term migrant futsal player in the Czech Republic illustrates the points I have tried to make in this paper:

Me: How did you start your career?

Roberto: I started in Brazil. [I usually get longer answers. I remembered I was forced to ask Roberto directly about the relationship between futsal and football]

Me: At a football club?

Roberto: Yeah, I started at Santos [FC].

Me: But at this club, did you play futsal and football at the same time?

Roberto: Only for one month, when I went to the pitch, Diego and Robinho were training there. So I couldn't advance. So I thought to myself "I need to come back to futsal". Football didn't work for me. In Brazil, it's like a mafia, football, you know? But I returned to futsal and I liked futsal better. I'm playing until today [Roberto is in his late 30s, a significant achievement for a sports career]. I've played in various Brazilian states, I played in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul. I am "rodado" [an experienced player]. I've played in Italy, Spain, and Azerbaijan. When you play well, there are lots of agents who come and ask you if you would like to play somewhere else.

Me: Okay, okay. Wait a minute, you started at Santos FC, right?

Roberto: Yeah, I did.

Me: After that you went to Santa Catarina?

Roberto: No, I started at Santos, then I went to play at Banespa, in São Paulo. After that I went to Joinville, then I went back to Banespa in 2004. After that I received an offer from an Italian club. I then left for Italy, then Spain. From Spain, I went back to Brazil, to Rio Grande do Sul. Then I came here [to the Czech Republic]. Here, I played until we reached the final. Then I went back to Italy. I've had a few problems there because the Italians are a little crazy. From Italy I came back to Brazil, I am a *gipsy* [my emphasis]. From Brazil, I went to Azerbaijan.

Me: When was that?

Roberto: Ah, it was a long time ago, 2012, around that time.

Me: So you played in the Czech Republic for a while, and then you went away.

Roberto: Yeah, I arrived here in 2011. I played half of the season, then I received an Italian offer. Then, I've had lots of troubles in Italy, I was really upset there. So I came back to Brazil, but this Italian club screwed me up. They held my transfer, so I couldn't play in Rio Grande do Sul. When the transfer arrived, and I had all the papers in order, I told this Brazilian club that I had an offer from Azerbaijan, so I went there to play.

²⁴ Joaquim eventually reached the Czech first division. I felt proud to witness his achievement.

Roberto's use of the same adjective, "rodado", that footballers used to describe their transnational moves to Carmen Rial (2008) is telling. While he would in theory agree that international experiences made him a more experienced player, his career trajectory reveals other routes, unexplored by Rial. Futsal allowed him to play in one of the world's best futsal leagues, in Spain, and provided a route to "Central" and "Eastern" Europe. Roberto also characterised himself as a *gipsy*, a reminder that in the city where he lives with his wife and child, in the Northwest region of the Czech Republic, there is a strong Roma "community". Roberto's story not only illustrates the *ethnographic continuum* between futsal and football, but also constitutes an example of the modalities of transnational migration opened to Brazilian migrant futsal players.

Furthermore, sports migration researchers should incorporate the role of emotions in the lives of sports migrants (see Lutz and White 1986, Maguire 1991, Svašek and Skrbíš 2007) to avoid seeing migrant athletes simply as rational economic agents searching to maximise their gains.²⁵ While monetary rewards are an undeniable characteristic of sports migration, previous studies have consistently tried to understand people's movements across the world, through various sports industries, without simply reducing sports migrations to the monetary rewards involved (Klein 1991). Roberto's story is not one of continuous movement towards Western Europe. His constant returns to Brazil, until he settled in the Czech Republic, have helped me deconstruct the exclusive prominence of material gains in the lives and careers of sports migrants.

An Afterthought: Does Red Bull still give you wings?

Transnational migration studies rose with a focus on the cross border activities of Caribbean migrants at the beginning of the 1990s (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton 1994; Glick-Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1995). In this sense, transnational migration studies emerged in tandem with neoliberal market policies in the 1990s, and sports industries have been affected by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism's advocacy that "human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms" (Harvey 2005, 2) fosters contradictions. Sports studies have been documenting the contradictions and conflicts surrounding the growing commercialization of sports industries (Maguire and Falcoux 2011).²⁶

Social anthropologist Daphne Berdahl (2010) has extensively analysed citizenship, consumption and memory in "post-wall" Germany. Her analyses have shown that East Germans had to adapt to a post-industrial capitalism, in which consumption has become more important than work, while East Germans have seen the breakdown of manufacturing jobs in the former GDR. Learning how to consume "properly", and "behave" in a post-industrial capitalist society, entails rebuilding a form of bodily discipline, materialised in everyday life as forms of investments in one's appearance. Berdahl showed how East Germans gradually learned how to "dress for success" to compete in a labour market in which their diplomas, skills and work experience had suddenly become "undervalued".²⁷

25 In their review of American perspectives on the anthropology of emotions, Lutz and White (1986, 427-428) acknowledge both the centrality of ethnographic descriptions in the analysis of emotions, and the necessarily "incompleteness" of data regarding emotions. To deal with these difficulties, the authors suggest a series of problems in social relationships that would be able to descriptively capture the emotionality of "others". In my current ethnography, I have followed at least two themes suggested by Lutz and White. My focus on injuries, borders and families, allowed me to focus on both the need athletes develop to keep relationships at a distance, a common theme among transnational migration studies, and the constant possibility of professional failure, which is usually described as the "precarity of athletic careers". For various perspectives on families in contemporary Brazil, see Scheper-Hughes 1993, Goldstein 2013, Dias Duarte and Menezes Aisengart 2017, Fonseca 2002.

26 Transnational migration studies emerged in the same context as Alan Klein's classic study of sports migration "Sugarball". Klein developed his thesis based on both dependency and world-systems analysis. At that time, even though social anthropologists were searching for new conceptual tools to understand the complexity of contemporary global processes and migration flows, a constant dialogue with world-systems analysis in the development of transnational migration studies can be noticed (see Basch Glick Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton 1994).

27 As Matti Bunzl (2010) analyses, in the introduction to "On the Social Life of Postsocialism: memory, consumption, Germany", Daphne Berdahl's attentive look into everyday practices of East Germans led her to consider "ostalgic", and "ostalgic practices" as integral parts of how the memory of transition from socialism to capitalism took place. Berdahl's analyses encompass both everyday consumer practices in the beginning of the 1990s and a series of board games, museums, and films expressing various discourses about *die Wende*, the process of German reunification.

In this sense, no transformation of contemporary football epitomises better the importance of consumption than the involvement of Red Bull in former East German football. Red Bull's investments have been highly polemicalised by the media. East German teams are said to have failed to "integrate" into contemporary football. Often accused of corruption and mismanagement, these teams have been associated with far-right extremism (see for instance, The Blizzard March 1, 2017). Furthermore, Red Bull is often accused of having changed the form of club management in German football, distancing fans from club policies (The Economist May 16, 2016). The controversial entrance of Red Bull in Leipzig led to the ascension of an East German football team to the top of German and European leagues. In fact, during the 2017/2018 season, Red Bull became the prey of its own success in European football when Red Bull Salzburg and RB Leipzig both qualified for the UEFA Champions League. Both teams were accused of violating UEFA's article 5 that impedes the same owner from having two teams in UEFA-organised competitions (UEFA 2017).

After a series of measures to separate these teams' close links, UEFA decided that both teams could compete. I was fortunate to interview Miguel before a match between Red Bull's two European teams in the 2018/2019 season. Miguel offered me a detailed story of his migration and his close association with Red Bull teams in Austria and Brazil. Other characteristics in Miguel's story aroused my attention. He is white, Catholic, and comes from a comfortable middle-class background. These features set him apart from the usual representation of Brazilian football migrants (Rial 2012).

Miguel told me he was the first Brazilian footballer to take what is now a somewhat common migration route for Red Bull Brazil's footballers. He went from Red Bull Brazil, a team based in São Paulo state, to Austria's third division. There, not only his football performance was monitored, but also his language skills. Learning English and German were also prerequisites for advancing his career and reaching the main Red Bull Salzburg team. Miguel saw these requirements as an *ethical* way of managing players' careers. Contrary to much media discourse, Miguel seemed at home with Red Bull's way of doing business in football. He responded to my questions:

How was your adaptation process? Do you speak German?

Yes, today I can get by. I mean it's always difficult to tell you how good is my German. But today I speak German, English, and Spanish. Spanish is quite close to Portuguese and I played with other footballers that spoke Spanish. English was my first language for communicating with people. My English was terrible in the beginning. I could only say these basic things "hey, how are you? Where do you come from?". But the club provided us language classes once or twice a week. I now get by well in German, I give interviews in German, and I do everything in German. I speak better German because I have been living here for a while.²⁸

According to Miguel, local language learning is a crucial aspect of football's labour *adaptation*.²⁹ After Red Bull Salzburg, Miguel went to Germany. The fact that he did not make the starting team there made him *happier* to return to Salzburg, where he did. However, when the interview accidentally changed to the forthcoming match between Red Bull Salzburg and RB Leipzig, the contradictions of highly commercial football became more evident.

28 Red Bull's investment in players' language skills should be noted because, as Rial (2006, 2008, 2015) wrote, many Brazilian players are only able to speak Portuguese. Language access is one of the main difficulties for researchers in Central and Eastern Europe. For instance, in one of his studies Molnar (2015) was only able to interview four players working in the top Hungarian league because football migrants in Hungary could not speak Hungarian or English.

29 I interpret Red Bull's investment in footballers' language skills as a deliberate attempt to avoid xenophobic fans' complaints about football migrants.

Me: Tomorrow you play, right?

Miguel: Yeah, tomorrow we play in the Europe League.

Me: So it's a very important game...

Miguel: Yeah, it's against RB Leipzig. I don't know if you know them.

Me: RB Leipzig... Is it the other Red Bull team?

Miguel: [He laughs] Yeah, it is.

Me: So it's a polemical match.

Miguel: Yeah, there are lots of polemics, but everything was already sorted out. People say that teams belonging to the same owner cannot play against each other. But whoever saw the first match saw two teams wanting to win. It's quite complicated, but one team is supported by Red Bull, and the other is partially owned by Red Bull.

Me: So is Salzburg owned by Red Bull?

Miguel: No. It's only sponsored. RB Leipzig is partially owned by Red Bull.

Miguel did not explicitly mention the previous UEFA intervention in both Red Bull teams to avoid conflicts of interest. Instead, he preferred to emphasise the teams' performances on the pitch and that they follow UEFA's regulations. Nonetheless, Red Bull's roles on each team are differentiated in terms of the reach of its commercial interests. However, in his interview, Miguel revealed that in contrast to the highly commodified Red Bull sports network, he did not have any written contract with his agent. *Trust* was the basis of Miguel's relationship with his agent. He told me his agent was a family friend, a friend of his parents, and there was no reason to have a contract with him.

Trust³⁰ in Miguel's circle of family and friends has limits, however. Miguel is the only footballer whose club I analyse in more detail in my ethnographic writing. I adopted this approach to Red Bull football teams, not simply to highlight the commodification of contemporary football, but mostly because Miguel gave me permission to use his real name, which I did not do. Throughout his interview, Miguel simply dismissed a narrative of suffering and pain. He has mostly focused on the "glamorous side" of football, and actively sought to highlight Red Bull's ethical way of managing his career. Miguel also rejected the importance of injuries. When I asked him directly. He told me: "Of course I have already been injured, but these were small injuries, nothing serious".

While I cannot attest that Miguel's statements are false, I would argue that the absence of a deep discussion of injuries in Carmen Rial's ethnographic works with Brazilian footballers at top European leagues stems from athletes' reluctance to reveal issues that might *hurt* them financially. Miguel's dismissal of injuries and pain as a vital part of his career as a professional sportsman, I suspect, is a cautionary tale for researchers in sports migration. As in Berdahl's ethnographies of East Germans trying to cope with the contemporary neoliberal labour market, Miguel's long-term identification with "the Red Bull brand" did not allow him to speak more freely about the painful side of football.³¹

In this sense, I argue that researchers should understand both how professional athletes embody contemporary investments and business ethics, and the effects these might have in social studies of sports.

30 "Trust" is usually analysed as an element of "social capital". The concept of social capital has been associated with the works of Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman (see Portes 1998). In applying social capital as a concept, both Bourdieu and Coleman sought to show that nonmonetary forms of capital can also be sources of prestige. Marcel Mauss' classic work (1990 [1950]) on "the gift" is an inspiration to contemporary sociological perspectives on social capital. For an analysis of the epistemological implications of trust involved in the social sciences, see Barone (2003 [1995]).

31 For a perspective on the relationship between injuries and athletes' religiosities, see Oliveira Filho (2020).

Endnote

At the beginning of 2020, I had found a welcoming sociology department at Jagiellonian University, and I was planning to go to futsal matches and interview Brazilian futsal players in Poland. In March, Czech friends told me to come back to the Czech Republic because the Czech borders would soon close. At that time, I still thought the European Union would close its exterior borders, and allow some movement within the EU in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I decided to follow my friends' advice, and a few hours before the Czech borders were closed, I returned to the Czech Republic on a train from Krakow. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments and sports governing bodies have suspended professional sports activities in all countries I have analysed in this paper. In these times of crisis, professional athletes in the Czech Republic have reacted differently to the possible abrupt end of the 2019/2020 sports season. Footballers in the Czech Republic told me they could not return to Brazil to see their families due to both visa restrictions and travel bans. Futsal players waited until the last minute for a decision from the Czech Futsal Association. On April 15, 2020, the sports governing body declared the end of the 2019/2020 Czech futsal season. Most Brazilian futsal athletes contacted the Brazilian embassy for assistance in their efforts to return home.

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