

Chapter 11

The Black, the White, the Green: Fluid Masculinities in Brazilian Dressage

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*If I can just allow myself to experience this, let myself go with it,
I can feel the angels here,
in this world where we live with animals (Ann Game)*

Rio 2007. The Pan American Games. Nilo V.O.,¹ an elegant, well-trained, white stallion, parades on the tracks. Its horseman, wearing a tailcoat and a top hat, attempts to be discreetly inconspicuous, as the dressage competition rules demand. However, his discretion stops short of one detail: Rogério Clementino is the first black man in the history of the Pan American Games to be part of a dressage team. And he goes on, as a member of the 2007 Brazilian team, to win a bronze medal riding Nilo. The following year, again riding Nilo, Roger was to be the first black person to be a member of a dressage team in the Olympic Games. Unfortunately, the “Ebony and Ivory” tandem (Knijnik et al. 2008) was not able to compete in Beijing as Nilo failed medical tests before the competition started.

“Like human athletes, horse athletes have the power to inspire us, and sometimes break our hearts” (Warren 2003: 1). When I first saw the Nilo/Roger tandem performing in Rio 2007 – I was there to study “delicate masculinities” (Rojo 2014) – I was struck by both the “Ebony and Ivory” metaphor and the grace of their presentations. The flow of their dance showed their connection clearly. They were not a human riding a horse, or a horse being ridden by a man; they were another “creature” (Game 2001: 1–2). I was inspired to follow this “creature” in my research project on masculinities.

¹The V.O. indicates that the horse comes from the stable of the Brazilian entrepreneur, Victor Oliva.

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My inspiration proved justified. Both Roger and Nilo had started as “outsiders” in the Brazilian equestrian sports scene; Nilo had been an abandoned horse in Victor Oliva’s stable when Roger started to give him some attention, while Roger was a humble employee on the ranch when he began to work Nilo. Their relationship empowered them both and impacted not only on their own and Victor Oliva’s gender performances (Butler 2006) but also on the Brazilian dressage scenario.

It is the co-embodied human/horse relationship between Roger and his white stallion Nilo and the tensions of this relationship with Victor Oliva – the “hegemonic” male (Connell 1995a) – that are important in the construction of what I call *fluid* masculinities on the dressage field. The image of the Amazon warrior (Adelman 2004) is just one example that illustrates how the human/horse interaction can become a factor in the “destabilizations of gender boundaries” (Plymoth 2012: 345). Birke and Brandt (2009: 189), in a seminal work on human/horse relationships, argue that the mutual embodiment that occurs within these relationships offers “several ways in which gender can be produced.” The authors note that humans have singular gender experiences while dealing with animals, but “the animals themselves become gendered through the interaction” (2009: 189).

In a country where only a few are elite “horse riders” while the majority may still be treated in ways more akin to pack animals, this chapter will show how the interactions between Roger and Nilo, and between the two of them and Victor Oliva, make fluid the notion of a unique masculinity in the Brazilian equestrian world (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Anderson 2008). The data for my analysis comes from two sources: in-depth interviews I conducted with Roger in 2009 and my ethnographic notes made during dressage competitions in which Roger was participating and/or working as a coach for Victor Oliva’s son, or during visits to Victor Oliva’s ranch.

I begin the chapter with a brief explanation of the dressage competition scenario and of my research route within Brazilian dressage. I then outline some relevant aspects of the interconnected lives of the three protagonists of this paper – the black Roger, the white Nilo, and the “green” Victor Oliva.² Following that, I attempt to make the interconnection between them even more transparent, by exploring Roger’s words and acts toward both Nilo and Victor Oliva. Within this, I conduct a discourse analysis (Denscombe 2003) of my interviews with Roger, using insights from my ethnographic notes to reflect on the gender issues that arose from the relationships between the three protagonists. I will show how the interspecies connection (Nilo/Roger) empowers Roger’s masculinity while transforming that of Victor Oliva. I draw extensively on the theoretical framework provided by Birke and Brandt (2009: 189) in their research on the “mutual corporeality” or the “co-embodiment” that occurs between horse and human and which can produce new tensions within the gender order. As these authors claim, “the presence of horses enables a subversion of dominant gender practices particularly at the localized

²I refer to Victor Oliva as the “green” as he owns the Green Island ranch, where this story has started – as well as he is the one who owns the money, the “green” dollars to sustain his social position.

(private) level” (p. 189). At the end of the chapter, I provide a reflection on what might be not only further research development of masculinity issues in the equestrian field of Brazil but also new possibilities brought to the sports arena by human/horse relationships (Adelman 2011).

Dressage

Unlike other forms of equestrian competition which are based on measurable achievements of the horse/rider, dressage is subjective. In dressage competitions, tandems – the pairs formed by horse and rider – are evaluated by a group of judges for harmony and specific movements that they have to demonstrate in the arena (Rojo 2014).

The particularities of the dressage competition – rhythmic and delicate progressions which are compared to dance movements – have created a gender stereotype for this competition and its competitors (Rojo 2014). Despite the fact that it has its origins in males aiming to show control over their horses, nowadays within the equestrian world, dressage is seen as a feminized arena (Adelman 2004; Birke and Brandt 2009). Ethnographic research has found that effeminate and gay men are likely to be better accepted in the dressage context (Dashper 2012) than in some other sports fields.

My Research Route into Brazilian Dressage

I followed the Brazilian competition until I was able to make contact with Roger, who invited me to attend the national championships in Sao Paulo, in 2009. For a middle class university lecturer like myself, the scenario was quite new: a large wealthy country club in an upper-class area of my city, where people of European descent assembled to cheer on their horses. Most intriguing for me, though, was that the whole competition was held in English; no Portuguese language either in the announcements or in the flyers distributed to the audience.

During the days I interviewed Roger, I was able to meet his boss, Victor Oliva, and even have lunch with him, his ex-wife Hortencia, some of his friends, and Roger, who was the only rider allowed to eat at the restaurant with the horse owners. All the other riders, professional competitors, went elsewhere to eat, many having brought their own food and sitting under a tree to eat. Below it will become clear how Roger gained the right to lunch with his boss as he gained power through his relationship with Nilo. What follows is the outcome of my conversations with Roger, which became, with his express authorization, in-depth interviews (Minichiello et al. 1995; Denscombe 2003). These conversations were conducted for the duration of the national dressage competition.

The Black

To become a member of the Brazilian team for Rio 2007 and Beijing 2008, Roger had endured an epic history. As he stated, “nobody, not even I, would imagine a *neguinho* (small black man) from Mato Grosso do Sul riding a white horse in the Olympics!” He was well aware that, if he had lived more than 100 years ago, he would not even have been in the place of the well-treated competition horse; he would have been humiliated and used as traction in the sugarcane mills. At that time, to be a black man in Brazil meant you were a slave.³

Rogério Clementino, 27 years old at the time of our meetings, was born in the tiny town of Viena, in a remote region of Brazil. His father passed away when he was a toddler, and his mother moved with him, his sisters, and brothers to a farm, where he was raised by his stepfather, mother, and aunts and where he had contact with all types of animals. He had little formal education, as he was forced to leave school in Year 5, at the age of 12. At that time, he started full-time work on a farm in order to support his mother. He worked with cattle and rode bulls and wild horses. It was then that his passion for horses began:

this passion for riding...it came from my childhood, sometimes I used to ride a bull or a wild horse, my brothers and I rode adults' horses...it was an adventure, something crazy... but in my teen years, when I was 12, I started to work on a farm to help my mum, and my life was to ride wild horses and bulls...it was my dream, and I guess these crazy early adventures have helped me a lot in the dressage competition.

As the wages on this first job were so low, he decided, at the age of 14, to move to a neighboring city to make more money in order “to better help my mom.” As a worker in dairy production, he still had opportunities to ride horses on the farms where he went to get the milk. After a while, he went to Sao Paulo to work as a helper on a stud. He worked with Leandro Aparecido, who at that time was already a renowned rider and dressage competitor. Leandro admired Roger’s hard work and talent. Roger always acknowledges Leandro as the one who gave him his first chance to work a horse, a spirited animal called Romantic (“I will always remember Romantic, my first horse, I worked and tamed him a lot, and after 7 months he became a cool horse,” says Roger).

³From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, Negroes were brought from Africa in the basement of ships, taken ashore with ropes around their necks and marked with a branding iron. Despite the fact that the slavery of blacks in Brazil was terminated more than a century ago (1888), its real and symbolic marks still linger in the country. According to official government data, racial inequalities remain strongly present in Brazilian society. *The Summary of Social Indicators 2007 – an Analysis of Life Conditions of the Brazilian Population* (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) 2007) found that the “illiteracy rate of black and brown [or *mulattos*: mixed race] people is more than twice that of white persons.” They also reported that “white persons earned, on average, 40 % more than black or brown people with the *same level of schooling*.”

One day, Leandro told him there was a job going in a distant ranch, but he had to make a quick decision. It was at Victor Oliva's Green Island ranch. Roger decided to go.

It was a unique opportunity, I had to take it, and I have always strongly grabbed the few chances in my life. I was to be the helper of an established rider (Fabio Lombardo) but he soon left Green Island, and I had to ride Nilo in a competition. I didn't know anything, but I won that competition against really experienced riders. It was God, his hands, that helped me there. Mr. Oliva came to me and said he would not hire another rider, and I was to be the official rider of that horse.

It was a turning point in Roger's life. He had to use all his ability to surf the wave that was to change his life forever. He was the humble black employee, with no education or training. However, he started to negotiate his position in the hierarchy, and as a result, his masculinity, at that moment. Roger, who was originally employed as a humble employee in the stud, at the bottom of the social and masculine hierarchy (Connell 1995b), suddenly became empowered by his relationship with Nilo. As Birke and Brandt (2009: 193) affirm, horses have been active part of the gender constructs around their riders, and usually "the maleness of the horse (...) reflects the masculinity of the rider."

After Victor Oliva told him he was to "be Nilo's official rider," Roger demanded better work conditions so he could deliver what the owner was expecting. He reported speaking to his boss:

Mr. Oliva, I don't know much about working competition horses, I don't have either the technique or the time to work this horse. However, if you give me an instructor, if you make some investment, I have the strongest will that anyone can have. That's what I'm telling you, sir, I have the disposition, but it's up to you sir'. And he started to do that! He paid for some instruction for me, and I worked hard, man, I worked as hard as I could and a bit harder!

In speaking to Oliva this way, Roger established a dialogue with him, a conversation that would become an essential part of the relationship of the three protagonists of this story.

The White

Nilo V.O. is a white Lusitanian stallion, with withers of 1.62 m, born in 1994 at Green Island ranch. In the equestrian world, Nilo fights for space against more traditional European breeds. However, even among the other Lusitanian on Green Island ranch, Nilo was not considered valuable before Roger's arrival. As Roger said,

Nilo was a horse that no one cared about...when I first came to the stud, he was a heavy horse, tough to ride, so nobody would work him...Only the children stayed with him, more bullying him than riding...The best horses went to the professional riders who did not want to ride or work with Nilo...So, he was abandoned, and I picked him...I thought that, as nobody wanted him, he would be the best for me to work and learn something...I thought here is the good one for me...

Roger started to work Nilo, and step by step, people started to see him as a “different” horse. From being a “nobody” in the stud, Nilo began to be seen as a *stallion-to-be*. At the same time, Roger began to be seen as more than a mere employee. Their connection was transforming both. There was no more “pure horse or pure human” (Game 2001: 3). They developed a daily “cross-species communication” which is how people who live with animals connect with them (Game 2001).

Their connection was, of course, mediated by their dressage practice. Their training that made a “horse-human rhythm” (Game 2001: 3), the cadences of the dressage movements, and the control that Roger had to have over Nilo (with the latter’s acceptance), in sum, the enactment and performance of their bodies, formed a “living centaur” (Game 2001: 3). Their bodies were mediators in their relationship (Brown 2006). Through their embodied connection, or better through their “co-embodiment,” Nilo and Roger were transforming their world and, as I will show, transforming the gender order around them.

The “Green”

Jose Victor Oliva, as he defines himself, is a restive self-made man (MaisUol 2009). He started his life as an entrepreneur during the 1980s, running successful restaurants and night clubs in Sao Paulo, two of which became legendary meeting places for the social elite of this richest of Brazilian cities. At that time, he was known as the “King of the Night” and was seen constantly in newspapers and TV shows. He was married to Hortencia Macari, a legend in the basketball world,⁴ and they had two sons. During the 1990s, Oliva started working in a different industry (promotional marketing). Since then, he has built up a “business empire” in this area (Farah 2003).

Oliva has social and economic power. Compared to Roger and Nilo, he is certainly at the top of a “masculine hierarchy.” The “cultural ideals” (Donaldson 1993: 646) of masculinity he emanates are those of a hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995a). He is the boss, and other men are subordinate to him. However, he starts to change when horses appear in his life.

In 2002, Oliva, by this time divorced from Hortencia, fell in love with horses. He purchased his first horse, a black Lusitanian called *Bolero*, and never looked back (Farah 2003). He transformed his farm (Ilha Verde or *Green Island*) into a ranch where he raises nearly 100 Lusitanian horses, all of whom he knows personally by name. In his ranch, Oliva is aiming to transform his passion for horses into a lucrative business. At the same time, he believes that horses have been a powerful turning point in his personal life: “Horses fascinate people. They have helped me to reconnect with my sons, my current wife and my friends. With horses, I’ve started a new cycle in my life. This is priceless” (Farah 2003).

⁴Hortencia is considered one of the best female basketball players in world history. She was world champion with the Brazilian Team in 1994, when she received the nickname Queen of Basketball; at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, she took the silver medal. She is also part of the Female Basketball Hall of Fame in the USA.

Oliva's relationship with horses has changed his whole life. His relationships have become more dialogical, bonding again with significant people in his life. In the following sections, I will show how the Nilo/Roger co-embodiment has affected the masculinities of all the protagonists in this story.

Black and White

There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man
(Winston Churchill)

The "new creature," the "centaur" that was made by the Nilo/Roger relationship, is the focus of this section. My conversations with Roger became more intense with bigger breaks needed to recover and breathe, as we moved from talking about his life, and Nilo's life, to the topic of the relationship between them. In our second meeting, I asked him to talk "a bit" about his relationship with Nilo. Roger was reluctant; I could feel how moved he was while talking about this relationship. As Game (2001: 4) would state, "the relation is what matters here – individuals, human and horse, and species, are forgotten."

Mate, I'll tell you something... This horse to me... he is... he is a blessing... he is a blessing... It was God, God alone who put him in front of me... When I first started in the stud, nobody would take care of him... He was the first horse I had an opportunity to ride in a competition... So, everything that I learned with my colleagues I taught to Nilo, everything... Then I worked hard with him, I started to do dressage with him, and in our first year together we went to the Brazilian championship, for beginners... And we won it!

The concept of "relationship" is also central in Connell and Messerschmidt's theory on gender and masculinities. They conceive masculinity not as a rigid trait with which someone is born; rather, masculinity is enacted in the social world, within people's daily lives and practices. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 836), "masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting."

The empowerment of both Nilo and Roger throughout their relationship is evident in Roger's words and was confirmed in my observations. Roger states that at the beginning, Nilo was

An ugly duckling... It was impressive as nobody would talk about him except to complain... Mr. Oliva was trying to sell him, but he couldn't find anyone to buy... But now, wow! We are trying to mate him with some mares... Mr. Oliva has already sold his semen once, he made some money... He gave me a percentage as well!

As Roger explained how Nilo stepped up in the economic and social hierarchy, he tells me that he, Roger, with help from Nilo, has also stepped up the hierarchy. As a man and as a worker, he now felt more valuable.

Before Nilo and I started winning the competitions, I was the guy who everyone in the ranch came to with an order to do something. I was what they called the fixer, the one who was happy to do everything. The difference was that I never had to listen twice. I always did whatever they asked of me. I woke up at 6 am and went to bed after 10 pm. My wife was

always complaining...But I said I had to work hard to achieve my aims... And I was frequently spending time with Nilo, talking to him, caressing him, taking care, kissing him...

As can be seen by his discourse, Roger was at the bottom of the social hierarchy on the ranch. However, at the same time, he was building up his relationship with Nilo; he was also performing gentleness and caring. Plymoth (2012: 337) affirms that “boys and men are to a considerably lesser extent [than women] engaged in the daily tasks of caring for the horses in riding schools and elsewhere.” Roger, however, was performing these tasks – enacting “feminine values” as stated by Birke and Brandt (2009: 192) – which in this case may perhaps not be seen as “tainting Roger’s masculinity” as he was also trying to work on Nilo’s wildness to make him a better dressage horse. Yet, there was an ambiguity in their relationship, since at the same time the horse would “symbolize great feats of conquest, those feats depend upon the horse becoming tamed, its wildness contained by domestication – and so implicitly feminized” (Birke and Brandt 2009: 193).

The ambiguous fluidity of the tandem’s masculinity started to become clear to me. As they built up their relationship (“each day we spent more time together, he understood me, I understood him, it has been 6 years now,” Roger says), Nilo moved from an “ugly duckling” to a great stallion, even though he performed a “feminine” dance in his dressage. His fame as a good stallion grew, as the tandem became well known in the dressage competition circuit, ending among the top three in several contests. Of course, not only was Nilo being recognized as a “better male”/a good stallion, Roger was also going up the masculine hierarchy. Here, it was their co-embodiment that helped them both to become seen more “valuable” as males. In their theoretical approach to the co-embodiment of horses and humans, Birke and Brandt (2009: 196) clearly state that it is the specifics of the mutual corporeality in the human/animal relationship that makes a new gender performance:

But here, unlike many of the social worlds in which we perform gender, we engage in choreography with another – with another who is not human. People and horses create a kind of intimacy when connected through embodiment, an intimacy which is both enacted through, and brings about change in, the body. (...) it is also an embodiment that could carry a multitude of meanings and fluidities

It is within this fluid gender context where feminine and masculine frontiers and stereotypes are blurred and where horse and rider modify themselves as they increasingly understand each other, it is here where the “green” Oliva is challenged to make a contribution to this gender fluidity, and it is also here where his own masculinity becomes more fluid.

The Rainbow

After several years, the Nilo/Roger relationship was well-established. They were performing well in both local and national competitions. However, the support they received from Oliva was still minimal; they had access to formal dressage training, but not with the best instructors. Then, Nilo/Roger was invited to be part of a series

of dressage workshops, which were run by Mr. Eric Lette, who was to be the Brazilian Team's coach in the forthcoming Rio Pan American Games. Roger's memories of those days are clear:

There was an internal competition in this workshop. At the beginning, there were more than 20 tandems, and Mr. Eric was eliminating a few couples for the next workshop. And we stayed, stayed... and I stayed as a reserve of the team. I was still by myself, with Nilo, but our stuff was so good, so nice, the horse was in such good shape, that one day Mr. Oliva came to me and said: "You will practice with Joham Zagers"... That would be really expensive, Mr. Oliva paid everything, and there we went! Joham became my trainer; he is a famous Swedish trainer...

The formal training was what Nilo/Roger were looking for and this training process became central to an even more strongly connected relationship. As Game (2001: 5) argues, "dressage is the bringing to life of the relation between horse and rider, involving a mutual calling up of horse and rider in each other."

Yet, it was not only their relationship that changed through the training. The enhancement of the Nilo/Roger relationship was the start of another turning point in this intricate game of masculinities. As the "mutual corporeality" experienced by Nilo/Roger became more acknowledged and valued, Roger became more assertive toward Oliva, who, at the same time, started to move from his "superman" position, becoming more accepting of Roger's opinions and thoughts.

Just after the lunch with Oliva and his friends, Roger told me something that sounded quite unbelievable. It might appear a simple request, but in fact, it is an example of a big step and a big challenge for both men. Roger told me that just before that national competition, he asked for better conditions:

I wanted to sleep in a nice and warm bed, to have a warm shower. So, some weeks ago I asked if I could go to a hotel in the period of the competition, instead of staying in the horse bay. Mr. Oliva agreed....

In the elite social group to which rich and powerful men such as Oliva belong, allowing a humble black employee to go to the hotel and to have lunch at the same table with the horse's owner is not well regarded. It is considered a sort of weakness. Rich men should be in control, exhaling their powerful masculinity (Connell 1995a) and not mixing with subordinates. While I accept Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005: 846) claim that "(...) certain masculinities are more socially central, or more associated with authority and social power than others," I could see that Roger and Oliva's increasing connection was making more fluid the once "tough" masculinity performed by the latter.

Roger testifies that Oliva was changing his behavior toward him. He was more talkative, and he even started to give advice to Roger about important issues such as racial prejudice. "His advice for me was to just ignore them if they said something about my color, just ignore it. Keep up my hard work and my aims, keep walking," Roger says, with an innocent smile. Oliva was using his position as a local hegemonic male to teach Roger to use a type of action and discourse to "promote self-respect in the face of discredit, for instance, from racist denigration" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 842).

Nonetheless, Roger is not naive. He is smart enough to realize that Oliva's acknowledgment of the value of his partnership with Nilo meant other things too. "It is business, mate, all business. He is making money with us, and if it is good for Mr. Oliva, it is good for us as well."

Roger's way of negotiating and challenging Oliva's position in the social and masculine hierarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) was contributing to a softening of Oliva's toughness and rigidity; the latter was opening himself for dialogue with his rider. This can be seen in another facet of their relationship.

I was watching the dressage competition when the chairman called the children's competition in which Oliva's elder son, Joao, aged 12, was to compete. Oliva, agitated and nervous, went to talk with both his son and Roger, who, it turned out, was Joao's coach, a job he took up at Oliva's request. I observed the conversation, which ended with Roger smiling and Oliva departing, angrily.

Later, Roger told me that Oliva was hard on his son; he wanted his boy to be "the best man in the whole competition." Roger wanted the boy to play and to have fun with horses. To him Joao was still a child. Oliva disagreed, and this generated an increasing level of tension between the two men. Such tensions between masculinities are discussed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 841) who show how the daily lives of boys and men are influenced by disagreements and the overlapping of several masculinities, "including the mismatches, the tensions, and the resistances." The interaction described above shows how Roger was learning how to practice and exercise, in his daily life, "gender power and resistance" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 841).

Fluid Masculinities

Birke and Brandt's (2009) research presents gender in the horse/human relationship as "ultimately a conjoint production, an accomplishment of both horse and human" (p. 190). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 836) make clear that "masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting." The authors claim the historicity of the gender relations in order to demonstrate that those relations are subject to transformations: "hegemonic masculinities therefore came into existence in specific circumstances and were open to historical change" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832).

I have tried to explain such historical changes in this chapter. Using a social setting with a unique animal/human embodied relationship, I sought to demonstrate how masculinities changed, becoming more fluid, with men and horse modifying themselves while the co-embodiment was produced. These modifications produced repositioning of masculinities for all of them, through both embodied and discursive practices (Knijnik et al. 2010).

This point in their history is just a beginning. The gender performativity (Butler 2006) that is profoundly embodied in the dressage competition allows, as Birke and

Brandt (2009: 195) explain, “bodily states which facilitate other ways of being.” The deep communication between horse/human through their mutual corporeality, as the authors argue, helps to create what would be a “becoming with – the ultimate goal of almost all horse riders” (Birke and Brandt 2009: 194). The connection between human and not human, and the choreography they engage in the dressage competition, offers a unique stage to see the changes in bodies, and the emergence of a singular co-embodiment that can carry “a multitude of meanings and fluidities” (Birke and Brandt 2009: 196).

These are the meaningful fluid masculinities that have been created by the unique co-embodiment of the “Ebony and Ivory” tandem, with the participation of the Green, who not only supported the tandem but also made changes in his own life during this process. These fluid masculinities will certainly be seen penetrating the social spaces of the Brazilian equestrian world in forthcoming years.

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