

Queer-Trans Solidarity in Soto's *Juego de chicos*

Herbert J. Brant
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

I. INTRODUCTION

Facundo Soto (b. 1972) is one of a group of young Argentine writers whose work explores the wide variety of homoerotic identities and experiences among the post-dictatorship generation in Argentina. In his novel, *Juego de chicos*, Soto continues his exploration of the interpersonal relationships and socially constructed identities that he began in his first work of fiction, *Olor a pasto recién cortado*. The 2011 work, divided into chapters that treat each individual player of the team, focuses on the members of a Buenos Aires gay soccer club as they participate in the “boys’ game,” a phenomenon which serves as a metaphor for the intricate play of gender and sexual identities which is more and more characteristic of contemporary Argentine society. In this study I examine each of the main focal points of the novel’s title: the national GAME, soccer, as a context for contextualizing Argentine masculinity, as well as the transformation of what it means to be a “BOY” in a city that has made significant progress in sexual citizenship and acceptance of diversity in the past several years.

Unlike the traditional game of soccer in Argentina, which focuses more on the outcome—victory or defeat—, in Soto’s novel the playing of the game itself becomes the goal. That is, the quality of play, teamwork, and the bond between the members of the team acquire greater value

than winning. Pride, for this gay soccer club, comes not through defeating an opponent (what might be called the traditional Argentine masculinist standard) but rather through the creation of a special community which prizes diversity, tolerance, and coexistence (a new “queerer” Argentine virtue). Intimately connected to the change in what it means to play the game of soccer is the new definition of “boy.” The “boys” on the team form a diverse collection of gender and sexual variations which defies easy labeling. The team members, within their own selves and in their relationships with others, reject categories, dichotomies, binary oppositions, and work to combine together what society and culture have enforced as absolutely distinct and insoluble. As a result, the team is a dizzying mixture of gays, straights, bis, and queers; boys, trans, and men; friends and lovers; and brothers, sons, and fathers which defies traditional laws, rules, and limits on gender and sexual roles, and which rejects the imposition of a hierarchy to maintain the privilege of one identity over another. As the players yell at the beginning of the novel, “¡No discriminen!” when the coach bans the presence of a *travesti* (a male who lives as a woman and who has been enhanced surgically to have a female appearance, but who still possesses male genitalia), the team members, in my view, exhort each other, and in a larger sense, their fellow Argentines to cease their discriminatory efforts, in the double sense of dividing up people into categories, as well as oppressing them based on their identity differences.

II. BEING A “MAN”

In recent years, gender and sexuality studies have heightened our awareness of the social construction of bodies, gender and sexuality across the centuries. Men, maleness, and masculinity are cultural constructs, connected both to biology and ideology in ever evolving ways. The theorists of the past half century who have revolutionized our thinking about gender and sexuality —Foucault, Sedgwick, and Butler, to name the most influential— have illustrated

that the traditional notions of both femininity and masculinity have demonstrably evolved over time and, as a result, do not represent fixed and universal concepts rooted in a timeless, or “natural” link between bodies and identities. Absent this link, the propagation of cultural concepts surrounding masculinity, as Reeser indicates, depends on four principal mechanisms: the dissemination of 1) *imagery* (for example, athletic and muscular bodies, the symbolism of the phallus, etc.), 2) *mythology* (for example, cultural models passed on through stories of “paragons” such as Superman and other “super heroes”, Perseus, Jean Valjean, etc.), 3) *discourse* (for example, various medical, legal, religious, pedagogical and political texts), and 4) *practices* (the activities that can augment or reduce masculinity, such as sports, hunting, military service, use of specific clothing, etc.) (20-27).

Like other Western cultures, the Argentine can be examined to find that masculinity has been codified by the imagery, mythology, discourse, and practices surrounding the idealized versions of national figures that begin with the military heroes and *próceres* of the independence movement (with the possible exception of Moreno), continuing with the gauchos, then to the *compadritos* and *tangueros*, and finally to the superstars of Argentina’s national obsession, soccer. As Archetti and Acha have shown in their studies on the relationship between the construction of gender and sexuality and soccer, the national sport is much more than a public display of athletic talent, a spectacle that entertains and inspires passion; it serves the very strategical function of institutionalizing Argentine masculinity. In Argentina, soccer actually becomes both an *expression* and a *producer* of individual and collective masculine identity. For that reason, Soto’s novel, which explores the broad and dynamic range of gender identities and sexual orientations of a soccer team in contemporary Buenos Aires, embodies a radical critique of and resistance to the hegemonic view of Argentine masculinity that had been in full effect until the end of the 20th century. It appears then, that Soto has taken the classic trio of elements —*body*, *gender*, and *sexuality*— as focal points for his examination of both what it means to be a “boy,” that is, a

person with a specific body configuration who plays soccer in Argentina, as well as the rules of the “game” that result from the interplay of the classic elements listed above.

III. BOUNDARIES AND RESTRICTIONS

In order to appreciate Soto’s critique of hegemonic definitions of what it means to be a masculine heterosexual, male person, it is useful to review how the traditional definition draws boundaries around what it means to possess a “manly” identity. Traditionally, masculinity and maleness have depended upon a variety of factors that limit and restrict manliness to a tyrannically narrow range of options in terms of the male body, its gender identity, and its sexual behaviors.

The male *body*, for example, should be *powerful* in order to take control of any situation and in order to impose the male’s will on others. Certain prototypically male features, such as body and facial hair, salient musculature, large hands and feet, and a pronounced Adam’s apple, contribute to the overall effect of maleness. Importantly, any significant variation in these elements—that is, its unmistakable presence or noticeable lack—serve to augment or diminish the subject’s masculinity. A man with little or no body and facial hair can either be reduced to the status of a sexually indistinct *child*, or he can be *feminized* because of a suspected lack of testosterone. And most importantly, a man’s body must also possess a distinctively exteriorized set of male genitalia which, under normal circumstances, must be kept hidden from public view so that it may retain its mystery as the symbolic essence or legendary source of masculinity itself.

In connection to the male body, a conspicuously masculine *gender* must accompany a man’s physical form. Gender displays, as Butler has examined so forcefully, are part of the system that maintains patriarchal privilege. Everything from physical gestures and how the body moves

through space, to vocal patterns, to hobbies, interests, and professions, and to clothing, adornments, and hairstyles, all determine the degree to which a man is considered a masculine person in most cultures. In the Argentine context, Urresti notes that “en la circulación de estos estilemas que conforman una verdadera estética de la presentación del sí mismo de los varones, se afirma subrepticamente una prescripción ética del orden del deber moral que se connota a través de los gestos, de las miradas, de la inflexión de la voz, de la forma de mover el cuerpo” (147). And again, in traditional cultures, a man’s masculinity lies in direct proportion to how close or how distant his gender performance approximates or deviates from current definitions of appropriate masculine norms.

Furthermore, it must be noted that at the heart of this masculine gender identity display lies an explicit *anti-feminine bias* that not only privileges masculinity over femininity, but also, paradoxically, restricts the freedom of males within a system that actually works to propagate the myth that masculine behavior is freer and less limited than feminine behavior. Kimmel calls the drive to repudiate the feminine a “lifelong project to demonstrate that [a man] possesses none of his mother’s traits. Masculine identity is born in the renunciation of the feminine, not in the direct affirmation of the masculine, which leaves masculine gender identity tenuous and fragile” (127). Urresti, echoing Kimmel’s classification of the fragility of masculinity, goes on to note that “la fragilísima figura del varón tradicional [es una] vulnerable construcción que niega y reniega todo el tiempo ese polo femenino del que con tanto ahinco se lo trata de sustraer. La mujer en el hombre: un síntoma de terror” (147). Because of the peculiarly delicate state of masculinity, masculine gender identity requires an endless process of affirmation and reaffirmation because masculinity can be questioned, challenged, or forfeited at any given moment; it can never be securely possessed.

The third element of the classic triad that restricts the definition of a “real” man is heterosexual orientation. Numerous studies have explored the subtle and not-so-subtle links

between compulsory heterosexuality and the definition of maleness or femaleness.

Heterosexuality as a determining factor in the definition of a masculine male person requires an indispensable accompanying component that one might call “compulsory homophobia.” Modern social and cultural restrictions on male sexuality, as Foucault and others have demonstrated, cannot function without the complementary force provided by the presence of non-heterosexuals. Reeser summarizes the dynamic by stating that “a key aspect of power’s normalizing effect is the constructing of an abnormal other. For in order to create a norm, discourse must create or invent an anti-norm, which implies that the norm is the norm by opposition” (31-32). As a result, hegemonic culture has conflated heterosexuality with masculinity in men, and in so doing, has defined non-heterosexuality as anomalous and, consequently, anti-masculine.

IV. FLUIDITY AND VARIATION

So it is against, in opposition to, this backdrop of hegemonic concepts regarding the definition of masculine heterosexual male persons that Soto constructs his novel.¹ The characters in the work illustrate the wide variety of possibilities that defy easy and simplistic labeling in modern Argentine society. And most importantly, the author places the human variation within a context of a non-discriminatory democratic ideal, linking his inclusive soccer team to the larger issues of Argentine politics and society.

The novel begins with the story of “Turquesa,” a *travesti* who comes to soccer practice in the hopes of being a part of the team. The question quickly arises whether she may be allowed to play in league games due to her status as an “in-between” person: partly male-partly female,

¹ It is significant that this work of fiction which I have been calling a “novel,” reflects, in its structure and form, the same resistance to categorization as it illustrates in its content. The work itself defies easy labeling and classification in terms of its generic identity, considering that it is composed of a collection of loosely interrelated character portraits of men who play on a gay soccer team. In fact, the absence of a traditional “plot” actually serves to underscore the disconformity that forms the basis of its principal theme.

partly feminine-partly masculine, partly-heterosexual, partly homosexual. In this section, the reaction of the players and coaches establishes the ideological viewpoint from which the reader must consider all of the stories to follow and which focus on each of the various players on the team. The narrator is explicit when he confesses his own view: “comprendí que no todo es blanco o negro, y que la diversidad sexual va más allá de ser hombre, mujer, homosexual, bisexual, trisexual, sino que hay de todo, para todos los gustos...” (*Juego 8-9*). At this moment early in the novel, he defines his opposition to hierarchical distinctions and, in a sense, asks us all to do the same.

In a dramatically ironic manner, when the issue of Turquesa playing on the team explodes into a fierce debate, the author presents how the dynamic of discrimination functions within and across social groups. As they reject Turquesa for not being *fully* male on a gay *men's* team, some players and the coaches want to maintain clear distinctions, strict limits, and bounded categories for fear that the “straight” teams will not see the players of the gay team as “real men” and that they will lose their hard-earned status as “machos gays” (*Juego 11*). In other words, they do not want to forfeit their hopes for integration and tolerance within the soccer community by seeming to violate the rules and regulations of a “game” controlled by those who hold the power to relegate them to an inferior status. As the captain of the team puts it, “Queremos reivindicar nuestra posición ante la sociedad. Nuestro lugar de hombres, más allá de lo gay o no gay. No queremos que nos sigan identificando como locas... No queremos más discriminación. Queremos ocupar un lugar en la sociedad como cualquier otro...” (*Juego 10*).

In response, some of the players side with Turquesa, and argue that the discrimination that they themselves have suffered as generically or sexually at odds with traditional cultural norms should not be perpetuated and aimed at a person whose body does not conform to the rigid classification of male or female. Leading the opposition, the player identified as “10 Suplente” responds by saying that giving in to cultural pressures to conform will not solve

anything, or make them more accepted in society: “lo tuyo es querer mostrar que se puede ser gay y macho a la vez... No me parece ningún aporte a la sociedad... ningún cambio... lo que están haciendo es militancia gay y si quieren vender una imagen de ‘machos gays’ para que se sume más gente reprimida y así tener un millón de amigos... allá ustedes” (11). The players who chant “¡No discriminen! ¡No discriminen!”, including the narrator, understand that the so-called tolerance gained by playing by other people’s self-empowering rules cannot realign the power relationships that disadvantage certain people; the rules themselves are unjust and should be opposed.

In spite of the protestations of most of the players, the team captain and coaches win the political battle and make the decision to prevent Turquesa from playing during official games. She will be demoted to second-class status and allowed to practice with the team, but she must be kept on the sidelines when it comes to games that really count. The *Director Técnico* explains the decision: “Discriminar no es aceptar todo... Discriminar es poder elegir con quién jugar. Que juegue cualquiera no tiene sentido... uno elige. La vida es así. Consciente o inconscientemente nos la pasamos eligiendo una cosa u otra, discriminando” (11-12). The coach’s explanation takes the argument to levels far beyond those that have to do with the membership of players on a gay soccer team, and echoes Archetti’s notion that “El fútbol es un ritual de iniciación adulta. [...] El ritual de fútbol es un ritual de poder en tanto mantiene fronteras y tiende a expulsar a los ‘anómalos’” (“Fútbol, violencia” 44). The “adult” impulse, even the compulsion, to divide everything in the world, to include and to exclude, is a very powerful force.² But the factors that affect those choices are extraordinarily complex and reveal much about how culture and society play a key role in what we decide to include, incorporate, integrate, and what we decide to

² Kimmel describes the phenomenon from the perspective of the insecure men who wield power: such men “...still rehearse the politics of exclusion, as if by clearing away the playing field of secure gender identity of any that we deem less than manly —women, gay men, nonnative-born men, men of color— middle-class, straight, white men can regroup their sense of themselves without those haunting fears and that deep shame that they are unmanly and will be exposed by other men. This is the manhood of racism, of sexism, of homophobia” (138).

exclude, reject, and segregate. At the heart of the issue here is the question of what constitutes acceptable variations of a category (in this case the male body), and under which circumstances certain variations may be included or excluded.

With this debate at the opening of the novel, the author masterly sets up all the stories to come, featuring each of the different players, along with a final concluding story on the team as a whole. The twenty stories that make up the bulk of the novel are marked by the impressive heterogeneity that serves as the essential thematic unifying feature of the entire novel. Some of the stories are funny, some are powerfully erotic, some are poignant and tragic, some are lyrical and poetic. Soto paints the enormous diversity of the Argentine male with great affection and humanity. But for me, what stands out most strikingly is how the author illuminates the fascinating multiplicity of variations in terms of the male body, gender performance, and sexual desires. For example, in addition to the controversial body and in-transition male-female appearance of Turquesa, all of the other players make up a gamut of *body* types and peculiarities. For example, “4” is “petiso, maciso, peludo. Lo llamamos ‘osito de peluche” (*Juego* 35); “9 Suplente” has a “cuerpo trabajado por el gimnasio, lampiño, cara de bebé y pija de burro” (*Juego* 63); and “5” has a “parálisis parcial, hereditaria. Podía mover el brazo izquierdo, pero el otro le colgaba como una rama seca, al lado del cuerpo” (*Juego* 40). Gender identity and behavior also vary enormously among the players of the team, with some maintaining a carefully manicured typical masculine performance, and some adopting the most exaggeratedly cross-gendered characteristics. “3,” for example “parecía una mezcla del ‘Lagarto Juancho’ con ‘Penélope Glamour’ [...] ...a medida que pasaban los encuentros se soltaba más, hasta llegar a la cúspide de sus mariconeadas. Un día comenzó a hablar como la Abuela de *Gasalla*, y al otro ya era toda una mujer” (*Juego* 28). And in terms of *sexuality*, the diversity becomes truly astounding. Beyond the question of same-sex versus different-sex attraction, desire in Soto’s novel includes nearly every

Freudian “perversion”: fetishism, scopophilia and exhibitionism, to name a few. Some of the players satisfy their desires through so-called “anonymous” sex in public places, while others are looking for long-term commitment and partnership. Some are turned on by what Bersani calls “inaccurate replications” of themselves (365) (“10” and “10 Suplente”, for example, begin to date and the narrator notes that “fueron adquiriendo los mismos gestos y rasgos. A veces nos confundíamos y les cambiábamos los nombres. Ahora los dos parecen la misma persona” [*Juego* 72]), while others are attracted to men who differ greatly from their own identity elements (“4,” for example exclusively desires mature men, that is, as the narrator says: “Lo calientan los abuelos” [*Juego* 35]).

The final section of the novel, ironically labeled “DT” (for “Director Técnico”) forms a splendid conclusion to the series of stories about the individual players, and closes the novel as a striking bookend to the opening section on Turquesa. While the beginning chapter highlights difference, division, and distinction, the ending chapter brings all the teammates together in a magical moment that unifies and unites them at a deeply emotional level. In the absence of the “DT,” who had been let go by the team, the boys get high and play a game, stark naked, during a furious summer thunderstorm. Partly due to the drugs, and partly due to the dramatic spectacle of nature, the players band together, they lose their masculinist tendency towards competition and rivalry, and play a game in which “todo era pasión y conocimiento” (*Juego* 119). Without the authoritarian presence of a technical director who, significantly, had been a police officer and later a prison guard, the team experiences the freedom from distinctions and the welcoming acceptance of others that some had argued for in the initial chapter on Turquesa.³ The narrator describes the extraordinary feeling of connectedness and discovery:

A la vez sentíamos el ardor de los cuerpos que se abrían, se expandían buscando la energía del otro, como hilos de colores que se mezclaban, conformando un tapiz, un

³ Note on the post-dictatorship rejection of authoritarian powers of the military.

cuadro. Después, esa imagen se me deshacía como el agua, para combinarse de otra manera con los mismos colores. Mientras tanto seguíamos jugando y tomando una extraña consciencia acerca de quiénes éramos, dónde estábamos, que hacíamos, cuál era el sentido de estar ahí, el tiempo que llevábamos jugando. Cada intercambio de pelota era como desprenderse de un pedazo de nuestra historia y compartirla con los otros. Cada enfrentamiento con el contrincante una oportunidad para redescubrir al que teníamos al lado. (*Juego* 118-19)

During this exceptional night, the boys play until dawn, using the game of soccer as a way to become truly intimate with one another, and moving from a team of players to a band of brothers.

V. CONCLUSIONS: “GAME” / “TEAM” / “SPORT”

The novel comes to a close, then, when the narrator finds the meaning in the “poetry” of the game of boys: that is, the magic in the celebration of variations, the rich interplay of options within a system. Like a work of poetry which relies on the structure of rhythm, condensation, and subtle implication, the boys find meaning and pleasure in the structure of the game in which all the various diverse parts contribute to a harmonious whole.

In essence, Soto’s novel portrays for the reader a vision of what might be called a “new” Argentine man. Instead of depending on restrictive exterior forces to impose rules, regulations, limits, and exclusions, the players on the gay soccer team come to discover unity in diversity, and come to doubt the need for authoritative (or authoritarian) powers tied to hegemonic masculinity and heterosexism as a useful or acceptable mechanism for social organization.⁴ Soto’s *Juego de*

⁴ The final lines of the novel suggest that authoritarian control is not rejected outright, but only seriously questioned. After the night of seemingly limitless freedom, “alguien, no sabemos quién, llamó al DT pidiéndole que cambie algunas actitudes, pero que sea bueno y se reincorpore al equipo. El resto nos preguntábamos si lo necesitábamos” (*Juego* 122).

chicos gives us a glimpse of how democracy, as messy as it may be, has altered contemporary Argentine culture. Coming on the heels of the 2010 Equal Marriage Law and the 2011 Gender Identity Law, Soto's novel signals that the ideals of democratic inclusiveness are more than just a "boys' game."

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