

Tackling Homophobia in Spain's Football Culture: Changing the Discourse Through Art and Social Media¹

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Abstract: The stadium has long been a haven for hypermasculinity and homophobia, even while the rest of the country marches toward inclusivity. By examining three works—a chapter from the recently published graphic novel, *Fútbol* (2014), by Santiago García and Pablo Ríos, *La partida* (2015), a dance performance created by Vero Cendoya, and a recent play, *El gol de Álex* (2017), written and directed by Antonio Hernández Centeno—I argue that art can be a first step in queering the football stadium.

Keywords: Homophobia – Football – Soccer – Spain – Graphic Novel – Theater – Dance.

“Durante más de un siglo el fútbol nos habló de la masculinidad”
Jorge Valdano

After Spanish referee Jesús Tomillero came out as gay in 2016 the attacks were as swift as they were ugly. “¡Renuncia, maricón!” shouted a fan from the stands (Urdaneta). “Va el primer aviso,” threatened a tweet, “El patrón no quiere desviados en sus campos de fútbol. Le aconseja que se retire o se muere” (qtd. in Urdaneta). A third comment was especially vile: “Espero que mueras de SIDA, maricón” (qtd. in Oliveira). Wary of the abuse and fearing for his safety, Tomillero eventually resigned.

¹ I am indebted to my student research assistants, Ines Malone and Andrei Bucaloiu, for their important contributions to this article. I also benefited from conversations with my colleagues Erica Delsandro and Fernando Blanco.

The reaction of these football fans highlights a contradiction within Spanish culture.² Spain is relatively progressive in its LGBTQ legislation, and indeed was one of the first countries to legalize same-sex marriage in 2005. In the most recent ILGA-Europe, which releases an annual review of the human rights situation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people, Spain ranked 6th, out of 49 European countries, behind only Malta, Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark, and Norway (“Rainbow Europe”). And yet the world of football remains, according to Tomillero, “machista y homofóbico” (qtd. in Urdaneta). One can conclude that in Spain queer identities may be expressed in some spaces but not in others.

This essay explores a potential shift in the world of Spanish football. It begins with the premise that the football stadium has long been a gendered space, a haven for hypermasculinity and homophobia, even while the rest of the country has marched toward inclusivity. As a result of this compulsory heterosexuality, the football stadium functions as a closet for gay players and fans. But there have also been signs of an emergent counter-discourse, one that is attempting to stake out a territory within the stadium for these same players and fans. I examine three works: a chapter from the recently published graphic novel, *Fútbol* (2014), by Santiago García and Pablo Ríos, *La partida* (2015), a dance performance created by Vero Cendoya, and a recent play, *El gol de Alex* (2017), written and directed by Antonio Hernández Centeno. I argue that such stories, when combined with the potential of social media, are the first step in queering the football stadium in Spain.

The Stadium as Closet

It is by now common to view gender identities as constructs. Biology produces differences, but society and discourse give those differences meaning. Critics and theorists have convincingly argued that these constructed gender identities are plural, shifting, and shaped by social pressures and cultural norms. R. W. Connell's pioneering work on masculinities is particularly useful in understanding the gender norms that operate in spaces such as the football stadium. Connell argues we must dispel the myth of masculinity as a monolith, and instead recognize the multiplicity of masculinities. “To recognize more than one kind of masculinity is only a first step,” explains Connell, “We have to examine the relationships between them” (76). Connell argues that unique societal conditions lead to the construction of hierarchized masculine archetypes, which are endowed with varying degrees of social capital. Hegemonic masculinity, Connell explains, is the archetype that enjoys the most social capital in any given cultural context: “‘Hegemonic masculinity’ is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same; it is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of

² Although the term “soccer” is preferred in the USA, Canada, and Australia—in order to distinguish it from other sports—in this essay I have opted for the more universal “football.”

gender relations” (76). In other words, hegemonic masculinity is a model anchored in cultural ideals, but it is also a particular configuration of masculinity that changes over time as cultural norms and social realities shift. Because it can be challenged by subordinate or marginalized models of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity is fluid and will be reconstituted when new conditions arise (77).

In Spain, no sport enjoys as much popularity and prestige as football, and the hegemonic model that has dominated Spanish football culture since the creation of a professional league nearly a century ago is bellicose, cisgender, and heterosexual. The masculinization of football results in a climate that tolerates, and at times encourages, machismo. Vicent Borràs, vice-president of the Association of Lesbian and Gay Families of Catalonia, has referred to football in Spain as “un núcleo de resistencia al machismo” (qtd. in Escudero). He goes on to say that children are conditioned from a young age to associate football with hegemonic masculinity: “Desde pequeños los niños tienen que escuchar frases como ‘pareces una niña’ si no van fuertes a las disputas de pelota. Parece que en todo momento tienen que demostrar su virilidad y lo machotes que son” (qtd. in Escudero). Citing Argentine sociologist Juan José Sebreli, Patrick Ridge observes that “sporting competitions in patriarchal societies like Spain, Italy, and Latin America institute traditional virile roles such as aggression, physical strength, toughness, an obsession to win, boasting, and the desire to dominate the inferior” (419-20).

In football culture, the hypermasculine model just described is tethered to a traditional binary view of sexuality. In an article titled “Sportophobia,” David Plummer notes that homophobia is used to “police” expressions of manhood, and “is deeply implicated in the gender order and its influence on contemporary masculinities and male identity is comprehensive” (122). Similarly, Adi Adams explains that in societies that conflate sexuality with gender expression, sport becomes “a mechanism of masculinization” and therefore a way of (im)proving one’s heterosexuality (580). As a result, the spaces in which sporting activities take place are ruled by a code of compulsory heterosexuality. This cult of masculinity is not limited to the field, but extends to the stands, the club boardrooms, the media, and even the bars where games are watched.

In her article, “En el armario del fútbol español,” Bárbara Ayuso describes a scenario which perfectly captures one of the ways that this takes place in the stands: “Es una imagen conocida por cualquiera que frecuente un estadio, tanto que muchos han dejado de verla. El hincha ensancha el pecho, forma un altavoz con las manos y dirige su voz hacia el jugador: ‘¡Maricón!’... En el fútbol, el insulto homófobo sirve para todas las circunstancias.” Ayuso argues that this blatant homophobia results in the erasure of queer identities in the world of football: “en España sigue imperando la tesis de que en el deporte rey no hay varones homosexuales.” Sergi Escudero observes that football culture seems out of place in today’s Spain, an anachronous relic from the past: “En otros ámbitos como la política, la ciencia o la comunicación vemos salir del armario a personas a menudo, pero no sucede tan frecuentemente en el mundo del deporte y directamente no sucede en el fútbol español.” This point was echoed by Pep Guardiola, a retired

Spanish footballer who currently manages Manchester City F.C.: “Es curioso que en España, un país en el que la homosexualidad se vive ya con normalidad en todos los ámbitos, ningún jugador haya dado el paso [de salir del armario]” (qtd. in Ayuso).

Even those outside of the footballing world have noted this paradox. Following Spain's victorious European Championship campaign in France in 2012, writer Rosa Montero was suddenly struck by the realization that there are no openly gay players in Spanish football, which remains true today.³ In an article titled “Muy machos,” Montero writes: “¡Y luego nos jactamos de que nuestra sociedad es tan tolerante y de que la homofobia ya no existe! De acuerdo: entonces, ¿dónde están los futbolistas gays?” Montero goes on to suggest that football, and sport in general, “está cubierto por un velo homofóbico.”⁴

Virtually nobody interviewed by Ayuso believes the absence of gay footballers should be interpreted as a sign that there are simply no gay players. Rather, the persistent stigma of homosexuality keeps them in the closet. Eve Sedgwick famously referred to the closet as “the defining structure of gay oppression this century” (71). Similarly, geographer Michael Brown explains that the closet represents “the denial, concealment, erasure... of lesbians and gay men” (1). The Spanish football stadium, as a physical, discursive, and cultural space, continues to be a closet for so many.

Many of the players and coaches believe that the problem lies primarily with fans rather than the players themselves. “Estoy seguro de que en el vestuario se aceptaría, no habría ningún problema,” suggests Gerard Piqué, a central defender at F.C. Barcelona (qtd. in Ayuso). Rubén López, an expert in LGBTQ issues in sport, agrees: “A lo que más se teme es a la hinchada, no está educada para aceptar a un gay en el terreno del juego” (qtd. in Ayuso).

Because the popularity of football in Spain dwarfs all other sports, with roughly half of adult Spaniards identifying as football fans (Llopis-Goig 10), the social impact is significant. According to sociologist Ramón Llopis-Goig, within this world of fandom there is a stark gender imbalance, with only half as many female fans as male fans (11), which reflects the popular opinion that the football stadium in Spain is “a uniquely masculine space in which women could only be present as mere companions” (119). While European football leagues have attempted to re-brand football as a family-friendly pastime in recent years, football culture continues to be “a strictly gendered affair. Its relational dynamics, its working practices, its commercial ventures, its promotional interests, are replete with images of maleness” (Parker 691). This is especially true

³ Of the nearly 11,000 men that have played in Spain's top division, none have ever come out as gay. According to Rubén López, president of the Observatorio Madrileño contra la LGTBfobia, the reluctance of players to come out due to the fact that: “Los estadios de fútbol son probablemente el mayor foco de expresión espontánea e impune de homofobia en nuestro país hoy día” (qtd. in Álvarez).

⁴ Members of the far-right party Vox recently blocked a motion, which had called for an official stance against homophobia in sport, arguing that, “In Spain, there is no LGTBphobia” (qtd. in Carreno, et al.)

amongst the hardcore fans, known as *ultras*, which tend to be homogenous when it comes to gender representation (Pitti).

The problem is compounded by the fact that the disciplinary arm of football's governing body seems reluctant to act in cases of homophobia in the stadium. Paco Ramírez, from the Observatorio Español contra la LGTBfobia, notes that homophobia is handled differently than other forms of discrimination in the world of football: "Se actúa con una rapidez inusitada en los casos de racismo y xenofobia, pero se continúa ignorando que la mayor intolerancia en el fútbol es la homofobia" (qtd. in Ayuso). With so much to lose, and so little support, gay players and fans remain invisible, trapped in the closet.

The Sportification of Warfare

In the foundational study of sport, *Quest for Excitement* by Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, Dunning famously labels the sporting sphere as a "male preserve" (242). Similarly, Adi Adams states that sport remains one of "the last bastions of traditional male values" (580). But how did football become a hotbed of machismo and heteronormativity and why does it remain so? To answer this we might consider the way we talk about football. When Santiago Solari was appointed as interim coach of Real Madrid in 2018, he referred to his players as "guerreros" and described his tactical plan for an upcoming game as "ir... y jugar con dos cojones" (qtd. in Torres "Solari"). Solari's comments belong to a long discursive tradition. George Orwell famously quipped that serious sport is "war minus the shooting" (42), and if you read the sports section of the newspaper even that distinction can be difficult to see. Journalistic accounts of games often read like descriptions of armed conflicts. Take the following snippet from the sport section of *El País*, in which the author describes some of the action from a Real Madrid game: "armaba la pierna y fusilaba a la red" (Torres "Ostentación"). Or a scene from a match between Spain and South Korea: "armó el tiro y embocó el disparo desde 25 metros. Directo a la escuadra" (Hernández Alonso). Or this passage from Eduardo Galeano's celebrated book *Fútbol a sol y sombra*: "Mediante una hábil variante táctica de la estrategia prevista, nuestra escuadra se lanzó a la carga sorprendiendo al rival desprevenido. Fue un ataque demoledor" (19). Without the proper context these passages could easily be mistaken for episodes from a war chronicle. Many more examples of military rhetoric in sports journalism can be found in William Zambrano and Juan Sebastián Cáceres Moya's study, "Las metáforas bélicas del fútbol: un fenómeno cultural y discursivo."⁵ This conflation of terms raises a number of questions. Is this linguistic borrowing simply a case of sensationalism in the media, an example of a narrative style employed to heighten drama

⁵ For a different view of sporting discourse, one that uses the language of love and desire to describe the relationship between fans and players, see chapter 4 of Mariann Vaczi's fascinating study *Soccer, Culture and Society in Spain: An Ethnography of Basque Fandom*.

and sell a product? Or do words like *capitán*, *fusilar*, *tácticas ofensivas*, *línea defensiva*, and *atacar por la banda* reveal a deeper connection between sport and warfare? To answer these questions one should look back, beyond the origins of football, beyond Spain, and examine the whole of sport today as the product of a historical sequence.

Modern sport is a descendant of medieval martial culture, which is why one finds so many echoes today. Hastiludes, like jousting or the *mêlée*, began as military exercises, mock-warfare meant to hone the skills of those most likely to participate in actual battle. But, as historians have pointed out, the social function of tournaments quickly changed “from that of a game with military overtones to a purely sporting occasion with little practical application... highly stylised, with elaborate rules, and extremely expensive” (Barber and Barker 4). As the role of spectators became more central to the spectacle, tournaments were further regulated and sportified. This is not to say that the conversion of the hastilude into a sport meant that it lost its military spirit. While the link between sport and warfare is most obvious in mimetic characteristics of combat sports and field sports, all sporting contests are founded upon a warrior narrative.⁶

In his seminal work *The Civilizing Process*, Elias argues that from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the 20th century, Western Europe experienced a gradual push toward refinement and an increase in the social control of violence. Violence was either criminalized and stigmatized, or institutionalized. For instance, the organization of military structures, such as the formation of standing armies, confined violence to specific people, while the rise of sport allowed everyone to enjoy restrained, symbolic violence within the confines of an arena or other designated area. Emergent European nations thus became increasingly effective at monopolizing force, as Patrick Murphy, Ken Sheard, and Ivan Waddington have explained: “far from being simple antitheses, violence and ‘civilization’ are characterized by specific forms of interdependence” (94). In nineteenth-century Spain, as in other industrializing countries, sport filled a vacuum left by an increasingly peripheral military, thereby supplanting warfare in a number of ways—as a symbolic spectacle of military-inspired conflict, as an outlet for violence in an increasingly regulated world, as a source of patriotic sentiment, and as a proving ground for traditional masculine ideals.

Sociologists who approach sports studies with a feminist gaze have rightly noted that patriarchal privilege has been “played out in, and reproduced through sport” (Birrell 61). In the gender paradigm that has prevailed in Spain since its foundation, there has been little room for women in the world of sport. First, women were relegated to the role of divinely-ordained homemaker (*la perfecta casada*), and later, biologically-determined domestic angels (*ángel del hogar*). Women, so the story went, possessed neither the physical strength nor the aggressive mentality necessary for sport. An episode from *Fútbol: la novela gráfica* suggests that such views continue to linger in the culture of football despite the fact

⁶ For further reading on the intertwining of sport, masculinity, and militarism in a Spanish context, see Collin McKinney’s “How to Be a Man” (161-166).

that the theory of essential differences has lost its currency in scientific thought. When asked if a highly skilled female player could make it in a men's league, a famous coach replies that there is one quality that trumps both technical ability and physical strength: "Lo más importante, por encima de todo... es tener cojones" (García and Ríos 68). As this passage and the above-mentioned quote by Santiago Solari suggest, the symbolic importance given to *cojones* continues to be a problem for Spanish football culture. As recently as 2019, Diego Simeone, the head coach of Atlético de Madrid, celebrated a goal by turning to the crowd and shouting while grabbing his testicles. Following the game, he explained the gesture, stating, "Significa que tenemos huevos, muchos huevos. Ya lo hice alguna vez de jugador" ("Simeone"). Fortunately, the gesture was criticized by many, including football legend Jorge Valdano, who pushed back at such displays of machismo when he said: "Que se agrande la cancha y que entren cuantas más mujeres mejor para ayudarnos a sensibilizar el juego y enterrar de una vez la falacia de que al fútbol se gana por huevos."

Not only have women been excluded from the sporting sphere, but hegemonic masculinity, by conflating manliness and athletic aptitude, has also marginalized and feminized non-sporting men. David Whitson, in "Sport in the Social Construction of Masculinity," argues that sport has played a key role in constructing and elevating a particular way of being male since the middle of the nineteenth century (21), and Varda Burstyn adds that the nexus between athleticism and hegemonic masculinity remains alive and well today. Similarly, in her essay "Warriors or Wimps?," Barbara Humberston explains that: "Male hegemony is produced and perpetuated through the particular images of masculinity constituted by dominant forms of sport prevailing in [any given] society" (Humberstone 201). In other words, within a Connell's framework, where multiple masculinities coexist and compete, a man who competes and wins in sports will be closer to the hegemonic ideal than non-sporting men, who are relegated to positions of subordinate masculinities.

Given the persistence of patriarchy and the cultural capital granted to athletic prowess, is it any surprise that today's footballers are celebrated as masculine paragons? In days gone by, boys pretended to be war heroes, running around with toy swords shouting "Soy Prim," as we read in the sixth chapter of Galdós' *La desheredada* (147). Today they wear the names of Ronaldo and Messi on their backs. But, as I have argued, the connection between footballers and heroic soldiers runs deeper than the shared adoration of little boys. Footballers are not only viewed as shining examples of modern masculinity because they are athletic and make lots of money, they are what John Hoberman refers to as "proxy warriors," whose victories provide ideological and political validation for fans (6). Much has been said of the Real Madrid – FC Barcelona rivalry in terms of nationalist agendas and political ideologies (Fitzpatrick; Linares; Lowe). The same is true of national teams. When *la Furia Roja*, Spain's national team, plays against *Les Bleus* of France, it seems the specter of past wars is present, although perhaps not to the same degree as when the German national team takes on the Netherlands, or when Serbia

plays against Croatia. In a time when actual warfare is less common, and still never a cause for celebration, sport continues to see displays of pseudo-jingoism. Amidst the singing of club hymns, the wearing of crests and captains armbands on uniforms, and the waving of flags, it is hard to ignore the parallels with more ominous displays of chauvinism and bellicosity.

All of this is to say that sports like football were gendered from the very beginning, and were shaped by a specific strain of masculinity. But football in Spain is not merely another sport, it is *the* sport, and has a unique history that magnifies the masculinization of its culture. In the case of Spanish football, we must note that the rise to prominence of La Liga, the professional football league in Spain, occurred in the years immediately following the Spanish Civil War.⁷ The war took place from 1936 to 1939, and pitted the military, monarchists, Catholic church, and landed gentry against anarchists, farmers, socialists, and liberal intellectuals. In the end the fascists won and General Franco's dictatorship lasted nearly 40 years. In the post-war era women's freedoms shrank, homosexuality was not tolerated, and football became both a way to placate the masses as well as a vehicle for nationalist propaganda (Ashton 25-37; Shaw; Quiroga).

If we bear in mind the performative nature of gender identity, then the football stadium has been an ideal stage for the expression of a certain type of masculinity. Given the sport's origins, one can see how football culture in Spain came to celebrate "muscular, tough and moral bodies, politicized and ideologized bodies, heroism, warrior spirit, individuality, acceptable male-to-male relationships and compulsory heterosexuality, aggression, sexual exploits and violence" (Vaczi 85). While Spain has come a long way since the unabashed sexism and compulsory heterosexuality prevalent under Francoism, the stadium continues to be a cult of masculinity in which homophobia usually goes unchecked.

Imagining New Realities

The converging of sport, sexuality, and gender is used as artistic fodder by comic book creators Santiago García and Pablo Ríos in their 2015 graphic novel *Fútbol: La novela gráfica*. The work is a framed narrative, in the tradition of *El Conde Lucanor* or *One Thousand and One Nights*, with Santiago García serving in the role of first person narrator. There are several embedded tales, which include a cross-dressing football star who fakes an injury in order to go on maternity leave, a corrupt team owner who uses mafioso tactics to reach the final of the Copa del Rey, and an avant-garde artist who takes over as manager of Rayo Vallecano as an anti-capitalist art project. One of the most compelling storylines, and the one most apropos of this essay, depicts the relationship between Aitor and Koldo, teammates at Athletic Bilbao who start off as friends and eventually become lovers.

⁷ Originally founded in 1929, the league ceased competition at the outset of the Civil War. Play resumed beginning with the 1939-40 season.

The two players begin their footballing careers in the youth academy of the Basque club, before a string of triumphs leads to starting roles in the senior squad. Aitor leads the defense, while Koldo stars on offense, and their secret off-field romance translates to chemistry and success on the field, earning them the moniker “*yunque y martillo*” (86). The story takes a twist when Koldo is sold to FC Barcelona and Aitor is traded to Real Madrid. Given the famous rivalry between the two clubs, which are known as the *eternos rivales*, the couple is initially concerned, but they are confident that their love is stronger than any sporting rivalry. However, the loneliness of being apart affects their performances on the field and both players experience a significant dip in form.

For their first Clásico, which is the name given to the match between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, both players are substitutes and do not face each other on the field. They do manage to steal a kiss in the tunnel at halftime, which turns into an awkward punch-in-the-arm greeting when a teammate approaches (90, see Figure 1). Eventually the toll of being apart becomes too great, and Koldo cheats on Aitor. After their break-up the players re-discover their winning form and when the two teams meet again, they are both in the starting line-up.

The action on the field is intense, with both men playing at the limits of what is acceptable. They trade verbal insults and violent fouls. At one point Aitor sticks a finger up Koldo’s bum, and when Koldo reacts angrily, Aitor shouts back, “¿Qué pasa, ya no te gusta?” (98-99, see Figure 2). Later, in another altercation, Koldo is shown telling Aitor to “Chúpamela... otra vez” (99). Denigrating insults are common enough in the trash-talking that takes place in sport, and the passage serves as a reminder that homophobic acts and discourse have long been used to humiliate and dominate rivals on the battlefield as well as the playing field. What makes this episode even more startling are the quips, “¿ya no te gusta?” and “otra vez,” which attempt to mock the pair’s past intimacy and reinforce the notion that the field or the stadium is a closet where genuine homoaffective eroticism cannot exist.

The chapter’s climax occurs when the tit-for-tat fouls between the players erupt into a brawl between the two teams and their fans (102-03, see Figure 3). The panels are entirely colored in red, suggestive of the fiery conflict. But just as the violence reaches a head, the two players break down in tears, declaring their love for one another. The red abruptly turns to pink, and the words “Te quiero” reverberate around the stadium, arresting the violence and causing a moment of suspense (104, see Figure 4). Next, the unthinkable happens: Koldo and Aitor kiss, for all to see (105). This produces a chain reaction. First the players from the opposing teams, the *eternos rivales*, begin kissing, then the coaches and support staff. Then the fans get in on the action, turning the bleachers into a massive orgy. Even folks watching from home are caught up in the moment, having sex in front of their television sets (106). The story ends with the narrator declaring: “Todos ellos comprendieron que el fútbol también es amor” (106).

While it might be tempting to dismiss this bacchanalian queer utopia as pure whimsy because it is so far removed from the reality of today’s Spanish football culture,

or alternatively, as subtly reinforcing heteronormativity because the final two frames depict straight couples having sex, I propose a more optimistic reading. In an arena so dominated by rampant vitriol against non-conforming masculinities, the positive incorporation of gay bodies and stories into narratives about Spanish football, no matter how fanciful, are important steps towards a broader cultural shift.

Playing and Performing Queerness

Gender, sexuality, and football also intersect in meaningful ways in *La partida*, a sport-dance piece choreographed by Vero Cendoya and performed by a company of five female dancers, five male footballers, and one male referee. The performance takes place on a small outdoor football court, with the audience seated around the perimeter of the court as if they were fans at a game. The hour-long performance highlights various themes in football culture: coordination and grace, aggression and melodrama, and of course gender performativity. By pitting five women against five men, the piece forces viewers to confront “la visceralidad y lo primitivo del ritual de un partido de fútbol” (Cendoya “Sobre *La partida*”). It also makes explicit the place, or lack thereof, of women and marginal masculinities in a space that celebrates “la agresividad, la euforia, la competitividad hasta grados salvajes” in an atmosphere of “tanta testosterona” (Cendoya “Sobre *La partida*”). As if to remind spectators that the women are out of place on the football pitch, the men are designated as the home team and the women as the visitors.

There are numerous examples from *La partida* that throw into sharp relief the implicit gendering and (hetero)sexism of the football arena, but I will mention just three. The first comes in the twenty-third minute, when the team of men charges forward and scores a goal. As the men celebrate, the female players complain to the referee, signaling that one of their teammates, who stands on the pitch and breastfeeds a baby, is unable to play (00:23:30-26:00). The game is delayed, and a narrator comes over the sound system to discuss the ways in which women must often choose between professional success or a family.

One of the liveliest moments of the performance comes during the half-time interval (00:30:30-33:35). The ten players retire to the bench, and the referee, performed by Mikel Fiol, emerges wearing a black blazer studded with shimmering sequins and several large feathers attached to the lapel. He launches into a playful, sexually charged dance routine (see Figure 5). The jazzy instrumentals of the first half have been replaced by Estela Raval's “Arriba,” and the reverent crowd comes alive as Fiol skips and twirls across the field. The spectators laugh and clap, although a few begin throwing water bottles and even a shoe at the referee (it is not obvious whether this is spontaneous or planned). The referee's role is clearly meant to play with gender norms and sexual stereotypes. The referee quite literally *tiene pluma*, with several large feathers affixed to his

lapel.⁸ The prop is a physical reminder of his queerness, and serves as a foil for the traditional hypermasculine figures that normally populate the football pitch.

Another key moment is initiated by the narrator, who gives the occasional soliloquy over the loudspeaker in order to provide auditory messages that complement the visual spectacle of the dancers. In the second half, the narrator begins to quote from Eduardo Galeano's book *Fútbol a sol y sombra*, citing a passage on the sport/warfare link: "En el fútbol, ritual sublimación de la guerra, once hombres de pantalón corto son la espada del barrio, la ciudad, o la nación. Estos guerreros sin armas ni corazas exorcizan los demonios de la multitud" (00:45:00-30). At this point the referee begins a campy, balletic fight with all of the players (00:46:30-50:11). The juxtaposition—between his graceful ballet moves and the stylized violence, between the soothing classical music and his guttural shouts as he wields his red card like a knife—gets plenty of laughs, but it also draws our attention to the fact that spectators enjoy a bit of violence in their sport, so long as it is confined to the boundaries of the field.

The title of the piece is itself a clever commentary on gender. Rather than use the masculine noun "partido," which means game, as in a soccer match, Cendoya has opted for the feminine "partida." While the word "partida" can also be used to describe a match, or part of a match, the word has other definitions that are equally relevant to the theme of the performance. For instance, it highlights the militaristic aspect of football, since "partida" can refer to a military deployment or squad. But the performance also invokes another definition of "partida", specifically when it means a point of departure. By considering the performance as a new beginning or an inflection point, one can see the way that the dance company's exploration of gender and football attempts to take the discourse in a new direction. When asked about art's capacity to bring about social change, Cendoya stated: "Hace 25 años que me dedico al arte y he comprobado que el arte tiene un efecto de transformación en las personas" ("Sobre *La partida*"). Not only can it produce positive outcomes for individuals, she explained, but "es una herramienta fundamental para el desarrollo de una sociedad sana y libre."

Fiction as a First Step

Coinciding with 2017 World Pride in Madrid, there was a theatrical production about what it means to be gay in the world of Spanish football. *El gol de Álex*, written and directed by Antonio Hernández Centeno, tells the story of an up-and-coming footballer, Álex, and his post-game tryst with Mario, a sports journalist. Through the dialogue of the two characters, *El gol de Álex* highlights the way gay players must navigate the compulsory heterosexuality of football culture in Spain and what it might mean for a star player to step out of the closet.

⁸ The phrase "tener mucha pluma" is used colloquially to describe a gay man that acts in a flamboyant manner.

The setting is modest, with alternating colors projected on a large screen, in front of which lies a stage painted green and white to resemble a football field. The field's center circle, elevated into a platform, serves as a bed. After connecting on Grindr,⁹ Mario arrives at the hotel room of Álex, who is in the mood to celebrate after scoring a sensational goal to beat Real Madrid. Mario is caught by surprise when the door opens and Álex invites him to come in. As a gay man and a football writer, Mario admires Álex both romantically and professionally, although he initially neglects to disclose that he works for the press out of fear that it will give Alex cold feet. The two men volley intimate details about themselves back and forth: Mario reveals his betrayal by an ex-boyfriend, and Álex discusses the challenges of being a closeted soccer player. Whenever the conversation turns to romance, football metaphors abound. Taken aback by Álex's desire for a purely physical experience lacking in any emotional intimacy, Mario makes as if to leave. Álex apologizes for his "fuera de juego" behavior, admitting that: "He querido meterte un gol y he adelantado, de forma dudosa, a todas tus defensas... he jugado con ventaja" (Hernández Centeno 26). Álex becomes upset when he discovers Mario is a journalist capable of publicizing their encounter, though his anger quickly gives way to panic at the prospect of being outed in the press. His entire life is one of secrecy and posturing, trying to pass as straight; fake girlfriends deter rumors, yet the occasional outings with teammates are marred by a nagging fear that a drifting eye or misplaced hand will give his secret away (57-58).

Their conversations extend late into the night. Mario urges Álex to come out publicly, lamenting the fact that there are no gay heroes in football: "Bueno en el fútbol no hay héroes gay, pero en el mundo del cine y la música muchos... Es importante tener referentes que te ayudan a crecer y a ser quien eres. Ojalá algún jugador en activo saliera del armario. Muchos niños se lo agradecerían" (52-53). When Mario asks Álex why he fears showing the world who he really is, Álex answers that coming out is never easy, but especially in the world of football, which imposes unique pressures and constraints on players:

La dureza del fútbol, su masculinidad, el colequeo entre todos nosotros, que me rechacen, que no me quieran abrazar tras un gol, a que tu compañero piense que lo observas en esas duchas. Tú no sabes lo que se oye en los vestuarios. Es todo tremendamente ambiguo y masculino que llega a confundir. Luego te das cuenta que es un acto de defensa para que cada uno demuestre su puñetera hombría, porque ser macho y heterosexual es ser medalla de oro (57).

The comments are clear enough. Contrary to statements made by Guardiola and Piqué that players would be accepting of a gay teammate, the sentiment here is that not only

⁹ Grindr is the largest social networking app designed specifically for LGBTQ people.

might the fans reject him, but his own team might as well. Perhaps this comment was inspired by Antonio Cassano, a retired Italian footballer who played for one season at Real Madrid. When asked about the topic in 2012, he replied: “¿Si hay maricones en el vestuario? Yo espero que no” (“Polémica”). Similarly, Ivan Rakitic, a Croatian footballer who currently plays for Sevilla F.C., made the following statement in a 2012 interview: “Respeto a los homosexuales, pero no quiero a esa gente en el vestuario. No me marcharía de un equipo por eso, porque respeto igual a un homosexual que a un negro, un gordo o un enano, pero de ser posible prefiero no tener gais en mi vida” (qtd. in Bellver 47). Leaving to one side the racist and ableist undertones that are also present in his remarks, the message regarding queerness is clear enough: keep it hidden. Álex is responding to this air of compulsory heterosexuality that hangs over all areas of the stadium when he declares: “Los maricones no van al fútbol. Van los hombres hombres... y los que pretenden serlo” (Hernández Centeno 62). Gay players, if Álex is to be believed, do not have a place of their own in the stadium.

Mario departs in the morning and the two go about their separate lives. Mario gets over his ex-boyfriend, and Álex plays his best season as Celta Vigo qualify for European competition. All the while, he pours over Mario’s journalism, searching for some subtle wink at him or their encounter. After his breakout season, Álex does what no active footballer in Spain has ever done. During a press conference, he recalls his night with Mario: “Esa noche conocí a alguien... alguien con quien celebrar el gol de mi vida... Ese alguien es un hombre, como yo” (69). He continues:

Estoy dispuesto a jugar este partido y todos los que vengan, le pese a quien le pese. No me van a importar los insultos, las bromas pesadas, los pitidos, el exceso de falsa masculinidad que rodea este deporte. Este deporte maravilloso al que amo y que muchos quieren hacer suyo... sólo suyo... imponiendo unas reglas que no existen. ¿Quién ha dicho que un hombre que desea a otro hombre no puede jugar al fútbol? Yo soy la prueba de que sí se puede (69).

The use of the possessive “suyo” emphasizes the way that sport has been appropriated by hegemonic masculinity, to the exclusion of women and marginal masculinities. The text also reminds listeners that this move is based on “reglas que no existen,” which is to say that it is based on socio-cultural norms rather than any concrete truth.

Mario follows up with an article applauding and supporting Álex for his strength and bravery. Álex leaves a brief comment about the article online, including the hotel name and room number at which the two first met, and Mario goes there that night. Face to face for the first time since Álex came out publicly, he looks Mario in the eye and tells him with certainty, “Es el partido de nuestra vida ... Empieza el juego,” to which Mario adds, “Empieza la vida” (73-74). The closing words echo Brown’s comment about the

erasure of homosexual men and women who are kept in the closet. Only when they are free to step out can life truly begin.

Actor Alejandro Albarracín, who plays Álex in the play, reaffirms the importance of narratives like *El gol de Álex*, explaining that his character reflects a reality that still exists: “Si en otros contextos sociales la homosexualidad está totalmente aceptada, ¿por qué en el mundo del fútbol existe una barrera que capa la libertad de amar libremente a los deportistas más admirados? La ficción es el primer paso, pero ojalá dé fuerza a todos aquellos que vivan esta situación en su día a día” (“¿Existen?”). Like *Fútbol* and *La partida*, Hernández Centeno’s *El gol de Álex* is a work that acknowledges the current problems with football culture, but also reimagines football as a space for inclusivity.

From Social Media to Social Activism

It is fair to wonder whether queering the stadium is possible in real life or will forever be relegated to the stage and to the pages of fiction. Héctor Bellarín, a Spanish footballer playing in the English Premier League, recently told a reporter from *The Times* that, “It is impossible that anyone can be openly gay in football. Some fans are not ready” (qtd. in Syed). And as recently as June 2020, Toni Kroos, a German footballer who plays for Real Madrid, told *GQ* magazine that, while he believes that everyone should have the freedom to live openly, he would be reluctant to encourage a gay player to come out, given the way this could be used against them by opposing players and fans (Landsgesell). Gerard Piqué once suggested that he was aware of several fellow footballers who are gay “pero no se habían atrevido a dar el paso [de salir del armario]” (Escudero). Santiago García agrees, suggesting that homosexuality surely exists in the world of Spanish fútbol, but it remains hidden “porque conviene vender la imagen de virilidad” (qtd. in Tones).

If, as I have argued, the Spanish football stadiums remain a stronghold of heterosexism, then the works of art examined here should be read as an effort to disrupt the heteronormativity found in football culture. And they are not alone. Jesús Tomillero, the referee whose experience was described at the beginning of this essay, is now the president of Roja Directa Andalucía-LGTBI, the first association in Andalusian sports dedicated to combating homophobia. Since 2010, various leagues around Europe have (somewhat tentatively) celebrated “International Day Against Homophobia in Sport” on February 19th, often posting messages on their social media accounts (Weldon).¹⁰ Valencia CF, for instance, sent a tweet that day that read: “Con motivo del Día Internacional contra la #LGTBIfobia en el deporte, el club reafirma su compromiso por una sociedad respetuosa” (@valenciacf). The message was accompanied by an image of the club’s crest, which had been remade with rainbow colors. Another way that players demonstrate their support on this day is to use rainbow-pattern laces in their shoes. At

¹⁰ February 19th marks the birthday of Justin Fashanu, an English footballer, and the first openly gay professional footballer, who committed suicide in 1998.

first glance, wearing rainbow laces may appear insignificant, but one must bear in mind that the football boot is an iconic object, not only because football is a game played with the feet, but because it is the source of significant commercial attention. Players receive millions from Nike, Adidas, and other brands to wear their shoes. The symbolic importance of this privileged site for a public awareness campaign is not insignificant. Unfortunately, this movement has enjoyed very little traction in Spain compared to England.

Arguably no team has been as bold in combating homophobia as Rayo Vallecano, a team based in the working-class neighborhood of Vallecas, Madrid. In 2015, Rayo's president, Raúl Martín Presa, explained that the club's leadership wanted to be a force for good as much as it wanted to win trophies: "Es el momento de hacer un Rayo nuevo. Vamos desde hoy al futuro y queremos estar al lado de la gente, de los problemas sociales" (qtd. in Santos Chozas). His plan to look to the future rather than the past is sound, given the complicated history of football in Spain outlined above. And if the club wanted to address a societal problem relevant to the world of football, tackling homophobia would certainly be a good place to start. Martín Presa continued, stating: "Hay que aprovechar el poder comunicativo del fútbol para hacer algo más." Showing that the statement was more than just another platitude, Martín Presa revealed that the "algo más" to which he referred was a new uniform design for their away jersey. Rayo's home jersey is white with a red sash running from shoulder to hip, but in this new design the shirt is black, with a rainbow sash. In explaining the club's decision to make such a visible declaration of solidarity, the club president stated:

Tenemos algo que es sagrado y es nuestra franja roja que va de izquierda a derecha y atraviesa el corazón. En este caso estamos cediendo lo que es más sagrado a favor del respeto... Es la bandera arcoíris que va a luchar contra la homofobia, en una batalla que empieza esta tarde. La vamos a llevar presente y con mucho orgullo (qtd. in "El Rayo").

The symbolism could not be clearer: it is a gutsy, visual proclamation of support bursting forth from an empty void.

Rayco Vallecano, *Fútbol*, *La partida*, and *El gol de Alex* form part of a growing counter discourse, one that seeks to queer the football stadium inasmuch as it questions and problematizes the notion of heterosexual stability that has long been associated with Spanish football culture. In the same way that Lefebvre and others argued for a "right to the city... to make and remake our cities and ourselves" (Harvey 23-40), stories like these have the potential to remake the stadium as a space for all sexual identities, to reconceptualize who football fans and players are, and to create a discursive space as well as a physical space where they can claim a right to the stadium. If to queer is to crack open both physical spaces and discursive spaces, so that difference is recognized and even celebrated, then it appears that Spanish football is on the verge of being queered. It is

happening in literature and art. It is happening in social media. It is happening in academic scholarship. As of yet it has not really happened in the stadium. For now, the stadium remains a closet, but at least people are knocking.

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Figure 1



Figure 2a



Figure 2b



Figure 3



Figure 4a



Figure 4b



Figure 5