
Article

Making fútbol straight again: Homophobia, misogyny and the politics of Alexis Sánchez's sexuality

Brenda Elsey

Hofstra University, USA; Brenda.Elsey@hofstra.edu

How to Cite: Elsey, B. 'Making fútbol straight again: Homophobia, misogyny and the politics of Alexis Sánchez's sexuality.' *Radical Americas* 3, 1 (2018): 3.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ra.2018.v3.1.003>.

Submission date: 14 May 2018; Publication date: 17 October 2018

Peer review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double blind peer-review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Copyright:

© 2018, Brenda Elsey. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ra.2018.v3.1.003>.

Open access:

Radical Americas is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Abstract

This essay examines the media frenzy around the 'love-life' of Chilean football star Alexis Sánchez, particularly the 2017 announcement of his romantic involvement with actress Mayte Rodríguez. It discusses the media coverage as a poignant example of misogyny and homophobia in Chilean football culture, as well as one of the forces that perpetuates that culture. During the years of the 2018 World Cup qualifying process, Chile accrued the most severe fines of any country for homophobic behaviour at football matches. This fact has attracted some, but not much, attention. There are few spaces of such extreme gender segregation as football. Once football's capacity to develop proper masculinity and heterosexuality was widely accepted, football directors, journalists and fans pushed women outside of the sport. The relationship between homophobia and sexism has a long history in the construction of football fandom, play and organization. Media played a crucial role in reinforcing the heteronormative and misogynist aspects of the sport. This essay discusses how these long-standing prejudices have hurt women journalists, fans and athletes. Please note that this essay was previously published in Spanish in *De Cabeza*.

Keywords: Chile; football; sports; sexuality; homophobia

During the years of the 2018 World Cup qualifying process, Chile accrued the most severe fines of any country for homophobic behavior at football matches.¹ This fact attracted some, but not much, attention. However, it merits a good deal more consideration. I suspect that many Chileans breathed a collective sigh of relief when Alexis Sánchez announced his romantic relationship with actress Mayte Rodríguez last year. The depth of that sigh stemmed from questions that have arisen over the years about Sánchez's sexuality, in particular, whether he might be gay. Football is saturated with equal parts homoeroticism and homophobia, which is why establishing the heterosexuality of its stars is a part-time job for fans, agents and club officials. Sánchez's announcement came in the form of a self-gratifying video and vacation photographs shown countless times on television, in newspapers and magazines and across social media.² In the video, Sánchez smiles into the camera while Rodríguez poses behind him, standing on a sofa, dressed in a toga and swaying back and forth. All the while, Celine Dion and Andrea Bocelli's song 'The Prayer' plays in the background. The British press described the video as 'bizarre' and 'cringe-worthy' and it is difficult to disagree with them.

In Chile, there are few public figures as beloved as Alexis Sánchez and even fewer with working class backgrounds from the provinces. At just twenty-eight, Sánchez could retire tomorrow as the best forward in Chilean history. Football's leaders have argued for over a century that the sport develops proper men and therefore it is not surprising that the way Sánchez's performance of masculinity is important, even when not explicitly discussed. What speaks volumes is the Chilean media's disinterest in Sánchez as a gay icon or recognition of his differences from his teammates. Without tattoos or extravagant hair, indeed hardly any hair at all and with his shorts hiked up to Mt. Aconcagua, his aesthetic is strikingly different. Moreover, the man's dogs, Atom and Humber, have their own instagram account and he admittedly loves Disneyland. The silence has been even more deafening in the face of the media onslaught following Sánchez's change in relationship status. There's a reason teammate Arturo Vidal holds the title of *el Rey or King*, while Alexis Sánchez is still the *niño maravilla* or Wonder Boy and it has to do with swagger and domination of women, or lack thereof in Sánchez's case. In 2014, media outlets reported that Sánchez's girlfriend Laia Grassi left the relationship because he 'failed' her in the bedroom. It took some heavy spin and mental gymnastics, but eventually the story was framed as a sacrifice Alexis made for Arsenal.³ In any case, it made it difficult to fit Sánchez into the role of a womaniser.

The British press, at least the tabloid genre, has not been so quiet about Alexis' pruning and preening. After he agreed to endorse Gillette razors, *The Mirror* wrote, 'But shouldn't a man have *some* hair? We've seen Ken dolls looks more rugged than the Arsenal man.'⁴ The gay press has embraced Sánchez's look, just as it has responded to this generation of global football stars that have challenged traditional models of masculinity.⁵ David Beckham blazed this trail a decade ago when the fashion-conscious footballer famously proclaimed he felt 'honored' to be a gay icon.⁶ In his own way, Lionel Messi's nervousness, monogamy and doting fatherhood starkly deviated from Maradona's model of the *pibe*, the rebellious boyish soccer icon of Argentina. If anything, Sánchez's appearance most closely resembles Cristiano Ronaldo's in his meticulous attention to muscle mass and hair removal. The exhibition of qualities traditionally seen as feminine has routinely led to questions about the sexuality of these stars.

Despite the Chilean presidential race or deliberations on the draconian abortion laws, those who questioned the gravity of Sánchez's announcement, such as journalist Lucía López, were forced to apologise for their offense.⁷ López had suggested that the public remain focused on the case of Nabila Rifo, which dealt with reducing the sentence for Rifo's partner who brutally beat her, gouged her eyes and left her on the street.⁸ In total defiance of reason, the reaction to López's plea was outrage at *her* lack of feeling. The media's trafficking in celebrity gossip at the expense of stories about Rifo's case, among others, has been both distressing and distracting. So should we just turn our heads in disgust at the corrupt, de-politicised and vapid sphere of sports? At least in Chile, a member of that murky confederation CONMEBOL, that disengagement only guarantees the ongoing domination of a huge amount of money, public opinion and media by the country's elite.

Public television in Chile, for its part, served its audience hours of already-known information; most egregiously repetitive was the morning program *Muy Buenos Dias*, which spent twenty-three minutes concluding that Rodríguez is the most beautiful woman in Chile, 'a goddess' and that Sánchez

is 'ultra-romantic'.⁹ The announcers hypothesised that Sánchez felt happier than when he won the Copa América and expressed their pride that he had chosen a Chilean woman over a foreign one. If one needed more evidence of the national projection into this relationship, there it was: two professional women proclaiming Sánchez's choice as a victory for Chilean women.

Not all Chileans celebrated Sánchez's choice of Mayte Rodríguez. One particular fan letter, which circulated widely enough to become a news item itself, found Alexis's choice of woman as a betrayal of his working class roots.¹⁰ The post questioned how an upper class woman would fall for a short and dark hoodlum (*flaute*). Hoodlum? This is Arsene Wenger's good soldier, who asked fans to please stop protesting the Arsenal coach, this is the guy with the 'I Love Mom' shirts. The letter compared Sánchez to marketplaces like Patronato or O'Higgins Park, sites of elite invasion. Now, this supposed gold digger had claimed another piece of working class patrimony. The objectification of Sánchez in these social media posts was palpable and, well, it is terrible class politics. The narrative of Alexis Sanchez's meteoric rise has all the elements of a rags-to-riches football story that keeps people loving the sport. However, part of what makes him a complicated figure is that the politics of class have been glaringly absent from Sánchez, unlike, for example, the outspoken leftist sympathies of Jean Beausejour, who has also participated in campaigns against sexism.¹¹

The popular fan letter, along with many others, used homophobic slurs to describe the rich people who had gentrified these areas of Santiago. It is a common way to de-masculinise elites and reveals long-standing tensions between football, the working class and sexual identities. Football's rampant homophobia is part of the sports media's obsession with players' wives and girlfriends. Consider that not one player has come out in professional football as an active player, *ever*. Certainly, sponsorship plays a role in players' decisions of when and how to release personal information. Take a moment to plot out the 'leaks' and news of Sánchez's relationships and you will find they coincide neatly with his transfer history, which is quite common. That Alexis Sánchez is working class and de facto non-white, that his body is the basis of his labor, only increases the public spectacle. It heightens the will to know, to police and to categorise desire.

Pedro Lemebel, one of Chile's most eloquent writers on football, lived the tensions between sexual and class identities. Lemebel sneered, 'no me hable del proletariado, Porque ser pobre y maricón es peor'. Lemebel poignantly described the homoerotic experience of the football match, the sweat, the naked torsos, the emergent erections and the exciting danger of the stadiums in the 1980s. On the surface, there is the obvious love of the club, 'Como no te voy a querer', but there is so much else going on. Lemebel thought that the construction of us versus them built sexual attraction and that the insinuation that one wanted to fuck the other was not only violent, though it often was. Lemebel reflected on contested visions of masculinity within football as he explored the experience of the 'flamer' at matches.

So where do women fit in this landscape? In Chilean mainstream media they appear in the confined space of Mayte Rodríguez, as wives and girlfriends of players. There are few spaces of such extreme gender segregation as football and like any other segregation, separate is not equal. Indeed fans, players, journalists and directors routinely express their enjoyment of women's exclusion. The state has helped professional clubs avoid bankruptcy and has subsidised the men's national team, while the women's national team has struggled to exist. There are perhaps no other countries with as marked a disparity between the men and women's team as Argentina and Chile, whose men's teams were ranked second and fourth, respectively, while their women's teams fell out of the rankings. The assumption that women footballers are masculinised and strange is equally as widespread as assuming they are non-existent.

Women in sports media have been subjected to harassment, privately and publicly. Recently, Vanessa Vargas analysed the coverage of the Confederations Cup, only to find the objectification of women fans and reporters repeated *ad nauseum*.¹² The debut of Grace Lazcano last month as a panellist on 'Canal de Fútbol' was announced with pride as a pioneering move by producers. 'Journalist' Romai Ugarte sat to Lazcano's left. As the panel and audience greeted Lazcano, Ugarte turned toward the cameramen and audience, made a face of disgust and gestured as if putting a penis in his mouth. Ugarte later apologised, but not before Claudio Bravo and Gary Medel spoke out against his blatant sexism. The reaction of these football stars is encouraging, because allies have proven important in drawing attention to sexism and

creating models of men who explicitly reject the abuse of women. Beyond the way in which Ugarte sought to ruin Lazcano's debut and humiliate her, it is important that the way in which he chose to do that involved him simulating performing oral sex on another man. Certainly, Ugarte would not ask us to take that at face value, but the fact that we *only* read sexism and not homoeroticism into the gesture is part of the structure that fails to recognise the double-sided nature of sexism and homophobia. Ugarte's performance signals the necessity of other men to understand the gesture and share his hatred of Lazcano's presence.

The prevailing climate of sexism and homophobia in football has undoubtedly shaped the women's game. Women have played football and actively participated in clubs in Chile since the early twentieth century. Facing social stigma and general apathy has not stopped them from enjoying the camaraderie of the sport. The identification of the football pitch as proving grounds for masculinity has increased the scrutiny of women players. Girls and women almost all report being called *marimachos* or other names. Parents, teachers and neighbors have questioned their sexuality because of their interest in football. However, the women's national team players report that their lack of notoriety has, in fact, allowed them to avoid the public surveillance of their sexuality that men experience. Among the community of women's football, players report acceptance of LGBTQI athletes. National team player Fernanda Pinilla explained, 'there doesn't exist homophobia among the players but you could say I've felt it among coaches'; she continued, 'it's affected me to hear coaches saying that we can't do lesbian things during training or while wearing the official clothes of the club'. The players have been told that if they act 'like lesbians', audiences will find them less attractive, which will hurt the sport. This is not just within Chile, but a warning that has come from as high up as FIFA, presidency. The lack of discussion around women's historical participation in football has served to naturalise gender differences, homophobia and justify the denial of resources to women athletes.

The frenzy over Alexis Sánchez's dating life will likely continue unabated in the Chilean media, replete with endless gossip about future wedding plans, infidelity, pregnancies, conflicts with in-laws and so on. For those who cannot avoid it, perhaps the best approach is to confront it by exploring why people care so much and what it means. It means holding journalists accountable for covering women playing football as often as women dating football players. It would also require acknowledging both the homoeroticism and homophobia within football.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The author confirms no conflict of interests.

Author biography

Brenda Elsey is Associate Professor of History and Latin American and Caribbean Studies at Hofstra University. She is author of *Citizens and Sportsmen: Fútbol and Politics in Twentieth-Century Chile* (2011) and the forthcoming *Futbolera: Women, Gender and Sexuality in Latin American Sport* with Joshua Nadel (2019).

1. Notes

¹ FIFA. 2017. 'DISCIPLINARY OVERVIEW – 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP RUSSIA QUALIFIERS,' FIFA Resources, accessed May 9, 2018, http://resources.fifa.com/mm/document/tournament/competition/02/88/07/90/fifa_disciplinaryoverview_fwqqualifiers_april2017-1_neutral.pdf.

² Bristow, Thomas. 2017. 'Arsenal Star Alexis Sanchez Reveals "New" Girlfriend Mayte Rodriguez in Holiday Video,' Daily Mirror Online, accessed May 9, 2018, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/football/news/arsenal-star-alexis-sanchez-reveals-10782404>.

³ Escobar, Carlos. 2014. 'Exceso de Fútbol y Sexo Ponien en Duda Titularidad de Alexis Sánchez,' La Cuarta Online, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://www.lacuarta.com/noticia/exceso-de-futbol-y-sexo-ponien-en-duda-titularidad-de-alexis-sanchez/>.

⁴ Innes, Richard. 2015. 'Oddly Hairless Alexis Sanchez Is Really "Living the Brand" in New Gillette Advert,' Daily Mirror Online, accessed May 9, 2018, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/row-zed/oddly-hairless-alexis-sanchez-really-5591484>.

- ⁵ Anonymous. 2015. 'Alexis Sanchez Has Raised the Bar with His Latest Instagram Pics,' Gay Times Facebook, accessed May 9, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/gaytimes/posts/10153350917041273>.
- ⁶ Yaqoob, Tahira. 2007. 'Why I Feel Honoured to Be a Gay Icon, by David Beckham, as He Admits He Lets Posh Choose His Clothes,' Daily Mail Online, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-504372/Why-I-feel-honoured-gay-icon-David-Beckham-admits-lets-Posh-choose-clothes.html>.
- ⁷ Anonymous. 2017. 'Lucía López Criticó a Alexis y Mayte Rodríguez por dar a Conocer su Relación,' Cooperativa.cl, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://www.cooperativa.cl/noticias/entretencion/personajes/lucia-lopez-critico-a-alexis-y-mayte-rodriguez-por-dar-a-conocer-su/2017-07-11/204638.html>.
- ⁸ Anonymous. 2017. 'Nabila Rifo: Chile Court Cuts Jail Term of Attacker,' BBC News Online, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-40580037>.
- ⁹ Anonymous. 2017. 'Lo que No Sabes de la Relación Entre Alexis Sánchez y Mayte Rodríguez,' Muy Buenos Días Online, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://www.tvn.cl/programas/muybuenosdias/destacados/lo-que-no-sabes-de-la-relacion-entre-alexis-sanchez-y-mayte-rodriguez-2445667>.
- ¹⁰ Anonymous. 2017. 'Redes Sociales Estallan por Carta Abierta a Alexis Sánchez,' El Mostrador Online, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://m.elmostrador.cl/dia/2017/07/13/redes-sociales-estallan-por-carta-abierta-a-alexis-sanchez/>.
- ¹¹ Anonymous. 2016. 'VIDEO|Jean Beausejour, Francisco Pérez-Bannen y Gepe Protagonizan Viral Contra el Machismo,' El Desconcierto Online, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://www.eldesconcierto.cl/2016/03/31/video-jean-beausejour-francisco-perez-bannen-y-gepe-protagonizan-viral-contra-el-machismo/>.
- ¹² Vargas Rojas, Vanessa. 2017. 'Sexismo y Cosificación: Cómo Trata la Prensa Deportiva a las Mujeres en la Cobertura de la Copa Confederaciones,' El Desconcierto Online, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://www.eldesconcierto.cl/2017/06/22/sexismo-y-cosificacion-como-trata-la-prensa-deportiva-a-las-mujeres-en-la-cobertura-de-la-copa-confederaciones/>.

References

- FIFA. 2017. 'DISCIPLINARY OVERVIEW – 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP RUSSIA QUALIFIERS.' FIFA Resources. Accessed May 9, 2018. http://resources.fifa.com/mm/document/tournament/competition/02/88/07/90/fifa_disciplinaryoverview_fwqualifiers_april2017-1_neutral.pdf.
- Bristow, Thomas. 2017. 'Arsenal Star Alexis Sanchez Reveals "New" Girlfriend Mayte Rodriguez in Holiday Video.' Daily Mirror Online. Accessed May 9, 2018. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/football/news/arsenal-star-alexis-sanchez-reveals-10782404>.
- Escobar, Carlos. 2014. 'Exceso de Fútbol y Sexo Ponen en Duda Titularidad de Alexis Sánchez.' La Cuarta Online. Accessed May 9, 2018. <http://www.lacuarta.com/noticia/exceso-de-futbol-y-sexo-ponen-en-duda-titularidad-de-alexis-sanchez/>.
- Innes, Richard. 2015. 'Oddly Hairless Alexis Sanchez Is Really "Living the Brand" in New Gillette Advert.' Daily Mirror Online. Accessed May 9, 2018. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/row-zed/oddly-hairless-alexis-sanchez-really-5591484>.
- Anonymous. 2015. 'Alexis Sanchez Has Raised the Bar with His Latest Instagram Pics.' Gay Times Facebook. Accessed May 9, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/gaytimes/posts/10153350917041273>.
- Yaqoob, Tahira. 2007. 'Why I Feel Honoured to Be a Gay Icon, by David Beckham, as He Admits He Lets Posh Choose His Clothes.' Daily Mail Online. Accessed May 9, 2018. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-504372/Why-I-feel-honoured-gay-icon-David-Beckham-admits-lets-Posh-choose-clothes.html>.
- Anonymous. 2017. 'Lucía López Criticó a Alexis y Mayte Rodríguez por dar a Conocer su Relación.' Cooperativa.cl. Accessed May 9, 2018. <http://www.cooperativa.cl/noticias/entretencion/personajes/lucia-lopez-critico-a-alexis-y-mayte-rodriguez-por-dar-a-conocer-su/2017-07-11/204638.html>.
- Anonymous. 2017. 'Nabila Rifo: Chile Court Cuts Jail Term of Attacker.' BBC News Online. Accessed May 9, 2018. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-40580037>.

- Anonymous. 2017. 'Lo que No Sabes de la Relación Entre Alexis Sánchez y Mayte Rodríguez.' Muy Buenos Días Online. Accessed May 9, 2018. <http://www.tvn.cl/programas/muybuenosdias/destacados/lo-que-no-sabes-de-la-relacion-entre-alexis-sanchez-y-mayte-rodriguez-2445667>.
- Anonymous. 2017. 'Redes Sociales Estallan por Carta Abierta a Alexis Sánchez.' El Mostrador Online. Accessed May 9, 2018. <http://m.elmostrador.cl/dia/2017/07/13/redes-sociales-estallan-por-carta-abierta-a-alexis-sanchez/>.
- Anonymous. 2016. 'VIDEO|Jean Beausejour, Francisco Pérez-Bannen y Gepe Protagonizan Viral Contra el Machismo.' El Desconcierto Online. Accessed May 9, 2018. <http://www.eldesconcierto.cl/2016/03/31/video-jean-beausejour-francisco-perez-bannen-y-gepe-protagonizan-viral-contra-el-machismo/>.
- Vargas Rojas, Vanessa. 2017. 'Sexismo y Cosificación: Cómo Trata la Prensa Deportiva a las Mujeres en la Cobertura de la Copa Confederaciones.' El Desconcierto Online. Accessed May 9, 2018. <http://www.eldesconcierto.cl/2017/06/22/sexismo-y-cosificacion-como-trata-la-prensa-deportiva-a-las-mujeres-en-la-cobertura-de-la-copa-confederaciones/>.