

Childhood as Refuge from Gender Performance in *The Last Summer of La Boyita*

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A girl in a pink-flowered nightgown walks out into a room that is being packed up, nosing about. She puts a stethoscope to her chest and rummages through a box. She then furtively picks up a book and, after ascertaining that the coast is clear, clasps it to her chest and carries it to her room. The next shot shows the girl's face in close-up, completely absorbed by the book. She lies on her bed, surrounded by colorful toys. The reading that has her so intrigued is an old-fashioned biology book that shows sexual maturation of the female body in a series of drawings titled "chronology of feminine evolution."¹

The girl is Jorgelina (Guadalupe Alonso), one of the two protagonists of *The Last Summer of La Boyita*, (*El último verano de La Boyita*, 2009),² written and directed by Argentine Julia Solomonoff. The other protagonist is Mario (Nicolás Treise), a young farm hand. The anatomy book comes to play a pivotal role in the film, which centers on the two friends' attempt to understand the (imminent) changes of their bodies, on the verge of abandoning childhood. Jorgelina feels estranged from her sister Luciana (María Clara Merendino), who has just entered adolescence and has started to claim the right of bathroom privacy, and prefers the company of her girl friend to that of her little sister. Jorgelina therefore decides to spend the summer with her father (Gabo Correa), a doctor, in Entre Ríos, the Argentinean countryside. There she meets up with Mario, her pal who works the land with his father, and is training for the local horse races. One day, Jorgelina discovers blood on Mario's saddle and pants. Fearing for his health, she asks her father to examine him. As it turns out, Mario is not sick, but menstruating. Although the most readily available reading of the film is one about Mario's discovery of his intersexuality, a subtly veiled subplot reveals that Jorgelina struggles with some gender issues of her own. When Mario whispers into Jorgelina's ear what he has found out about his "abnormal" genitalia, she responds: "I'm not so normal either."

Mario's ambiguous biological characteristics complicate his masculinity, whereas Jorgelina seems not to feel at ease with the restrictive femininity assigned to her gender. In this article I analyze the contested relationship of both friends to their queer gender and (gender) identities. It is my contention that the film negotiates these issues by interpellating the concept of innocent childhood in

¹ My translation.

² Hereafter referred to as *The Last Summer*.

two opposing, yet complementary ways. First, it serves to instill a notion of heteronormativity, which in and of itself contains a contradiction; innocent childhood assumes 'queerness' to be an adult category because the child is asexual, while it also presumes every child to be straight (Stockton 6). Secondly Jorgelina, aided by the film's cinematography, performs childhood to play up her innocence and childish ignorance to shield both herself and Mario from the normativizing gender discourse that the adults deploy.

Cinematographic Context

The Last Summer is Solomonoff's second feature, after her directorial debut *Sisters* (*Hermanas*, 2005). She has also directed several shorts, and worked as assistant director on *The Motorcycle Diaries* (*Diarios de motocicleta*, Walter Salles, 2004). Her films have received wide critical acclaim, and appear in the context of a vibrant Argentine cinema. As Gonzalo Aguilar has argued convincingly in *Other Worlds* (2006), during the late nineties a new Argentine film emerged.³ In terms of their artistic approach, many of the directors associated with New Argentine Film ('nuevo cine argentino,' or NCA) differ radically. Martín Rejtman's aesthetic, for example, has as little in common with Lucrecia Martel's or Pablo Trapero's as it has with Julia Solomonoff's, but the virtuosity of the composition of their frames is a characteristic they share. Other commonalities among the NCA films and directors include financial support provided by international film funds, such as the Dutch Hubert Bals Fund or the French Fond Sud Cinéma; unconventional modes of production and distribution that seek to avoid the Argentine film institute (the INCAA)⁴ and to foment alternative forms of cultural expression, i.e. not sponsored by governmental organizations; and technical and aesthetic knowhow of a new generation of producers and technicians (Aguilar 10-31).

The film that inaugurated, so to speak, this new cinematographic phenomenon was *Pizza, Beer and Cigarettes* (*Pizza, birra, faso*, 1997), co-directed by Adrián Caetano and Bruno Stagnaro. This film owes a particular debt to Italian neo-realism, in regards to its negotiation of the 'real,' and a series of procedures such as the sequence shot; mise-en-scene; and elliptical, erratic narration (Aguilar 57), as well as its use of non-professional actors. Indeed, the NCA witnesses a 'return' to the 'real' that entered filmic imaginary with Italian neo-realism.⁵ It should come as no surprise, then, that the child performs such a

³ The Spanish edition, *Otros mundos: ensayo sobre el nuevo cine argentino* was published in 2006, and was translated into English by Sarah Ann Wells two years later.

⁴ The 'Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales.'

⁵ Aguilar argues that the construction of the real in NCA is related to both the role of television and our perception of the real. He quotes Martín Rejtman, who summarizes both of these points: "This kind of *costumbrismo* or supposed realism of a good deal of TV is a bit harmful. In a way, it becomes something realer than reality. That's why when you hear someone speak in a different

crucial part in neo-realism as well as the NCA, which offers profuse instances that invite the child to be read as an index, that is, as an ‘imprint’ of the real.⁶

During the first years of the new millennium the epithet ‘New Argentine Film’ proved productive to account for the sudden surge of films that ruptured the national film tradition. Roughly fifteen years after its first appearance, however, its use as a classificatory category has become dubitable, due to the institutionalization of the new cinema on one hand, and, on the other, the impulse the INCAA provides to a cinema tied to its own institution. Some critics have gone so far as signaling its end already.⁷ It is certain, in any case, that the NCA radically altered the cinematographic horizon, exercising great influence on posterior films, and paving the way for films such as *The Last Summer*.⁸

Thematically, an important point of reference within contemporary Argentine film is Lucía Puenzo’s *XXY* (2007). Puenzo’s film tells the story of intersexual Alex (Inés Efron), who has the Klinefelter syndrome, meaning that she has two x-chromosomes and one y-chromosome.⁹ In *XXY* intersexuality functions as the explicit thematic focus of the film, starting with the title and encompassing the entire narrative. *XXY* reads gender mostly on the body’s surface, and accordingly, Alex’s body is constantly on display (in the shower, in the ocean or in bed).¹⁰ Nevertheless, the one body part that distinguishes her, i.e. her penis, is carefully hidden from view. In doing so, the film transforms the vision of Alex’s penis into its fetish. The narrative too supports this fetish; a group of boys assaults her, exposing her genitalia to ‘confirm’ her gender identity, and even Alex herself ascribes to the rhetoric in which seeing her penis equals ‘knowing’ her identity in the final sequence, in which she voluntarily exposes herself to her lover Álvaro.¹¹ Thus, despite Alex’s parents’ insistence on their

way it may not sound real, whereas for me what it [sic] clear is that in everyday life people speak much more like they do in *Silvia Prieto* than in a television comedy like *Son amores*” (30-31, original emphasis).

⁶ To cite but a few examples of NCA films with important parts for children: *The Swamp* (*La ciénaga*, 2001) and *The Headless Woman* (*La mujer sin cabeza*, 2008), both by Lucrecia Martel; *Red Bear* (*Un oso rojo*, Adrián Caetano, 2002); or *Lion’s Den* (*Leonera*, Pablo Trapero, 2008).

⁷ Jaime Pena cites *Extraordinary Stories* (*Historias extraordinarias*, Mariano Llinás, 2008) as the last film of the NCA.

⁸ More than the NCA, however, Solomonoff herself stresses her involvement with the Independent Film Project (Proyecto de Cine Independiente, PCI). The PCI is a group of about 50 filmmakers that includes Lucía Puenzo, Pablo Giorgelli, Ariel Rotter, Celina Murga, and Rodrigo Moreno. They have no aesthetic dogma or “alignment;” rather, the PCI’s intent is to defend independent filmmaking from development to exhibition, share information and fight for better institutional policies and transparency (Shaw and Martin, n.p.).

⁹ Anne Fausto Sterling explains that the Klinefelter syndrome is a form of gonadal dysgenesis that causes infertility, and after puberty often leads to breast enlargement (52).

¹⁰ Even the hormones Alex takes are directly linked to outward bodily features: she tells Álvaro that she takes them to prevent growing a beard.

¹¹ Interestingly, Álvaro (Martín Piroyansky) is the only person who does *not* want to see it.

daughter's normalcy, the film's formal workings as well as its narrative do not escape society's tendency to see intersexuals as abnormal.

In *The Last Summer* intersexuality is more subdued, and rather than having the phallus take center stage, in Solomonoff's film intersexuality questions Mario's right to masculinity, and thereby raises issues of gender, and sexual or gender identification. Deborah Martin affirms that he "is genetically female" (40) based on statements made by the filmmaker.¹² In the film, however, his gender, whether anatomical or genetic, is never explicitly stated or clarified. Quite the contrary, the film makes a point of *not* identifying what 'condition' he 'suffers' from, in its efforts to de-pathologize non-standard gender identification.¹³ Given the information that the film does provide (i.e. two different gender identifications by medical professionals, socialization as a boy, female genitalia) I take his condition to be 'intersex.' As I will show, Mario and Jorgelina recur to a space of innocent childhood to shun discourses that medicalize his queer identity.

Mario's Masculinity

The Last Summer opens with Mario, a farm hand, helping to tame a horse, "such subjugation of horses being a traditional marker of *gaucho* masculinity" (Martin 40). It quickly becomes clear that he lives in a decidedly masculine environment, one in which gender is understood to be normative. Although his small, rural community in northern Argentina, Entre Ríos, cannot be equated with *gaucho* culture, its gender rules have remained much the same, reserving equine culture for the men. Indeed, Mario's dexterity with horses is crucial. He is training for a local horse race, and winning the competition would constitute his legitimization as a man in town. The film even verbalizes the direct connection between horsemanship and masculinity, when the doctor explains to his daughter that with the race "Mario has to prove himself as a man."¹⁴

There is no doubt that he identifies completely as a boy, and that his community accepts him as such. All the cultural markers, what Suzanne Kessler has called the "cultural genitals" (Fausto-Sterling 110), identify him as male; he dresses in boy's clothes, responds to a male name, works the land with the other men and enjoys some local fame as an extraordinary horseman. When confronted with Mario's strange bleedings, his parents take him to see a doctor, but they never share the results of the tests with him. Mario, nonetheless, develops a sense of shame, and realizes he is different. He moves out of his parents' house and creates a place for himself in their garage, where he places his bed. Moreover, he

¹² Solomonoff has remarked that the condition that Mario suffers is CAH (Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia), caused by two recessive genes, and more common in endogamic or closed communities such as the one he lives in (Shaw and Martin, n.p.).

¹³ Although homosexuality no longer appears in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5, published in 2013), gender dysphoria is considered a mental disorder.

¹⁴ Quotations are taken from the subtitles.

starts to bind his breasts, and secretly washes his bloodstained clothes. And yet, none of these unusual occurrences seem to interfere with his gender identification; his confusion concerns his body only. His parents, however, are unable to dissociate Mario's ambiguous biology from his gender performance. His masculinity, to which he was "naturally" entitled in his childhood, may now be challenged. As Connell reminds us, "[t]rue masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body" (45). Knowing that Mario's pubescent body is developing female characteristics (breasts, ovulation), his parents can no longer treat him as a man.

In fact, Mario's attitude is surprising given the fact that in his community sex and gender are indistinguishable. When at birth the obstetrician determines his sex as male, this claim socially positions Mario. The medical world routinely still holds that biological characteristics determine sex ascriptions, while 'gender' refers to an identity created socially and culturally.¹⁵ This differentiation has long been destabilized; Michel Foucault proposes that "the notion of 'sex' does not exist prior to its determination within a discourse in which its constellation of meanings are specified, and that therefore bodies have not 'sex' outside discourses in which they are designated as sexed" (Moore, qtd. in Chant and Craske 130). Judith Butler takes up this notion with her claim that gender is performative, in the sense that gender is embodied in everyday practice. She considers biological sex to be "always already gender" (1999, 10), since sexed bodies are not fixed, but sites of contested meanings and cultural construction. Halberstam points out that "[f]ar from holding on to the notion that sex refers to one's biology, and gender to one's acculturation, feminist theorists have tended to use 'sex' only to refer to sexuality, and gender to refer to the mutual construction of both biology and social role" (1998, 119).

The Last Summer seems to hark back to the traditional differentiation, determining Mario's biological sex with the doctor's pelvic exam, which leads to the conclusion that Mario is a female. At the same time, his gendered identity is defined by his participation in his rural, tight-knit community as a male. It is Jorgelina, and her relationship with Mario, who complicates this binary. She is socialized as a female, but yearns for phallic masculinity. At the same time, the hints of sexual attraction between the two protagonists further unsettle the binary. As Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* (1990), individuals have

¹⁵ Johnson and Repta point out how health researchers have yet to catch up with the theoretical work performed in gender and sexuality studies: "A serious problem faced by researchers is that our methods have not kept pace with our theoretical work in the area of sex and gender. [...] For example, while gender is typically theorized as a multidimensional, context-specific factor that changes according to time and place, it is routinely assumed to be a homogenous category in research, measured by a single check box" (18).

'intelligible genders' when they somehow "institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (2006, 23). But neither Mario nor Jorgelina maintain those relations of coherence, given their cross-gender identification, as well as their mutual love and (sexual) desire.

Yet, *The Last Summer* continuously switches between the possibility of the protagonists' queer identities, messy and unstable, and the idea that their sex organs determine their gender. When Jorgelina notices that Mario's body is a source of confusion to him, she avails him of one of her father's anatomy books. With every diagram and photograph he watches, his nervousness grows more apparent, until he decides to confront the situation. Filmed from a low angle in a medium shot, Mario starts to slowly unbutton his shirt. The camera movements, ever so slight, contribute to a sense of tension, as he is about to compare his genitalia to the pictures. A cut to a close-up of Mario's back shows him opening up his pants and reaching down. Solomonoff then cuts to an extreme close-up of a hole in the ground, filmed outside. Editing, in the form of this less-than-subtle juxtaposition of frames, provides the visual confirmation of the existence of Mario's vagina. What follows is a sequence of great intimacy between the two. In a long traveling shot, Mario and Jorgelina stroll while discussing Mario's discovery of his non-conforming body, which is not "like in the pictures." Although Mario feels visibly embarrassed about his abnormal body, Jorgelina comforts him.

The anatomy book provides Mario with a first, preliminary clarification about his biological sex, but it does not resolve how he can (much less *should*, according to his community's strict gender binary) function socially with his non-conforming body. Mario does not immediately connect his realization that he is biologically different from other men to his gender performance. He continues to identify as male; it is how he has been raised and socialized, and he feels comfortable with his masculinity. Connell notes that "[t]he constitution of masculinity through bodily performance means that gender is vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained – for instance, as a result of physical disability" (54). In Mario's case, his intersex body means that he is excluded from the performance of masculinity that, nevertheless, constitutes the expression of his gender identity. The only way he sees to claim his maleness in his rural community is to be bolder than the men, to be more masculine than the machos: to be able to participate in the races he steals back his horse *el Yayo*, competes against four-time-winner Claudio, and wins.

When Mario competes he performs his gender – not as a choice, nor as a theatrical performance, but as his only possible identity. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993) Judith Butler points to a prevailing tendency to think of sexuality as either constructed (and thus in some sense free) or determined (and thus in some sense fixed). She argues that "[t]hese oppositions do not describe the complexity of

what is at stake in any effort to take account of the conditions under which sex and sexuality are assumed. The ‘performative’ dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms” (2011, 59). Mario is not free to choose his gender, and when he participates in the race, it is because he has been socialized as male. Since it is the first time he partakes of the contest, it constitutes a sort of rite of initiation for him, one that he performs not by free will, but because he feels he has no choice.¹⁶ When Mario beats Claudio, the town’s local macho guy, the film literalizes the performative dimension of maleness. His body is gender-defiant, but it best endures the test of masculine performance, one that is performed in front of an audience that validates it. The notion of ‘passing,’ moreover, does not apply either. Halberstam notes: “For many gender deviants, the notion of passing is singularly unhelpful. Passing as a narrative assumes that there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self and does so successfully” (1998, 21). Mario’s notion of self is not only masculine but male, too, and his non-conforming body may confound him, but does not challenge his own identification as male.

When he is born, his intersexuality shows no easily legible signs, apart from his undersized penis/oversized clitoris. In *Sexing the Body* (2000) Anne Fausto-Sterling shows the arbitrariness according to which intersexuality is determined according to the size of the penis/clitoris.¹⁷ Sex assignments are never merely descriptive, but always contain a normative aspect. In this case, the obstetrician identifies a penis, which, so he assures the parents, will certainly grow. For a long time, surgeons responsible for assigning the intersex child’s sex considered it very important that the parents ‘believe’ in the child’s assigned sex. For this reason they would often tell the parents half-truths (Fausto-Sterling, 63-64). Although Fausto-Sterling’s research is based on North American medical history, something similar seems to be happening here. The doctor chooses Mario’s sex and reassures the parents of his masculinity, ignoring other, evident, outward signs of female genitalia. Consequently, since Mario is perfectly healthy, his parents choose to ignore the issue altogether.

With the imminence of adolescence, however, the concern resurfaces with particular urgency. It first manifests itself as the unidentified menstrual pains, which pose the question of Mario’s gender in medical terms. After examining the boy, Jorgelina’s father confronts the parents with the “truth” of Mario’s body, articulating a discourse of medical reason and pathology. As Halberstam notes: “[G]ender is always a rough match between bodies and subjectivities; when and

¹⁶ Furthermore, there is a very real danger in this performance for him. If (or when?) his community finds out that he “really” is a “girl,” he risks being outcast and he probably risks more physical violence, which he has already suffered from his father.

¹⁷ See figure 3.4 (59).

where that mismatch shows itself, we tend to talk about pathology” (1998, 126).¹⁸ I have placed the word truth in quotation marks to indicate the contested nature of its claim. Over the course of the twentieth century people of mixed sex “all but disappeared out of medical history, not because they had become rarer, but because scientific methods classified them out of existence” (Fausto-Sterling 39). This also entails the medical world striving to correct those bodies to neatly fit into the binary, to constitute them as either male or female, resorting to hormonal therapy or surgery. And yet, the criteria used in determining sex and, as a matter of fact, choosing to make the determination at all, are social decisions for which the scientist can offer no absolute guidelines (cf. Fausto-Sterling 5).¹⁹ The opinion of Jorgelina’s father will therefore inevitably be informed by the social conventions of gender.

As he investigates Mario’s pelvic area, his distressed face is shown in close-up, and is contrasted by a reverse shot of Mario’s worried expression. The doctor does not answer Mario’s straightforward question “What do I have?,”²⁰ telling him merely that some tests may be necessary.²¹ Instead, he hurries to talk to Mario’s mother to share his discovery. He urges Elba to talk to her husband as soon as possible, “for Mario’s sake.” In this adult’s opinion, the fact that Mario could live as a man in a body with outward female genitalia is quite literally unthinkable.

In their work on gender and social geography in Latin America Chant and Craske remark that “assumptions underlying male-female divisions in sexuality in Latin America are grounded in part in essentialised notions of gendered bodies” (141). *The Last Summer* shows this binary and corroborates Mario’s involuntary gender re-assignment through its mise-en-scene. The men and women are carefully separated, and share next to no screen time. After he has been medically labeled as female, however, the film aligns Mario with his mother. Elba literally gets closer to Mario, while also becoming more openly affectionate towards him. Mario’s father too radically alters his behavior toward his son, whom he now considers to be his daughter, which culminates in his decision to sell Mario’s horse *el Yayo* – a symbolic emasculation. Since Mario is no longer considered a man, he cannot race, or even own a horse.

¹⁸ In fact, the doctor says that the hospital made a “mistake” when Mario was born and that Mario should see “specialists” to see what kind of “treatments” can be done – he never explains why, or to what effect all these treatments are necessary, other than the biological normalization of Mario.

¹⁹ In her book, Fausto-Sterling shows how scientific discourse works with underlying, often subconscious assumptions about the gender binary. She disputes the existence of a clear binary in terms of genitalia; the sexed brain; sex glands; hormones; and gendered chemistry.

²⁰ Subtitled translation emended.

²¹ The film leaves the matter ambiguous; although Mario is aware that he is “not normal,” neither one of the doctors that examines him, nor his parents explain his biological situation to him. The spectator, therefore, equally remains in the unknown.

This drastic change in behavior lays bare the different aspects that socially constitute masculinity in the town,²² and exemplifies the hold of the medical world over issues of intersexuality. Jorgelina's father and the obstetrician assess the same body in the opposite way, and in both cases the parents accept the authority of the medical discourse without question. They fail to recognize that this very discourse is the result of gender as a social construction, and take it as an essentialist truth. They cannot conceive of any options outside of the gender binary, even though the fact that two doctors can make opposing claims about Mario's physiological gender, suggest that he is quite literally inter-sex.

Playing With Gender

There is one instant, halfway into the film, in which gender performance becomes an act: a playful act of cross-dressing. Mario and Jorgelina are readying themselves for the carnival parade in Gualeguaychú when two elements from the film's opening sequence reappear: the stethoscope is set on Mario's chest this time, and Jorgelina is once again rummaging through boxes. At her parents' house in Rosario Jorgelina was depicted as a child, due to the toys in her room and, more specifically, as a girl by way of her girly-pink attire. At this 'repetition' of the scene, in contrast, she plays an adult male. The film thus relates the initial quest to understand gender as biological and essentialist to this session of cross-dressing, and poses the question of gender's social validity and fluidity. They are able to try out a different gender, because they frame this experimentation, what Deborah Martin calls "identitarian play" (44), as innocuous child's play.

Yet, how innocent is this play really? Jorgelina's painted facial hair may be good fun – her giggles seem to indicate as much – but this queer act of cross-dressing needs to be considered in light of her other gender bending behavior. Her sister Luciana mockingly calls her "tomboy" and "Georgie," after which Jorgelina attacks her and wrestles her to the ground. Clearly, Luciana hits a nerve. The question of Jorgelina's masculinity can only be read by carefully piecing together clues in dialogue, cinematography, and editing. Its difficult legibility may be due to the fact that her masculinity appears as inseparable from childhood. In other words, the force of her masculine identification is downplayed because it is presented as tomboyism, i.e. as a passing phase of childhood. As Halberstam elaborates in *Female Masculinity* (1998), "tomboyism is tolerated as long as the girl remains prepubescent: as soon as puberty begins, however, the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl" (6). The film, in point of fact, establishes a clear contrast between Jorgelina and her sister, who has recently entered adolescence, and savors every change it entails. While Luciana and her friend are trying on brassieres, Jorgelina holds up a magazine

²² Mario can no longer work the land, his father does not let him lift any heavy items, and he is not allowed to join the men at the local bar.

that spells in big, bold letters: “Happy Children’s Day.” In extreme close-up, she hides behind the magazine that fills the frame and covers most of her face, peeking over it only to stare warily at the two young women.²³ Here, childhood quite literally provides her with a shield that protects her from adolescence and femininity.

This shield of childhood, nonetheless, works both for and against her; while it protects her from imposed femininity, it also prevents her pre-adult female masculinity, and possibly butch lesbianism, from being taken seriously. The film ties her to a Romantic ideal of childhood innocence, which most importantly implies an asexual childhood. To be sure, innocent childhood is by no means a social or cultural given; as cultural historian Philippe Ariès claims in his hugely influential *Centuries of Childhood* (1963), childhood innocence did not enter cultural imagination until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, with concepts such as the tabula rasa or ‘blank slate’ (mainly through John Locke) and the view of the child as an intrinsic part of nature, to be formed by education (an idea most influentially put forth by Jean-Jacques Rousseau). Both before and after the Romantic era, however, the child enters discourse in radically different guises, such as the demonic or possessed child, the hyper-sexualized child, or the criminal child.²⁴ Nevertheless, childhood innocence is an illusion that is firmly rooted in culture and collective conscience, and is generally taken to be the child’s natural condition and predisposition. Like gender, childhood innocence too is presumed to be legible on the body. Jorgelina’s gender defiant behavior, consequently, is permissible only insofar as her body shows no signs of sexual maturation, and as long as she does not show sexual interest.

Even her asexual tomboyism cannot be truly severed from sexuality, however, due to her close relationship with Mario. Fausto-Sterling observes: “[T]he debates over intersexuality are inextricable from those over homosexuality; we cannot consider the challenges one poses to our gender system without considering the parallel challenges posed by the other” (112). Although the sexual desire between the two protagonists is skirted and only ambiguously hinted at, (hetero)sexuality is part and parcel of the construction of gender in *Entre Ríos*. As Mario’s case illustrates, masculinity is a privileged category to which only ‘real men’ have access, and the idea that Jorgelina may

²³ There are other ways in which Jorgelina is framed specifically as a child: the Boyita camper van is full of toys; to amuse his daughter, the doctor puts on a mask and imitates a sheep; Luciana claims her little sister has lice; etc.

²⁴ Although I cannot go into details regarding the different manifestations of the child in the space of this article, it is important to point out that the different ways in which the figure of the child has entered cultural discourse are always already gendered and racialized, and tied to economic class and heteronormativity. Whereas the innocent child may be white and middle class, the criminal child is often non-white, the demonic or hyper-sexualized child female, etc. See, for example, Projansky (2014) or Bernstein (2011).

aspire to female masculinity and that she feels a possible sexual attraction to intersex Mario, may be even more threatening and destabilizing than Mario's intersexuality. The underlying "danger" that both Mario and Jorgelina pose to their community is the destabilization of the gender binary, and with it, a transgression against society's compulsory heterosexuality.

Jorgelina's character provokes the question whether, with time, she will outgrow childhood and tomboyism at once, or whether she will develop a more clearly defined female masculinity, and possibly lesbianism.²⁵ The film offers no easy answer, but it does suggest that, at the very least, her tomboyism is to be taken seriously. Jorgelina cross-dresses as a man for the carnival; her sister teases her about being a tomboy; she likes to play rough; she spends the summer in the countryside with her father, rather than on the beach with her mother and sister; and at the farm, she often longingly looks in the direction where the men are at work, a space inaccessible to her as a girl. Moreover, the outward manifestations of gender fascinate her, both as they appear inscribed on the body, as in the performance of gender. When father explains that the horse races are a test of masculinity for Mario, she misunderstands him, wondering whether Mario's masculinity is something he can try on, in case he doesn't like it.²⁶ When her father corrects her, explaining that Mario has to prove himself a man, she squints her eyes and asks: "And how will he show it?" She wants to learn how to read gender, and the possibility that one can change if so desired, seems laughable only to her father.

Indeed, Jorgelina experiments a little with gender manifestations herself. Back home in Rosario, she is shown playing in the Boyita, a camper van the two sisters use as a playroom. On the bed behind Jorgelina lies a book with big letters that reads "the vowels," and all around her colorful toys are stacked against the walls. In other words, the Boyita van symbolizes Jorgelina's and Luciana's childhood, and the film's title thus signals its end. When the end credits have already started rolling, Solomonoff shows an image of a fallen tree on top of the Boyita van, thereby literally putting an end to the summers in the Boyita. Yet even before the times of happy playtime are definitely crushed, the image of carefree happiness already appears crooked. The maid Peca (Edith Nadalin) enters the van and picks up a pair of panties from a chair, which she examines carefully before asking Jorgelina sternly: "How come all your panties rip in the same place?" Self-consciously, Jorgelina diverts her eyes and mumbles a form of excuse. The film's cinematography (designed by Lucio Bonelli) assigns particular interest to the sequence; Peca picks up the panties in extreme close-up, after

²⁵ For an analysis of the research on tomboyism and lesbianism, see Judith Halberstam, "Oh Bondage Up Yours! Female Masculinity and the Tomboy," (2004), especially pages 197-203.

²⁶ The misunderstanding stems from a play of words in Spanish; "probarse" both means "to try on" and "to prove himself".

which the camera pans up to the maid's face, which displays an accusatory expression. The spectator is not allowed a privileged look at the cause of Peca's concern, however, since both Jorgelina and Peca block the camera with their movements and hide the panties from view at crucial moments. The incident is silently repeated at the farm, with Elba, thus confirming Peca's qualms, but without providing any explanation.²⁷

The mystery of Jorgelina's ripped panties is never resolved, but its deliberate visual treatment and its reiteration mark its importance. One possible explanation is that she fantasizes about having a penis, and would rather wear boys' underwear; another is that she plays (sexual) games rough enough to rip her underwear. Whatever the case may be, Jorgelina's embarrassment suggests that she considers her own behavior to be transgressive. While Mario's mother keeps her disapproval limited to an austere look, Peca is quick to make an explicit reference to sexuality. She warns Jorgelina that "if you damage your inner piece of fabric, no-one is going to be able to sew that for you," implying a possible sexual nature of Jorgelina's games. On the one hand, Jorgelina is thus linked to a form of sexual transgression. At the same time, the film rhetorically releases her from any sexual implication, by virtue of her innocent childhood, written all over the Boyita van in which she is playing.²⁸

And yet, her ripped underwear is not all that connects her to implied sexuality; the montage of the sequence in which Mario discovers his vagina implicates her in non-sexual, vaginal penetration. I mention above how Solomonoff shows Mario reaching down into his pants, and juxtaposes that image with an extreme close-up of a hole in the ground. Keeping the hollow centered in the frame, from the lower left corner an arm then slowly moves towards the cavity and inserts its hand. The sound of Mario's screaming voice follows, while the camera cuts to a medium shot of Jorgelina. Solomonoff toys with the ambiguous interpretation of sight and sound. The editing suggests that Mario yells out in surprise upon discovering hitherto unknown parts of his body, but it quickly becomes clear that he teasingly scared Jorgelina, who was poking around in the shrubs. The interpretation of these shots seems straightforward enough regarding Mario, but just how do they relate to Jorgelina? After all, it is her hand that penetrates the cavity that the film has rhetorically equated with Mario's vagina. By suggesting her phallic gesture through purely formal means,

²⁷ Jorgelina is brushing her teeth in the bathroom when Mario's mother walks in. In the mirror we can see how she grabs some panties from the drying line, and then looks disapprovingly at Jorgelina. Neither utters a word.

²⁸ In line with Stockton's claim that children are supposed to be asexual, yet straight (6), the Boyita van promotes an ideal of heterosexuality. As the sisters play on top of the camper van, Jorgelina flips through a Boyita promotional magazine. It shows images of happy families that consist of a man, a woman, and a small child. Thus, by refusing to spend the summer in the Boyita Jorgelina also, in a way, rejects heteronormativity.

the film engages in a form of doublespeak: it hints again at the girl's desire for phallic masculinity, while at the same time maintaining her sexual innocence intact. Moreover, briefly hereafter Jorgelina affirms to Mario that "I'm not that normal either." This is the only time she explicitly talks about herself, and she provides no further explanations. Her statement is particularly powerful, though, because she makes it after Mario's intimate revelations. The context opens up her affirmation as a divulgement about her own gender identification, or desire for female masculinity.

The Shield of Childhood

Rather than providing explanations of why the protagonists feel they are "not normal," the film complicates their struggles with biological sex and gender identification by introducing desire – although the possibly sexual nature of this desire is carefully kept at bay. It is Jorgelina who, after their confessions that they don't feel normal, expresses her desire for Mario, changing the tenor of the conversation: "I like you as you are." Certainly her fondness for Mario, thus expressed, can have both platonic and sexual connotations, and could be read as a preconfiguration of a lesbian sexuality.²⁹ Jorgelina is so insistently portrayed as a child, however, that with those simple words of acceptance, she creates a space for both of them to remain a child for a little while longer – with or without mutual sexual desire. For a moment, she steers Mario and herself away from individualistic gender identities that depend on socially acceptable categories that they both feel to be insufficient. She reassures him of their relationship in which both can be queer without the need to define their gender or sexuality in any particular way.

"Queer," as several scholars have argued, is a strangely apt term to describe childhood.³⁰ Certainly the idea of "the innocent child," invoked in *The Last Summer*, has been packed with often-contradictory meaning over the course of the twentieth century, which has led to the figure of the child being "queered by innocence" (Stockton 12). In *The Last Summer* the two protagonists are queered by their bodies and cross gender identification. The notion of innocent childhood operative in the film, rather than confining them to heteronormative conformism, is actually instrumental to a tranquil exploration of their changing bodies and (gender) identities. Mario and Jorgelina perform innocent childhood in order to find refuge from societal impositions of specific gender performance.

Early in the film an extraordinary emblem of idealized childhood innocence cushions two revelations about Mario's body. Jorgelina inquires about the bandages she has seen on Mario's chest, worried his father has hit him. In

²⁹ Martin reads it as such, for example (42).

³⁰ See, for example, the introduction of *The Queer Child* (2009) by Stockton or many of the essays included in *Curiouser* (2004), edited by Bruhm and Hurley.

lieu of a response, there is a cut to the two playmates in medium close-up, cheerfully riding a horse together, their faces beaming with happiness.³¹ Directly after the ride, Jorgelina discovers blood on the saddle. The riding sequence, which lasts for nineteen full seconds, is accompanied by a particularly cheerful and loud guitar tune.³² Since the soundscape in *The Last Summer* mostly consists of diegetic sounds that often pertain to nature, this particular sequence aurally stands out. Both sound and image create the impression of a ride on a carousel horse, a moment of childhood carefree pleasure. The cinematographic choices that determine the image, however, are so apparent (particularly the non-diegetic sound track), that they call into question the reading of the protagonists as indexes, i.e. as imprints of the real. Thus, the cinematic moment mirrors the constructedness of the concept of childhood as a time of happiness and play.

The notion of idealized childhood innocence, furthermore, serves to protect them from too much adult interference. Instead of talking directly to Mario, the doctor prefers to communicate with his parents. This type of protected childhood provides the two protagonists, paradoxically, with a space and time to explore their bodies and gender, without having to endure the alienating discourse of pathology. They are often filmed together in extreme long shots, which accentuate the distance that separates them from the spectator, as several key moments in the narrative are withheld. Those moments function as narrative lacunae, in which either the characters cultivate a deliberate silence, or formal procedures such as cinematography or frame composition block the spectator's view by filming from angles that conceal actions or bodies. I have already discussed the moment when Jorgelina's ripped panties are carefully kept out of sight; and when Mario whispers into Jorgelina's ear that his body is different, the audience cannot hear his words. Another important deliberate silence occurs after the doctor's examination. The camera is placed inside the house, filming Jorgelina from her back. She sits in the doorstep next to her father, and both look out at the pampas. A silence of twelve long seconds passes, before she asks her father what is wrong with Mario.³³ Although the doctor did not provide Mario with any explanation, he now proceeds to detail the medical situation to his daughter: "We all have a gland over the kidney, that produces masculine hormones. In the case of Mario, it produces them excessively." As soon as Jorgelina hears the word "excessively," she covers her ears with both hands and starts humming loudly to shut out his voice, until he falls silent.

For the first time in the film, Solomonoff deploys subjective sound. The spectator perceives the doctor's voice as if through a thick filter, while the

³¹ It serves as the image for the film's promotional poster, too, underscoring its importance.

³² The music in the film is composed by Sebastian Escofet.

³³ Although she acted out of concern for his wellbeing, Jorgelina feels she has betrayed Mario by telling her father about the bleedings.

humming becomes so overbearing that the description of Mario's case cannot be fully understood. Jorgelina refuses to hear anything her father has to say. The frame in which the exchange takes place is composed hierarchically; Jorgelina's father occupies the superior position in his chair, while Jorgelina looks particularly small and childlike, next to him on the doorstep. He speaks to her in a calm, soothing voice, and after her refusal to listen he gently caresses her head. His demeanor implies that he believes her to be too young to understand the medical details about the construction of sex and gender. She has displayed a real thirst for knowledge throughout the film, though, so perhaps another reason informs her behavior. I propose to read her refusal to hear her father out as a refusal to accept his pathologizing discourse. To her, Mario is fine just the way he is.

As discussed, the film establishes a social context in which masculinity is tied to equine culture, and appears almost hyperbolic. Mario's position in this male-dominated culture is contested. He is recognized by his peers to be one of the best riders, but his intimate relationship with horses in general, and *el Yayo* in particular, also constitutes a way in which he is able to resist his community's heteronormative gender model. Kathryn Bond Stockton, in *The Queer Child* (2009), elaborates how animals offer queer children "what they can't easily or otherwise discover: a lateral community that understands, affirms, and offers sorrow for unsupported choices" (100-101).³⁴ *El Yayo* allows Mario to prove his masculinity by winning the race, but also to offer resistance, galloping away after his win, rather than returning to claim his victory. Hidden from his community's scrutiny, Jorgelina finds him sitting by the river. She leads him into the final sequence in Entre Ríos, one that celebrates their queerness and may be construed either as a final retreat into childhood, or as an incipient romantic and sexual relationship.

The film invites both interpretations, due to yet another narrative lacuna that obscures the central action. As Mario sits by the shore, the composition of the frame and the camera angle are exactly the same as when he was leafing through the anatomy book, a formal choice that visually connects both sequences. The mellow guitar tune that sets in provides the aural cue that the development of the sequence may be akin to the joyful horse ride. Jorgelina walks into the frame and, in the next shot, leads him into the river. They are framed in an extreme long shot, filmed from a high angle. Jorgelina positions Mario with his back toward the camera, starts to unbutton his shirt and then to unwind the breast bindings, tossing both items into the river.³⁵ Mario then takes Jorgelina's

³⁴ See Deborah Martin (2013) for an analysis of horses and queerness in *The Last Summer*.

³⁵ Breast-binding is not only a practice to hide secondary gender characteristics; the film industry has used it to mask adolescence or even womanhood. Warner Brothers, for example, wanted Shirley Temple for the role of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), but she was

hand and, giggling, they fall back into the river and float downstream. Throughout the film, Jorgelina has insisted that Mario take off his clothes and come swim with her. She herself mostly walks around in her bathing suit, and spends a lot of screen time in the water. The final sequence therefore marks a last withdrawal into an act of innocent childhood play. At the same time, the disrobing scene, discreetly hidden from the spectator's view, also opens up the possibility of a more sensual reading; they float downstream half naked, and in the car on the way home, Jorgelina caresses a woodcarving of *el Yayo* that Mario has gifted her.

On the one hand, the sequence suggests that Jorgelina accepts and loves Mario for whom and how he is. By removing his clothes and breast-bindings, however, Jorgelina also divests Mario's self-representation, i.e. the choice to hide his growing breasts and dress in male attire. She thereby reduces him once again to his body, one that does not express his choice of gender. As Halberstam notes: "Stephen's repudiation of nakedness or the biological body as the ground for sexual identity suggests a modern notion of sexual identity as not organically emanating from the flesh but as a complex act of self-creation in which the dressed body, not the undressed body, represents one's desire" (1998, 106).³⁶ Quite possibly, then, the river sequence reveals more about Jorgelina's sexual desire for Mario's female-looking body than about his gender expression.

The question of Mario's gender identification remains ambiguous. Does Mario feel comfortable identifying as a man in a gender-bending body? Has he accepted or even understood his intersexuality? The film provides no answers, and does not make the spectator privy to Mario's feelings about the issue. Jorgelina's status as a tomboy, on the other hand, is disputed and almost inversed in the last few minutes. She joins her mother on the beach, wearing a pink, girly bikini, a huge contrast with the blue, much less feminine looking one-piece we see her in during the entire film. Her mother discusses Jorgelina's situation with a friend, completely ignoring her daughter, who is within earshot and listens attentively, but does not utter a word. When they refer to her as "Georgie" and "Jorge," however, she firmly demands to be called "Jorgelina," apparently no longer comfortable with the childish, masculine diminutives. When she joins her sister's friends on the beach, moreover, they all stand in a circle, neatly separated by gender. An extreme close-up of a round-breasted girl is juxtaposed with Jorgelina's girl-like, flat-chested body, and seems to reinstate the film's medical discourse that equals gender identity with outward gender

unavailable. Physically, Judy Garland already appeared a young woman, so the producers decided to bind her breasts, braid her hair, and craft her appearance to conform to that of a young(er) child (Aylesworth). In this case, Mario's bindings both enable him to hide his female body, and to stay a child a little while longer, before deciding how to confront his queer gender.

³⁶ Halberstam analyzes a scene from the British lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness*, by Radclyffe Hall, first published in 1928.

manifestations. Jorgelina's arrival at the beach thus coincides with her arrival at the realm of strict gender conformity.

The final sequence, nevertheless, reinstalls a sense of ambiguity. Luciana demands to be told exactly what occurred in the countryside, surmising something happened with Mario. Yet in a final narrative lacuna, Jorgelina refuses to talk. She claims it is a private matter, just like Luciana had demanded her privacy in the bathroom. Her refusal to talk is more than a childish revenge on her sister. It signals a refusal to interpret; a refusal to simplify Mario's physical situation, their intimate and possibly sexual relationship, and their joined search for identity in and with their gender. Rather than violating this intimacy, she prefers to remain silent.

In *The Last Summer* the two protagonists seek refuge from gender performance in a space of innocent childhood that the film creates with its mise-en-scene, soundscape and frame composition. The narrative lacunae protect them from the adult gaze – including the spectator's, – enabling them to share with one another their doubts and discoveries about gender, as well as their incipient desire, without being subjected to the force of the community's heteronormativity and strict gender regulations. Female masculinity, in Halberstam's phrase, can be used to “explore a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity” (9). Jorgelina's tomboyism, in point of fact, functions in *The Last Summer* both as an expression of her own identity and sexuality, and as a way to reinforce Mario's gender non-conformity. Protected in an idealized, utopian space of childhood innocence, away from the adult gaze and interference, the two protagonists are able to turn a blind eye to conventional masculinities, and refuse to engage (cf. Halberstam 9). Moreover, Mario and Jorgelina turn the fiction of childhood innocence on its head; aided by the film's cinematography, they employ it not to be protected from any force that compromises their innocence (especially sexuality), but as a shield between them and the adults. Rather than safeguarding them from gender, sex and sexuality, by performing innocent childhood they are able to find a space in which Mario can be masculine in his menstruating body, and Jorgelina a tomboy with phallic desire.³⁷

³⁷ I would like to thank both anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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