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**Violence and the quotidian scenes of becoming a man****La violencia y las escenas cotidianas de convertirse en un hombre**Carlos Ulises Decena<sup>1</sup>**Abstract**

This essay turns to quotidian negotiations of homophobia within an immigrant group of self-identified gay and bisexual men to stress how the construction and sustenance of male privilege and of the very contours of the male subject require vigilance and careful policing of all presumably male bodies regardless of their sexual orientations. Based on an analysis of retrospective life history interviews with Dominican gay and bisexual immigrant men conducted between 2001 and 2002, I will propose what is at stake in quotidian exchanges among the participants is the fastidious work of calibrating the male body to signify "maleness" properly. By drawing attention to the micro-politics of masculine becoming, the essay suggests that attention to recent instances of homophobic violence should be considered as part of larger and chronic patterns of the aggressive policing of the male body in the social. By looking at the continuing power that homophobia has to structure gay male networks, the essay also challenges us to consider how patterns of marginalization continue to be reproduced even among the groupings most directly disadvantaged by them.

**Keywords:** Violence, becoming a man, gay, bisexual, police violence, homophobia.

**Resumen**

Este ensayo se dirige a las negociaciones cotidianas de la homofobia dentro de un grupo de inmigrantes de hombres auto-identificados como gays y bisexuales para resaltar cómo la construcción y el mantenimiento de los privilegios masculinos y de los mismos contornos del sujeto masculino requieren vigilancia y cuidado de todos los cuerpos policiales supuestamente masculinos independientemente de sus orientaciones sexuales. Basándose en un análisis retrospectivo de la historia de vida de gays y bisexuales dominicanos inmigrantes llevadas a cabo entre 2001 y 2002, propongo que está en juego en los intercambios cotidianos entre los participantes el trabajo exigente de la calibración del cuerpo masculino para significar "masculinidad" adecuadamente. Al llamar la atención a las micro-políticas del devenir masculino, el ensayo sugiere que la atención a los recientes casos de violencia contra homosexuales debe ser considerada como parte de los patrones más grandes y crónicas de la actuación policial agresiva del cuerpo masculino en lo social. Al observar el poder constante que la homofobia tiene que estructurar redes masculinas gay, el ensayo también nos desafía a considerar cómo patrones de marginación se siguen reproduciendo incluso entre los grupos más directamente perjudicados por ellos.

**Palabras clave:** Violencia, convertirse en hombre, gay, bisexual, violencia policial, homofobia.

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## I

It doesn't get better.

In 2010, the spate of teen suicides and of horrific tortures involving gay or suspected to be gay men rendered spectacular violences that are routinely experienced in complex and differently articulated ways by women and men of various socio-economic backgrounds, races, classes, and orientations *in their socialization as women and as men*. While much of the reaction to the suicides, for instance, reassured LGBTQ-identified youth that there were people who “love you as you are” and that those should have been their resource at moments when considering suicide, we continued to tell the victims to do all of the work of “reaching out,” “resisting,” or “not giving up” on life, as if that could solve the fundamental problem of the violent construction and policing of the gendered body. This suggests that we are not collectively invested in challenging the violence at the foundation of our socialization as women or men *in general*, that what we really seek, in telling these youth that “it gets better,” is that they *survive* this violence while we keep it intact. By positing those who “love us as we are” as an antidote to this violence, we further (and naively) assume that love, violence, and regulation do not cohabit. The bully, the torturer, the teaser, the gossip: they will all disappear-- “Abracadabra!”---, become a thing of the past in these communities where love, as the song goes, conquers all.

This essay turns to quotidian negotiations of homophobia within an immigrant group of self-identified gay and bisexual men to stress how the construction and sustenance of cisgendered male privilege and of the very contours of the male subject require vigilance and careful policing of all presumably male bodies regardless of their sexual orientations.<sup>2</sup> Masculinity studies scholars have rightly pointed out that homophobia and “gay panic”

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2 In his ethnographic research on masculinity and male intimacy in urban parts of Hermosillo and rural Sonora, México, Guillermo Núñez Noriega remarks on the ways in which local men tended to experience others' surveillance of their masculinity. “The body of men is under strict surveillance in its public expression: the way of talking, the mode of addressing others, the walk, the way of expressing emotions, the way of talking and dancing. This surveillance of the body is so intense and so evident that one man told me that he never crossed the plaza when there were people; instead, he preferred to go around it. Another friend told me of the extreme case of a cowboy who decided not to marry just because of his fear of walking down the church to marry; in fact, when this man married, the wedding took place in a ranch.” See Guillermo Núñez Noriega. *Masculinidad E Intimidación: Identidad, Sexualidad Y Sida*. Editorial El Colegio de Sonora. México, 2007. P. 116, my translation.

constructs and sustains masculinity.<sup>3</sup> Usually, this is a “panic” manifested most explicitly in a phobia of homosexuality in its collapse with gender dissent. However, our emphasis on the dichotomy effeminate vs. masculine man has made it difficult to grasp where power in hegemonic masculinity resides. Based on an analysis of retrospective life history interviews with Dominican gay and bisexual immigrant men conducted between 2001 and 2002, I propose what is at stake in quotidian exchanges among the participants is the fastidious work of calibrating the male body to signify “maleness” properly. The codes and signs associated with “sissies” are not the exclusive province of homosexual-identified men. It is precisely because they might erupt in *any body* that they need careful policing in quotidian exchanges as well as in communities of self-identified gay men. The sequela of the constitutive role that low-intensity forms of violence has in the constitution of masculinity is part of what these men wrestle with as they develop relationships and build a sense of belonging.

The larger study from which this discussion draws took place with men who ranged in age from their early twenties to their late fifties, though most were in their mid-thirties at the time of the interview. Most had immigrated to the United States as adults, except for one person who had migrated at age 15. Some participants came from the capital city of Santo Domingo. However, most of them were originally from other parts of the country and migrated to either Santo Domingo or Santiago (the second largest city in the Dominican Republic) when they began their university studies. All participants had graduated high school, more than half had earned a college degree, and a few had advanced degrees in areas such as medicine and education. These attainments characterize this sample as possessing higher educational levels than those that appear in U.S. Dominican communities in general, where almost half of all people above the age of 25 had not completed high school as of 2000.<sup>4</sup> Socioeconomic backgrounds varied. Most men described themselves as middle-class, a term that in the Dominican Republic accounts more for social than for material capital, for one might have an education, values, and aspirations of upward

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3 An important introduction and overview of the masculinities literature is R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*. University of California Press. Los Angeles, California, 2005.

4 See Ramona Hernández and Francisco Rivera-Batiz. *Dominicans in the United States: A Socioeconomic Profile, 2000*. The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute. New York, NY, 2003.

mobility without the financial security to sustain it. A few participants described themselves as “working-class.” Others described themselves as “upper-class.”

## II

The men I interviewed negotiated and constructed a sense of self in relationship to masculinity and from the vantage point of their identification as gay or bisexual, but they were not alone in feeling anxieties about themselves as men. Anxiety may be part of the constitution of masculinity within patriarchy, and Dominican masculine formations have specific histories that merit consideration. Christian Krohn-Hansen argues, for example, that masculinity is a “legitimate problematic,” a site of conflict produced by the unequal distribution of power and political legitimacy among men. The ability of individual men to authorize themselves and become viable in social life depends on how well they present themselves as men to others. But the centrality of masculinity to Dominican social life goes beyond enabling and sustaining relations among men. “Relations between leaders and followers, patrons and clients, are given meaning in terms of ideas about masculinity.”<sup>5</sup> In this way, masculinity is central to the discourses of what is politically imaginable in Dominican society.

Many of the interviewees experienced and narrated “becoming men” as the process of internalizing rules, mostly manifested as interdictions from others. In his work on the socialization of boys in the Dominican Republic, E. Antonio de Moya captures the restrictive nature of the masculine self-fashioning and the circuits of visibility and surveillance that produce and regulate these bodies:

*Mostly in the upper-middle and middle classes in the Dominican Republic, who are mainly concerned with social power, there is a relatively basic, clear-cut, stereotyped and paranoid (totalitarian) etiquette for gendering both the verbal and non-verbal behavior of young boys away from “femininity” ....This spiral of no-no rules, this panopticum, is meant to avert any possible “femininity” in boys’ body language. It works as a straightjacket that automatically warns them, as a thermostat, against any*

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5 Christian Krohn-Hansen. “Masculinity and the Political among Dominicans.” En: *Machos, Mistresses, Madonnas: Contesting the Power of Latin American Gender Imagery*, edited by Marit Melthuss and Kristi Anne Stoler. Verso. London, 1996. P. 108.

*innocent gesture, movement, word or action that is not the best choice for prospective true males. ...In this way Dominican males are socialized in a strongly restrictive and prohibitive environment, which surely cripples their spontaneity, authenticity and joy, and produces much hypocrisy and neurosis.*<sup>6</sup>

De Moya's description of the etiquette that constitutes Dominican masculinity resonates with what many of the participants experienced growing up. His use of the word *panopticum* (in a nod to the mechanisms of discipline described by Michel Foucault) suggests that this "difference" can be located in the body. This difference registers as failure to cite proper masculinity when seen and evaluated by the respondents themselves and/or their family and neighbors. Since masculinity is so wound up with what is conceivable political agency, the problem is not a difference in sexual orientation per se but rather dissent that can be "read" onto particular bodies.

De Moya's suggestive use of the word "straightjacket" allows further elaboration on the masculinity of the "serious" man, or the unmarked site of masculine normativity in Dominican society. The restrictive bodily codes deployed to produce the effect of masculinity and legitimacy, as De Moya explains, reveal that what is opposed to masculinity on the surface of this body is not femininity *per se*, but *locura* (craziness). An expansive interpretation of *locura*, one that encompasses male effeminacy but that is also open to disruptions in the smoothness, seamlessness, and rationality of normativity, illustrates the ways in which power and legitimacy combine to produce masculinity as cover, as a "straightjacket," for bodies imagined as always already excessive, prone to break, and feminized. This is a phallogentric regime that requires masculinity to control, to shield a femininity imagined as "essential" and "authentic" excess.

An expansive interpretation of *locura*, then, situates languages that produce masculine "seriousness" in relation to all of the other communicative practices that break that mold. In his research on masculinity in the Dominican Republic, Krohn-Hansen argues that the people he interviewed understood and negotiated masculinity around five interrelated ideas:

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6 E. Antonio de Moya. "Power Games and Totalitarian Masculinity in the Dominican Republic." En: *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities: Theoretical and Empirical Analyses*, edited by Rhoda E. Reddock. University of the West Indies Press. Kingston, Jamaica, 2004. P. 72-73.

“(1) of autonomy and courage; (2) of men’s visibility in public spaces; (3) of the man as seducer and father; (4) of the power tied to a man’s verbal skills; and (5) of a man’s sincerity and seriousness.”<sup>7</sup> “Seriousness” is particularly relevant to the figuration of *la loca* precisely because of its circulation as a cluster of performative utterances which are centrally associated with *relajo*, or joking, in Dominican culture. The figuration of the “serious” man is restrictive; it does not contemplate having a sense of humor.<sup>8</sup> Krohn-Hansen elaborates:

*People claimed that the serious man did not have recourse to the relajo; he didn't "joke" ...men in La Descubierta claimed that joking could be dangerous...A man did not know another man well enough to be able to joke with him unless they had already established some sort of friendship. One did not joke with a stranger. The relajo was, to some extent, based on a kind of confianza, or trust....Stories about how a friendship between two men became destroyed by a relajo were commonplace among the villagers.*<sup>9</sup>

The “straightjacket” projected onto these male bodies also spills over to a social world in which men develop close personal relations with one another based on mutual trust, interpersonal proximity, or kinship ties that work so long as every man involved remains mindful of the boundaries set by the other and the contexts of interaction. The disruptive potential of *relajo* constitutes the flip (or public) side of exchanges and homosocial intimacies between men that can cast doubt on their seriousness if aired in public. Two *compadres* may very well develop relationships shaped by inside joking and teasing; should one of the men attempt these jokes in the wrong context or in situations where strangers or people outside of trusted circles are also interlocutors, they could be

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7 Christian Krohn-Hansen. *Political Authoritarianism in the Dominican Republic*. Palgrave. New York, 2009. P. 138.

8 The importance of seriousness and the orientation of male socialization toward work also appear in Barbara Finlay’s research among rural women and their childrearing practices in the province of Azua. “For sons, after the major goal of education came the traditional male activity, work. For about half of the community sample and almost half of the workers, one of the most important things to teach a son was ‘to work,’ or ‘to have a profession,’ or (for example) ‘to be a good farmer.’ So, although the women put education above other things for both sons and daughters, they followed that with household chores for daughters and work skills for sons....A few women mentioned such things as ‘to be responsible,’ ‘to be serious,’ or not to steal or drink too much. These last two items were never mentioned for daughters.” See Barbara Finlay. *The Women of Azua: Work and Family in the Rural Dominican Republic*. Praeger. New York, 1989. P. 111.

9 Krohn-Hansen, *Political Authoritarianism in the Dominican Republic*, 146.

jeopardizing the friendship. Parallel situations present themselves among the men I interviewed though, in their recollections, these questions (or proximity and/or intimacy with friends in public) are negotiated and worked through the figure of *la loca*.

### III

*Tú sabes que a veces entre nosotros, en diferentes grupos de amistades, se usa mucho el femenino para referirse el uno al otro. Te cambian el nombre. Te lo ponen en femenino o te dicen loca o te dicen maricón...hay gente que se relaciona con otra gente así. ¿Eso es algo que tú haces con algunas de tus amistades?*

*You know that sometimes, amongst us in different groups of friends, it is common for people to use the feminine to refer to one another. They change your name. They call you in the feminine or they call you loca or they call you maricón...there are people who have interpersonal relationships like that. Is that something you do with some of your friends?*

Máximo Domínguez: Oh sí, sí. Si ‘tamo en grupo. Depende a donde tú estés y la confianza que tú tenga’ con el grupo...si tú eres de mi confianza pues tú dice, “mira e’ta loca y mira la Roberto o la Raúl. ¿Tú sabe? Tú pones “la.” Pero que hay una confianza. Pero si hay una gente que no es de confianza...pues tú no va’ a ‘tá’ con ese relajo.

Máximo Domínguez: Oh yes, yes. If we are with the group. It depends on where you are and the trust you have established with the group...if you are someone I trust, well, you say, “look at this *loca* or *la Roberto* or *la Raúl*. You know? You put the “la” [in front of the name, to feminize it]. But there is trust. But if a person is not someone I trust...you can’t start that *relajo* [joking around].

*¿Ha habido alguna ocasión en tu vida en la cual alguien lo haya hecho contigo, te haya hablado femenino y que a ti no te haya gustado?*

*Has there ever been a situation in your life in which someone did that--addressed you in the feminine and that you did not like?*

Oh sí, una vez cuando...hace muchos años un dominicano. Ese muchacho no era amigo mío pero yo lo había visto en Santo Domingo...y me saludaba. Me saludaba y depeú’ yo lo veía aquí y un día yo estaba saliendo con este muchacho y me dijo [el conocido] “mira tú, loca.” Y yo no le

Oh yes, one time...a Dominican guy. That guy was not my friend but I had seen him in Santo Domingo...and he would say hello to me. He would say hello and later I would see him here (in the United States), and one day I was going out with this guy and this acquaintance says to

contesté nada. Yo lo ignoré y eso es lo peor pa' me "hey you, loca." And I did not answer back. una gente. Yo como que no fue a mí. Y el I ignored him, and that's the worst you can do to muchacho que andaba conmigo ni se dió cuenta somebody. I acted like what he said had nothing porque tú...si tú me ves con alguien a mí, por to do with me. And the guy I was with did not ma' confianza que haiga. Si 'tamo juntos pues even notice because you...if you see me with 'tá bien o si 'tamo en el circulo que 'tamo someone, not matter how much trust there is siempre. Pero si tú me vez con una gente extraña between us. If we are hanging out together, ok, saliendo, ¿cómo tú me viene' a vocear a mí, or if we are in the group. But if you see me with "mira loca"? Y yo lo único que le hice al tipo someone you don't know, how can you shout fue que lo ignoré y él no me pudo decir nada. out "look here, loca"? The only thing I did was Porque ya sabe que con eso le dije todo. No le ignore him, and he couldn't say anything. contesté nada. Because I said everything with what I did. I did not answer back.

The participants navigated the worlds in which they lived through the use of verbal and other bodily communicative practices to engage others as close friends, strangers, or mere acquaintances. The mobilization of the distinction between "public" and "private" worlds was operative in the way they mapped out their relationship to their surroundings. Nevertheless, that distinction was not mobilized in ways characteristic of traditional liberal conceptualizations of public and private. These men deployed these categories in a sense closer to that described by anthropologist Susan Gal: "Public and private do not simply describe the social world in any direct way; they are rather tools for arguments about and in that world."<sup>10</sup> Moving beyond the perception of "public" and "private" as distinct "places, domains, spheres of activity, or even types of interaction,"<sup>11</sup> I follow Gal's suggestion to understand "public" and "private" as "indexical signs that are always relative: dependent for part of their referential meaning on the interactional contexts in which they are used."<sup>12</sup>

In his response to my question in the excerpt above, Máximo Domínguez outlined the circumstances for interactions where verbal cues allow interlocutors to express closeness and/or distance with other gay- and bisexual-identified male acquaintances and friends. Mobilizing codes with multiple inflections may be a way for these men to practice

10 Susan Gal. "A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction," *differences*. No 13. 2002.

11 *Ibidem*, 80.

12 *Ibidem*, 80.

belonging, but Domínguez's observations underscored that specific interactional conditions must be met in order for these signifiers to produce desired linkages between men. Some of these insights, which are quoted below, prompt the extended analysis that follows.

*"Depende de donde tú estés."* Domínguez astutely pointed out that usage of these codes did not depend on who you are [*quien eres*] but of where you are [*donde tú estés*]. This was not a naïve reference to a physical view of "context" but rather an allusion to the conjunction of temporality, spatiality, bodily contact, and shared affective resources that result in being [*estar*] somewhere--what I call the *scene of interaction*.<sup>13</sup> It might be tempting to assume that ambivalence about the figure of *la loca* would result in its avoidance. But part of the complexity of the travels of this word and figure through the narratives of the interviewees is related to the force it had in shaping the construction and sustenance of boundaries and intimacies among these men.

*Loca* had multiple meanings and uses. Some men almost never used the word to talk about themselves or their close friends, but they used it to speak negatively about someone else. Older participants, for instance, might use *loca* or its diminutive, *loquita*, to signify crassness, lack of manners, low class, immaturity, and a lack of direction in life. These were "defects" that stood in the way of one's upward mobility. When older men used the words, their commentary usually referred to younger, working-class and darker-skinned men who "called" attention to themselves as homosexual men in explicit terms by behaving in "low class," uncontrolled ways. The more middle-class a respondent was, the less "public" he was in his expression of gender dissent.

*Loca* also expressed intimacy. The word might operate as a put-down with words like *maricón* or *pájaro*. But, in groups of older and younger Dominican immigrant men, these words also functioned as expressions of closeness among friends, depending on the context. In these situations, use of these words might have been accompanied by others, which were

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13 In defining scenes of interaction in this way, I take cues from the literature on "context" in linguistic anthropology, which parts way from reductive definitions of it as physical environment to conceptualizations that account for the convergence of bodies, spaces, temporalities, and linguistic practices. For a discussion of the various meanings of "context," see Charles Goodwin and Alessandro Duranti, "Rethinking Context: An Introduction." En: *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon*, editado por Alessandro Duranti and Charles Goodwin. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge and New York, 1992.

usually articulated in feminine form (e.g., “manita” for “hermanita” or “little sister”; “mujer” for “woman”; use of the feminine article “la” in saying, for example, “la José”).

*Loca* can express both distance (through its deployment as an insult) and intimacy (through its use as a term of endearment). This underscores the fact that its performative force is “happy” (if it successfully distances or brings together speakers) or “unhappy” (if it is incorrectly mobilized or, as Austin might put it, “misfires”)<sup>14</sup> given the specificity of what Austin calls “the total speech situation.”<sup>15</sup> Like other social actors, then, Domínguez was aware of the history of multiple usages of terms like *la loca* in his life and in others’ lives, but the exigencies of daily life demanded skill in the interpretation and response to specific scenes of interaction. The accuracy and correctness of his (or his interlocutors’) apprehensions of a given scene were manifested in what he and others considered (in)appropriate responses, practices that corroborated the correctness/felicity or incorrectness/infelicity of the performatives mobilized.

“Tú pones ‘la.’ Pero [es] que hay una confianza.” As a gynographic performative,<sup>16</sup> *la loca* materializes relations that connect various social actors through temporally, situationally, and interactionally specific and interarticulated subject positions. Domínguez explained that using feminine articles, feminizing male names, and using words in the feminine form depend on a trust, a *confianza*, established before all interlocutors understand these practices as appropriate in one another’s presence. It cannot be taken for granted that the valence of these connections was always positive. Thus, not every one of the men welcomed “code swishing,”<sup>17</sup> these *jueguitos* (little games, referring to the feminization of words and names) or *mariconerías*, and even those who engaged in these signifying practices given certain conditions.

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14 As Austin explains, “when the utterance is a misfire, the procedure which we purport to invoke is disallowed or is botched: and our act (marrying, &c.) is void or without effect, &c.” The act “botched” in this instance is not “marriage” but rather a specific stitching of social actors with one another as fellow gay men. See J.L. Austin. *How to Do Things with Words*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1962. P. 16.

15 Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 52.

16 By “gynographic performative,” I reference the staging of femininity as excess in a male body. For an elaboration of this concept, see *Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire among Dominican Immigrant Men*. Duke University Press. Durham, North Carolina, 2011. P. 170-171.

17 For a definition and elaboration on “code swishing,” see “Code Swishing” *Journal of Language and Sexuality*. No 1, Vol 1. 2012.

Most interviewees were conflicted about which situations made the use of these terms acceptable. When I asked an man if addressing others in the feminine or using the word *loca* to address his friends were things he did, he replied angrily that he did not and that he considered men who called each other *loca* to be “*lacas humanas*” (human waste). Other respondents reported not engaging in these exchanges at all, making a point of addressing even their closest gay-identified friends in the masculine. But a third group of people played those games only with people they considered very close to them. These games were most likely to take place in “private” contexts where their masculinity was unlikely to be compromised.

“*Pero si hay una gente que no es de confianza...pues tú no va’ a ‘tá’ con ese relajo.*”<sup>18</sup>

Like Domínguez, many of the men with whom I spoke revealed awareness of the need to discern where it was appropriate and where it was not appropriate to use *mariconerías* to interact with other people. If there is no trust, there is no joking; appreciating the conceptual frames that Domínguez brought to his evaluation of social interactions helps understand his view of the operations of the social order and the way one connects with others within it. These are views echoed in the commentary provided by other interviewees, and they offer clues about the way some of these men understood and engaged the social.

*Mariconerías* often operate as a form of *relajo*. What distinguishes *mariconerías* is that they stage an assault and interruption of the seamless, wholesome, and apparently fully articulated contours of masculinity itself.<sup>19</sup> What makes *mariconería* a specific form of *relajo* is the explicit centering of practices associated with *la loca*—practices that call attention to the gendered dissent of the actor(s) who engage in them but that ultimately

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18 For a treatment of *relajo* among Mexican rural immigrants in Chicago, see Marcia Farr. *Rancheros in Chicagoacán: Language and Identity in a Transnational Community*. University of Texas Press. Austin, Texas, 2006.

19 The legitimacy of masculinities in the context of intense racial and class antagonisms may be worked through the figure of the homosexual, as it is among middle- and working-class men in Argentina documented in the work of Gustavo Blázquez. According to the author, the usage and mobilization of different usages of the word “gay” in Argentinian Spanish effects a leveling effect between men of various class backgrounds (differences that are racialized to the degree that working-class and poor men are seen as “negros” by middle-class participants in the sites documented in this ethnography). The result is the mobilization of the terms “gay” and “gay panic” for the stabilization of masculinities in specific class and racial locations. See Gustavo Blázquez. “Gays Y Gais En Los Bailes De Cuarteto: Humor, Homofobia Y Heterosexismo Entre Los Jóvenes De Sectores Populares De Argentina.” *Sexualidades: Una serie monográfica sobre sexualidades latinoamericanas y caribeñas*, no. 3 (2008), [www.IRNweb.org](http://www.IRNweb.org).

challenge the apparently strict boundaries between “serious” masculinity and *locura*. Although same-sex desire is central to the men’s negotiation of *mariconerías*, and although the appearance of these codes in Dominican popular comedy can cast suspicion on a comedian’s sexual orientation, this is a form of *relajo* with effects that are not unilaterally stigmatizing of the sissy and that settle in any certain way the “truth” of a comedian’s sexuality. The conditions of possibility for *mariconerías* in general impacted quite specifically the participants’ negotiation of the social. For these men, there were requirements in situations for them to feel comfortable enough to practice this kind of humor, even with each other.

Undoubtedly, internalized homophobia has something to do with many of these men’s conflicted relationship with *la loca*, as a figure, and with each other. Yet internalized homophobia has limited explanatory power. This categorization neglects a serious consideration of how astute these men are as theorists of their own realities. They recognized that in order to survive and thrive in a heteronormative and homophobic world, they had to be strategic in the way they carried themselves in settings where appearing as *locas* foreclosed access to the privileges of masculinity. Furthermore, they understood that recognition, legitimacy, and respect were contingent upon social actors’ ability to exercise some control in the way they were perceived.

“*Con eso le dije todo. No le contesté nada.*” Although participants strove to exercise control of the way others addressed them, many of them were also aware of their ultimate inability to control language. In interview after interview, the men recounted the moments when a person acquainted with the respondent used what the man considered an inappropriate form of address. It may have been inappropriate because they did not really know each other as well as the speaker thought or because the speaker used the term in the wrong context. It was up to the person who heard the “incorrect” address (usually the person recounting the incident) to “correct” the interlocutor, to put the other “back in their place.”

Returning to the specific situation Domínguez helps unpack the workings of power in specific scenes of interaction. Furthermore, underscoring Domínguez’s deployment of

silence suggests that the exercise of power resides not only on the one who issues a call, but also in the scene of interaction in which the call is issued.<sup>20</sup>

The man in question was a fellow Dominican, and Domínguez recalled having interacted with him in the Dominican Republic and then in New York City. On one occasion, which happened to coincide with a time when Domínguez was going out (on a date?), the couple crossed paths with this acquaintance, who shouted at Domínguez, “mira tú, loca” (look here, loca). Domínguez’s response was silence, which neutralized the call, because Domínguez’s date did not notice the interaction, which Domínguez also suggested hurt his acquaintance. As Domínguez set, through silence, a firm boundary between the couple and the acquaintance in this scene of interaction, he also foreclosed the possibility of interaction and social legibility of his interlocutor. Whereas Domínguez said everything with his silence (“...con eso le dije todo. Ne le contesté nada”), his acquaintance was effectively silenced (“...lo ignore y él no me pudo decir nada”).

This scene suggests the importance of heeding J. L. Austin’s advice that an examination of the scene of an utterance is crucial for a full grasp of a performative’s success or failure in “doing” something in the world. In this way, Austin’s view helps revise the Althusserian scene of interpellation. In Althusser’s frame, subjects are inaugurated into subjecthood through the operations of ideology in the famous allegorical scene of the “call” issued by an authority figure (in the street scene, he offers the example of a cop) in the form of a “Hey, you there” that is recognized by the individual who (walking down the street and after hearing that call) “turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that ‘it really is he’ who is meant by the hailing.”<sup>21</sup> In her reading of Althusser, Butler suggests that it is not always necessary to “turn around in order to be constituted as a subject”<sup>22</sup> and that the power of the hail need not always stem from its being issued by a voice; this is Butler’s attempt to disarticulate Althusserian interpellation from authority,

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20 In this particular discussion, I will move through Domínguez’s narration of his ignoring the acquaintance who called him out in front of a third party to offer a reading of Althusserian interpellation as performative, underscoring the importance to its happiness of what I call the scene of interaction.

21 Louis Althusser. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation." En *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Monthly Review Press. New York, 1971. P. 174-175.

22 Judith Butler. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. Routledge. New York, 1997. P. 31.

which derives from what she calls the “divine voice.”<sup>23</sup> That disarticulation of power from figures (the cop, the king, the father) or sites of authority (the state) is necessary to understand the multiple and multisited operations of power in the social. But that disarticulation is not enough. Attention to the performative aspects of the hail itself *as issued in the scene of interaction* suggests that Domínguez’s silence trumps the happiness of this utterance.

In the situation that Domínguez presented, he clearly was “hailed,” regardless of his nonresponse to the hail itself. He knew that he was the “loca” being called out by his acquaintance. This is consistent with Butler’s rereading of Althusser. Yet Domínguez’s “ignorance” of the hail and his silence before it further disentangle the power of hailing as a performative from the authority of the one who emits the utterance. In this situation, recognition of the hail did not equal capitulation to its potentially stigmatizing power, for nonresponse, a refusal “to turn back” after hearing the call, jeopardized the happiness of the call itself. What was staged here was not misrecognition of the hail; after all, Domínguez heard and understood it as addressed to him. What he illustrated was that given a scene of interaction in which the alignments of power are not clearly derived from alignments with the state or its institutions (this was an acquaintance, after all, not a cop), a lack of acknowledgment or indifference before the call can suspend a potentially stigmatizing trajectory of power.

Finally, this analysis has also argued that once the hail is taken out of Althusser’s “little theoretical theatre” of subject formation,<sup>24</sup> interpellation emerges as a performative that can be “happy” only to the degree that a “turn” (or another form of acknowledgment) inaugurates a subject engulfed by its chain of signification. Nonresponse to and ignorance of the hail might not rupture its full reach, and the participants understood this all too well. But they also knew that ignoring the hail, acting as if they were not the ones being called, interrupted its trajectory, put on “pause” the others’ ability to injure, marginalize, or express inappropriate proximities.

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23 *Ibidem*, 32.

24 Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 174.

## Conclusion

Pondering the horror of spectacular results of abuse, neglect, and violent regulation is absolutely necessary. It is unacceptable that anyone should experience harassment, physical abuse, violation, or death for whom they love or for who they carry their bodies as they traverse the world. Yet political work in this direction cannot to blind us to the structural conditions of possibility for the gendered body itself, which circumscribe in powerful, painful, and small ways how all of us move in daily life. This essay, as it traces the strategies some of the men interviewed utilized to validate themselves, establish tenuous intimacies with some and clear boundaries with others, sites the afterlife of growing up in a homophobic world as one key condition for any sense of belonging these men may forge with one another. The policing of masculinity trickles and structures gay community relationships, perhaps trumping the very possibility of community, or perhaps simply underlining how belonging, intimacy, and friendship are achievable as long as they do not challenge these respondents' access to the privileges they associate with being validated as men.

As immigrant men living in New York City, as men who understand themselves to be minorities in multiple and intersecting ways (as Dominicans/Latinos, as self-identified gay men), some the examples discussed here point to refusal, indifference, and silence as strategies utilized to exercise a measure of agency when the conditions allow for that to be possible. The figure of the sissy, it turns out, is quite polyvalent in the daily worlds the men inhabited: not always the abject, sometimes the intimate, and always haunting friendship and belonging. Furthermore and contrary to models that uphold the value of visibility and pride in the public sphere, the men I interviewed were deeply cognizant of the stakes in their negotiation of friendship with each other and sought to find ways to exercise control, themselves, of how they could be read in public. Although not always effective, such measures demonstrated that survival was not always about winning a fight or asserting oneself. Silence, it turns out, might be one mechanism to get through the world, even if it doesn't get better.

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