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Notes on boundaries and bodies that matter in male sex clubs

Camilo Braz

Abstract

This article is based on ethnographic research carried out in male sex clubs in São Paulo between 2006 and 2008. Drawing on interviews conducted with club-goers and club owners, it discusses the recent segmentation of the sexual leisure market for men in the city, and the processes by which stereotypes and characteristics associated with virility are valued and performed. The possible effects of these processes on subjectivity constitution are also investigated. In sex clubs, sexual practices considered borderline, such as fist-fucking and other practices associated with BDSM, are material for specific and refined learning. The data gathered from interviews show that condom use and drug and alcohol consumption are subject to a sort of surveillance and control, especially when it comes to their questions of ‘excess’. This control provides sex clubs with a sense of legitimacy, making them part of a viable erotic market. The intention here is to demonstrate the analytical interest of this control in the context of the construction of subjects and bodies that matter in these venues. Like practices which evoke control or loss thereof, bodies and clubs need to have their excesses checked so that they are intelligible and desirable.

Keywords: Gender – Sexuality – Masculinity – Body – Market – Consumption

Resumo

Este trabalho baseia-se em uma etnografia realizada em clubes de sexo masculinos de São Paulo entre 2006 e 2008. A partir de entrevistas realizadas junto a alguns dos seus frequentadores e empresários, discute a recente segmentação do mercado de lazer sexual entre homens na cidade e performatividade de atributos e estereótipos associados à “virilidade”, indagando acerca de seus possíveis efeitos na constituição de subjetividades. Nos clubes de sexo, as práticas e experimentações sexuais que lidam com a idéia de “limites”, como o *fist-fucking* e outras experiências relacionadas ao BDSM, são objeto

de aprendizados corporais específicos e bastante refinados. Além disso, as falas sobre o uso de preservativos, assim como de drogas recreativas ilícitas ou mesmo de álcool, assinalam que essas práticas estão sujeitas a uma espécie de “vigilância” do ponto de vista de seus “excessos”. O significado desse controle é dotar os clubes de um sentido de legitimidade, como um mercado erótico viável. Meu intuito aqui é apontar como essa noção de “controle” é analiticamente interessante para pensar também na construção dos sujeitos e corpos “que importam” nesses estabelecimentos. Do mesmo modo como as práticas que evocam o (des)controle, os corpos nos clubes também precisam estar controlados em seus excessos para que sejam inteligíveis enquanto desejáveis.

Palavras-chave: Gênero – Sexualidade – Masculinidade – Corpo – Mercado – Consumo.

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Opening Scene

Júlio Simões and Isadora França have pointed out the “noteworthy amplification and diversification of venues for homosexual sociability and forms of cultural and political expression of homosexualities” in São Paulo. Simões and França claim that in recent years venues have opened that seem to reproduce “the European and North American model of entry-restricting clubs catering for the upper class” (França e Simões, 2005: 324). This aroused in me a curiosity to visit these places, and made me wonder what were their unique features and what were their similarities to other sex venues in the city (bathhouses, porn movie theaters, and dark rooms at gay nightclubs).

On their websites, the sex clubs were presented as places for ‘manly’ men interested in other ‘manly’ men. One of the main factors that led me to study these places anthropologically¹ was the realization that they comprised a market closely related to gender conventions. Such places appeared in São Paulo at the end of the 1990s, striving to stand out from ‘traditional’ man-to-man sex venues, such as bathhouses and porn movie theaters. These new venues flirted with elements of gay pornography and made use of those ones historically built around North American and European leather sex clubs from the mid-1960s to the 1980s.

The investigation’s main aim was to articulate a discussion that drew together the recent segmentation of the man-to-man sex market in São Paulo and the performative valuation of ‘virile’ attributes and stereotypes, whilst inquiring into the latter’s possible effects on the constitution of subjectivities.

Throughout 2006 I conducted preparatory field work, during which I took notes, as I sought out deeper observations². I started by looking at the

1 This work is based on my PhD thesis entitled “In Low Light - an improper ethnography in male sex clubs”, defended at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP) in April 2010, under the guidance of Professor Dr. Maria Filomena Gregori, and funded by CAPES (Braz, 2010).

2 My field trips to various man-to-man sex locations in São Paulo began in September 2006. In June

websites of the venues and 'online forums'³ whose discussion topics were the venues themselves. I also started to visit online dating websites⁴.

Over the course of two years, I chatted with 29 men on MSN messenger, some of whom I kept in touch with almost throughout the research process. Having completed the fieldwork in bars and sex clubs, I conducted recorded interviews with their patrons, as well as with their owners and organizers. I had met some of the informants online, others whilst doing fieldwork in clubs.

Whilst doing preparatory fieldwork, I noticed that most personal advertisements for sex partners on dating websites and Orkut were by men who wished to meet "manly guys" with a "manly attitude," not "camp" men with "effeminate mannerisms." Describing oneself as "discreet," "not into socializing in gay places," and, above all, "not effeminate" seemed to be a way of being valued sexually or affectionately⁵. Both those who claimed to be tops (the penetrators) and those who claimed to be bottoms (the penetrated) described themselves as "non-effeminate," and were looking for partners who were the same.

These data intrigued me, due to the existence of a Brazilian intellectual tradition on 'homosexualities' that goes back to the 1980s, and which has Peter Fry's pioneering work (1982) as a reference⁶. Such studies gave rise to a classification system which identifies two contrasting models of homosexuality. The first, which is modern and egalitarian, refers to middle-class men who identify themselves as *gays* or *entendidos*. Examples of this model are the *Cariocas* (people from the city of Rio de Janeiro) studied by Carmem Dora Guimarães (Guimarães, 2004). The second model, based on tradition and hierarchy, is composed of working-class men whose self-identification is based

2007, when the research focus had already been defined, I began to conduct fieldwork only in sex clubs. This continued until May 2008.

3 Specifically, Orkut communities about commercial establishments for sex between men. Orkut is an online social network, like Facebook, and is very popular in Brazil. Carolina Parreiras has done intriguing research about identities and sexualities on Orkut (Parreiras, 2008).

4 Disponivel.com and Manhunt.net.

5 For discussion of these issues in virtual environments, see Miskolci (2009).

6 It is worth pointing out that this essay of Fry's represented a perspective on sexuality that, in light of poststructuralist ideas and queer theory, we could say was «anti-essentialist, alert to the possible discrepancies between sexual practices, identities, and categories of classification» (Carrara e Simões, 2007: 87). These ideas are rethought and reclaimed in Richard Parker's (2002) influential work, which deals with the tricky question of articulating global and local contexts in his interpretation of so-called 'Brazilian sexuality'.

on, among other factors, their role during sexual intercourse: *bichas* are the bottoms, and are considered homosexuals, unlike *bofes*, who avail themselves of an alleged bisexuality (Duarte, 2004).

In *O Negócio do Michê*, an ethnography about young male prostitutes in São Paulo in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Néstor Perlongher looked at this kind of ambivalence. His analysis of the “curious trade, where the ‘regular ones’ prostitute themselves to the ‘deviant ones’ (Perlongher, 2008: 45), takes into account the relationships between appropriation of manhood and self-assertion of heterosexuality on the part of young hustlers who, through these resources, did not “abandon the discursive chain of normality” (Perlongher, 2008: 46). In the preface to the reissue of the book, Richard Miskolci and Larissa Pelúcio remind us:

“The paradox of man-to-man sex business falls apart when one realizes that what is bought and sold is not just the body, but a body marked by hegemonic masculinity. Muscled backs, huge biceps, members bulging underneath tight jeans, icons of male prostitution that Perlongher analyzed, now serve as iconographical identities on the webpages of dating services, where manly men are offering their bodies marked by excess. Hyperbolic use which denounces heterosexuality, but which might be interpreted as reverence for it” (Miskolci and Pelúcio, 2008: 18).

This hyperbolic use seemed to indicate dissociation of body penetration from femininity, expressed by a quasi-‘requirement’ that bottoms be as manly as tops. I began to wonder whether the nuances concerning this ‘sex between virile men’ were also present in the commercial venues for sexual rendezvous.

In an article discussing research on LGBT parades in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro⁷, Sergio Carrara notes that, over the last few decades, “the public emergence of the ‘gay’ phenomenon has shown that male homosexuality is not synonymous with ‘effeminacy’.” The assertion of a manly homosexuality might be viewed as a political issue by many, as it destabilizes the paradigm of ‘sexual inversion’, which produces male homosexuality as a result of the

7 Notably, a survey conducted by Datafolha during the 2005 São Paulo LGBT Pride Parade, and research conducted by CLAM (Latin American Center for Sexuality and Human Rights), Grupo Arco-Íris and Cândido Mendes University’s Center for Security Studies and Citizenship during the 2004 Rio de Janeiro LGBT Pride Parade.

“imprisonment of an alleged female soul in a male body.”⁸

“To some, due to the fact that it increases prejudice, femininity in men seems politically incorrect. To others, it must be kept carefully in check by those who venture into the market of affections and lusts”(Carrara, 2005).

Carrara argues in the article that “adjusting oneself to the gender norms in force is the price one pays to enter the realm of successful citizenship or successful conjugality.” He concludes with a question: “After all, do only manly, discreet and well-behaved homosexuals deserve heaven?” (Carrara, 2005).

These ideas made a great deal of sense at the beginning of my fieldwork, when I realized I was observing the valuation of attributes associated with masculinity and the production of ‘the manly male’ as subject and object of desire. Both kinds of attributes are involved in body materialization (Butler, 2003) and subjectivity production in many contexts in contemporary Brazil where there are men who have affective and sexual relations with other men.⁹

Such conventions are quite widespread, but marked to differing degrees in the venues I investigated during preparatory fieldwork. There was an issue to be investigated which drew attention for its ambivalence: to what extent does the valuation of attributes associated with masculinity imply possible displacements or reassertions of gender conventions?

Bodies that matter

Sexual practices carried out in sex clubs in ‘low light’ are not only guided by social difference markers, but also by the idea of controlling ‘excesses’.

I propose that one characteristic of the use of male sex clubs is what might be called a ‘controlled de-control’ of practices and bodies. Thus, some of the ideas from Mike Featherstone’s book on postmodernism and consumption (Featherstone, 1995) are relevant.

For Featherstone, getting around contemporary urban spaces or visiting theme parks and museums entails a ‘controlled de-control of emotions.’

8 Perlongher referred to Pollak’s ideas, so as to note that “the emergence of a manly image as opposed to an effeminate one within the homosexual realm” is at the root of the establishment of a ‘homosexual identity’ (Perlongher, 2008: 79-80).

9 See Braz 2007 A; 2007b; 2007c, 2008, 2009a and 2009b, 2010; Santos, 2007, 2008; Sívori, 2002, 2006, França, 2009, 2010.

“The images may evoke pleasure, disruption, carnivalization and upheaval, but one must have self-control to experience them; the stealthy surveillance on the part of security guards and remote-controlled cameras is on the prowl for those unable to control themselves” (Featherstone, 1995: 45).

The effect of ‘controlled de-control’ becomes clearer in Featherstone’s analysis of Renaissance fairs. He suggests we consider such events as both public markets and leisure places, characterized as local, festive, communal and “disconnected from the real world.” His intention is to relativize the uniqueness and the transgressive effects of experiences that might be ‘unstructured’ in postmodernity. “Today fun fairs and theme parks such as Disneyland still retain this aspect, albeit in a more controlled de-control of the emotions, where adults are given permission to behave like children again” (Featherstone, 1995: 114).

According to Simões, Featherstone’s ideas become relevant when he points out how important an effect consumption has on ‘life projects’ and the expression of ‘individuality’ today. Rather than popularizing and standardizing tastes and styles, the so-called ‘consumer society’ produces a complex set of differences and social distinctions (Simões, 1995).

Recent surveys conducted in Brazil have shown that there is a relationship between the segmentation and amalgamation of styles and identities associated with consumption, and the possibilities for experiencing and expanding sexual conventions and etiquette in a growing erotic market. According to Gregori, it is important to investigate the commercial aspect of eroticisms because “there is now an aggregation of experiences and practices that alternate efforts towards standardization and transgression in a complex manner.” (Gregori, 2010).

While analyzing the relationship between consumption and the so-called sexuality limits, Gregori refers to Fry’s argument that the recent targeting of beauty products at black people in Brazil is not a result of black middle-class demand, but a part of its formation (Fry, 2002). In light of this, I would argue that consumption at, and of, male sex clubs in São Paulo does not simply reflect its customers’ demands, but also creates them¹⁰ in a way.

10 This issue is well-explored by Isadora Lins França who, in her Doctorate research, discusses subjectification processes mediated by consumption among men who have affective/sexual relations with other men. She went to different places frequented by these men in São Paulo (França, 2010). For this issue, but regarding women that have affective/sexual relationships with other women in São Paulo,

Consequently, it is worth questioning what is being consumed in male sex clubs: evidently, it is the possibility of “being in a porn movie” as some informants told me. It is interesting to problematize how social conventions and difference markers¹¹ are activated in this process, and to consider what their potential effects on the contextual constitution of subjectivity and embodiment may be.

Controlling de-control

The literature dealing with North American and European sex clubs from the mid-1960s to 1980s shows that the alleged use of illicit recreational drugs and non-use of condoms were key elements in campaigns to close down the clubs in the early 1980s (Rubin, 1991; Bolton, 1995; Levine, 1998; Brodsky, 2008). With this in mind, my analysis draws a great deal from informants’ statements about the use of recreational drugs and condoms.

All the venues I went to prohibit the use of illegal recreational drugs. This is emphasized on their websites and also emerged in talks with their owners.

When talking about the ‘clones’¹² of the 1970s in the United States, Levine points out how important the use of recreational drugs was for them. He writes that clone sociability was based on four main things: “disco, drugs, dish and dick”. The drugs taken included marijuana, alcohol, cocaine and poppers¹³. The latter were used as aphrodisiacs and energizers for dancing (Levine, 1998: 71).

Some of my informants spoke about the use of poppers and other recreational drugs (mostly marijuana, but also cocaine) in sexual contexts. Although some had done, or seen other people do, poppers in sex clubs, it

see Facchini (2008).

11 I follow Gregori’s approach to the term ‘social difference markers’: “I employ the notion of social difference markers in order to avoid portraying differences of sex, class, race, or age as natural/dependent on nature. I use the term to emphasise that my work is related to research which highlights the social, cultural and political construction of these differences, and which sees the bonds between social difference markers as pillars that uphold social inequality.” (Gregori, 2010: 4)

12 According to Levine, ‘clones’ were “hypersexualized and hypermasculinized gay men who lived in large urban centers in the United States”. In order to shape their identities, “clones” used images and stereotypes associated with ‘traditional’ heterosexual masculinity and sought gratification in anonymous sex, recreational drug use and “big” parties (Levine, 1998: 7). Clones were “the most masculine of men”, but they sought sex with other men.

13 Amyl nitrate inhalants. They come in small bottles whose caps are popped off to inhale the chemicals (Levine, 1998).

is striking that in almost all reports, poppers were associated with private sexual encounters.

Drinking alcohol, by contrast, was said in interviews to be very common. During fieldwork I saw that this was true, especially in the bar area called ‘American bar’, where most mingling takes place.

However, those interviewed emphasized that even alcohol consumption involves or should involve a certain amount of control – one is expected to drink, especially at the bar, but one should not drink “too much”. Several informants said that you could be rejected from sex clubs for being drunk, and almost all reports of unpleasant experiences in these places were linked to drunkenness. Knowing how to behave in these venues includes knowing “how much to drink”.

As for condoms, all surveyed venues supplied them to customers. During fieldwork I was given condoms upon entering the venues, and sometimes got sachets of lubricant gel, too.

Informants told me that though some people do have anal sex without a condom, most regulars do not. Condom use was not common for oral sex, however.

Mestre¹⁴ was one of the few respondents who claimed to be a barebacker¹⁵ and said that there are others like himself who do not use condoms.

“They’re kinky, they’re transgressors, you know? Most of them, lots of them are into barebacking. Know what I mean? Well, it’s not conventional...but, there’s a lot of it here in Brazil.

[You said you consider yourself a barebacker, right?]

Yes

[Do you think that changes things for you at clubs?]

Yeah, there are a lot of people who wear condoms...but there are some who really enjoy sex without them.

[And, if you don’t mind my asking, how did you, hm...]

Man, it’s like, it’s...I’ll be honest with you: my cock goes soft when I put on a condom”

[Mestre, 36, Rio de Janeiro]

14 The names used here were invented in order to maintain the anonymity of informants.

15 According to Garcia (2009), ‘Barebacking’ means sex without a condom, but it is increasingly associated with intentional and continual non-use of condoms in sexual practices between men. Some say that it is now becoming an identity marker, especially in the United States and Europe.

However, even Mestre or the other few respondents who, despite not considering themselves barebackers, said they had had sex without a condom, generally referred to instances occurring outside of sex clubs - in private meetings, such as in motels. This was the case for Lauro:

“[What about wearing condoms?]

I wear them.

[Do you think most people do?]

Well, I think most still wear them. But, I have noticed an increasing number of non-users and of sex propositions not to. This much I have noticed. Guys who just go ahead and wanna do it without a condom and then you have to say, ‘no, I’ll put on a condom’, so...

[You always wear them, even for oral sex?]

No.

[But, for intercourse...]

Yes. Listen, usually younger guys, those who haven’t experienced the horror I have. They’re usually less scared. Sometimes even I feel a little tempted not to wear them because it all seems to be becoming a distant dream. There’s this impression that AIDS is no longer the monster, right? It was once, and it seems we’re forgetting...

[But have you ever had sex without a condom?]

Yes, I have. It was in a...in a motel, not in a club.”

[Lauro, 47, Sao Paulo-SP]

I heard both users and owners of sex clubs repeatedly reporting that patrons end up helping to monitor the use of condoms and even drugs. During fieldwork, several informants came to tell me when they witnessed someone proposing to have, or actually having, sex without a condom. It is a kind of “community control” (Facchini, 2008) which “the most assiduous attenders” helped to exercise.

My aim here is not to say whether condom use is frequent or not in sex clubs, or to discover the contextual factors that lead to such use or lack thereof. This issue falls outside the scope of this research. My goal is to show that condom (non)use and drug and alcohol consumption are subject to a kind of ‘control’ and ‘surveillance’ from the standpoint of their ‘excesses’.

Ultimately, the meaning of this control is to give clubs a sense of

legitimacy as a viable erotic market. There are similarities between this ethnography and a previous one of mine in which I showed that, among body modification adherents, enthusiasts and professionals in São Paulo, there was a profuse discursive appreciation of the ideas of hygiene and asepsis, as important elements for the legitimization of this universe as a professional field (Braz, 2006). Gregori's ideas on sexuality boundaries and politically correct eroticism are relevant here. When analyzing a sex shop set up by lesbians in San Francisco, she draws attention to the process of creating a "politically correct" kind of eroticism, in which actors defending sexual minorities in the US have a special role. There is an ongoing shift in the meaning of the transgression of eroticism towards care for a healthy body and strengthening of the *self*. With regard to sadomasochistic practices, Gregori perceives a kind of domestication or neutralization of their features and possibly "violent" content (Gregori, 2010: 172).

This leads me to the idea that the excesses being controlled in male sex clubs are practices that evoke a sense of loss of control – such as the use of illicit recreational drugs, alcohol, and the (non)use of condoms.

In sex clubs, sexual practices linked to the idea of limits or boundaries, such as fist-fucking (penetration using the fists) and other BDSM¹⁶ practices, are objects of specific and very refined bodily learning. Informants detailed a number of techniques and instruments whose operation must be learned so that fisting can be carried out safely. Consensus between fister and fisted is the most emphasized and valued rule. José provided some information about the practice:

"You can have a 'fisting master' who enjoys fisting his 'slave' as some sort of... punishment. Except that it's fake punishment, you see? Since, actually, the slave enjoys being fisted, and he is prepared for it...the master...prepares the person to be properly fisted.

[What is this preparation like?]

For fisting?

[Yes]

There are a lot of people who prepare others for it, and it is a slow kind of

¹⁶ According to Facchini (2008: 55), the acronym BDSM refers to at least three sets of erotic practices: "bondage and discipline", "domination and submission", and "sadism and masochism". Also see Zilli (2007).

preparation. There must be a sort of constancy. You must be willing to, I mean, not only those who prepare someone to be fisted, but also the ones who are being so. You get your anus dilated. You start with one finger, moving on to two fingers, three fingers, four fingers

[I get it...]

A little this way, a little that way, the anus is...the anus is a delicate place. There are people who are deep and narrow. Others can't dilate much. Some can dilate a great deal but they are shallow, there isn't much depth in them. And some people are deep and wide. What does it depend on? A good, confident partnership, the width of your hip bone, and whether you are able to get dilated. And it also depends on how you have been preparing yourself lately and on what your...your body is like. There are people who are deep, there are people who are not deep, you know? There are people who can take two hands, which is called double fisting, and even a foot, and there are those who cannot. So you can get someone prepared for fisting by doing it constantly, like every week. People can use dildos. I only got greater dilation after Amsterdam, back in 2000, using an inflatable dildo – ever seen one?

[I've seen some online.]

It's gradual, you dilate gradually, you increase the anal cavity that way. Back then I was practicing with this dildo, you know? You practice to get fisted

[José, 53, São Paulo]

People I interviewed who practiced fisting also stressed the need to use a lot of lube and surgical gloves during practice so as to prevent injuries. I saw both lube and surgical gloves being used in all my observations of fisting.

The *control* of potentially *uncontrolled* practices in sex clubs for men in São Paulo may be interpreted as a way for these establishments to acquire intelligibility and legitimacy – thus becoming *possible*. That does not mean that we cannot entertain the idea of 'transgression' as an extension of erotic norms from these establishments. But this transgression is *controlled*. And so are the 'excesses' of and in the bodies.

“Not all nudity shall be punished”

From my field observations and interviews, it is clear that one must have a body proportional to one's height in order to be desirable (“to be successful,”

“to do well”) in sex clubs. In this sense, body marks associated with aging and even obesity are also contextually relevant in the establishment of the “bodies that matter” (Butler, 2002) in the clubs.

In sex clubs, everyone is ‘manly’. But what does that tell me? Men who prefer to be with other men who “behave like men”, who are not ‘camp’ or ‘sissies’. The ‘manlier’ and the less ‘camp’ or ‘queer’ one is, the more successful, sought out and cruised one will be. This manliness is acted out repeatedly. According to my informants, it doesn’t matter whether someone acts ‘manly’ out of the clubs or not, but inside, they must. The point is that it is not only about looking virile. Physical attributes certainly matter: a man who is tall, good-looking, muscular, and well-endowed, and who keeps his body hair trim, is likely to be cruised by virtually everyone. But it is also important that his behavior, his gait and his voice are manly.

Many of the informants emphasized that in sex clubs the “bodies that matter most” are the same ones that matter in other contexts of sociability and flirting between men: the young, handsome, well-endowed and manly ones. However, I realized that this convention has nuances. The valuation of these bodily attributes in these venues does not mean that everyone must look like “Greek gods,” in the words of an employee I met. It is much more about control of body ‘excesses’ – the same approach as that taken to ‘uncontrolled’ practices. Superlative expressions such as “too fat,” “too large a gut,” “too old,” and “too effeminate” have been widely used to describe those who are not at all ‘successful’ in the establishments. Apart from sex practices involving decontrol, bodies also have to be kept under control, as far as their excesses go, with the purpose of making them desirable in male sex clubs. Thus, there is a control of bodily practices and body language, using boundaries.

As a porn movie

When mentioning their erotic preferences, the vast majority of informants pointed out that they preferred ‘manly’ men, using a series of stereotypical attributes and characteristics to explain what they meant. Moreover, the general perception is that this market of sex clubs is targeted at men interested in sex with other men considered ‘masculine’, ‘manly’.

Thus, gender acts as a marker informing the intelligibility of the subjects and ‘bodies that matter’ in the sex clubs, considering the proposed key which

refers to control of bodily practices. In this instance, bodies are controlled through gender - the 'excesses' to be contained are those that demonstrate 'effeminacy'.

Informants often acknowledged how prejudiced the rejection of 'effeminate' people is. But, in general, they justified their preference by saying that it regarded "sex drive" - as if sex drive had no socially or culturally informed context. However, according to theories inspired by Foucault, desire also exists within the discourses that name it. Desire might be considered discursively constructed as ineffable (not said, not verbalized, impossible to put into speech, and even prior to speech). This process has more to do with gender relations than is usually assumed.

In the preface to the 1979 issue of *Mother Camp*, in which Esther Newton examines the years following the completion of her fieldwork on "camping" and drag queens in the United States, she wrote about the recent appearance of 'clones' - studied by Levine (1998) - and about *leathers*.

"Over the past ten years there has been a huge struggle within the gay male community to end the stigma of effeminacy. Its most visible result was a change from effeminate styles to manly ones. Mind you, the word 'style' is used. While ten years ago the streets of Greenwich Village were packed with limp wrists and lined eyes, now what we see is a parade of young boys with shaved heads, leather jackets and neatly trimmed mustaches. 'Sissies' are out. Inevitably and sadly, the desire to be manly, pursued uncritically - just a few souls in the desert called for a feminist analysis - led to a proliferation of poorly imitated cowboys, fake lumberjacks, and, most ominously, imitations of Hell's Angels, police officers and even storm troopers. The SM crowd, formerly a small and marginal subset, is now ruling; its style and, to a lesser extent, its sexuality have captured the male gay imagination" (Newton, 1979: XIII).

Newton's stance echoes an interpretative possibility for 'manly gay males'. In an article that reviews part of the production of 'clones' in the 1970s, Tim Edwards points out that their "hyper-masculinity" and "exacerbated sexuality" generated much academic controversy. According to Edwards, radical feminists tended to view clones as examples of a "reiteration" of hierarchical gender norms (Edwards, 2005).

There are interpretative possibilities to the appropriation of masculine stereotypes by gay men. The appropriation can be seen as 'reiteration' of

hierarchical gender norms. I propose that these interpretations can be related to the idea of ‘male domination’, as formulated by Pierre Bourdieu (2000).

Bourdieu views male domination as a kind of “paradoxical symbolic violence,” insensitive and invisible to its victims, which perpetuates itself by transforming a “cultural arbitrariness” into something that can be taken as ‘natural’. Resuming the feminist debate over nature and culture, Bourdieu asserts that it is not nature that shapes culture, but culture that constructs nature. ‘Male domination’ occurs through the legitimization of a relationship of domination by means of an inscription into a biological nature that itself is a naturalized social construction. It is the naturalization of gender-based asymmetries that makes male domination seemingly universal, and this naturalization is shared both by its “perpetrators” and its “victims” (Bourdieu, 2000). Thus, the work seems close to discussions held by post-structuralist theoreticians, who question the view of gender as a cultural interpretation of sex, since even the latter is culturally constituted as ‘natural’. That is not quite what Bourdieu does, however, as noted by Mariza Corrêa (1999).

In his book regarding the appropriation of ‘manhood’ by homosexuals, Bourdieu takes up a stance that seems quite similar to feminist anti-pornography positions, such as Catharine MacKinnon’s (which Bourdieu acknowledges in the book). He argues that homosexuals often apply the principles of ‘male domination’ to themselves. For example, the way lesbian couples often play male and female roles and sometimes take the assertion of manhood to the extreme, as a reaction against the previously dominant ‘effeminate’ style. (Bourdieu, 2000: 145).

Corrêa writes:

“Here, the same logic of the criticism directed at feminist theoreticians is reproduced: If homosexuals are ‘manly’, it is because they embody ‘dispositions’ of the dominant *habitus* when they were socialized as heterosexuals, thus distinguishing themselves from dominated categories – the effeminate. If they are ‘effeminate’, it is because, in addition to embodying these dispositions, they apply them to a body which would suddenly be alien (their own) and now part of the dominated category in the M/F ratio. There is no escaping the pitfalls of the dominant *habitus* - tautologically, it always dominates” (Correa, 1999: 50).

A second – and, to me, more interesting – understanding of the valuation of virility stereotypes in male sex clubs is one that, whilst recognizing

its relationship to gender conventions (and hence to power relations), views its appropriations as possible performative displacements from the socially widespread norms of gender (Butler, 2003). Thus, some poststructuralist ideas may provide a basis for questioning. I agree with Judith Butler here:

“The ‘presence’ of so-called heterosexual conventions within homosexual contexts, as well as the proliferation of specifically gay discourses of sexual difference, as in the case of “butch” and “femme” as historical identities of sexual style, cannot be explained as chimerical representations of originally heterosexual identities. And neither can they be understood as the pernicious insistence of heterosexist constructs within gay sexuality and identity. The repetition of heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories. The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of “the original”...reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original” (Butler, 2003: 56-57).

Instead of rigidly separating the ‘manly clone’ from the ‘camp’ style of Newton’s study on drag-queens, Levine sees the appropriation of male stereotypes among clones as a kind of camp style as well – when they consciously appropriate traditionally male signs, they express almost ‘parodistic’ references to stereotyped traditional masculinity, and at the same time embrace the stereotype. Once more, the ambivalence: “The clone style was parody and emulation simultaneously” (Levine, 1998: 59).

“In their attempt to define themselves as male, gay men chose an ideology of masculinity related to the physical attributes and the style of manual laborers – a look associated with ‘the Marlboro man.’” (Halkitis, 2000: 132).

This idea is strengthened when one considers that sociability in sex clubs is not restricted to sex and cruising. There is some separation between the bar areas and the spaces one might call ‘practice areas’. According to Levine, when not cruising, clones, who frequented leather sex clubs, would abandon the hypermasculine posture, using “typically camp” language: feminine names and pronouns, for example. When cruising, however, their

mannerism expressed typically male signals - “spatial distance, facial blankness, deep voices” (Levine, 1998: 82).

In the field, I realized that a similar separation operates in sex clubs in São Paulo. At the bar, people do not always “act manly,” as one informant pointed out. The very idea of ‘acting manly’ implies a certain notion of theatricality. Many respondents’ statements indicate that virility valuation in sex clubs has a lot to do with “fantasy”¹⁷.

From my informant’s point of view, it is not about asserting a stable male ‘essence’, but rather ‘performing’ it, or making use of precisely those attributes that can be read as virile, from a hegemonic point of view, during erotic situations.

Perlongher’s idea of “libidinous tensors” introduces an interesting interpretive possibility; it is through these that “social difference markers – among them gender, age, class, status, colour, and race – which contribute to the formation of inequality and abusive relations, also act in the formation of that which provides pleasure” (Gregori, 2010: 4). Eroticism, as seen from a gender perspective, is indeed – and intriguingly – about both “pleasure” and “danger” (Vance, 1984).

Levine noted how minimized sociability was in sex venues he studied in New York in the 1970s and 1980s - conversations occurred at the bar in sex clubs and in the common areas in saunas, but men were there “primarily to cruise,” (Levine, 1998: 82) something which they did in silence. When speaking about Catacombs, a widely-known sex club in San Francisco in the 1970s, Rubin also said that silence ruled in the ‘practice rooms’, creating an almost ritualistic atmosphere (Rubin, 1991).

All male sex clubs in São Paulo have areas in low light, for sex and cruising, which are gloomy and quiet - the only sounds are those from movies being shown on TVs, the music on the speakers and, especially, groans and mutterings. There is a lot of cruising, in a ceaseless search for other bodies to touch and be touched by. The exchange of glances is essential, informing whether or not a flirt will be reciprocated. Perlongher (2008) had already said that there is no better way to “study trottoir” than “doing trottoir.” I, who

17 “To talk about culture is to talk sense. The meaning is constructed, often from related imaginary referents. Is there is anything more imaginary and, by extension, more cultural than fantasy? Well, then, fantasy is one of the factors that allows cultural and social approach to BDSM, reflects cultural imagery and is built around BDSM as a complement to the establishment of role dynamics (Viñuales, 2008: 14).

was not cruising in the clubs, had to learn ‘the proper way’ to decline flirts. Paraphrasing Leandro de Oliveira, I realized that sex clubs also have their own “gestures that matter” (Oliveira, 2006). Using the emic metaphor “it feels like a porn movie,” I would say that when two or more join and start a ‘scene’ (be it penetration, oral sex or masturbation), the others will stop by their side and, sometimes, join in. New pairs or groups might also pinch off, constituting other ‘scenes’.

The choice of participating in a scene or just being a spectator is determined, in general, by whether or not someone is seen as desirable. From what informants said, one might suggest that desirability is informed, broadly, by appearance, bodily attributes and masculine attitudes. The subjects participating effectively in sex scenes in these clubs are intelligible within reiterated conventions (Butler, 2003) that create a ‘manly’ subject of desire and that are materialized in a body that is masculine, attractive, and desirable. The others are compulsory voyeurs, making up an audience.

In the halls of “silence, sweat and sex” of the clubs I went to, a sort of ‘hyper-masculinity’ is performed, repeated, and embodied. A hyper-masculine subject of desire is acted out bodily and gesturally in these contexts. Once more, the idea of control can be used. Bodily performances are controlled in the sex rooms so that the attitude (or the ‘posture’) evokes ‘manhood’.

In a club one Saturday night, I saw some men leaning against the wall in the smoky gloom; their postures, with their legs on the wall, reminded me of the hustlers portrayed by Perlongher: “manlier than the most heterosexual of men, caricatures when it comes to their manhood” (Perlongher, 2008: 100).

Reflecting on the possible effects of the contemporary market of erotic goods, notably sex shops frequented mostly by middle- and upper-class women in São Paulo, Gregori underlines something that can be thought of, in terms of gender, as a kind of destabilization.

“By comparison with the image that other countries (especially Spain) have of the Brazilian female prostitute – as “caring, sweet and docile” (Piscitelli, 2005) – it seems that these boundaries are indeed being blended: the middle-class heterosexual woman enjoys resembling a ‘slut’, whereas the prostitute seems to wish to be a sort of ‘Amélia’¹⁸ (Gregori, 2007: 11).

18 This refers to the song “Ai, que saudades da Amélia,” released by Ataulfo Alves e Mário Lago in 1942. The lyrics describe an idealized submissive woman resigned to her chores.

Here is an interesting perspective: in a way, sex club patrons use the same bodily acts as those that Perlongher's hustlers availed themselves of in the 1980s to evoke virility. The difference is that they are not hustlers, but men "fantasizing about being in a porn movie."

It is possible, perhaps, to see the performativity of gender stereotypes in male sex clubs as potentially subversive, since it exposes 'manhood' as a kind of pastiche. Despite being based on pervasive gender conventions of masculinity, 'butch man versus butch man' could be taken as an example of performative subversion (in the sense of potentially subversive bodily acts) of gender norms. The ambivalence in its tension, however, remains.

Last takes

When I named my ethnography 'In Low Light', I was clearly referring to the fact that lighting in male sex clubs tends to be dim. What is most interesting about experiencing the dimness is that the initial sensation of darkness, as one walks into the gloom, wears out as one's eyesight gets accustomed to it and the shaded contours turn into recognizable images. This investigation stemmed from a possible problem: does the valuation of virility stereotypes in male gay sex clubs involve re-assertion of, or displacement from, gender conventions? The investigation has ended with ambivalence - the answer to that question depends, ultimately, on how we conceptualize gender relations and their possible effects. It is certainly possible to 'turn the lights on' in the sex rooms in male clubs and see the reiteration of hierarchizing gender norms. But it is also possible to stay in the penumbra, illuminating some of its parts and questioning whether or not, after all, these practices *in low light* can be seen as potentially disconcerting towards their own conventions.

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