



TACIT SUBJECTS

Carlos Ulises Decena

BELONGING AND SAME-SEX
DESIRE AMONG DOMINICAN
IMMIGRANT MEN

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Belonging and Same-Sex Desire

among Dominican Immigrant Men

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Carlos Ulises Decena

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*Para Alfredo,
compañero al andar,
por enseñarme que lo
que más importa
es la gente.*

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INTRODUCTION

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ESTA OBRA HA SIDO IMPRESA EN
UNA EDICIÓN DE AMIGOS QUE
CONSTA DE SÓLO VEINTICINCO
EJEMPLARES, NUMERADOS DEL
1 AL 25 Y CINCO EJEMPLARES
NUMERADOS DEL I AL V, CON LA
FIRMA DEL AUTOR.

THIS WORK HAS BEEN PRINTED
IN AN EDITION FOR FRIENDS
MADE UP OF TWENTY-FIVE COPIES,
NUMBERED FROM 1 TO 25 AND
FIVE COPIES NUMBERED FROM
I TO V, WITH THE AUTHOR'S
SIGNATURE.¹

In 1943, barely a decade into the bloody regime of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, the established editor, poet, and essayist Pedro René Contín Aybar published the first Dominican novel with a male homoerotic theme: *Biel, el Marino*. As far as examples of the genre go, Contín Aybar's piece is short for a novel: in fourteen pages, the narrator recounts his relationship with Biel, a seaman. The specifics of the story and the lyrical prose the author uses to tell it deserve literary critical treatment, but my interest in *Biel* resides in its distribution and the scandal it provoked. As the prefatory comment above says, an edition of twenty-five copies and five extras, all numbered and signed by the author to his "friends," made up the first edition of this literary work. Nevertheless, the novel and its subject matter titillated the imaginations of many who did not read it. As Andrés L. Mateo explains, "Todavía en los años sesenta duraba el resplandor del escándalo asordinado que levantó" (The muted scandal it caused lived even into the sixties).² Mateo suggests that the scandal was provoked mainly by Biel, a character "que muchos decían conocer" (whom many claimed to know) and by a piece of writing that "todos . . . conocía[n] de oído, pocos lo había alcanzado a leer" (many . . . knew by ear, few had the chance to read).³ In 1982, an edition of Contín Aybar's *Poemas* was published and edited by Víctor Villegas. A reproduction of the last of the copies with roman numerals (*Ejemplar V*) was made

available in this compilation thirty-nine years after the novel's initial publication. Villegas provided no commentary or reference to *Biel's* controversial history. Though Mateo suggests that *Biel* caused a scandal because of its topic, what may be ultimately most scandalous is the way this short piece of writing, which was accessible only to a select group of people, worked its way into literary circles of writers and critics who gossiped about it, wondered who the characters were, claimed they knew one of them, and claimed they knew the novel's contents "by ear" without having read it.⁴

We will never know who Contín Aybar's twenty-five (or thirty) readers were, what they were like, or what linked them to him, just as most of this book's readers will not know who were the twenty-five participants in the research leading to the study you now read. After all, the first and last names settled in these pages are pseudonyms, and details about the men's lives have been modified to protect them from adverse effects from their involvement with this project.

This book describes and performs connections that cannot be said. It is about what words say, but also about the way words produce circuitries of sociality. To the degree that it participates in that which it describes, this book is an invitation to continue a conversation.

Tacit Subjects is a study based on autoethnography, participant observation, and twenty-five retrospective life-history interviews with Dominican immigrant men in New York City. It argues that when they moved to New York, they moved into a site in an increasingly transnational Dominican society, and they continued to juggle their proximity with fellow compatriots in the city with the advantages and challenges of pursuing a life as men who love and have sex with men.⁵ The participants offer great insight into the worlds they straddled and struggled with, and the book develops concepts informed by feminist, queer, ethnic, and cultural studies to aid in understanding how invested these men were in stretching, refashioning, and reproducing the structures of possibility and constraint in their lives.

This study is composed of seven chapters. The first, which bears the title of the work, is its point of departure. The Spanish-language grammatical concept of *sujeto tácito* draws attention to the informants' negotiation of information about their lives with families, friends, and associates before and after migration. It foregrounds the importance of unspoken bases of connectivity for the making and sustenance of socialities. While sexuality is often implicated in what I call "tacit subjects," this chapter stresses a key insight this book will develop: what binds people to one another and what makes

networks, solidarities, and resource sharing possible and sustainable are forms of connection that cannot be fully articulated but can be shared, intuited, and known. The informants in this book are astute readers of the worlds they traversed, and this book makes it possible for me to share some of what I learned from their stories.

The book explores different aspects of the narratives, and readers will encounter moments when what is tacit is central to a given situation. Sometimes I stress its importance, but my overall interest is in drawing out the implications of what these men said and thought for the choices they made, the values they challenged, and the values they upheld. Thus, the analytical work that the book performs and the concepts it develops aid in understanding what is at stake for the interlocutors in any given interview exchange. My narrative voice shifts in emphasis, sometimes focusing on migration and survival, and sometimes underscoring what was at stake in self-presentation in daily life or in narrated sexual encounters. This movement in focus refuses the title of this book as a closed frame. Concepts may help us think through life, but we are always more; we always exceed what can be said about us. I follow these men's preoccupations to highlight how much more they are than any of the categories that attach to them. Indeed, the central theme of this book is the intensity and unease with which these men grappled with their identities and their refusal to let any category or imperative rule their choices, despite how limited they may have been.

The six chapters that make up the rest of the study are divided in pairs, organized following three insights: (1) moving to New York means moving to another part of a Dominican world, and these men juggled their continuing connections to fellow Dominicans after migration to critique and rethink their identities; (2) in their past socializations and present negotiations of daily life, the body and the regulation of its significations functioned to communicate, demand legitimacy, and create boundaries with others; and (3) narrating sexual practices allowed these men to elaborate on their values, revisions of traditional Dominican identity, and erotic investments in masculinity and power.

I appear in this study as narrator, social analyst, translator, and participant. But the translation happens long before I put English and Spanish side by side, as I do at the beginning of this introduction; the selection and recounting of specific aspects of a person's life history are acts of interpretation and translation. As a Dominican immigrant man who self-identifies as gay, as someone who experienced firsthand the subordination and denigration

of his native language in the United States, and as a person linked to the networks about which I write throughout this book, I soon realized that writing it demanded a different kind of social and cultural analysis, one for which I could draw inspiration from decades of writing by artists and critics of color.⁶ All of the translations are mine, but having the Spanish original and the English translation side by side illustrates the cohabitation of these languages in what the men said and in how I analyzed what they said. It also gives readers access to the materials to evaluate on their own, which may lead them to disagree with my translations or capture interpretive nuances in the movement between languages that escape me. To the degree that exposure to both languages allows the reader more than one way to access what the informants said, *Tacit Subjects* is an open text.

Each part of the book begins with an introductory section that is either autobiographic or autoethnographic and that acts as counterpoint to the chapters that follow it. A counterpoint emerges from the interaction of several voices and registers. They may momentarily repeat or invert what another voice has presented, but contrapuntal music is not bound to strict repetition; its richness derives from the densities of sound with unexpected points of pressure, contact, release, and silence. By including these alternative ways to enter this project, I insert my voice and parts of my history in the ongoing conversation and thus position research as an activity that is embedded in dynamics of power, legitimation, and professional mobility, but also one that partakes of belonging, and that uses language to open up possibilities of connection. This polyphony of voices, which includes mine, constitutes *Tacit Subjects* as an expressive and critical artifact that relishes in the ability of words to establish and sustain affective and political networks as well as to open up possibilities of transit between different forms of being—words as worlds.

Tacit Subjects is about the messiness of daily life and the joys, laughter, struggles, and possibilities of connection, belonging, and complicity with social hierarchy that we can glimpse if we remain vigilant of the ways research is embedded in power. The analysis of the stories these men shared with me attends to the dynamics of the interview encounter itself: to the moments when they positioned me and the project, letting me know that they knew how the interview fit my career aspirations; to the moments when they conveyed the closeness of friendship through jokes; and to the moments when they enlisted (or hailed) me in their criticism of fellow Dominicans. Throughout this study, the interview encounter is an event that makes

it possible to interpret individual lives, but it also becomes a mechanism for the informants to critique me, themselves, their friends, their networks, gay communities, and Dominican society. In short, constructing a self was part of the project, but it was, like all self-making in this study, a collaborative project possible given the conditions of where we were.

Tacit Subjects stages, performs, and interrogates interlocution through its analysis of the interview encounter, that quintessential moment of apparently totalizing revelation of the self before someone else. Its protagonists have a lot to teach us with their words, with stories, with insights, and with the bits and pieces of their lives that they narrated. This study promotes intellectual activism committed to think with what people say as much as it might think with self-designated theory. The aims are to point to the richness and complexity of what happens when people encounter someone in an interview; to demonstrate that what people say merits as much careful attention as any other form of literary and artistic expression, performance, or piece gathered in the historical archive; to model a critique that listens to how people view the world and that never assumes language to be transparent. To borrow Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé's words, this book "was born from the commotion that is to listen—to truly listen—to someone else's voice."⁷ It is an initial step toward a critique on the move,⁸ an agile hermeneutic that draws insight from the way everyday people interpret and theorize their own lives, from the ways they transit through the world and from their quotidian contestation and complicity with structures of oppression.

::: Answering Hamlet

The impulse to write about these men sprung from living in New York City from 1997 to 2009. Although the bulk of the research for the book was conducted between 2001 and 2002 (and the majority of the interviews were completed before 9/11), many of the men with whom I spoke were friends or acquaintances of mine long before and after our interview exchange. I experienced and engaged the city through the networks of (mostly) Dominican self-identified gay and bisexual men I was meeting, men whose lives, loves, and struggles I shared and learned from. An important turning point for me was becoming involved in federally funded studies on HIV/AIDS among Latino gay and bisexual men. As a sex interviewer, outreach worker, and project director, I was educated in the conceptualization, design, implementation, and administration of public health research while being schooled

in the challenges Latino men faced in their lives and with the spaces of sociality available in the city. I learned about the experiences of men like myself through one of the few mechanisms that made access to financial and institutional support available for such work. For me, as for other Latino/a intellectuals emerging out of the HIV/AIDS research industry, the perception of risk and the experience of marginality in these communities became a condition of possibility for my work, for the networks I built, and for the coalitions that supported the research I conducted.

While being involved in HIV/AIDS research and activism, I learned about the degree to which many of the positions about identity and sexuality adopted by men like those I interviewed were seen as suspect or pathological. For the participants in this study, living was about dealing with conditions stacked up against their survival and success as immigrants, as men who love and have sex with other men, and as parents, sons, brothers, friends, and providers in the lives of those whom they loved. Yet their candor in relegating information about their lives to the realm of the tacit, or calibrating their bodies as they moved or interacted with others to achieve relative masculine normativity, were initially challenging for me as a scholar, an activist, and a gay man. After all, wasn't it precisely this inability to come out, this inability to own their sexualities, that was holding these men back from organizing and possibly even putting them at risk for HIV/AIDS?

My initial interpretations of what these men were saying found their echo in the voices of colleagues at conferences, some of whom went so far as to question these men's politics, as well as mine. Some argued that the informants' not wanting to say that they were gay and their degree of investment in normative masculinity signaled denial. These men had psychological problems. By presenting their views without registering my disapproval, I was echoing and possibly espousing these strategies.

I listened to my colleagues, listened to interviews repeatedly, and reread transcripts. By letting these voices live in my ears and mind, I realized that my interpretive praxis had to change. As long as I let my own investments in existing models of normative gayness color my interpretations, I would see these men only as failures. But these men survived, and I was a witness to that survival as they faced me as well as themselves and their pasts, presents, and futures. They spoke.

As I listened more and more, the lives of these men began to resonate with larger themes in Dominican history and culture. After all, they had

been born in the Dominican Republic, and their plights were in many ways similar to those of other immigrants in the United States. Could the lives of these men, gay or bisexual identified, Dominican, and immigrant (who may appear to be so particular as to be of interest only to a specialist like me), speak to all Dominicans, or speak to everyone?

I began to formulate the question differently, inspired by feminist intersectional analysis:⁹ when one straddles so many worlds, demands, investments, expectations, and communities, what are the conditions of possibility for being? Antonio E. de Moya, a social psychologist and pioneering analyst of Dominican sexuality, shared the following insight with me:

If Shakespeare presents Hamlet's dilemma as "to be *or* not to be: that is the question," Dominicans seem to have resolved it when they say: "to be *and* not to be: that is the answer." We don't seem to believe in a disjunction but in a conjunction. If you offer me A and B, why not give me both? Why choose only one of the two?¹⁰

This statement speaks to many of the paradoxes of Dominican history: a country that yearned for independence in the nineteenth century but had elites who did not believe in the viability of that autonomy and sought protection from more powerful nations; a society openly admiring of everything foreign ("xenophilic," as de Moya told me once) but ambivalent or disdainful toward everything Haitian; an independent society living under the economic and political influence of the United States, an "unsovereign state" somewhere between the Cuban revolution and the commonwealth status of Puerto Rico;¹¹ and a people whose history oscillates between the rebellion of Caliban and the servility of Ariel in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.¹²

De Moya's provocative framing of a Dominican answer to Hamlet's dilemma echoes the way this study responds to that earlier self who sought pride and visibility but found something else altogether when he encountered the men whose thoughts fill these pages: if one is so much more than the labels one uses to define oneself, then although the mandate to be something versus something else may be justified by political necessity, labels cannot fully define anyone, let alone dictate how anyone should live. It is not hypocritical to navigate and work through the contradictions of living in and through various identities, positionalities, and commitments. But it is totalitarian to demand one choice versus another, or to suture moral imperatives to identities. To the degree that the analysis in this book registers

the way that individual choices, decisions, and interpretations were formulated (given conditions these men could not control), the realities with which these men wrestled individually resonate with the limited choices and struggle for self-determination of other Dominicans and of Dominican society as a whole.

::: *Razón de estar*: Bodies in Places

Tacit Subjects argues that identities are lived in their partiality and polyvalence but that living is centrally about contestation among differently situated actors who claim one category. Though they reproduce hierarchy and division, identities also have the potential to be “enabling, enlightening, and enriching structures of attachment and feeling.”¹³ “*Razón de estar*” refers to an interpretive praxis that insists that self-making is based on the construction of positionalities that emerge from interlocking, interarticulating structures that function as situated conditions of possibility and constraint for the protagonists and narrators of the stories I analyzed.

Capturing the partiality and relationality of identities as they are lived and narrated demands that we capture “being” as a movement without end, as an enabling transitivity. This study pushes against the expressive and political limitations of the English language by arguing that English misses a distinction between forms of the verb “to be” that are crucial to capture being as movement. The literary and cultural critic José Quiroga offers an astute distinction that helps articulate the analytic strategy of this book:

Spanish makes a distinction between two forms of the English verb “to be”: *ser* implies a permanent essence, whereas *estar* is a verb of position. It is the verb of position that interests me here. Spaces portrayed in Latino art . . . are not marked with their own specific borders—they are all (*están*) in constant interrelation with each other. Static definitions of culture clash with a sexuality mobilized by different positionalities. This negotiation allows us to see characters in a state of “becoming” . . . possibilities and not fixed identities.¹⁴

“To be” will not do anymore, for the structures of signification of the English language may be part of the problem of capturing identities as forms of “becoming,” as always relational and always in process. *Tacit Subjects* offers an analysis that takes to heart Quiroga’s emphasis on the verb of position. We do not need to abandon identities but rather need to better grasp the

mediations and intersubjective conditions of their emergence. The proposal this text makes is to pursue a radically contextual analysis of the mediations of identity as the transit between *ser* and *estar*.

The argument repeatedly highlights the transitivity of subjectivity. The anthropologist and philosopher Rodolfo Kusch articulated the dichotomy of *ser* and *estar* as an “American” dialectic,¹⁵ one that refuses synthesis or transcendence and insists on the cohabitation and co-presence of different forms of being.¹⁶ He explains:

La intuición que bosquejo aquí oscila entre dos polos. Uno es el que llamo el ser, o ser alguien, y que descubro en la actividad burguesa de la Europa del siglo XVI y, el otro, el estar, o estar aquí, que considero como una modalidad profunda de la cultura precolombina. . . . Ambas son dos raíces profundas de nuestra mente mestiza.

The intuition I am sketching here moves between two poles. One is the one I call to be [*ser*] or to be someone, which I discover in the activity of the European bourgeoisie of the XVI century and the other, the to be [*estar*], or to be here, which I consider a deep modality of pre-Columbian cultures. . . . Both are two deep roots of our mestizo mind.¹⁷

Living and working in the Argentina of the 1950s and 1960s, Kusch was a forerunner of critiques of “the politics of location” that circulated internationally in the 1980s,¹⁸ but he was not a North American or European writing about Asia, Latin America, or Africa. Kusch was an Argentine of German ancestry, writing about indigenous populations in his own country and in other parts of South America. As the semiotician Walter Mignolo writes, “The people and communities he contacted, both historically and at that time, were simultaneously ‘they’ and ‘we’ vis-à-vis himself. . . . And Kusch’s ‘selfsame’ was also his ‘other,’ in that he had grown up amid the fragments of the European tradition at the colonial periphery.”¹⁹ The conditions for the production of Kusch’s work led him to an intellectual project to explore “‘America’ as a locus of enunciation,” a project summarized in its early stages by the coexistence of “cognitive patterns of dealing with new situations, allowing for creativity, resistance, and survival very much shaped by the colonial difference.”²⁰ The idea behind Kusch’s early formulations is not that one cognitive pattern takes over for or annihilates a second one but that the forms of thinking and being that emerge from the aftermath of the

colonial encounter in the Americas are necessarily split, and that no pure “being someone” (*ser*) is possible without accounting for one’s being somewhere, for its location (*donde está*).

Mapping the circuitry that compels or impels movement, toward becoming something different from what a person has been taught he is, points to the way in which *Tacit Subjects* transforms existing narratives of queer migration and is in dialogue with emerging scholarship on this topic.²¹ For the informants, moving to New York City is part of a larger process of pluralization in the possibilities for being ironically provoked by the historical desire of the U.S. and the Dominican states to appease the political turmoil that threatened to make “another Cuba” of this country in the 1960s.²² The choice to move to New York City to find oneself in another site of a Dominican transnational world points to these men’s investment in being part of ethnoracial networks, to transit in worlds where the expansion of a person’s erotic, social, cultural, and economic prospects are possible without rupturing these contested and conflicted but cherished and necessary connections. For this reason, *Tacit Subjects* wrestles with the ways gay and bisexual men continue to critique, reformulate, and practice belonging in Dominican worlds. In an ironic twist in the story of U.S. empire in Latin America, the transnationalization of Dominican society prevented “another Cuba” but pluralized, exploded, and continued to put pressure on the national polity through the disarticulation of *dominicanidad* (Dominican identity) from the geopolitical space of one nation and one state. Thus, the multiplication of sites for “being” Dominican undermined the hegemony of official and nationalist subject forms. In other words, the escape valve to brewing tensions and social conflicts, which was the massive exodus of Dominicans beginning in the 1960s, has ironically lessened the grip of the Dominican state over the projects of being of its populace.

Written by someone living in an officially (and stubbornly) monolingual country, *Tacit Subjects* borrows from Spanish to challenge, expand, revise, and present alternatives to the accepted geopolitics of feminist and queer knowledge production by fashioning concepts that attend to the specificity of the experiences being narrated. But this is no naive celebration of the Spanish language. Spanish, like English, has been and continues to be a language of conquest and colonization in the American continent. Nevertheless, the subordinate structural position of the Spanish language in U.S. society at large and in the academy gives an edge to *Tacit Subjects* as a political intervention that is (*está*) in the United States.

Students of Dominican cultures will recognize this study as one of emerging efforts to add nuance and complexity to the study of migration and transnationalism among these populations.²³ For a long time, Dominicans appeared to be the quintessential transnationals, but as Silvio Torres-Saillant has put it in his trenchant critiques of this trend, there is “nothing to celebrate” about Dominican transnationality.²⁴ This book is also part of ongoing and emerging feminist and queer Dominican criticism.²⁵ It contributes to U.S. Latino studies by addressing and analyzing at length the conflicted ways in which immigrant men who self-identify as gay or bisexual deal with their fellow Dominicans and official notions of national identity and society. The study goes beyond adding sexuality to the intersectional analysis of Latina/o experience: through the stories these men tell, this book explores the ways that differences in class, race, and education shape their relations with their compatriots; instead of taking dominicanidad as a given, *Tacit Subjects* focuses on the ways these men contest, reproduce, and reformulate it in New York.²⁶ Though it values the impulse of Latino studies scholarship to document the experiences of these populations, *Tacit Subjects* does so and interrogates critically the technologies used to produce this knowledge. Furthermore, this book bridges Latin American and U.S. Latino studies by addressing the afterlife of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin American nation-state in contemporary immigrant lives. Moreover, it bridges ethnic and area studies as it brings the geopolitics of U.S. imperial designs to bear on the daily lives of immigrant men whose racialization in the United States has everything to do with encountering and learning to interpret their lives through linkages and exchanges with African Americans and Puerto Ricans.

Tacit Subjects contributes, offers alternative ways of seeing and producing knowledge for intellectual labor at the crossroads of transnational feminist and queer studies,²⁷ and promotes intersectional analyses that honor and build on decades of activist scholarship by illustrating the ways immigrant men negotiate interlocking and interarticulating oppressions and sometimes uphold them because of their investment in patriarchal privileges. It extends feminist transnational critiques and feminist-inspired masculinity studies into a consideration of immigrant men’s investment in male privilege while also demonstrating what investments in masculinity have to do with power and legitimacy, as well as with establishing, sustaining, and regulating socialities. *Tacit Subjects* also contributes a critical social scientific account of transnationalism within the United States to emerging scholarship

on transnational queer sexualities.²⁸ It offers another view of “gay New York”²⁹—one that sees the struggles for respect, belonging, and survival within immigrant communities at the center and the dazzle and pride of the gay metropolis out of the corner of its eye or, as Rafael Damirón put it so admirably, “de soslayo.”³⁰

::: The Study

The analysis in this study draws from twenty-five semi-structured retrospective life-history interviews conducted between May 2001 and May 2002 with self-identified Dominican gay and bisexual men.³¹ It also draws selectively from an interview with an informant who self-identified as transsexual; excerpts from this interview are highlighted in chapter 4 because they are relevant to that discussion. Given the specificities of this informant’s experience, however, extended analysis of this narrative will be published separately. The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to two hours. I conducted most of them in Spanish, though informants and I also used English, code switching, and Spanglish. Each participant and I discussed a consent form, which they signed. Participants received a small monetary compensation. In addition, I conducted archival work at the Dominican Studies Institute at City College, City University of New York. Finally, I complemented these interviews and archival work with ethnographic observations at general Dominican community events and at formal and informal events attended by Dominican and other Latino homosexual men in New York City during the research period. These events included gay and Dominican Pride Day parades, poetry readings at Alianza Dominicana, organizing meetings, and informal gatherings among informants, friends, and acquaintances. As I explained earlier, in the course of data analysis, autobiography and autoethnography were also integrated into the study.

The men ranged in age from their early twenties to their late fifties, though most were in their mid-thirties. Most had immigrated to the United States as adults, except for one informant who had migrated at age fifteen. 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 from 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 Dominican communities in the United States in general, where almost half of all people above the age of twenty-five had not completed high school as of 2000.³² Socioeconomic backgrounds varied. Most informants 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 mobility without the financial security to sustain it. A few informants described themselves as working class. Others described themselves as upper class.

Most participants described a deterioration of their class position upon arrival to the United States, partly due to their experience as undocumented immigrants. Many of them arrived in the United States with either tourist visas or work permits that expired after their arrival. About two-thirds were undocumented. The lack of documents made it difficult to work in jobs with benefits or union protections. Indeed, most of the undocumented (and even some of the documented) men had to work independently or work in restaurants, retail and sales, or jobs in the ethnic economy in Washington Heights. A few men with advanced degrees fared better than others. Still, most informants with professional credentials had not been able to work in their fields of expertise, even after changing from undocumented to documented status. Some had not been interested in continuing their careers. Others were unable to pass the examinations required to have their advanced degrees validated. The characteristics of the job participation of these men are consistent with findings about Dominican populations in general in 2000, where only 17.3 percent of all members of this population worked in high-skilled, technical, or professional occupations.³³

Being a member of this community and being known already as an HIV researcher influenced who agreed to participate in the study. Having worked as an HIV researcher shaped the characteristics of the men I approached for interviews and the men who agreed to be interviewed. I was acquainted with most of the men interviewed because they were friends or acquaintances of mine, community activists, or frequent attendees at community events. I also met informants through my work in AIDS-prevention research. Finally, I established connections with informants through people who had already participated in the study and who volunteered to recruit their friends.

The chapters in part I of the book explore the men's existing linkages with fellow Dominicans and with Dominican identity. Providing an alternative to accounts that view gay men as having to "choose" between biological

kin and other kinship formations, chapter 2, “Moving Portraits,” argues that biological families, as well as gay and other non-kin Dominican social networks, made possible the migration and survival of the informants in New York City. To the degree that these men, in their stories about arriving and settling in Nueva York, accounted for their circulation between two sites in Dominican transnational cultures, the three case studies analyzed point to the ways these men experienced, participated in, traversed, and negotiated the regulation of their bodies on multiple and often disparate discursive registers. Although their telling of the stories that follow attests to the many obstacles they overcame, their ingenuity in the face of adversity, and ultimately their success, their stories are not the stories of young men unshackled from the binds and pains of biological family by the vicissitudes spawned by transformations in the capitalist world economy. Instead, the stories in the chapter illustrate the ways these men wrestled and straddled multiple and conflicting demands, prohibitions, intimacies, and affective investments. Apart from introducing the reader to some of the men I interviewed, these narratives offer portraits of the relations of individuals and collectivities in order to demonstrate that self-realization as a man who loves men does not require moving away from the biological family. Indeed, these narratives show that as individuals move and evolve, so do their families.

Migration, settlement, and ongoing interactions with Dominicans and other populations in New York City set in motion a process of recognition, evaluation, and self-fashioning premised on the vibrancy of and need for transnational networks of support and the informants’ growing awareness of themselves as racialized subjects. Geographical displacement and the immediacy of racial and class subordination provoke a *desencuentro*, or failed encounter, with dominicanidad in New York City. This failed encounter is the focus of the third chapter, “Desencontrando la dominicanidad,” which explores what Kusch calls “la continuidad del pasado americano en el presente” (the continuity of the American past in the present).³⁴ In this case, I am interested in untangling the cohabitation of past and present visions of modernity, culture, and progress expressed by the informants in relation to the work of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century nationalist intellectuals to envision the Dominican nation’s move toward the future through the concepts of *progreso* and *cultura*. In many ways, the negative light these men cast on Dominican identity in New York makes it antithetical and irreconcilable with gayness and modernity. However, the language of race plays a key role in resuscitating older discourses about the Dominican national

question in ways that make possible these men's trenchant critiques of the racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia they associate with Dominican society.

Part II focuses on the body and its stylizations as signifying practices the informants remember learning through their collaboration with relatives (as children) and sustained in their ongoing regulation of themselves and others. Chapter 4, "Eso se nota," uses childhood narratives to illustrate how important it was for these men to calibrate the movements of their bodies through coaching with their mothers and other relatives. Embodying masculinity was about recognizing the disjuncture between the way they carried themselves as children and the men they had to become, a form of labor coordinated through transfers of knowledge and collective evaluation and coaching. The figure of the effeminate homosexual (*la loca*) makes an initial appearance here not as an abject but as a proximate "other" who cohabitates with "serious" masculinity. I theorize *la loca* as a performative utterance, which I call *gynographic* to reference the staging of stereotypes of femininity on a male body instead of communicating that effeminate men "want to be women," as they are traditionally perceived. By figuring masculinity as a straightjacket, an apparatus of collective surveillance and regulation of what is supposed to be a male body, the chapter argues that the opposition in Dominican patriarchal regimes is not between masculinity and femininity but rather between masculinity and *locura*, an opposition that stresses the need to keep vigilance and to control bodies always already imagined as feminized and excessive. Conceptualizing *locura* in this way helps locate "serious" masculinity in opposition to the figure of *la loca* and also in relation to other suspect forms of masculinity that may not be "effeminate" but that are structurally subordinate to "seriousness." My analysis shows that structurally, some ubiquitous and privileged forms of masculinity are ultimately other forms of *locura* that need controlling: the key example explored in this chapter is that of the Dominican *tíguere*.

Chapter 5, "Code Swishing," brings the narratives of negotiating masculinity in daily life to the present to suggest that *la loca* has negative as well as positive valences and that we miss a lot of its richness if we imagine it only as a figure of homosexual abjection. In this way, the chapter offers an alternative to established and influential interpretations of queer subject constitution that overemphasize abjection while ignoring the multiple meanings of identities. Through an investigation of the conditions that make *la loca* instrumental in the expression of closeness and intimacy, the chapter

analyzes the way it operates in the making and regulation of networks of self-identified Dominican gay and bisexual men. My conceptualization of “code swishing” borrows from scholarship on bilingualism and code switching. But it revises this work to implicate the body and gender dissent as communicative practices and to make clear that these men established and sustained networks with one another so long as camaraderie and connection did not threaten their legitimacy in daily life and their investments in normative masculinity. For them, surviving and being respected was more important than any sense of community they may have felt toward one another.

Part III explores the narrations of sex practices and relationships as mechanisms for these men to further articulate their values and continue to revise and express their investments in proximity with fellow Dominicans. Chapter 6, “Virando la dominicanidad,” explores sex as a site of continuing regulation and discipline. The sexual also appears here as a space to work through one’s relationship with dominicanidad, personified in the figure of the macho. The ideal of versatility, which several of these men presented as important to them in relationships, is ideologically connected with the idea of reworking dominicanidad toward what they envisioned as sexual cosmopolitanism. But this ideal, as the case studies central to this chapter show, is often frustrated by the expectations other men had of the informants—expectations that (I suggest) are connected to broader perceptions of Dominicans within New York City’s transnational sexual cultures.

The final chapter uses narratives of return to further explore the ways power and mobility are implicated in the formation and sustenance of hierarchies of desire of which Dominican gay and bisexual men (along with other traveling men of color) participate. Using autoethnographic accounts of my return to Santo Domingo and informants’ commentaries on return, this chapter suggests important dynamics of power, male privilege, and mobility that obtained among men of color. Instead of continuing to center the white-gay-male traveling body of the sex tourist as the antagonist of our critiques, “To Be Someone, To Be Somewhere” argues that the time has come to grapple with what it means for people of color to establish and sustain sexual relations where money is explicitly implicated. The point is not to condemn or pass judgment on these practices but rather to understand what they might mean to the men and their partners and to grasp better the ways men of color negotiated power and the erotic with one another.

CHAPTER 1

Tacit Subjects

I did not tell them anything. They did not ask me anything. I know that they know.—**DANNY**, Filipino.¹

Basically, you know, she doesn't like my way of life so we don't talk about it. She respects me, she loves me, she spoils me. But it's something we just don't discuss. I think I don't do it out of respect for her, and she doesn't do it out of respect for me.—**ALICIA B.**, Puertorriqueña.²

They know, I mean, parents know. . . . I've had relationships . . . and when I've been with these guys, they [his parents] always refer to me as like you in plural. . . . And if there's like a family gathering or whatever, they'll always invite that particular friend that I'm going out with. So, you know, it's understood but it's never discussed.—**PATRICIO**, Puerto Rican.³

What is funny is I think they know. . . . I have been living with a man for 13 years and so how can they not . . . so I think my family is just living in denial, but I think that they know but they don't want to deal with it and I think it is safe not to discuss it.—**UNNAMED**, Latino.⁴

You know that's very interesting because I know they know. But my family is like this. They don't discuss it. . . . My older sister, she and I get along best of all. She loves me to death. But she doesn't discuss it. And if someone tries to discuss it in a demeaning way or something, not about me but just about gay people, period, she will immediately attack or whatever. But no, they don't discuss that.—**D.C.**, African American.⁵

I imagine that my whole family knows, but not from my mouth or because they've asked me. I think that they intuitively know. They prefer not to ask me and prefer that I don't tell them. It's not necessary, it's only my sexual preference.—**MARCOS**, *mexicano* interviewed in Guadalajara.⁶

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Conventional views of *coming out* in the United States celebrate the individual, the visible, and the proud. Given the growing legitimacy of predominantly white and middle-class lesbians and gay men in this country and of models that presume and uphold individual decision making, refusals of speech, pride, and visibility have been generally interpreted as suspect, as evidence of denial or internalized homophobia, or as outright pathology.

These standard interpretations stayed with me as I talked to Dominican self-identified gay and bisexual men who were my friends or acquaintances and, in some cases, who became participants in this study. Much of what I heard in these conversations paralleled the comments excerpted above from the work of other scholars: the men with whom I spoke described their sexuality as something present yet not remarked upon, something understood yet not stated, something intuited yet uncertain, something known yet not broached by either person in a given exchange. The sites where this presence, understanding, intuition, or knowledge mattered were invariably those of family and close interpersonal relationships. I began to realize that to become an apt interpreter of what I heard required me to listen carefully to what people said for what I could learn from them.

As the diversity of the men and women cited above illustrates, other scholars have remarked on this tendency to be present, be understood, or be known as lesbian or gay in several communities of color in the United States without statements or declarations.⁷ In the case of the Dominican immigrant gay men with whom I worked, the analysis of them as “in the closet” was consistent with existing views about the way Latinos and other populations of color deal with their sexual identities. These men were at best cast as indifferent to the development of a gay Dominican community and at worst were seen as immigrants whose physical displacement had not helped them overcome the internalized homophobia that supposedly characterized their lives in the Dominican Republic.⁸

A neoliberal interpretation of coming out characteristic of the contemporary United States takes for granted that all LGBTQ people should come out of the closet. Instead of being the beginning of a project of social transformation—as coming out was understood in the early days of gay liberation—individual self-realization through speech has been severed from collective social change. Today, one comes out not to change the world but to be a “normal” gay subject.⁹ From this perspective, some queers of color have an