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# Negotiating Discourses on Homoeroticism: The Coming Out and Other Tales by Colombian Immigrant Men in New York City

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NEGOTIATING DISCOURSES ON HOMOEROTICISM:  
THE COMING OUT AND OTHER TALES BY COLOMBIAN IMMIGRANT MEN IN  
NEW YORK CITY

A Thesis Presented

by

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper researches the multiple negotiations of social meanings in which immigrants engage, and focuses, for this purpose, on the experience of Colombian men who identify as gay. Through these immigrants' stories, I address the increasingly debated question of how immigration and the globalization of culture and politics affect the process of identity construction. At the same time, these stories allow me to reflect on how particular formations of identity affect the migratory process.

I analyze immigrants' stories within the broader plots provided by contrasting narratives<sup>1</sup> to understand same sex desire, starting with the traditional approach to homoeroticism in Latin America that conceives of homoerotic desire as the encounter between men who assume unequal passive and active roles. I find that immigrants borrow from this discourse to define their experience, but in practice develop more complex relations than prescribed by predetermined sexual roles. I continue with the narrative that sees sexual preference as the main trait defining people's identity. This view conceives of gay men as an international brotherhood that emerges around a common experience of sexual oppression. Immigrants borrow from this discourse to conceptualize their experience but not quite conform to its premises. Because their

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<sup>1</sup> When I use the term *stories* I refer to life stories or individual narratives to tell personal experiences. Some times I use *stories* and *narratives* interchangeably as I assume that both terms have the potential to illuminate networks of actors, power imbalances, and negotiations being told beyond the story's capacity to convey a mere sequence of facts (Somers 1994). When I refer to *narratives* I mean the argumentative lines that provide sense to different courses of action. For instance, as explained by Plummer (1995), sexual stories, or what I would identify as narratives, allow people to understand their own story within the framework provided by that encompassing narrative. Sexual stories or narratives can have healing or political potential when they offer a sense of coherence and organization to the individual stories that lack a reference to validate themselves. I use the term *discourse* to refer to broader frameworks that constitute what we see as common sense. For instance, the coming out has become a dominant discourse as it has come to be constitutive of a global common sense on what homoerotic relations mean.

experience is better understood by looking at the permanent negotiations in which they engage –as Colombian, Latino, gay, working class immigrants, I turn to a different perspective that stresses the strategic nature of their relations. From this perspective I challenge dominant narratives on same sex desire and explore the ways in which immigration shapes sexual identity.

Ultimately, I engage with the notion of strategic silence coined by Jose Quiroga (2000) as a point of departure to address the immigrants' unique trajectories and modes of engaging with discourses on sexuality. Implicit in this approach is the idea that the move towards an allegedly neutral globalization of identities and culture hides the imposition of hermeneutical frameworks that leave the experience of marginalized subjects like immigrants unexplained. With this in mind, I address the acritical translation of sexual meanings originated with the American born gay rights movement to a variety of geographical and cultural contexts.

As the popularization of the term “gay” as well as the internationalization of the gay rights movement indicates, the dominant narrative on homosexual desire that relies on the coming out story has become a universal referent when locating individual stories and collective action within and outside the United States. With this paper I aim to demonstrate that although immigrants often rely on the coming out story, presenting themselves as the character of a tale of progress from an oppressed to a public/politicized self, there are also complementary elements of their experience that are better defined by a narrative less reliant on disclosure. In this sense, the immigrants' experience may shed some light on the ways strategic sexualities come to exist amidst the more organized and vocal forms of identity politics.

Understanding homoeroticism through the idea of strategic silences challenges the conception that homosexual desire is structured around a bipolar system of relations where a partner plays a dominant (activo) role and the other assumes a submissive position (pasivo) –as has been traditionally argued in studies on Latin American homosexualities (in particular, Almaguer 1993, Carrier 1995, and Murray, 1995). This is then replaced with a more complex view that takes into account the disparities in the immigrants' encounter with culturally hegemonic discourses like the coming out. While traditional analyses on homoeroticism in Latin America attempt to describe the cultural/behavioral traits of homosexual relations in particular geographical settings, they assume, in a rather similar fashion to the coming out narrative, that there is some kind of essential way of experiencing homosexual desire, only this time such experience is defined by a binary set of roles which derive from third world homosexuals' backwardness vis a vis their American counterparts. This approach overlooks the fact that identity is strategically deployed throughout the different social locations where people interact. For instance, one could adopt a more dominant or submissive role depending on the encounter that is in place (i.e., people assume different roles depending on the way a sexual encounter presents itself. It is a contingent decision depending more on situational factors than on a permanent choice of roles). Also, being at the crossroads of various geopolitical and cultural locations (vis a vis Latinos and Americans; gay and straight communities; facing Colombian and American dynamics of inclusion-exclusion) my interviewees oscillate between a strong pledge to the outing creed and the strategic deployment of identity in dynamics that cannot be easily captured by essentialist representations of homoeroticism. Since immigrants engage in different spaces where



they negotiate varying forms of racism and homophobia, but also solidarity and identification, an approach that attends to the strategic character of all these negotiations is appropriate for the inquiry I present.

In the following sections, I present the methods I used in my study, as well as a description of the setting and the population I analyzed. I then discuss the ways in which immigrants negotiate gender and sexuality after immigrating. Finally, I move on to analyze the discourses on homoeroticism and the immigrants' responses to them. In this section, I present a discussion of my findings contrasting them with traditional approaches to homoeroticism in Latin America and with the discursive framework provided by American narratives. I finish this section building on critiques of these frameworks analyzing how immigration impacts sexuality through strategic homosocialities.

## CHAPTER 1

### METHODS AND SETTING

For this study I conducted seventeen open interviews of one to two hours each. I found interviewees through snowball sampling and talked to some of them more than once, most times in their own homes or in other friends' homes, in Jackson Heights, New York. On other occasions, I was able to talk informally with friends who visited my interviewees, and other times I approached customers of the local gay bars whose accent I ventured to identify as Colombian. Throughout this process I have spoken with other Latino gay men with whom I have become acquainted, trying to contrast their observations with the information I received from my Colombian interviewees.

Although this was hardly a random representative sample, it was broad enough to reflect some diversity in terms of backgrounds and times of immigration. Besides the interviews and informal talks, I collected some ethnographic material in my visits to various Latino gay bars in Jackson Heights. I have also followed the electronic bulletin of the Latino gay organization "mano a mano", and consulted other journalistic or literary pieces about same sex desire in Colombia and the occasional news that appeared on the list serve of the Colombian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Association, Colega.

The interviews were conducted in Jackson Heights, in the borough of Queens, New York City. Historically, Jackson Heights has had the highest concentration of Colombian immigration in New in the United States. There, my interviewees encounter products from their places of origin, from journals, to food, soap operas, patriotic

celebrations, and political candidates. Apart from Colombians, the neighborhood harbors populations from Asia, especially India, Pakistan, and Korea, and from most Latin American countries. Yet, rather than representing a non-conflicting mix of cultures, Jackson Heights is the locus where a number of immigrants construct their identity in a dialectical interaction with people from disparate locations: Other Colombians of similar or different regions of origin; other Latino/as from southern and northern countries; people from India, Cambodia, China. . . .All this complicated by daily negotiations around class, race, and gender positionalities. As I could see through the interviews I conducted, re-framing one's identity in this setting implied a number of negotiations. First, there was that of identifying oneself as part of an ethnicity or a community of immigrants. As an interviewee told me, "I didn't know I was Hispanic until I arrived here." Being part of the gay Latino networks in Jackson Heights implied to assemble a number of pieces of one's identity, all at once. It implied, for instance, to become a member of the "gay community," the "Latino community," the "immigrant community," and ultimately, the "Latino gay community."

Within the Colombian community, my interviewees fit the profile of most Colombian immigrants in that they came from the working middle class and immigrated due to economic reasons. Given the difficulties in obtaining an American visa and the high economic costs of travel expenditures, the poorest Colombians have historically been curtailed from immigrating. Unlike the immigrant population of the northern Central American countries that include a number of poor immigrants coming from rural areas, Colombians often come from working or middle class urban settings (Gaviria 2004). Still, immigration varies from wave to wave due to the different geopolitical

context at any point in time. Authors and immigrants I interviewed roughly coincide in pointing out that there are three waves of Colombian immigration to the United States (Gaviria 2004). The first wave occurred after the 1965 US Immigration Act period, between 1965 and 1975, motivated in part by the US migratory reform that modified the immigration quota system and the requirements for family reunification. The second wave, between 1975 and 1985, is in part related to the onset of drug trafficking from Colombia. Finally, after a period of stabilization in the migratory fluxes between 1985 and 1995, literature and travelers point to a third wave marked by the growing number of Colombians that immigrated after 1995 due to the serious economic crisis and the escalation of the armed conflict in the country.

A comparison between immigration trends in specialized literature and the interviews I conducted indicate that migratory dynamics in the group I analyze are connected to the broader fluxes of Colombian migration. Taking into account their date of arrival, I found that nine interviewees in the sample came in the last part of the second wave of Colombian immigration (1975-1985), mostly towards the early eighties. The rest came in a scattered way throughout the nineties. It was probably hard for me to find older interviewees because, as reported by people I interviewed, early immigrants were more likely to return to Colombia or to migrate to warmer places like Florida. Like the broader Colombian immigrant population, most of them came from the coffee region in the Andean mountains in the west part of Colombia (especially from the city of Pereira and nearby towns), as well as from Medellin and Cali, the second and third cities in Colombia respectively, with populations near the three million each. About one third of the people I interviewed finished college and the rest have some college studies in

Colombia or in the US. One person obtained a master's degree and one more only finished high school<sup>2</sup>.

Although Colombian immigrants rarely come from extremely underprivileged backgrounds, there is great variation among them resulting from different levels of education, region of origin, age or time of immigration. It is safe to say, though, that, since the last wave of immigration was connected to phenomena that for the first time affected the economic and personal safety of the professional middle classes (i.e. intensification of the armed conflict and a deep economic crisis), immigrants' socioeconomic profile became more heterogeneous. Since the second half of the nineties, the Colombian immigrant population began to include people other than the traditional economic immigrants from working-middle class background. Growing unemployment among middle-aged professionals and kidnap threats to middle-class families, led a number of Colombians to destinations like Costa Rica, Spain, and Florida, in the United States. Although none of my interviewees fit this profile, this change in the composition of immigration has affected older immigrants' sense of their status both in the sending and recipient societies. Because Colombian immigrants' class backgrounds have broadened to include middle class professionals and this has coincided with the economic consolidation of older immigrants, many appear to see themselves as different from other immigrant groups of peasant descent or working class background. In terms of race and ethnicity affiliations, interviewees mostly identified as Colombians and only made reference to race to differentiate themselves from black or indigenous immigrants. Like most heterosexual Colombians, they consider themselves part of the *mestizo* population

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<sup>2</sup> This high level of education coincides with the broader relationship between Colombians in the U.S. and in Colombia. Gaviria (2004) finds that the difference in education degrees between Colombians there and in the U.S. is of more than three years.

in a way that separates them from Central and South American immigrants of visible indigenous descent.

## CHAPTER 2

### GENDER AND SEX TRANSFORMATIONS IN AN IMMIGRANT SETTING: A TYPOLOGY

Parallel to the similarities, I found significant differences among the immigrants I interviewed. Differences related to the way in which immigration affects peoples' attitudes and practices in regards to their sexuality. More as a guide for the reader than as a strict ideal type, I have placed my interviewees in three groups: Traditional, Cosmopolitan, and Activist. The main criterion for this classification is the extent to which they have transformed their personhood and practices with immigration. I characterize the three groups with reference to three criteria: First, how gender norms have varied with immigration; second, to what extent relations with family and partners change after immigrating; and third, what are the variations in the degree to which immigrants use sexuality as a marker of identity (see table 1).

In the *Traditional* group I placed people whose sexuality and gender identity remains more closely shaped by the same discourses, norms and practices as before their immigration. For them, immigration has not represented a substantial rupture with the discourses and practices that shaped their sexuality and gender identity in Colombia. *Cosmopolitan* immigrants maintain traditional masculinities but innovate in regards to their practices by incorporating new forms of conducting social relations as well as a modified way of looking at their sexual identity. *Activists* are more critical of traditional masculinities and open to variations in gender identification. As a result, they are able to

engage in more equalitarian couple relations. After their immigration, sexual orientation has become progressively a more important marker of their identity. Table 1 shows a scheme of this characterization based on the following criteria: Differences in gender norms, differences in relations with family and partners, and differences in the degree to which sexuality figures as a marker of identity.

Table 1. Identity transformations in an immigrant setting

<b>Criterion/Type</b>	<b>Traditional</b>	<b>Cosmopolitan</b>	<b>Activist</b>
Gender norms	- Traditional masculinity - Instances of traditional femininities.	- Traditional masculinity	- Openness to various forms of gender identities.
Relations with family and partners	- Traditional/extended families. - Trend to monogamous, not anonymous relations	- Less reliant on traditional family model. - Variety of partners.	- Egalitarian, stable couple relations with other men.
Sexuality as marker of identity	- Class is more prominent than sexuality as a marker of identity	-Sexuality is not main dimension of identity but there is identification with symbols of gay culture.	- Importance of sexual dimension to define identity expressed in activism.



a. Traditional

In terms of their gender identity, interviewees in the traditional group identified immigration as an instance where traditional masculine roles were reinforced in order to fulfill the needs of their life as immigrants. Due to the risks associated with immigration, traditional masculinities were seen as a form of dealing with risks in entering the U.S. and guaranteeing a livelihood. Eduardo, a typical member of the traditional group, emphasized that throughout immigration he had become stronger, more self-reliant, and more aggressive, which he identified as typically masculine attributes. Twenty years after his migration, Eduardo narrated his father's first visit to New York as the confirmation that his success as an immigrant was related to his ability to maintain these allegedly masculine attributes. Eduardo thanked his father for having educated him as "a macho" and remembered how throughout his father's visit, the father had felt proud of Eduardo's life as he now had seen how Eduardo's home was a "respectable, well established" one and "not a place full of heels and wigs as he had once thought." (interview with Eduardo). Other perceptions at work were that success as immigrants presupposed that immigrants were honorable or good men (*hombres de bien*), and that they assumed a provider role towards families in Colombia or the US.

Traditional masculinities in this group were also sustained by constant enactment of conventional femininities. For instance, Juan and Jorge belonged to a clique of Colombian immigrants who work as hairdressers, tailors, and designers known as "missiologists". Missiologists are experts in beauty queens who also, for the most part, earn their livelihood by hair styling, dressing, and cloth designing for beauty queens both in Colombia and in events they organize in Queens.

To a certain extent, missiologists transgress gender roles through their professional performance, but ultimately they conform to a traditional masculinity scheme. In particular, they construct masculinity as a category tied to perceptions of economic success.

In terms of their social practices, this traditional attitude translated in the way they organized family and social life. Juan, a hairdresser who immigrated in the mid 90's maintained a commitment with other aspects that figured as more prominent markers of sexual identity in Colombia. In particular, enactment of class privilege competed with the idea of belonging to a particular sexual community. Juan, like other interviewees, identified being gay with an aesthetic reflecting a bourgeois respectability more similar to the Colombian middle class than to the cosmopolitan style he associated with gayness in the U.S. Jorge and other immigrants' aesthetic preferences also reflected their commitment to social norms that they identified with traditional families in the Colombian context. For instance, it was common that social networks resembled extended families where some persons played paternal or guidance roles. In a humorous way, Jorge, from the 'missiologists' clique, was known as "The Mother Superior" due to the leading and protective role toward newer immigrants he played within his network. Jorge was also seen as a respectable person, invested in his business and in his more immediate community. In the same way, Jorge's successful business around Colombia's profitable world of pageants clearly represented middle-class ideals of self-reliance, merit, and hard work.

Eduardo, Juan, and Jorge have in common their commitment with the same practices and discourses that shaped their sexuality and gender identity before

immigrating. They engage in sexual relations only with other Colombians and exceptionally with other Spanish speakers, they highly value monogamy, they meet sexual partners within their own social networks rather than at bars or at other more anonymous locations.

b. Cosmopolitan

Like the *traditional* group, immigrants in this category maintain a traditional masculinity related to their perceptions that successful immigrants must exhibit supposedly masculine attributes like being self-reliant and protective. Interestingly, they have incorporated elements that modify the contours of sexuality as envisioned in Colombia. There is an attitude that I name as cosmopolitan in how they approach homosocialities both in New York and in Colombia. On the one hand, they appropriate a global aesthetics of gayness (looks, symbols, consumption). On the other, their experience in New York has become an asset when they re-enter the gay scene or even other spaces in Colombia (they may appear stylish, trendy or knowledgeable of the mainstream American culture in ways foreign to other immigrants).

Much of this trend is related to the immigrants' ability to engage with codes of gay life in the United States. For instance, Mario explained his greater identification with New York gay life by saying:

“(...) (it) had to do with the fact that I learned how to read in English, that I became more familiar with the written part, that I had access to books that talked about homosexuality, about the gay movement, that was related to the fact that I felt more comfortable, with the fact that I came out of the closet and that I participated in other

activities of an activist type; that I got engaged and that I exercised, that I felt that I had the right to be treated with more dignity.” (Interview with Mario).

In the next subsections I use Mario’s case to illustrate this group. Mario has lived in New York since the early eighties. He visits Colombia about twice a year and after many obstacles to validate his college degree, he finally obtained a graduate degree in his specialty and a stable job as a school teacher. In their everyday life, Mario and other people in this group have incorporated some of the symbols that identify the gay movement internationally. I observed this when I interviewed Mario and Eduardo at their respective apartments in Jackson Heights. Mario’s place was decorated with some objects representative of the gay movement. He had a rainbow flag, wore a pink triangle button and on his freezer’s door there was a sticker with the line “I can’t even stand straight”. This contrasted with the case of Eduardo and others in the *traditional* group. Eduardo’s apartment did not have any object or image that talked about his sexual identity; it was pretty formal and looked more like the house of any conventional middle-class Colombian family.

Unlike his peers in the first group, Mario claimed to have re-evaluated much of his beliefs on sexuality after his immigration. This included especially the type of relations he pursued, which he saw as less reliant on the traditional family model. When I asked Mario how immigration changed his sexual and gender identity he pointed out:

“(Immigration) changed my practices; I became much more liberal in the way in which I looked at homosexual activity. I mean, in Colombia I still thought that I had to reproduce the heterosexual model, that I had to have a lover and to live with him and get settled; in many ways I still think that

that's important but then that's not the goal anymore but rather to enjoy my life, my homosexual life and not to have so many tribulations for the fact that I have different partners, friends, lovers; that doesn't complicate my life so much. I have become much more liberal in that sense."

(Interview with Mario).

On the other hand, although Mario was one of the persons more invested in the gay rights rhetoric in the *cosmopolitan* group, he repeatedly declared that he does not need to declare his sexual preference to anybody. As I will show in the section on immigrants' responses to the coming out discourse, while Mario and other immigrants in this group use the coming out language to articulate their free engagement with same sex desire, they are less committed with the public character involved in the outing. At the same time, the core of their identity appears to be more related to their experience as immigrants than to the process through which they come to identify as gay men.

### c. Activist

Interviewees in the third group are very committed to the coming out discourse and a good part of their lives is organized around this frame. They work for American gay organizations although they might keep their residence and good part of their social life in Queens. Esteban, a typical representative of this group, narrates his own experience as a constant struggle to overcome his own intolerant attitudes towards ways of life different from his own and to construct a more egalitarian Latino gay community. Like Eduardo and Mario in the *Traditional* and *Cosmopolitan* groups respectively,

Esteban immigrated in the early eighties. However, unlike them, Esteban came to complete college in the U.S. Esteban has worked for more than ten years as an activist in several organizations promoting rights and welfare for gay people and currently works as an organizer for the rights of Latino gays.

Although egalitarianism is not exclusive of this group, there is a more expressed consciousness about the need to transform asymmetrical gender relations among gay Latinos. Ramon, also part of the *activist* group, pointed out that gay men often discriminate against other men whose sexual choices they find unacceptable. On one occasion, a young member of the Colombian gay and lesbian organization physically attacked another member because he was a transgender. From that moment on, members of the organization started to promote a discussion on the inclusiveness of the association so in fact it became officially open to bisexual and transgender people.

Esteban has worked on promoting these ideas through his formal employment in various gay organizations within and outside Queens. Unlike most people in the *traditional* and *cosmopolitan* groups, Esteban has lived with a stable partner, also an immigrant, for several years. When I did the interviews, some people in the *traditional* and *cosmopolitan* groups had lived with male partners but they had eventually separated. Esteban and his partner's adherence to the coming out discourse combined with their relatively comfortable economic situation might have played a significant role in their ability to maintain a stable relation. Esteban's high involvement as an activist in Latino and U.S. organizations for gay rights influenced his way of thinking on homoeroticism as a field that connects with political struggles for a community of people with coinciding identities and interests. Recently, Esteban participated in a project to survey the

Colombian LGBT community to determine what they thought were the community needs, health concerns, and degree of political involvement. By appealing to the community as a delimited and rather homogeneous group of people that works as any LGBT organization, Esteban and others in the *activist* group have incorporated much of the interpretive framework provided by their activism in U.S. gay organizations.

## CHAPTER 3

### NEGOTIATING DISCOURSES ON HOMOEROTICISM

Transformations in gender and sexual norms throughout immigration intersect with broader discourses on homoeroticism and immigrants' appropriation of them. In this section I show a set of discursive bodies that characterize homoerotic relations as framed by silences, speech, and strategic silences, and tie them with my previous discussion on how immigrants' attitudes towards gender and sexual norms are shaped with immigration. Throughout this section I argue that alternative immigrant homoeroticisms do not take the form of total opposition to dominant discourses but that they rather involve the appropriation and transformation of traditional meanings of homoeroticism. Immigrants in all categories –*traditional, cosmopolitan, activist*, transform hegemonic sexual discourses through their experience with features typical of immigrant spaces such as anonymity.

#### a. Silence: The activo/pasivo model

Traditional studies on same sex desire in Latin America tend to trace a sharp distinction between Latin American and Euro-American homoeroticisms. This distinction relies on the element of reciprocity that supposedly characterizes homoerotic relations in Euro American contexts while being absent from Latin American and other peripheral areas. Authors like Tomas Almaguer (1993) and Joseph Carrier (1995) argue that in Latin American same sex eroticism there is a polarized gender system where



individuals play sexually active and passive roles (activos and pasivos). Almaguer (1993) describes this representation of sex and gender in Latin America as transversed by a division between dominant and submissive roles. He writes, “unlike the European-American system, the Mexican/Latin American system is based on a configuration of gender/sex/power that is articulated along the active/passive axis and organized through the scripted sexual role one plays. It highlights sexual aim –the act one wants to perform with the person toward whom sexual activity is directed –and only gives secondary importance to the person’s gender or biological sex”. In contrast, this tradition also finds that in Euro American homosexualities, homoerotic relations are typically reciprocal and do not involve a distinction of roles by sexual partners.

For the “activo/pasivo” view, the former features explain why in the United States and other core countries the constitution of a gay lifestyle and subculture has been possible. As in John D’Emilio’s (1983) analysis, much of the supposed differences between Latino and Euro-American homoeroticisms are attributed to the particular forms of capitalist development in core and peripheral geographical regions. The specific configuration of Euro American same sex eroticism has been associated with phenomena like industrialization, women’s liberation, consolidation of a welfare state that substitutes the family as the only care provider, and emergence of an ideology of sexuality and love (Drucker 1996). Drucker (1996, p. 77) argues, “forms of reciprocal gay-lesbian sexuality have arisen later and taken different forms in the Third World than in Europe, North America and Australasia, for several reasons: later and more limited industrialization; later entry of women into the paid labour force; greater strength of family structures due in part to less developed welfare states; and poverty, which limits most Third World

lesbians' and gay men's participation to a gay ghetto founded on consumption". In this reasoning, Third World homoeroticism is associated with sporadic sexual contacts among people from the same gender who do not commit to a particular lifestyle as part of a sexual minority, and to the delayed development of a gay subculture in these areas.

Interestingly, for the Colombian case, Salazar Esquivel (1995) finds that advancing towards institutionalized homosocialities (i.e., through ghettos, commercial niches, gay marriage, etc) is not necessarily a desirable goal because this might lead to the commodification of sexual desire. In a study of homoeroticism in Cali, Colombia, Salazar Esquivel showed that while bars, public restrooms, porn theatres, and other places customarily attended by homosexual men used to allow free exchange of pleasure, the consolidation of more permanent gay spaces has introduced the idea that the male body is a commodity that can be exhibited and sold, as in ads offering young, athletic, and "well equipped" men to the rising local gay market.

Lionel Cantu's important work on Mexican gay immigrants (2000) is also critical of the activo/pasivo model and its presuppositions about the backwardness of peripheral homoeroticism because it does not take into account that the globalization of politics and culture deeply influence individuals' practices. To Cantu, the fact that discourses and populations travel back and forth between central and peripheral countries makes it impossible to find unaltered landscapes and identities, which leads to the necessary mix of elements from Euro American and Latin American discourses on sexual identity. Cantu's work also criticizes works that rely on the activo/pasivo divide because they ignore the changing character of sexuality, and are therefore inappropriate to describe contemporary masculinities. To Cantu, this model makes an inappropriate reading of

how social class and capitalist development shape gender and sexuality. In my own case study, I found that immigrants' narratives challenge the activo/pasivo view by showing that while they were in Colombia they participated in homoerotic networks and had regular partners even if this was not done in an open way. They mention that a number of men do not openly address their homoerotic choices, but quickly moved to state that there were indeed homoerotic networks and spaces recognizable to people who went in and out of 'el ambiente'. For interviewees in the three categories labeled in this paper as *traditional*, *cosmopolitan*, and *activist*, the fact of immigrating did not represent the transition from a heterosexual to a homosexual life or from furtive and sporadic contacts with other men to a life of stable coupling and identification as gays. Even those coming from adverse family and working environments declared that they attended gay bars, parties, and social circles in Colombia.

After immigrating, Colombian men maintained this trend of not adopting sexuality as the main marker of their identity. Identifying as active or passive in sexual relations was secondary to the fact that available partners offered stability, support, pleasure or that they fulfilled other needs during the process of immigrating to a new and hostile setting. Declaring one's sexual orientation or framing sexuality as the search for pleasure in a determinate kind of active or passive sexual partner were not as important goals as finding a pleasant companion or as just navigating homosocialities in an immigrant setting. Although as I showed in the typology of the previous section, immigrants tend to identify themselves with traditional masculinities in ways that resemble the gender distinction insinuated in the active/passive model, this identification should be considered as strategic but not as constitutive of certain kind of identity. The

interviews I conducted showed that declaring oneself or claiming one's homosexuality was not as important as achieving stability or security at the most basic levels of survival. Immigrant homosocialities were, for the most part, spaces where companionship and complicity helped to secure these goals. Despite the threats posed by the ever-present homophobic violence and the difficulties of dealing with AIDS and other illnesses, lack of financial stability, and precarious migratory status, to only name some problems dealt with by immigrants, homoerotic spaces maintained by immigrants cannot be interpreted as the mere locus of sexual exchange with partners that perform a certain role during sex relations. Immigrants document the cases of multiple Colombian men who were in terminal stages of AIDS and who only immigrated to Jackson Heights because the stigma of the illness among families was so harsh that they preferred to move to a supportive environment as the one they found among Latino immigrant men in this area. This speaks to the social ties that could be found among immigrants beyond the mere sexual exchange with partners of a given sexual or role preference.

At the same time, in support to Cantu's critique that the active/passive model overlooks the impact of globalization of culture on sexual repertoires, I found that immigrants adopt gender and sexual roles in strategic manners depending on the setting and situations of these negotiations. In the same way described by Cantu (2000), immigrants deploy conventional masculinities in labor-related settings and also when they convey narratives on their immigration. At the same time, conventional femininities are in place for the ample group of immigrants who attend local gay beauty pageants. Reducing gender and sex repertoires as the active/passive model is not useful to understand the permanent negotiations that immigrant men perform.

The interviews I conducted also showed that sexual identity and practices before immigration cannot be understood as backward stages in a race for sexual liberation. As Strongman (2002: 180) points out, Latin American homosexual categories differ from US ones in aspects other than their adherence to egalitarian or activo/pasivo frameworks. According to Strongman, the difference “lies in the issue of disclosure/secretcy, which in US gay discourse has been crystallized around the image of the closet”. In the immigrants’ accounts, activo/pasivo categories facilitated social exchange as they made it easier or more predictable to navigate through social expectations about their and others’ sexual identity. However, as I show in the section on Strategic Silences and Immigrant Homosocialities, activo/pasivo roles did not operate as organizing categories of homoeroticism in any of the groups of immigrants I identified. Rather, as in Strongman’s (2002) model, homoeroticism was negotiated throughout moments of greater or lower visibility. To keep Strongman’s logic, disclosure/secretcy were negotiated as recurring points in a continuum that extended from the immigrant barrio to the transnational family household and the strategically inhabited New York. For all of the *traditional*, *cosmopolitan*, and *activist* categories, the activo/pasivo divide was part of the navigation tools to operate in quotidian social relations, but it was not a frame defining homoeroticism.

#### b. Speech: The outing model

In the same way as narratives enacted by concepts like human rights or democracy (Appadurai 1990), the gay liberation story has become a powerful cultural

referent in the most recent wave of cultural globalization. If the discourse that studies activo and pasivo roles for Third World homoeroticisms became prevalent in academia, the coming out story has become the universal narrative framing individual stories of same sex desire in scholarly texts, community organizations, popular media, and elsewhere. In the following paragraphs I present the outing model as a discursive framework that a) Presupposes a liberal subject with autonomy to choose lifestyle and sexual preference; b) Considers homoeroticism as associated with a fixed identity and to a distinctive sexual orientation; c) Unfolds around a progressive narrative that frames gay identity as the last stage in a progressive path from secretive to open and proud sexuality. The coming out in this model is, more importantly, an encompassing narrative that provides an alternative world view on homoeroticism, one that turns deviance into pride.

The emergence of the outing model can be traced following John D'Emilio's (1983) classical analysis on the formation of an urban gay subculture during the first part of the twentieth century. D'Emilio (1983) suggests that the origin of this subculture is tied to the transformations of capitalism. In particular, he argues, with industrialization and urbanization, the productive process went from the household to the factory, so that the household became a space for intimate relationships and affection. At the same time, increasing mobility motivated by the needs of capitalism led more people to urban centers and transformed the structure of families. The individualistic trends that served the development of capitalism fostered the rise of the modern, autonomous, uprooted self, which in time gave place to an identity based on the ability to choose a sexual preference and lifestyle.

Another feature of homoeroticism in the coming out narrative is the fact that it

gives place to a fixed identity which in turn constitutes a well differentiated sexual orientation. To a great extent, political mobilization through judicial activism led the gay rights movement to play a significant role in the constitution of a gay identity that relies on sexual orientation as the central feature of someone's identity<sup>3</sup>. The consequence of this strategy was that homoeroticism became the expression of *a* particular sexual identity by a group of individuals who engaged in sexual exchange with people from their own gender. This way of understanding homoeroticism favored the constitution of a subculture, as well as the emergence of a discourse framing the diverse experience of individuals that in the past may or may not identify themselves as gay. This turn made homoeroticism appear to be the expression of a particular sexual orientation and not a sporadic activity in which any person may become engaged at some point in their lives.

Although this legal strategy had been used before, this became an important moment in the constitution of homoeroticism as a fixed identity, and of the coming out narrative as one of its political correlates. In this way, if an essential gay identity was elevated as the trait that identified a minority that possessed a common orientation, the coming out narrative became the element that tied this emerging political enterprise to isolated individual stories.

In his analysis of so-called *sexual stories*, Ken Plummer (1995) characterizes

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<sup>3</sup> Sonya Katyal (2002) illustrates how in cases like *Bowers vs. Hardwick* (1986), activists abandoned the strategy that claimed the respect for their right to privacy because laws maintained a prohibition to perform certain acts even if they occurred in the private realm. Katyal shows that instead of defending the defendants' right to privacy, gay right lawyers' claims focused on the defense of sexual orientation against any discrimination coming from the legal system. From the case *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986), where the Supreme Court declared Michael Hardwick guilty of the crime of sodomy, gay rights activists started to use a strategy based on the concept of sexual **identity** rather than on that of sexual **conduct**. Given that sodomy was sanctioned as a criminal *act* or conduct, the new legal strategy did not claim immunity for the perpetrators of the act because this was licit, but because it was performed in exercise of a different –and legitimate– sexual orientation. In other words, for gay rights activists, homosexuality was not a matter of exercising certain conducts in the realm of the private, but a life option that should be protected under the constitutional right to freely express and develop as persons.

homoerotic stories as an encompassing narrative fulfilling multiple purposes for their tellers. To Plummer, sexual stories like coming out unite against common enemies, raise new concerns, mark identities and differences, and change the dominant world view (Plummer, 178). In particular, the coming out story operates as a thread creating a dialectical relationship between communities, politics, and identities (Plummer, 87), as it makes individuals part of a broader community of people who share a common story. In this view, the coming out story becomes a master narrative that provides tellers with a sense of order and direction. At the same time, it fosters the emergence of a community that interprets and shares individuals' narratives. As Plummer (1995, p. 87) states, "Both the development of a gay personhood and a gay culture proceed incrementally, in tandem and feeding upon each other. As persons create a gay culture cluttered with stories of gay life, gay history, and gay politics, so that gay culture helps to define a reality that makes gay personhood tighter and even more plausible. And this in turn strengthens the culture and the politics". In this sense, the coming out story becomes an element providing consistency, structuration, order, and belonging. It is an empowering device in that it allows people to understand their own story within the framework provided by that encompassing narrative. As Plummer (1995, 84) graphically suggests, the coming out story implies a process of ventriloquism: "The mouthing of other's stories in the absence of your own". It is used as a healing device that provides a sense of coherence and organization to the individual stories that lack a reference to validate themselves. At the same time, through the elevation of sexuality as a defining feature of people's identity, the coming out story becomes a political story bringing about multiple transformations in the way identity is conceived and in the physical and political arrangements of the



emerging community. Gay ghettos, products, institutions and a new consciousness are facilitated by the emergence of a narrative like coming out.

Plummer (1995) further describes the coming out story as a modernist tale because it employs a causal language, a sense of linear progression, and delivers a feeling that the truth is being discovered (Plummer 1995, 83). He shows that the story is a tale of progressive development from secretive to open and proud sexuality. It presupposes that their protagonists go through a progressive path where they start exercising sexuality in a hidden, dark space represented by the image of the closet, and end up assuming a public performance and recognition of a distinctive sexual orientation. The coming out story, Plummer (1995, 54) suggests, is a tale of rebirth from secrecy and uncertainty to public embracing an identity as gay. The story ends happily with the embracement of a new identity and with a commitment towards political advocacy. The plot of this story is, then, relatively simple: Individuals traverse a path from suffering to epiphany to transformation.

To what extent do immigrants appropriate and reproduce this model?

Interviewees in all groups showed some level of engagement with the coming out story; from references to immigration as a way of abandoning a sort of national closet to a certain sense of joining an international brotherhood, all interviewees were familiar with and used the coming out metaphor. Narratives conveyed a sense of empowerment facilitated by New York's climate of sexual liberty for people with varied sexual preferences. Juan and Mario, from the *traditional* and *cosmopolitan* group, respectively, spoke about aspects of New York that portrayed it as an appealing place to any gay person regardless of his national origin. Juan (*traditional*) spoke about New York as "the

Gay Disney.” Mario (*cosmopolitan*) mentioned that now he could have access to legal, medical, and other types of services provided by people within his community.

Interestingly, immigrants’ interpretation of openness and liberty was much less optimistic than implied by the coming out rhetoric. Based on their experiences in the city, immigrants interpreted liberty as a quality that allowed them to act in the way they wanted but only to the extent that this happened under conditions of anonymity. Immigrating was associated with the loosening of social controls and therefore with a greater ability to engage with their sexuality in a more comfortable way. Eduardo, from the *traditional* group, spoke about his new setting in New York as a place to establish relations with other men without being judged. He narrated that a friend he maintained correspondence with had said that “here one could live with his friend, (...) nobody would criticize you, and there was not that prejudice that someone would see you, that someone would discriminate against you.” (Interview with Eduardo). However, in these cases, liberty was not much associated with greater possibilities to actively create or adopt a different identity but rather with the ability to more freely exercise the options that one had already adopted in conditions of less publicity.

Immigrants’ narratives emphasized aspects other than sexuality as the core of their identities. In particular, their accounts of the immigration process shaped their life narratives in ways more prominent than their sexual stories. The implications of this attitude were similar for the three categories. For individuals in the *traditional* group it was less important to adopt an identity performance as gay men than to be successful immigrants (i.e., stable workers, providers, with an ample capacity to consume). For individuals in the *cosmopolitan* group, sexuality-centered identity performance was

important, but it was mostly a sign of distinction that spoke to their success as immigrants. Finally, individuals in the *activist* group did commit with identity politics as part of their work in New York-based gay organizations, but they certainly understood that sexual politics necessarily intersected with race and class questions as immigrants face multiple forms of marginality aside from sex-based discrimination.

New York's alleged character of gay mecca was called into question through immigrants' dramatic encounters with discrimination and marginalization. Revisiting the idea of the Gay Disney, immigrants in all categories related that on their arrival in New York, their contact with the traditional gay circuits of the city had been as tourists or spectators rather than as participants. People remembered having visited places in Greenwich Village as part of tourist trips that other friends already in the city had prepared for them. They remembered having visited 'exotic' places like bathhouses, nudist or sado bars, and other sites with a reputation as places for cruising and sexual activity, but not feeling really part of the New York gay scene.

Their belonging to the gay scene of Jackson Heights was also problematic to the extent that their status of Latino brown gay men followed Colombian immigrants even to the territory they felt as home. Despite journalistic accounts that have presented Jackson Heights as a new queer destination in New York<sup>4</sup>, immigrants pointed out that there were fundamental disparities in their relations with U.S. gay men regardless of where exchanges took place. Although immigrants' accounts relate that Jackson Heights has been a scenario for interethnic sexual encounters, this never transcended the ephemeral moment of street or bar exchange. Colombian writer Jaime Manrique explains this as a

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, gay magazine "New York Blade News" published an article titled "Hitting the Heights in Queens". The article announced "Jackson Heights blossoms as a safe, affordable gay mecca".

case of prejudice and objectification. For Manrique, “The reason gay people bond is because of sex. It is like the hatred between blacks and whites, white men are like slave owners. They didn’t marry black women but having sex with them was fine. There is a lot of objectification going on in gay culture, and all cultures: Blondes who like Blacks or Latinos. It is just objectification of the other for sexual gratification. Actually, it is more prejudice, I think, with objectification, because the other person is not a person, but a type, an archetype.” (Jaime Manrique interviewed by Hans Almgren 1994, p. 57).

Immigrants’ criticism extends to heterosexual spaces in the U.S. Contrary to the ethnocentric belief that U.S. social institutions are more progressive due to greater access to civil liberties, immigrants insistently commented on unfair arrangements they saw and experienced in their everyday life. For instance, it was stated that homophobia is not privative of Latin American societies but that it pervades all sectors of U.S. society too. Jose, part of the *traditional* group, narrated how in his work as a security guard in a busy tourist location in Manhattan, it was common for transexuals to be considered suspicious and monitored by the security team, after releasing the alert: “He-she’s walking”. Mario, from the *cosmopolitan* group, too, said that even though in general Colombians face many difficulties fully embracing their sexual orientation, Americans from outside the main urban centers have as many problems as Colombians in coming out of the closet. For his part, Ernesto (*traditional*) found that although subtle, sexual discrimination was widespread and devastating for those who, like him, experienced it on a daily basis. Ernesto narrated that his job environment was a nightmare because even though his middle-class, educated work-mates did not show any sign of being homophobic, he felt that it would be completely inappropriate and probably censored if he made any remark

involving his own life outside work when the others talked about their heterosexual family or romantic lives.

Mistrust extended to attitudes towards the gay rights movement and their coming out rhetoric. Esteban, from the *activist* group, challenged mainstream U.S. gay activism's attitudes towards Latino gay militants. Esteban stated "there are many Whites who don't have a good relationship with Latinos because they see them as invaders. For instance, there have been tensions between White and Latino organizations in Jackson Heights". Esteban denounced the fact that many White gay men were politically on the right and often held anti-immigrant sentiments. He said that White gay organizations limited their contact with Latino gay organizations to sending information without being informed about what happened in Latino communities. For this reason, Esteban stated, "White organizations accused Latinos of not getting involved in politics. The result was that White organizations in the area did not offer a friendly space to Latino initiatives and therefore some Latino activists decided to create the 'Guillermo Vasquez Independent Democratic Club of Queens' in June of 2002." (Interview with Esteban).

It appears from these references that the coming out language is present in varied forms in the immigrants' accounts. Through the idea of coming out from a national closet to an enormous amusement park for men who desire other men, some immigrants engage with the notion that homoerotic desire ties to a set of common expectations and practices constitutive of a distinctive social identity determined by sexual orientation. Yet, much more often, immigrants' narratives demonstrate that they understand liberty as anonymity and that sexuality is not the main axis of their identity. On the contrary, immigrants reveal their permanent exposure to conditions of marginality and

discrimination.

c. Strategic silences and immigrant homosocialities

An emerging tradition of scholarship researches the constitution of same sex desire in diasporic communities. In this tradition, authors like Manalansan (2002 and 2003), Gopinath (1998), and Quiroga (2002) find that dominant discourses fail to capture diasporic homoeroticism. For this work I take Jose Quiroga's (2002) key concept of "strategic silences" in order to name that diasporic homoerotic quality that goes unrecognized in prevalent homoerotic discourses. To Quiroga, Latino/as engage with networks of lesbian and gays who play with the visibility of their sexuality and refuse to "proclaim their own desires as an identity." (Quiroga 2002, p. 19). To him, silence replaces declaration as the main element identifying subjects who experience same sex desire<sup>5</sup>.

As I have anticipated in the previous discussion about immigrants' negotiations with discourses based on predetermined sexual roles and on the coming out metaphor, immigrants engage in an alternative definitional framework characterized by a strategic

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<sup>5</sup> Although here I focus on the discursive aspects of homoeroticisms, it would also be important to reflect on the performative and its importance for identity building. In a pioneering study on seduction among gay men in Cali, Colombia, Anaconda Munoz (2000) shows that men who engage in homoerotic relations may be *activos* and *pasivos* interchangeably for strategic reasons, without having to assume one or the other role as a permanent identity. In the context of this middle-sized city, roles in homosexual relations "vary according to situations, that is, on some occasions one can become *pasivo* or *activo*, it is just a matter of giving up so both can have access to each other (...). Here, the character's performance is circumstantial, the scene requires a specific mode of behavior and, through his appearance, he assumes his script in such a natural way that he is able to transmit positively the desired information through the first impressions and he manages the situation with such a dexterity that he is able to choose not only his script, but also every step in the interaction; the selection of roles is used as a strategy to allow more possibility to the encounter" (Anaconda Munoz 2000, p. 44). In this context, the *activo/pasivo* categories become aspects of a performance allowing seduction and sexual encounters. Similar evidence is found on a groundbreaking work on places for gay men in Cali, Colombia (Salazar Esquivel's 1995, p. 79), whose findings suggest that sexual roles vary drastically depending on the type of sexual transaction being pursued in a particular moment.

negotiation of voice and identity. In this framework immigrants play with silence turning it into an element with multiple social functions from facilitating social ties among them and with the broader immigrant community, to navigating their place in the mainstream gay rights movement. In this landscape, *secrete* and its correlates silence and anonymity delineate an alternative understanding of homoeroticism among immigrants.

A remarkable characterization of *secrete* in Latin American homoeroticisms is in Colombian scholar Dario Garcia's (2004) original study on Bogota's gay bath houses, Garcia states that *secrete* represents more than a mere reaction to homophobic violence. To Garcia (2004), *secrete* does not only result from the need to avoid homophobia, but it is also a positive condition facilitating interpersonal relations among men who feel passionate about other men. In his words, "secrete institutes specific social ties among those who share it and with respect to those who do not share but that are able to imagine it or to know it eventually. *Secrete* gives place to a particular type of interaction and conflict (...) sociability ties are structured after worlds defined in function of the knowledge of the secret, like, for instance, that of those who do not know anything, that of those who know it, or that of the world's peers who share the secret" (Garcia 2004, 29). Thus, as stated by Garcia, silence is not only an absence of voice, but a way of making new social spaces possible.

For the case of Colombian immigrants I found that the notion of *secrete* is articulated with that of anonymity and the partial visibility allowed for the city. In immigrants' narratives, the private is not to be understood as a sphere where secret activities take place but rather as a porous space for performance and moments of partial visibility. Anonymity is identified like a characteristic of life in global cities but also like

a key feature explaining the dimensions of immigrants' outing. Mario explained this point by saying: "I have seen that the majority of homosexuals that come here progress not only because they are Colombians and they are strong to work and because they like working, but because of the fact that liberation (brought by immigration) allows them to be in a place where (everything) is more tolerated and where everything is more *anonymous* (his emphasis) than there (in Colombia), because here what one enjoys the most is this anonymity where no one knows you, then you can be whatever you want, and also here one really takes advantages of the fact that no one cares about what one does. One is completely anonymous." (Interview with Mario).

Although Mario, like other interviewees in the Cosmopolitan group, repeatedly made references to the coming out idea, throughout our conversation it became evident that the consequence of his pledge to a part of the coming out was not the fact that he sometimes he engaged in an open declaration of his sexual preference. Mario emphasized that immigration allowed him to enjoy more sexual freedom *but* without going through the process of coming out of the closet for family, co-workers, or the broader community. In the same vein, Mario indicated that the anonymity allowed by immigration was key to gaining access to partners and to transform one's expectations regarding sexual and social life. When I asked him what changed his expectations in this area, he pointed out: "Well, the fact of living here, of not having anybody from my family around, of being anonymous, of being one more person that walks through the streets of New York and that nobody knows and besides, in general, it is more difficult to establish connections with other people in New York than in Colombia (...) (In Colombia, as much as they may have liberated and that they do the same as people do



here (in the U.S.), it is presumed that one has to have more control over his homosexual activities outside the familial nucleus.” (Interview with Mario).

This mimetic position allowed by anonymity could also be seen in the centrality of bars as places to build immigrant homosocialities. Jokingly, Jose insinuated that *The Bon Heure*, one of the main Queens’ Latino gay locales in the early eighties, was a bar for undocumented immigrants that used a French name to confuse immigration authorities. Jose’s statement speaks about the strategic character of the immigrant geography, where places can be decoded by those who inhabit them but appear as hardly decipherable to outsiders, and particularly to those who might put their very presence in the U.S. at risk. Another example of this is the way in which outsiders could only learn that some Latino gay bars are such if guided by friends or acquaintances. At the same time, bars are not hidden or separated from the Jackson Heights’ landscape, but rather they are part of the local fabric of immigrant life. To the extent that they continue rather than interrupt immigrant life in Jackson Heights, they are guarded from an excessive and potentially dangerous exposure.

This is not to say that Latino gay bars do not have a life of their own. A number of exchanges and events occur there. For instance, organizations have bars as points to disseminate information about events, AIDS prevention, political activities, etc. Different groups also come to bars to distribute posters and flyers inviting to shows and performances. Even mainstream gay organizations use bars to spread information about health initiatives or various advertisements about gay New York. This indicates that beyond their protective function as places that “invisibilize,” bars are also the terrain to knit socialities. In particular, partial visibility permits an alternative praxis of sexual

liberty without pledging allegiance to the coming out creed. From immigrants' narratives, bars appear as an ideal place to appropriate two apparently conflicting values offered by New York City: On the one hand, liberation; on the other, anonymity. Immigrants identify gay bars in Jackson Heights as the social space that connect the idea of coming out with that of remaining anonymous for the straight community: a sort of exposed and collectively lived closet.

Homosocialities recreated in Latino gay bars in Jackson Heights lent support to this understanding of the public/private binary given their strategic position in the immigrant geography. Noting the peculiar position of Latino gay bars in Queens, Manalansan (2003, 72) notes: "These sites display and invoke intersections of temporalities and places. They are not intrinsically separate from their own mainstream immigrant communities, but are somewhat integrated into the geographical layout of diasporic life. Gay bars "out there" are no more gay bars in the stereotypical sense than they are places in which immigrants participate in claiming their own location in the city". In my own ethnographic work in Jackson Heights, I found a similar landscape. There, Latino gay bars coexist with an array of immigrant businesses offering everything from folk music to travel packets, long distance phone call services, Bollywood movies, or fortune-telling venues. They constitute a key location for people to socialize and strengthen social networks without disrupting but rather strategically interacting with the broader immigrant landscape.

Life in Latino gay bars confirmed Roberto Strongman's (2002) reflection on the meaning of the public/private divide in Latin America. Strongman points out, "in sharp contrast with the United States, where many states still have sodomy laws, Latin

American constitutional prohibitions against homosexuality are virtually nonexistent. Whenever homosexuals are arrested in Latin America, it is usually under the charge of *indecencia publica*. In other words, what is often punished in Latin America is not the homosexual act per se, but the alleged disclosure of it in the public sphere as “public indecency”. Broadly speaking, the North American closet spells liberation through disclosure and many native Latin American homosexualities operate through freedoms afforded by secrecy” (Strongman 2002, p. 181). As the interviews I conducted showed, anonymity allowed by immigrant life permitted to freely create homosocialities while maintaining some equilibrium within the immigrant community. Against the premises of the coming out logic, immigrants in all categories I identified, confirmed the importance of strategic silences as they also considered that these were key to preserving family and heterosexual immigrant networks. As it has been documented in the case of other Latino and diasporic communities (see Guzman 1997 and Manalansan 2003), broader familial or diasporic social space takes precedence over the choice of constituting new separated sex-based communities.

In this landscape, there is no place to organize homosocialities as in a gay ghetto. Instead, bars are an ideal space for being out inside their own community at the same time that they remain relatively invisible for outsiders. Bars become the space to develop social relations within and not in disruption of the immigrant community. I found a practical example of this when I visited a local bar at late afternoon. I could not find any of the bartenders or waitresses I had met in my previous visits to that place, and in fact, the customers looked unfamiliar to me. Five minutes later, I witnessed how the bar was making its daily transition from being a regular straight bar to the gay bar attended by

Latinos I had visited before. Both the clientele and the staff switched in a pretty well synchronized fashion every day around 7 pm. Through instances like this, I found that the physical layout of the Jackson Heights neighborhood was set up in such a way that immigrant homoerotic spaces do not interrupt but rather represent an extension of immigrant life, only with particular locations that become activated with their visitors' periodic presence. This is also the case with residential arrangements. Because housing is heavily connected to people's social networks and referrals from acquaintances, a number of my interviewees ended up sharing apartments or living in the same building than other Latino gay men. This arrangement, however, has not led to the constitution of a gay ghetto, but rather it is integrated into the geography of the local immigrant life.

As it can be seen in the previous discussion, interviewees in all categories stressed the importance of silence to articulate homosocialities before and after their immigration. Immigrants pointed out that immigrating to New York allowed them to enjoy more sexual freedom while maintaining their sexual preferences undeclared. To Jose, anonymity implied more liberty because "Here there's nobody who will see you get into the *joto's* house. In Colombia there's this say: Tell me with whom you hang out and I will tell you who you are." (Interview with Jose). Jose, from the *traditional* group, insisted that homosexuality was something that did not need to be declared and highlighted the loosening in social control in contrast with what occurred in Colombia. At the same time, he did not identify the U.S. gay mainstream rhetoric of disclosure as necessarily more progressive. In our conversation he pointed out, "(In Colombia) I did what I wanted and nobody got to know. Here, gays chant 'We want the civil rights no more no less than anybody else' and 'Be proud', but I don't say it, I don't want to be

proud; I don't want to tell anybody else my personal life" (Interview with Jose). Instead, Jose spoke about the importance of anonymity associated with immigrant spaces in the context of a global city. This belief extended to other groups: Helio, from the *cosmopolitan* category, said that he was not concerned about the fact of coming out as a declaration because, as he put it: "I have not told my mother that I am gay and I will not tell her; it is not necessary. I was never in the closet." To him, being gay was beyond engaging in a disguised sexuality or in a public declaration of identity. For interviewees in his and other groups it was clear that perceptions of immigration as a step closer to their sexual liberation need to be revised in light of the importance that immigrants concede to the notion of anonymity.

Despite the immigrants' broad use of the coming out rhetoric, it was apparent that immigrants do not necessarily conform to it in their everyday life. This was particularly true for people in the *traditional* and *cosmopolitan* categories. Immigrants may be partially open about their sexuality as when they participate unmasked in the local gay parade, but essentially they confine their "outing" to bars and other semi-public settings like cruising spots and more private ones like friends' gatherings. As an interviewee told me, "coming out of the closet means that everybody knows. I have come out for the gay community, not for the straight one." (Interview with Jose). For his part, Oscar insisted that coming out was unnecessary because his family always knew or at least suspected that he was gay. In the same vein, almost every man I interviewed from all three categories, maintained some spaces where their sexuality did not act as an organizing principle in their lives. Moreover, in the case of one person in the *traditional* group, outing was pointed to as an example of bad taste because sexuality was a private matter.

From both my ethnographic work and the interviews I conducted, it was clear that immigrants engaged with the coming out rhetoric, if only to then challenge it with a different conception of the public/private divide. In particular, from their experience as anonymous subjects who refuse to publicly declare their sexual preference, immigrants recreate a different sphere where deliberations are not intended to be public, but whose implications go far beyond the merely private. As a result, immigrants pose a challenge to discourses on homoeroticism that deal with sexuality as exclusively existing in the realm of either the public or the private.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION: SEXUAL STORIES AND IMMIGRANT HOMOSOCIALITIES

Under the anonymity facilitated by the city, immigrants establish networks and spaces within the broader heterosexual immigrant milieu. In these partially visible network and spaces, secrecy plays multiple roles: It is a positive quality enabling social relations; it is also a way of preserving immigrants' networks and a form of dealing with racism and homophobia. Above all, this partial visibility allows immigrants to develop their own spaces without disrupting the immigrant community where they find their most immediate support network.

Strongman's (2002) criticisms suggest that sexual practices not based on disclosure should not be interpreted in terms of more or less developed manifestations of same sex desire. Moreover, publicity should not be seen as synonymous with greater sexual freedom. If traditional studies on Latin American homoeroticism suggest that the activo/pasivo categories reflect the absence of a gay subculture characterized by reciprocal, egalitarian, and emancipatory relations, a more careful study on homoeroticism in the periphery shows that these categories may have multiple meanings some of which allow rather than constrain sexual liberty.

In the previous sections I showed that coming out is a powerful narrative shaping immigrants' accounts through their claim that immigration is a means to achieve sexual liberation. In particular, some immigrants identified their journey to the United States

with the coming out from a national closet. At the same time, immigrants talked about immigration as the bridge to a “Gay Disney”, where they would be liberated from sexual oppression thanks to their ability to formulate public claims about their needs as members from a special minority. I also suggested that, in practice, there were contradictions within this account, which became apparent in various instances where immigrants felt they had limited access to gay New York.

As in Quiroga’s concept of strategic silences, secrecy is an important condition defining immigrants’ sexuality. However, secrecy should not only be seen as a form of reacting to adverse conditions. In the immigrants’ case, secrecy has been a condition for developing homosocialities in Colombia and most immigrants have certainly been initiated in this atmosphere. Secrecy becomes strategic as immigrant life gravitates around immigrant communities. While family ties enable immigrants to gain autonomy and subsequently, to consolidate homosocialities, familial equilibrium is better maintained by not declaring one’s sexual orientation.

Immigrants’ experiences support recent critiques of the activo/pasivo and coming out discourses on homoeroticism. In these critiques, authors like Santiago (2002), Quiroga (2002), Cantu (2000), and Manalansan (2002 and 2003) address the developmentalist focus of these models which assumes that Euro-American homoerotic discourses are inherently more advanced and therefore more equalitarian and advantageous for gay people. The activo/pasivo model understands homoeroticisms not based on disclosure as lacking any meaningful content beyond the mere bodily exchange. Establishing such a differentiation between homoeroticism as an issue of political identification versus as backward behavior probably obscures more than it clarifies. For



one thing, this rhetorical distinction creates artificial categories with which sexual practices hardly coincide.

This criticism is also true for the scholarly tradition that emphasizes the structuring role of the coming out narrative while downplaying the diversity in sexual practices and stories. Ken Plummer's (1995) work, briefly referenced in this paper is only one example of this trend. While Plummer underscores the importance of producing more and more varied sexual stories in order to produce "a radical, pluralistic, democratic, contingent, participatory politics of human life choices and difference (...)" (Plummer 147), it is not clear how it is possible to attain his proposal for a "democratization of personhood" (Plummer 147). In particular, which are the actual voices allowed to define and to participate in Plummer's so-called sexual citizenship? Plummer's proposal is for broadening the scope and number of sexual narratives in order to include other stories about identity and self, as well as for their subsequent incorporation into the narrative of communities of memory or interpretation. He also claims that there is a need of enlarging repertoires of family, behavior, relationships, and bodily expressions. In theory, Plummer states, the more stories we tell, the more available stories there will be to frame our stories in a way that becomes socially acceptable. Yet, Plummer's faith in the potential of multiplying sexual stories contrasts with his enthusiasm about the coming out story as a privileged organizing framework.

Examining immigrants' stories, the coming out narrative appears as a monolithic plot unable to capture everyone's experience. Even accepting the political potential of this kind of strategic essentialism, the question becomes who will see their experiences and interests represented with this encompassing narrative. Will this opening of the

public sphere guarantee that immigrants, people of color, and economically disenfranchised subjects participate in democratizing sexual repertoires? Will immigrants become exotic others that flirt with achieving the American ideal of sexual liberation? While these subjects' incorporation into public discussions to redefine sexual repertoires does not automatically imply that this becomes a democratic process, a proposal to strengthen sexual repertoires should take into account silence as an element present in sexual stories.

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