



Vol. 9, No. 1, Fall 2011, 387-393
www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review / Reseña

Carlos Ulises Decena, *Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-sex Desire among Dominican Immigrant Men*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2011.

Tacit, Complicit, Rebellious: Empathically Understanding the Complex Transnational Lives of Gay Dominican Men

Diana J. Fox

Bridgewater State University

Innovative. Interdisciplinary. Inventive. Informative. These are some of the words that come to mind while reading Carlos Ulises Decena's ethnography of the lives of 25 gay Dominican men living in New York City in the first decade of the twenty first century. This book is important on multiple levels. Not only does Decena reveal rich ethnographic narratives that provide insight into a group that has not yet been subjected to ethnological description and analysis, thereby contributing to socio-anthropological appreciation of the growing corpus of masculinity and

queer studies, but he also challenges, through the prism of his research subjects' lives, what have come to be normative assessments of "coming out of the closet." Through his analysis, readers come to appreciate that the decision to reveal one's gay identity via the closet metaphor is historically situated praxis, conditioned by race, class, gender and nationality. This is one notion, like many Decena presents throughout his highly engaging and theoretically challenging text, that takes notions, even those that appear to be radical, and subjects them to deconstruction and critique— notions that are not only important for readers to examine on their own terms but which he shows are central to understanding the journeys of his research subjects. For middle and upper-middle class, white males in the United States, for example, and for the U.S. gay movement in general, "coming out" is a measure of one's achievement both in terms of identity acceptance and political maturity. However, Decena demonstrates citing others who have also subjected the "coming out" process to analysis, that for his particular cluster of male informants, and hence the likelihood for others, this now (ironically) mainstream model is not an appropriate strategy for survival or self-identity formation as immigrants in the U.S.A. Nor is it a measure of their own or their families' appreciation or acceptance of them as human beings. In addition to this important, central theme that Decena employs to organize his narratives and key insights, there are others that structure his presentation, shaping his readers' knowledge of these men's lives.

Among them is an overt attention that permeates the text, to linguistic concepts and processes. For instance, Decena draws out the notion of "tacit" and links it to his informants' decisions not to talk directly and openly to their families about their homosexual identity. He notes early on: "In thinking that their homosexuality is knowable in a tacit way to the people close to them, the informants in this book assumed that many people had the requisite skills to recognize and decode their behavior" (20), and then he proceeds to demonstrate how this was indeed the case through stories the men tell him about their interactions with others, others who "read" these men's body language, style of speech, life-choice decisions and daily behaviors through a lens of knowing, that made any explicit declaration of their homosexuality not only unnecessary but potentially

problematic. This latter point is one of the more interesting dimensions of the text when Decena underscores that some, although certainly not all of the men, in spite of any discrimination they have encountered, nonetheless choose with clear agency, to partake in many norms and symbols of heterosexual masculine identity to further their capacity to succeed as Dominican immigrants. In addition, measures of socio-economic class, and for lighter skinned gay Dominicans, of race, reveal that they participate in hierarchical and prejudicial modes of behavior and assessment of other Dominicans as well as African-Americans, influencing, for instance, their decisions about what neighborhood to live in and with whom to associate. Living in a transnational world of ongoing movement between New York City and the Dominican Republic, these men must traverse multiple worlds of work, family, friends, sexual partners, educational and training institutions as well as cultural constructs of masculine identity.

In addition to highlighting linguistic terms that he employs from his standpoint as author to interpret his informants' behaviors, language choices and kinesics as tropes of homosexuality, race and class, Decena also engages in an interesting, important methodology for depicting the narratives within the body of the text. The narratives of his informants' experiences are presented in both Spanish and their English translation, side by side in parallel columns throughout the book. This clearly is for the benefit of his informants, for whom Decena has an obvious and compelling commitment. However, it is also a methodology that others will find useful: native Spanish speakers who will read the text; Dominicans who will note the subtleties of specifically Dominican turns of phrase; and Spanish-speaking/reading anthropologists/social scientists in particular who will appreciate Decena's clear commitment to the transparency of his methodology. Through this approach, Decena gives much more than lip service to the discipline of anthropology's relatively recent, increased concern over ethical commitments to one's research subjects, demonstrated in part via transparency in research methodologies revealed in actual ethnographic writing. These open displays of interview transcripts-as-narratives underscore the dialogic, predominantly power-laden interaction between anthropologist and subjects. Beyond this, the narratives are

fascinating, engaging and absorbing; the stories of his informants' lives from their childhood socialization to their childhood and/or adolescent awareness of their sexuality, to their actual migration and lives in New York City are vivid and highly readable. Their shared experiences of alienation as young adults in the DR as well as the empathy and understanding they received from some family members is set in contrast to the blatant violence, hatred and anger that others hurl at them—fathers who disown and taunt, mothers who plead for change, relatives who joke and mock. Decena brings out these experiences extremely well, and it is likely for those readers who are fluent in Spanish, this side-by-side translation is immensely valuable. For this reader whose Spanish is barely conversational, the importance of the approach is clear, in spite of its lack of utility. Other non-Spanish speaking/reading audiences will similarly not find this useful, but Decena explains his process clearly enough so that even those without anthropological background will appreciate its value as a technique, although perhaps not as comprehensively as those of us in the discipline. It is important to mention, however, that in keeping with the practice of transparency of methodology, it would have been even more valuable to also include a well-developed discussion of what he chose *not* to include in his transcriptions and why not. This can be done without compromising our informants' secrets, through some distanced generalizing which nonetheless reveals that what is made explicit to readers is a choice and involves Decena's own privileged position vis-à-vis his informants as the ultimate conveyor of their truths. As well, another minor disturbance I felt throughout the book as a non-fluent Spanish reader was Decena's frequent use of Spanish phrases and terms, outside the context of reporting his interviews, which often do not have English translations in footnotes or in parenthesis beside them. Sometimes he does provide these but often he does not. While I understand the spirit of this use of language, as a non-fluent Spanish speaker, this reviewer found that to be a frustrating dimension of the text, making my reading choppy, interrupting my flow through frequent resort to Google translation, wishing that even for phrases, Decena employed his voice as translator, rather than necessitating a non-contextualized translation. However, I also wondered if this is

intentional, to highlight the often frustrating experience of migration and challenges of movement and interpretation between two worlds (a point he makes throughout) employing an experimental technique of writing to bring native English speaking readers into the world of his subjects. If this is the case, then he should state so, perhaps even explicitly, not assuming anything tacit as do his subjects when it comes to their sexual orientation. In other words, his objective, to capture what is often missed in translation, for me, was masked in the copious use of non-translated Spanish phrases.

Important also to note, given that methodology is central to the construction of this ethnography, is Decena's use of "autoethnography" an anthropological term to refer to the process by which researchers subject themselves to cultural analysis and subsequent description of self. We do this in part to facilitate empathetic understanding with our research subjects, in part to illustrate themes in researchers' lives that further shed light on our informants. Decena invokes this process on a few occasions, quite successfully, broadening his readers' appreciation for the diversity and multivalent experiences of Dominican gay lives.

The book is organized into three parts, seven chapters total including an introduction in which he defines many of his central concepts such as the notion of "tacit." Here he also outlines the text and his objectives in doing the research and writing. The two chapters in Part I, "Leaving the Mental Island" address the difficulties but also the freedoms of migration, underscoring processes of separation from *some* mental constructs, to the hoped for liberatory experience of New York. Because links to the island persist cognitively, emotionally and in everyday worlds via a fractured community of fellow migrants, the sometimes assumed immediate experience of freedom in a new place/space is not evenly realized, although it does seem clear that migration is ultimately a freeing choice and one that facilitates an empowered existence on multiple levels, sexually, economically, educationally. Part II, entitled "Body Languages" presents narratives of childhood, exploring his informants' growing awareness of themselves in relation to their wider sociocultural worlds via their bodies as symbolic vessels of sexual identity and communicative relations. In Chapter 5, entitled "Code Swishing" we see another one of

Decena's creative uses of language, adopting and changing the linguistic concept of code switching to indicate bilingual movement, to code *swishing* as a metaphor of the feminized masculine body that must exist and survive and chooses to thrive in a dominant world of heterosexual normativity.

Part III, "Colonial Zones," elucidates themes of sexual practice or what Decena calls the men's "erotic journeys" tying their experiences to a complex mix of education, desire and power dynamics with partners. Here the themes of "in the closet," racialization and *machitos* (the expression of heteromale normative traits) are taken up again as important facets of self-exploration, identity construction and the ongoing challenge of movement among multiple worlds. Chapter seven, for instance, weaves together the bulk of the significant theoretical and methodological threads that Decena lays out in earlier chapters. Here he conducts an engaging autoethnography of his own return to the DR, employing his story to identify differences between his own socioeconomic and racial background and that of some of his informants, as well as the concept of the return to homeland. A senior scholar he visits reminds him to keep this in mind—and indeed his own privileged position becomes highlighted when police raid a gay bar while he's there, that is part of the international sex tourist trade and he is reminded by his friend not to worry because "Here, you and I are white" (207). Decena shares this experience as an entry point into a fuller discussion of return or "regresos" in which he maps "circuits of desire" that link up multiple themes including colonial fantasies of travel to exotic locales, with gay men's travel for sex from economically developed countries to the Caribbean, underscoring the irony when it is gay men from the DR who have migrated to New York who then return as sex tourists. Needless to say, they are simultaneously complicit and resistant to power structures, in various ways at different junctures in their erotic journeys, a contradiction impossible for anyone no matter what your identity to completely avoid, as Foucauldian analysis has obviated. This fact, one that Decena brings out throughout the text, permits him to build a connection between readers whose own positionalities vary considerably from his informants'. This is one of the achievements of good ethnography, and Decena does it with subtlety and skill, so that this reader, for example, was

able at important moments to identify with these tacit subjects, because their struggle is, while particular to their circumstances, also part of a wider, shared human struggle for survival, success, identity, pleasure, and understanding, both of our world and of others in this world.

There is much packed into this worthwhile book. Its achievements are many, among them the rare capacity of a scholarly book to intertwine complex theorization with the kind of vibrant ethnographic storytelling that this text captures. As an experimental ethnography, partaking in many of the research and writing techniques that anthropologists developed in the 1980s and 1990s, Decena accomplishes an impressive work. While it is perhaps too technical and specialized for a broad audience, an educated populace, particularly readers across the social sciences and humanities, will find this an intriguing, elucidatory and captivating read. It is an important contribution to the multiple, intersecting fields of anthropology, gender studies, masculinity studies, queer studies, Latin American and Caribbean studies and sociology, among others.