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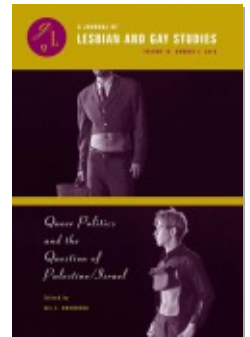
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Tacit Subjects

Carlos Ulises Decena

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TACIT SUBJECTS

Carlos Ulises Decena

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

During my field research, I encountered characterizations of Dominican immigrant gay men in New York as “in the closet” that are consistent with existing views about how Latinos and other populations of color in the United States deal with their sexual identities.¹ Cast at best as indifferent to the development of a gay Dominican community, these men were seen at worst as immigrants whose physical displacement had not helped them overcome the internalized homophobia that supposedly characterized their lives in the Dominican Republic.²

Taking for granted that all LGBTQ people should come out of the closet is consistent with a neoliberal interpretation of coming out characteristic of the current political climate in the United States. Instead of being the beginning of a project of social transformation—as coming out was understood in the early days of gay liberation—individual self-realization through speech has been severed from collective social change. Today, one comes out not to be radical or change the world but to be a “normal” gay subject.³ From this perspective, some queers of color have an uneasy relationship with the closet because they resist the depoliticized “liberation” that coming out promises, which currently resides in a gay identity as a social-cultural formation and as a niche market. Critiques of coming out in its current form have and continue to be made partly because of the persistence of this way of thinking about gay subject formation and the racial and class biases obscured by this dominant model.⁴

Based on research from a larger study of Dominican immigrant gay and bisexual men in New York City, this article argues that we must take seriously the distinction between refusing to discuss an openly lived homosexuality and silence.⁵ Drawing from Spanish grammar, I suggest that some of my informants inhabit a space that is “in” and “out” of the closet in terms of the tacit subject, an analytic framework that draws attention to the range, interaction, and intersection of the meanings and contexts that structure their social relations.⁶ Negotiations of information about a person’s sexual identity, as I show, teach us about the knowledge and complicity that structure and sustain hierarchical social relations.⁷

In Spanish grammar, the “*sujeto tácito*” (tacit subject) is the subject that is not spoken but can be ascertained through the conjugation of the verb used in a sentence. For example, instead of saying “*I go to school*,” in Spanish one might say “*Voy a la escuela*” without using the *Yo* (I). Since the conjugation *voy* (I go) leaves no doubt who is speaking, whoever hears this sentence knows that the subject is built into the action expressed through the verb.⁸

Using this grammatical principle as a metaphor to explain how my informants interpret how others view their lives, the *sujeto tácito* suggests that coming out may sometimes be redundant. In other words, coming out can be a verbal declaration of something that is already understood or assumed—tacit—in an exchange.⁹ What is tacit is neither secret nor silent.

Nevertheless, how tacit one’s sexual identity is to others is a matter of interpretation and requires that the others interacting with my informants recognize and decode the self-presentation of bodies and the information about them that circulates in family networks. In thinking that their homosexuality is knowable in a tacit way to the people close to them, my informants assume that many people have the requisite skills to recognize and decode their behavior. Everyone may not “get” the signs, but my informants understand that there is a distinction between their intentional manipulation of their self-presentation and impressions that they give to others unintentionally. Following Erving Goffman, I argue that my informants understand that there is a difference between “the expression that [they] *give*, and the expression that [they] *give off*.”¹⁰ They understand that their own bodies traverse the social world and signify in ways that exceed (and often betray) the intention of those who inhabit them. Thus it is always possible that someone might “get” their gayness despite any effort my informants may put into concealing it.

Tacit subjects helps us unravel the complicities that structure social relations instead of focusing on an explicit definition or categorization of individu-

als. As the examples presented below show, the tacit subject in specific situations includes but ultimately might exceed individual subjectivity or sexuality. Indeed, what materializes in these examples are the power dynamics that shape how individuals negotiate information about their sexual identities. In the case of my informants, the concept shifts the analysis away from self-definition toward an investigation of the way they refuse the reductionism gayness engenders in the public sphere.¹¹ Avoiding this reductionism is paramount when the very conditions of migration, survival, and (imagined or real) upward mobility depend on people's continuing reliance on the networks and resources that facilitated their geographic displacement in the first place.

Producing *lo tácito*

My informants' negotiations of coming out illustrate that ambiguity and shared understandings are crucial to the sustenance of individuals and collectivities. Interviews suggest that the main pattern is the refusal of disclosure to others. Many informants see accepting themselves as an individual, private matter. Indeed, part of their coming out involves taking ownership of their lives. This can be seen in their frequent references to personal privacy, especially when it concerns their sexual and romantic attachments. Their understanding of personal privacy, though echoing the traditional distinction between public and private spheres that characterizes liberal democracies, takes place in social networks that render such distinctions tenuous at best. After all, many of these men have migrated and survived in New York City *through* the resources of their family networks — transnational collectivities established before these men's migrations. In other words, my informants exercise ownership of their sexual identities by negotiating the degree to which their sexual and romantic lives become (or not) points of discussion in family settings. Thus they reference the public and private realms as “indexical signs that are always relative” and that depend for their deployment, meaning, and communicative effectiveness on the context in which they are invoked.¹²

In some situations, an absent family dialogue about an openly lived homosexuality reveals the legitimacy informants enjoy within those networks, a legitimacy that allows them to refuse to make their homosexuality a point of discussion. Máximo Domínguez, a light-skinned, forty-five-year-old informant who is unemployed but who comes from a family that enjoyed ties to the Trujillo regime, does not like to talk to relatives about his life.¹³ Because of what he characterizes as his “strong personality,” relatives do not broach the topic with him.

MD: Nadie se atreve a preguntarme nada.

CD: ¿Cómo tú sabes que ellos saben?

MD: Ellos no son estúpidos. Mi hermano ha ido conmigo a las discotecas. Y yo me he besado con mi novio alante de ellos.

(*MD:* Nobody dares ask me anything.

CD: How do you know that they know?

MD: They are not stupid. My brother has gone to gay discos with me. And I have kissed my boyfriend in front of them.)

This example is that of someone who is “out” to his family while remaining protective of his personal space. Having relationships with men is a part of Domínguez’s life that does not need to be discussed. Most readers will probably agree that this informant is “out of the closet,” even though there has never been a discussion about the topic with his family.

That Domínguez’s relatives have seen him kiss his partner shows the degree of openness he enjoys within the family, but this is far from representative of what happens to others. Although some informants integrate partners into their family lives in New York City, kissing and other expressions of affection are not common. More common are situations in which informants introduce partners as “amigos” (friends) to relatives. Pablo Arismendi’s dealings with information about his sexual identity illustrate how some informants handle these questions.

CD: ¿Quiénes en tu mundo saben que a ti te gustan los hombres? ¿Cómo tú se lo has hecho saber?

PA: Donde vivo, mi tía lo sabe. No porque yo se lo haya dicho. Ella lo intuye y se hace la loca. Pero ella sabe, por la manera en la que yo me visto y las salidas extrañas. Mi prima, se lo dije, porque una vez recibí una noticia de una persona muy allegada a mí, que murió de una manera trágica. Entonces, yo me puse, como que me descontrolé en ese momento. Y le bombié el asunto. . . . Y ya después de ahí es historia. Somos cómplices. Mi mamá es otra que lo sabe. No porque yo se lo haya dicho, sino que porque lo intuye como madre y también se hace la indiferente. Los demás familiares se lo imaginan, pero no se atreven a hacer comentarios ni a decir nada.

CD: ¿Tu familia se ha enterado de que tú has tenido pareja?

PA: Bueno, mis dos novios . . . yo los integré a la familia. Iban a los cumpleaños y a algunas reuniones.

CD: Y ¿cómo tú los presentabas?

PA: Como amigos. Pero [es], lo que te digo. Ellos saben quién es.

(*CD:* Who in your world knows that you like men? How have you let them know?)

PA: Where I live, my aunt knows it. Not because I have told her. She perceives it and acts as if nothing is going on. But she knows because of how I dress and the strange outings. I told my cousin because one time I received the news that a person very close to me died in a very tragic way. Then I kind of lost control in that moment. And I spilled out the issue. . . . And then after that the rest is history. We are accomplices. My mother is another one who knows. Not because I have told her but because she perceives it as a mother and acts like nothing is happening. The other relatives can imagine it, but they do not dare make comments or say anything.

CD: Has your family found out that you have had partners?

PA: Well, my two boyfriends . . . I integrated them into the family. They went to birthday celebrations and other gatherings.

CD: And how did you introduce them?

PA: As friends. But that's what I'm telling you. They know who it is.)

Extreme circumstances resulted in Arismendi informing a cousin of his homosexuality. As a consequence of Arismendi's coming out, the relationship with his cousin strengthened. Far more typically, the relationships Arismendi has with his aunt (in whose household he resides) and with his mother (living in Santo Domingo) show the degrees of ambiguity with which he works. His aunt may have a sense of what is going on because of the signs Arismendi gives of living a "gay" life; his mother's perception of his homosexuality is more a matter of mother's intuition than anything else. Arismendi's insistence on the visible signs of his gayness and in bringing partners into family gatherings point to the many traces of his life he brings into these settings without resorting to a verbal declaration of his gayness. His sense that his family "knows" what is going on is based on speculation, though it is also possible that his aunt and mother themselves give him signs of the presence of that knowledge. Regardless, whether and to what degree this knowledge is shared is something that cannot be expressed explicitly in this situation. Access to the support and resources his mother and his aunt provide him with depends on the ambiguity exhibited in these negotiations. A confrontation about his gayness, providing a definitive answer to traces that remain relegated to spaces of epistemological uncertainty, could rupture the bonds Arismendi has and needs.

Other informants take as given that their homosexuality is assumed or understood enough by those around them to render its revelation redundant. And underlining the redundancy of what is tacit, in the case of someone like Sábato Vega, can be a weapon used to ridicule attackers. One anecdote Vega shared with me concerns a family gathering he attended with his partner. During this gathering, one of Vega's cousins tried to show him up by asking, in front of everyone, when Vega was going to get married. Unfazed and without skipping a beat, Vega replied: "Pero ya yo tengo marido. ¿Tú no sabes que yo tengo marido? Míralo aquí [*pointing to his partner*]" (But I already have a husband. Don't you know that I have a husband? He's right here).

By responding to his cousin in this manner, Vega turned on its head a situation meant to "shame" him in public. His cousin was the one "shamed" for making an issue of something everyone else knew or should have known. What is important about Vega's response is not that the utterance "Don't you know I have a husband?" actualizes a "truth" about him (his homosexuality) but that it makes evident that the cousin should know something Vega assumes everyone else knows. One might say, following Michael Taussig, that this is a situation where the assumed character of what Vega says does not become evident until Vega points it out. What the realization of this tacit understanding effects is to underline everyone's complicity in a public secret. As Taussig puts it, "knowing what not to know" in public secrets demonstrates "not that knowledge is power but rather that active not-knowing makes it so. So we fall . . . aghast at such complicities and ours with it, for without such shared secrets any and all social institutions . . . would founder."¹⁴

The ability Domínguez and Vega have to present themselves before relatives in assertive ways can be partly explained by their geographic proximity to their immediate family (most of their parents and siblings also live in New York City). But it is also related to their economic independence. Their independence from relatives is evident even though Domínguez and Vega have struggled financially. While Vega's transition between jobs has been punctuated by periods of unemployment of varying lengths, Domínguez sustains himself through the disability benefits he is entitled to as an HIV-positive person. Their class backgrounds have not translated into easy upward mobility in the United States, a difficulty both share with the majority of my informants. Still, both of these men have learned enough English and have had enough experience to act as brokers between their family members and local institutions. Their proficiency at representing their families before institutions and persons with social power has come either because of their professional accomplishments (Vega holds a BA and cur-

rently works as a civil servant) or because of their ability to navigate the system (living with HIV for over a decade and having lost a partner to AIDS has taught Domínguez to be aggressive with providers of health and social services). Thus, that others “do not dare” confront them or face possible ridicule for trying to “out” them tells us much about the privileges Domínguez and Vega enjoy within their families. These networks are clearly important for Domínguez and Vega, but relegating the “public secret” of their homosexuality to the realm of what is tacit helps sustain kin relations that also depend on the knowledge, experience, and resourcefulness Domínguez and Vega contribute. In other words, all relatives are complicit in the public secret precisely because they are invested in sustaining an institution that makes them socially viable.

Arismendi’s situation is more typical of participants who are undocumented, whose immediate families live in the Dominican Republic and whose relatively low level of education limits their prospects for upward mobility. Thus, although Arismendi leaves enough traces of the life he leads to let others know what is going on, the ambiguity of his situation—at least in front of the aunt who provides him with a place to live and with his mother, his only emotional anchor—may make him shy away from a more confrontational style.

Arismendi’s disclosure to his cousin may have been the outcome of a “loss of control” of information that may be tacit but that once expressed verbally could be used against him. But strengthening relationships with relatives is something most informants hope will happen when and if they disclose their homosexuality to the people who matter the most in their lives. The circumstances faced by working-class, undocumented participants living with relatives (like Arismendi) are different from those of upwardly mobile or professional participants who are U.S. residents or citizens and who live independently. Class differences structure how participants negotiate the blurry lines separating what is tacit from that which is expressed explicitly.

While there are differences in how these informants handle information about their sexual orientation, Domínguez, Arismendi, and Vega have all been involved in gay politics since they arrived in New York City. For a brief period of time, Vega was involved in the creation and leadership of a New York–based organization for Latino gay men. As an HIV-positive gay man, Domínguez has been involved in various projects including support groups and activist initiatives among LGBTQ Latinos in New York City. Arismendi’s activities include volunteering for a social service organization serving LGBTQ Latinos as well as conducting outreach for agencies promoting safer sex. These participants may be exceptional within a broader Latino gay male population. Nonetheless, how these men deal

with information about their sexual orientation within their family networks suggests that more attention needs to be paid to what informs their rejection of the confession, especially given that their activism suggests their awareness of normative models of “coming out.” More attention also needs to be paid to the various forms of understanding and ambiguity that they tap into as they traverse various institutional and social locations.

Situations where circumstances beyond a participant’s control force him “out of the closet” constitute a disruption in the boundaries my informants establish with their parents and relatives around the handling of their sexual orientation in the family. In other words, parents and children agree not to talk about questions of sexuality in general and of homosexuality in particular. But what makes that agreement possible is the understanding that one’s sexuality is a private matter best kept away from scrutiny outside one’s immediate family networks. For example, Rogelio Noguera’s “outing” by the publication of his arrest in a police raid of a bar frequented by homosexual men in the Dominican Republic points to the violence, challenges, and frustrations that accompany the state’s shaming of homosexual subjects. This case illustrates how being outed in the Dominican Republic can make homosexual subjects vulnerable to ostracism and closes almost all possibilities of social legitimacy, let alone upward mobility.

At its core, Noguera’s outing points to the costs of public scandal to upper-class informants. A man whose skin color would qualify him as “white” by Dominican standards, Noguera was one of three children of a prominent family living in a city in the Cibao region in the Dominican Republic. Noguera’s father was a civil engineer and his mother was a housewife. Members of his family were farmers and generals during the Trujillo dictatorship. He describes both his father and grandfather as “machos of the land,” men whose lives revolved around working in agriculture, taking care of animals, gambling on gamecocks, and visiting local prostitutes. Although Noguera’s parents were invested in making professionals out of their children, they did not send Noguera to pursue a medical degree by himself in the capital. Instead, the whole family moved to Santo Domingo to support young Rogelio’s university studies.

Living in Santo Domingo and attending the university brought Noguera in contact with other self-identified homosexual men. But he insisted throughout his interview that this was not a topic of conversation in his family. “El asunto de mi sexualidad no está claro” (The issue of my sexuality is not clear), he explained. “La familia y yo, tú sabes, nadie habla. Nadie pregunta. Tú sabes como es con los dominicanos. Nadie pregunta. Nunca . . . nunca se ha casado. No tiene muchachos. Pero no preguntan nada” (The family and I, you know, nobody talks. Nobody

asks. You know how it is with Dominicans. Nobody asks. Never . . . he's never been married. He doesn't have children. But they don't ask anything).

When I asked whether he had ever encountered problems with the authorities because of his homosexuality, Noguera recounted a scandal that estranged him and his father for two years: Noguera met up with some friends at a bar and was arrested in a raid; he ended up in jail for a few days.

Después de los tres días de estar preso, parece que la publicación [en el periódico] . . . se realizó el mismo día o al día siguiente. Mi papá ya lo había leído y nadie me iba a visitar. . . . cuando yo salí de la cárcel, que fui a mi casa, mi papá me llamó y me dice, "Mira. Ve eso." Y yo leí el periódico y ahí estaba: ". . . fueron detenidos por uso de drogas y los clientes homosexuales." Entonces, él me dijo, "Sacar toda tu mierda y te largas de la casa."

[Llora.] [Pausa.] Y entonces lo agarré y le dije: "Bueno. ¿Terminó? Ahora yo quiero decirle a usted algo. Primero, no fumo ni cigarrillo. Segundo, si aprendí a ir a las barras y a los sitios, fue con usted. ¿O usted no se recuerda cuando me llevaba a . . . ?" Era una loca, este, que . . . parece que era reformista.¹⁵ Entonces ahí se reunían generales, ingenieros y vainas para hablar disparates . . . "¿O usted no se recuerda las veces que yo iba a donde Cambumbo a buscarlo temprano a las siete de la mañana?¹⁶ Bastante veces yo fui y usted estaba tan borracho que tenía una draga sentada al lado suyo." Se paró y me dio una trompada. Eso fue el resultado de eso. [Señala su mandíbula desencajada.] Esto está arrancado. No me lo han podido poner mas para atrás. . . . Este ahí él me tiró unos puños. Yo no le tiré. . . . Entonces de ahí me fui para Puerto Plata después que duré dos años sin verlo.

(After three days being locked up, it seems like the publication [in the newspaper] . . . was done the same day or next day. My father had read it and nobody was visiting me. . . . when I came out of jail, then I went home, my father called me and said, "Look. Look at this." And I read the newspaper and there it was: ". . . they were arrested for drug use and the homosexuals . . . in this bar." Then, he said to me, "Take out all of your shit and leave this house.")

[He cries.] [Pause.] Then I took this opportunity and said to him, "Well. Are you [uses the formal pronoun] done? Now I want to tell you something. First, I don't even smoke cigarettes. Second, if I learned how to find the bars and other places, it was with you. Or don't you remember

when you took me to . . . ?” There was this queen there that . . . must have been a reformista. Then at that place generals, engineers, and other people gathered to talk nonsense . . . “Or don’t you remember the times that I went to fetch you at Cambumbo’s at seven o’clock in the morning? I went there plenty of times and you were so drunk you had a drag queen sitting next to you.” He got up and punched me. [Points to his sunken jaw.] This is torn up. They haven’t been able to put it back. . . . Then he threw a few punches my way. I did not punch him back. . . . Then after that I went to Puerto Plata and I did not see him for two years.)

This anecdote reveals the pain of Noguera’s confrontation and estrangement from his father. But it is hard to tell whether the blow to Noguera’s jaw was produced by his father’s anger at the son’s public shaming, at the son’s homosexuality, or at the son’s “outing” of the father’s habit of frequenting bars where generals, government officials, prostitutes, drag queens, and other figures of “dubious” repute congregated. In other words, the recounted anecdote may substantiate Noguera’s claim that his sexuality itself has not been a subject of discussion. This messiness suggests slippages that can help elaborate further the meaning of the tacit subject. A tacit subject might be an aspect of someone’s subjectivity that is assumed and understood but not spoken about as well as a particular theme or topic. The difference between father and son, apart from the newspaper “outing” that interpellated this son of the upper class as a social outcast (possibly a drug addict or a homosexual), was that the father could enter and leave social spaces of “deviance” as part of his social power so long as his activities were “known not to be known,” as Taussig might put it. Active not-knowing—after all, Noguera knew where to go pick up his father even though it is doubtful that he and the rest of the family talked about it—transformed into expressed knowledge must have given bite to Noguera’s recrimination. In this sense, Noguera’s sexuality may not, itself, be the tacit subject of the exchange. Noguera is not suggesting that his father is gay either. What Noguera is suggesting is that his father does not have a steady “moral” ground on which to stand and judge his son. Apart from actualizing the “truth” of social difference (homosexuality, drug addiction), this exchange actualizes the complicities constituting the social power of differently situated actors. The father’s violent response is, in short, a response to the destabilizing force of an utterance by the son that reveals that the ability to “dabble” in marginality is also a function of power.

Playing with *lo tácito*

Privileging coming out as the act that produces the “public” gay subject makes the researcher insensitive to ways of dealing with the closet that avoid coming out while keeping the closet door ajar. It also makes the investigator oblivious to the fact that the closet is not an individual production but a collaborative effort. The closet door is ajar only to the extent that the gay subject and his or her others coproduce the closet when they interact with each other. Francisco Paredes, the dark-brown-skinned professional son of a Dominican business leader and of a mother with an advanced degree in biology, articulates eloquently the meanings informants give to coming out. His observations echo the uneasiness Latin Americanist critics have voiced with the metaphor.¹⁷

Cuando tú te sientas con una gente a aclarar tu vida sexual, estamos yendo con este estigma social de que “tú eres raro y tienes que explicarlo.” De que “tú estás mal y tienes que explicarlo.” ¿Por qué yo me tengo que defender si yo pienso que es normal? Sobre todo para que vengan a decirte, “Yo lo sabía. Entonces, ¿qué sentido tienes tú en discutirlo si yo ya lo sabía?”

(When you sit down with someone, to clarify your sexual life, we are going along with the social stigma that “you are queer and you have to explain it.” That “there is something wrong with you and you have to explain it.” Why do I have to defend myself if I think it’s normal? And then somebody comes and says to you, “I knew it. Then, what’s the point of your discussing it if I already knew?”)

Paredes articulates some of the concerns other informants have expressed in interviews. Paredes rejects disclosure because he associates it with the confession. His is a rejection of the confessing subject as the guilty subject. Saying no to the confession means that Paredes repudiates the religious resonance that makes a sin of what is being confessed. Instead of “confronting” others with the revelation of his sexuality, Paredes assumes its normality. Since being a homosexual is as normal as being a heterosexual, there is nothing for Paredes to talk about with others.

As a result of owning his sexuality without the guilt associated with the confession, Paredes positions himself within the discursive register of the liberal-democratic right to privacy. At the same time, he reveals an awareness of the tenuousness of his access to privacy, for that which he considers private may already

be accessible to the people who know him. Paredes's statement reveals that his sense of ownership of his own sexuality is predicated on the exercise of the right to not tell, to let others figure out what is going on if they can pick up the signs. Jason King's discussion of men "on the down-low" (DL)—predominantly African American men who have sex with other men without identifying as gay and while continuing to have female partners—resonates with what I have found among my informants. "Whether they pass as playas, [or] blend into the skateboard scene . . . young people of every race and class are responding to something in the air. It may seem like a retrenchment—and in some ways, it is—but their demand for self-determination extends a core value in gay liberation."¹⁸ Like the men on the DL whom King writes about, Paredes's emphasis is on the necessity to respect individual self-determination.

Paredes's comments reveal his understanding that he does not ultimately control the reception of his insertion in the public sphere. In other words, he thinks it is likely that his friends will figure out that he is gay because he is seen only with men and because he may "let out a feather or two" every once in a while.¹⁹ This is why, in gathering his friends to "tell them," Paredes fears he will be stating what will already be a "tacit subject" to them. His comments suggest his awareness of the ways his own body can be read by others as gay despite his own intentionality.

Paredes attended and graduated from a Catholic school, then pursued university studies in a private university. Before immigrating to the United States, he established himself in the Dominican Republic's engineering business community as an independent contractor. Being able to work independently was rare at the time. In addition, Paredes had spent a year in Germany living with the man who was then his partner. His decision to move to New York came once he learned of the failure of a business opportunity he had pursued in Puerto Rico. Once he began to live in New York and after meeting his current partner, Paredes chose to stay.

Even though he came to the United States on business, Paredes arrived with a tourist visa for six months. Unable to obtain employment in his own area of specialization because of his undocumented status, Paredes looked for jobs where his immigration status would not be a problem. A friend helped him get a job in a restaurant, which helped Paredes earn some money and work on his English. He eventually befriended a woman who agreed to marry him to legalize his status, and their successful application has helped him begin to find work closer to his professional expertise. Nonetheless, the scarcity of available work and his precari-

ous position as a newly arrived professional put him at a disadvantage in the job market.

When the interview turned to the theme of disclosure, Paredes insisted that his mother and all of his relatives know everything they need to know even though he has never discussed his sexuality with them. I asked him to elaborate.

FP: El único derecho que tú no puedes dejar que nadie te arrebate es el derecho de compartir lo que tú quieras compartir de tu vida. De ejercer ese derecho de decir, “Yo no quiero hablar de esto.” ¡Y eso no quiere decir esconderlo! Porque yo nunca lo escondí.

CD: Háblame de eso.

FP: Todos los novios que yo tuve yo los llevé a la casa.

CD: Pero hay personas que pueden decir que son amigos tuyos . . .

FP: Mi hermana mayor llevó a todos los de ella a la casa y nunca le dijo—mi mamá nunca se enteró que ella tuvo. ¿Por qué yo le tengo que decir que ese es el mío?

CD: Dicen que uno de los problemas que tienen estas comunidades en particular es que la gente no sale. ¿Qué le responderías tú a ese tipo de crítica?

FP: Una de las cosas en las que yo tengo que estar claro es que yo nací en un lugar, en un país que está colocado en una parte del globo terráqueo. Y dependiendo de donde está ese país colocado en esa parte del globo terráqueo, yo ya nací con ventajas y desventajas. Entonces, yo tengo que jugar con mis ventajas y mis desventajas, que son a nivel mundial, que son a nivel nacional, que son a nivel social, que son a nivel familiar. Tú tienes que decidir si jugar a ganar o jugar a perder.

CD: Háblame de tu relación con tu mamá y de tus parejas.

FP: Tú tienes que empezar diciendo que tu mamá te dio a luz a ti, ¿eh? Y te viene observando. Entonces, tu mamá tiene un PhD en ti. ¡Y yo no puedo subestimar la inteligencia de mi mamá! Ahora, ella hizo su trabajo y lo hizo muy bien. Excelentemente bien. Ella lo hizo bien porque ella quiso a todos mis amigos y los incorporaba en la familia. . . . Y esos novios durmieron allá muchas y otros vivieron allá otras veces. . . . Y ella iba a las 5:30 de la mañana y abría la puerta de la habitación que nunca estuvo cerrada a llevarme el café . . . y ella lo que veía ahí eran dos hombres abrazados. Entonces, ella hizo su trabajo muy bien.

(FP: The only right you cannot let anyone take away from you is the right to share what you want to share from your own life. To exercise the right

to say, “I don’t want to talk about this.” And that doesn’t mean to hide it! Because I never hid it.

CD: Tell me about that.

FP: All of the boyfriends that I had I took home.

CD: But there are people who might say that they were friends of yours . . .

FP: My oldest sister brought all of hers and she never said to my mother—my mother never found out that she had. Why do I have to say that that one is mine?

CD: It has been said that one of the problems that these communities have in particular is that people do not come out. What would you say to that kind of criticism?

FP: One of the things that I have to be clear about is that I was born in a place, in a country that is located in a certain part of the globe. And depending on what part of the globe that country is located in, I was born with advantages and disadvantages. So I have to play with my advantages and disadvantages, at a global level, at a national level, at a social level, at a family level. You have to decide if you want to play to win or to lose.

CD: Tell me about your relationship with your mother and your partners.

FP: You have to start by saying that your mother gave birth to you. Eh? And she has been observing you. Therefore, your mother has a PhD in you. And I can’t underestimate my mother’s intelligence! Now, she did her job and she did it well. Excellently well. She did well because she loved all of my friends, she loved all of my boyfriends very much. . . . And she incorporated them into the family. . . . And those boyfriends slept there many times and others lived there other times. . . . And she went at 5:30 in the morning and opened the door of the room, which was never locked, to take coffee to me . . . and what she saw there were two men hugging. Then, she did her job well.)

Paredes is explicit in using the right to privacy to frame the decision of whether or not the individual subject discloses. In his case and that of other informants, Paredes’s class privilege does not protect him from being accused of marriage fraud, for instance, should information about his homosexuality reach immigration authorities. Along with Noguera’s experience of a public shaming by having his name published in a newspaper in connection with a raid on a bar frequented by drug users and homosexuals, the possibility of being “outed” as a homosexual in immigration court underlines the importance of attempting to control how and where information about one’s sexuality circulates. Keeping one’s

sexuality in the realm of what is tacit is also a strategy for the management and circulation of information that, if expressed explicitly in the wrong context, could hurt a person's real (or perceived) possibilities of legitimacy and social mobility. Paredes's experience may be particular, but it reveals some of the ways in which he wrestles with his disadvantages within structures of inequality.

One advantage that informs Paredes's conviction of the need to respect individual self-determination and his access to privacy with an ease not shared by other informants is that he can perform normative masculinity. Paredes's ability to "pass" as a heterosexual male allows him access to a respect that may not be nearly so accessible to informants whose self-presentation is considered "effeminate" and whose gender nonconformity gets conflated with their sexuality. Though it is hard to guess what his mother thought when she brought in the coffee and saw two men hugging in bed—and asking such a question of his mother would probably do violence to the unspoken agreement between mother and son not to talk about what is tacit between them—the ability of this family to share in this "public secret" was probably facilitated by Paredes's gender conformity. In other words, Paredes's masculine self-presentation probably helped avoid external pressures (from distant relatives, from neighbors) this family could have experienced around his sexuality.

In addition, class position shapes Paredes's views about coming out. Apart from the respect that his mother and other relatives showed for his privacy while he was growing up, Paredes has resources and enjoys privacy in ways that are not accessible to informants such as Arismendi. Living with a partner and independently from relatives in New York City is not something other informants can do, especially shortly after their arrival in the United States. What sets Paredes apart from most of my informants is that he had that independence *before* he ever migrated to the United States. Although he brought partners to live at his mother's house, he had rented his own apartment and moved in with his partner for a number of years before traveling to the United States. This is rare among the men I interviewed. Thus, although other informants might share in Paredes's conviction that every individual has the right to not tell, it is not simply about whether or not one tells. Informants like Arismendi would not only have to consider whether or not to tell. Arismendi also has to consider whether he wants certain things to be "visible" to people who might say something to his mother in Santo Domingo or to his aunt in New York.

There is a game of advantages and disadvantages being played, Paredes suggests. The challenge becomes making decisions about the way one chooses to play. It is not hypocritical or unethical to wrestle with this complexity. On the

contrary, it is authoritarian to suggest that everyone need announce his or her identity, no matter the complexity. Paredes's comments about his own location at various levels (family, local, national, global) suggest that while in some ways he is aware of his class privilege, he understands the risks and benefits of disclosure for someone of his position. He understands how disclosure might curtail an individual's chances to occupy certain social positions. While these comments point, once again, to mobility and aspirations possible because of a social status he already enjoys, Paredes's comments also suggest that disclosure may have little to do, in the case of working-class men, with upward mobility in New York City. Being undocumented forced Paredes to take up the same kinds of work that men with less education and professional experience continue to perform. Yet his not telling coupled with his level of education might allow him to move up the social ladder in ways that would be inconceivable for other informants.

This article has focused on interpersonal relationships between informants and their relatives. Nonetheless, my argument relies on the critic's ability to contemplate varying contingencies as she or he investigates the operations of the tacit subject across locations (e.g., "home," family gatherings, public settings, institutions), actors (e.g., parents, relatives, the police), and publics (e.g., parents and relatives, friends and colleagues, institutions, marketers, researchers). Just as I do not use tacit subjects to generalize about the experiences of all of my informants, I am also wary of assuming that this strategy works in the same way across all of the different locations that a particular subject may occupy daily. The boundaries of what is "tacit," what is "silent," and what is "secret" may be harder to define in certain instances. The ways in which people live challenge us to develop more sophisticated analyses of the contradictions they handle with ease.

However, there is more at stake here than just how individuals make choices to tell or not to tell others about their sexual identity. Some of the examples described earlier present potential or real confrontations that actualize, through the verbal utterance of tacit subjects, how people are linked to one another in relations of asymmetrical power that they are invested in maintaining. There is a meaning of the word *sujeto* in Spanish that is not immediately derived from its pairing with *tácito* but points to a slippage I want to keep between "tacit subjects" (topics) and "tacit subjectivity."²⁰ When seen as the adjective form derived from the verb *sujetar*, *sujeto* is someone under the power of someone else (as in the English "subjected"). Yet one meaning of *sujetar* in Spanish, according to the Real Academia Española, is "poner en una cosa algún objeto para que no se caiga, mueva, desordene, etc." (to put an object inside something so it will not fall, move,

get disordered, etc.).²¹ In this sense, then, something or someone is *sujeto* if they are held by someone or something else that prevents them from “falling.”

An incorporation of this meaning of *sujeto* into my discussion of the “tacit subject” illustrates the complicities that constitute social relations. The tacit subject not only holds a person or topic from “falling” by bringing shame on those it concerns; the tacit subject holds the network as a whole from “falling, moving, getting disordered.” In the various exchanges and confrontations discussed throughout this article, at stake are the terms in which people address and interact with one another. When the terms are violated and people confront one another, what are exposed and most threatened are the social relations established. A *sujeto tácito* in this context might be constituted by the undiscussed yet understood knowledge (of individuals or specific issues) that links people together within specific social groupings.

The image of the individual gay subject “liberated” through migration to the metropolis may make New York attractive to men like my informants. Nevertheless, the experiences they recount present us with people able to make decisions and assert a sense of autonomy while being deeply aware of the social relations that make it possible for them (and for those linked to them) to survive. By underlining these implicit and shared linkages and understandings that cement social relations, the concept of tacit subjects begins to move us toward more relational accounts of the social construction of identity in queer studies. In a neoliberal world that exalts the atomized and unmoored individual and in LGBTQ communities that celebrate self-making by clinging to the promise of coming out as the romance of individual liberation, tacit subjects may make us more aware that coming out is always partial, that the closet is a collaborative social formation, and that people negotiate it according to their specific social circumstances.

Notes

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1. Even though my discussion takes Dominican immigrant men who identify as homosexuals as case studies, the works of William G. Hawkeswood, Jason King, and Martin F. Manalansan IV suggest that what I argue might be relevant to other groups commonly identified in the United States as “people of color.” See William G. Hawkeswood, *One of the Children: Gay Black Men in Harlem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Jason King, “Remixing the Closet: The Down-Low Way of Knowledge,” in *If We Have to Take Tomorrow: HIV, Black Men, and Same Sex Desire*, ed. F. L. Roberts and M. K. White (New York: Institute for Gay Men’s Health, 2006), 65–70; Martin F. Manalansan IV, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). The work of Diana Fisher illustrates that playing with being “in” and “out” of the closet is relevant to other immigrant groups. See Diana Fisher, “Immigrant Closets: Tactical-Micro-Practices-in-the-Hyphen,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 45 (2003): 171–92.
2. This is an all-too-common view of Latinos and other gay men of color in the United States. It is also common for members of these communities themselves to espouse these views. In some contexts, “to come out” is associated with “departing” the heterosexual world one has been reared in and becoming integrated into gay communities. Thus it is not surprising that migration is a strong part of gay histories and collective imaginings, especially for Latin Americans and U.S. Latinos. “For gays and lesbians from Latin America,” one article reads, “coming out often means joining the sexual migration to the U.S. . . . The combined pressures of machismo, religion, family, and Latin society for gays and lesbians living south of the border and the allure of a more open life in the big gay cities of the United States—known as El Norte—draw many into a migration that is partly for material reasons, partly for personal ones, not unlike the migration of gays from small U.S. towns.” See David Kirby, “Coming to America to Be Gay,” *Advocate* 834 (2001): 29–32. As this excerpt suggests, migration-as-coming-out is equivalent to a departure from locations associated with “restrictive” cultural norms and institutions: from south of the border and from rural America to urban “gay ghettos.” Mapping gay and lesbian collective histories as “coming out writ large” has recently been criticized persuasively by the historian John Howard, among others. See John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

While in the dominant narrative, coming out to oneself in the sense of owning a gay identity implies movement *away* from home, coming out to others demands a *return* to the settings and relationships where this identity has to be revealed. And a

refusal to “have the conversation” where one’s homosexuality is explicitly articulated is akin to denial. Steven Seidman’s argument about the closet in black communities, for instance, is that it dehumanizes. “Given their more ambivalent relationship to the gay community, blacks may be more likely than their white counterparts to manage their homosexuality within the framework of the closet” (Steven Seidman, *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life* [New York: Routledge, 2002], 42–43). According to Seidman, the problem is that blacks’ racial identity weighs more heavily than their sexual minority identity: “In short, blacks — straight or gay — are heavily invested in their racial identity and in their membership in the black community in a way that is generally not true of whites” (43). Seidman’s thinking about sexuality in relationship to race and ethnicity also illustrates that “coming out,” for people of color, tends to be understood as a choice between sexual and racial identities, with relatively little space for both.

3. The historical trajectories of coming out—from launching point to revolutionary gay liberation politics to the shift toward “mainstreaming” in the 1980s and 1990s and the normalization of the contemporary moment—have been discussed in texts including Robert McRuer, *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), and Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).
4. Critiques of coming out include Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 307–20; Ellen Samuels, “My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-Out Discourse,” *GLQ* 9 (2003): 233–55; and Ben. Sifuentes-Jáuregui, *Transvestism, Masculinity, and Latin American Literature: Genders Share Flesh* (New York: Palgrave, 2002). Recent critics of coming out have observed that when coming out is taken as normative, what usually gets valorized is a model that may fit white, gay, urban, middle-class men but that does not fit people in other positionalities. For three examples of insightful recent critiques, see Manolo Guzman, *Gay Hegemony/Latino Homosexualities* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006); Hiram Perez, “You Can Have My Brown Body and Eat It, Too!” *Social Text*, nos. 84–85 (2005): 171–91; and Marlon Ross, “Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm,” in *Black Queer Studies: An Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 161–89.
5. While acknowledging the range of attitudes expressed by his informants about “coming out,” Hawkeswood found that “for many gay men in Harlem, coming out was not a major concern, because their homosexuality, and later their gay identity, had always been assumed by family and friends. There was no need to ‘come out’” (*One of the Children*, 138; my italics). Manalansan argues something similar for Filipinos: “Many informants . . . felt that they didn’t have to come out because they thought that their families knew without being told” (*Global Divas*, 28).

6. This article draws from twenty-five semistructured retrospective life history interviews conducted between May 2001 and May 2002 with immigrant Dominican men who identified as gay and/or bisexual, who were at least fifteen years of age when they arrived in the United States, and who were then living in New York City.
7. This is an interpretation informed by the work of the cultural critic José Quiroga on the negotiation of sexual identity in the work of Latin American literary authors and cultural figures. See José Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
8. I am aware of the potential problems that may derive from borrowing a grammatical concept for an antisexist and antihomophobic enterprise. This might be especially true in the case of Spanish, since the language is so significantly gendered. However, one remarkable and useful characteristic of the “sujeto tácito” is that although one is able to ascertain the number and person of the subject, gender is not implicit in the verbal formulation. In other words, if I say “vamos a la escuela” (We go to school), it is not clear if the “we” in this case is “nosotros” (masculine) or “nosotras” (feminine). I am grateful to Carolyn Dinshaw for asking me to clarify this point.
9. I am using the word *tacit* in the sense of something “not openly expressed or stated, but implied; understood, inferred” (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, www.oed.com/ [accessed May 5, 2007]). In my view and as the essay shows, a tacit subject is a form of apprehending a social reality, person, or topic that materializes as implicit knowledge, speculation, or intuition.
10. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 2.
11. The argument advanced throughout this essay *is not* a proposal for a “postgay” or “postcloset” model of identity formation. Apart from the irresponsible neglect of ways of knowing and organizing one’s identity that have been fundamental to the lives of my informants, such an argument would erase the larger historical context in which my informants live their lives.
12. Susan Gal, “A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction,” *differences* 13 (2002): 80.
13. All names of the informants are pseudonyms. Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina was a dictator who ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 until he was assassinated in 1961.
14. Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 6–7.
15. “Reformista” refers to a member of the Partido Reformista Social Cristiano, a right-wing party led by Joaquín Balaguer. A lifelong bachelor who exercised power over the country’s politics until his recent death, Balaguer has been the most powerful influence on the twentieth-century history of the Dominican Republic. Noguera suggests that it was because of the affiliation with Balaguer’s party that the drag queen ran the bar.

16. Cambumbo (Tony Echavarría) is a television personality whose career began in Radio Televisión Dominicana and whose fame rests on his very public homosexuality and his ownership of a bar/cabaret frequented by working-class patrons and people involved in Dominican military, arts, and culture. Cambumbo's establishment was considered a space of debauchery and transgression, even though effeminate homosexuals—other than Cambumbo and his staff—began to be tolerated only in the last years of the cabaret. Even then, the space was more open in its last years of existence toward drag queens and their “bugarrones” than to homosexual men. Thanks to Richard Camarena for giving me background information on Cambumbo.
17. I am thinking specifically of the work of Sifuentes-Jáuregui and Quiroga.
18. King, “Remixing the Closet,” 68.
19. “To let out a feather or two” means to act in ways that are, in general, construed as “effeminate.”
20. For a useful discussion of the meanings of *sujeto* in Spanish and in the larger context of European philosophy, see José Miguel Mariñas, “*Sujeto, subdito, sugeto*: The Body of the Subject: Montaigne and St. Teresa,” *Radical Philosophy* 138 (2006): 38–39.
21. *Sujetar*, *Diccionario de la lengua española*, www.rae.es/ (accessed November 29, 2006).