

Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire among Dominican Immigrant

***Men.* By Carlos Ulises Decena. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.**

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1 Gay men in racial minority and immigrant communities encounter multiple levels of oppression and stigmatization, e.g., the intersectional construction as the racial other and the sexual deviance. Minority and immigrant gay men also face homophobia from their community members. They are blamed for bringing shame upon their communities, which demand men to uphold the dominant ideology of hegemonic masculinity in a racist and sexist society. In this globalized world under which national boundaries are often blurred, how do immigrant gay men negotiate their sexual identity in the process of transnational migration? Exploring an uncharted territory, Decena in *Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire among Dominican Immigrant Men* examines experiences of Dominican immigrant gay and bisexual men in New York. Central to the text are the following questions: How do Dominican immigrant gay men in New York reconfigure their sexual identity and gender presentation through transnational migration? How do they refashion themselves as modern subjects? How does their migration reshape their relationships to their homeland and their identification with Dominicanidad (Dominican identity and community)? What are the implications of their ambivalence toward the US colonial legacy as well as their simultaneous construction of the United States as the modern and Dominican Republic as the backward? What does all this mean in terms of their stigmatization as the racial/sexual other and their idealization of white gay men and identification with whiteness?

2 Decena makes several contributions substantively. One central theme in his text is the disciplining of the body. Many gay men in his study discuss the necessity to present themselves as “real men,” which requires them to erase signs of effeminacy through changing their mannerism and speech since childhood to the present. They have to consciously discipline their own body presentations and produce the facade of heterosexual masculinity in front of others. For many, the pressure for masculine performance persists after they migrate to the US. For example, some gay men conceal their sexual identity at work since heterosexual masculinity signifies “seriousness,” which confers privileges and power. Whether one stays in or out of the

closet depends on the context. The author uses the term “code swishing” to describe the two worlds that these men have to traverse and switch their performance accordingly.

3 While some gay men continue to remain in the closet, many of them perceive the transnational migration as their entry into modernity and their opportunity to present their authentic selves as well as refashion themselves as modern sexual subjects in an emancipatory milieu. They idealize (white) gay men as liberated and progressive, thus identifying with whiteness. However, they embrace their sexual freedom and liberation in the United States with ambivalence due to the American colonial legacy in Dominican Republic.

4 Many gay men in the study deliberately distance themselves from Dominicanidad (Dominican identity and community) for various reasons. For them, Dominicanidad replicates Dominican Republic in New York, particularly the problematic aspects. Rather than embracing the modernity, they don't utilize what transnational migration offers them, such as education, better job opportunities, and self-improvement. Still clinging on to their national identity and loyal to the Dominican nationalism, they work to save money with the hope to return home to live a better life. For these gay men, Dominicanidad continues to reproduce sexism, genderism, and homophobia prevalent in the Dominican society. However, these gay men's idealization of the United States reproduces the ideological construction of US as the modern and advanced and Dominican Republic as the backward and repressive.

5 One way they show their distance from Dominicanidad is their sexual practices. Refusing to carry on the activo/pasivo role and perpetuate the racialized sexual image of Dominican men as the masculine and dominant in sexual encounters, these immigrant gay men adopt “democracy in bed.” They look for men who do not hold on to the ideology of machismo and are willing to be versatile in bed. Yet, as the author argues, the racialized sexual image of Dominican gay men and the ideology of machismo continue to be upheld by both whites and non-whites, including Dominican men. Non-white groups are thus complicit in reproducing Dominican men's images for sexual consumption. The constructed sexual image of Dominican men and the consumption of their masculine body circulate across transnational borders. One example would be sex tourism. Men from the West, white men in particular, travel to Dominican Republic to consume Dominican male bodies and continue to deem them as sexual objects in these sexual encounters.

6 One major missing piece in the text is the lack of methodological reflections, which I believe warrant discussions. He names his interview method as retrospective life-history interviews. Twenty-two men reflect upon their experiences of growing up as children, teenagers, and adults in Dominican Republic and their settlement in the United States. They describe major events related to their struggles with family pressure and social stigma. They discuss their shifting performativity as they traverse in and out of the closet. Yet when we describe events in the past, our recollections do not reflect how events happen in actuality. Our memory is always selective and our reflection of the past is always interpretive. We use the present as the lens to interpret the past and our interpretation changes depending on our temporal and spatial locations. Since the interviews were conducted ten years ago, these gay men's retrospections of their past and reflections of their present would most likely be different today. A discussion of how people recollect and interpret the past seems to be necessary, particularly for the retrospective life-history approach.

7 Most of these gay men are the author's friends and acquaintances. The author uses semi-structured interviews to gather data. Yet, it raises some interesting questions. For example, how do we define data? How does data get legitimated? Is the line between "formal" interviews (legitimated by scientific method) and informal conversations between the author and friends that clear-cut? How does the author's familiarity with his friends shape his interpretation of their narratives? Further, the author is part of the Dominican gay community. My questions are: How does he negotiate his dual positions as both an insider (a Dominican gay man) and an outsider (researcher)? How do his own views, partially shaped by his socioeconomic and educational statuses, about Dominican Republic and Dominicanidad in New York shape his questions and interpretations? The author acknowledges that writing this book is an interpretive act. However, he misses the opportunity to explore and reflect on above central issues and methodological implications.

8 The book is written mainly for an academic audience. Since this topic is understudied, it might be better for the author to write for a wider audience. Nevertheless, this book integrates knowledge from multiple disciplines and is a must read for scholars in different fields, such as transnational migration, immigration, sexuality, gender, race, and area studies.