Original Article

Making masculinity: Negotiations of gender presentation among Latino gay men

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Abstract Many studies of masculinity examine the experiences of White men, men of color and White gay men, but often do not incorporate the experiences of gay men of color. This study builds on recent work on Latino gay immigrants by focusing on the experiences of US-born Latino gay men, who have received relatively scant attention by researchers. Drawing from ethnographic findings of gay Latino social circles, this study examines how gay Latino men negotiate boundaries of masculinity. These men employ specific strategies when “doing” masculinity, which in turn are shaped by their racialization as Latinos within the US context, their gendered socialization within their immigrant family, and feelings of exclusion from mainstream gay spaces. These findings have implications for better understanding and addressing racial and class schisms within the larger LGBT movement.

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Masculinity Matters

For the most part, I consider myself masculine. I mean, when I first came out, I used to play the part, you know, be a little more femme. But then I realized that just wasn't me. I was just trying to be part of the mainstream

white gay scene. That's not what I found I'm attracted to either. I love Latino *men*. And usually, Latino men only go for other masculine Latino guys.

-Javier,¹ 28, Mexican American

1 The names of individual respondents have all been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Throughout my conversations with Javier and other US-born Latino gay men, masculinity was a regular topic of discussion. The men constantly debated, both explicitly and implicitly, about what type of clothing, behaviors and ways of speaking they considered to be feminine, and by default *non*-masculine. The men in my study closely surveilled each others' behaviors, often sanctioning their friends who behaved too femininely in public settings. In addition, masculinity functioned as a prerequisite to determine which men were acceptable to date. What was also interesting, as illustrated by Javier's comment, was the way in which respondents' conceptions of masculinity were *racialized*. Many of the men, particularly in the early stages of coming out of the closet, associated White gay men (and their associated social scene) with femininity, while attaching notions of masculinity to being an "authentic" Latino man.

There has been extensive research on masculinity among heterosexual men (Kimmel, 1996; Messner, 2000), men of color (Mirande, 1997; Kelley, 2004; Pascoe, 2007), and gay White men (Connell, 1992; Levine and Kimmel, 1998; Yeung *et al*, 2006). Although there have been recent scholarly attempts to capture the experiences of gay immigrants (Cantú, 1999; Carrillo, 1999), there has been significantly less research on gay children of immigrants. This article examines how US-born Latino gay men "do" masculinity (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Connell, 1995). Specifically, I analyze the way Latino gay men construct and reinforce boundaries of masculinity within their social interactions. Latino gay men view masculinity as *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1984), a form of a symbolic currency used to elevate their social standing and used as a criterion of evaluation to select a partner. I illustrate that these men employ specific strategies when "doing" masculinity, and I argue that these strategies are shaped both by their racialization as Latinos within the US context and by their gendered socialization within their immigrant family and community.

Cultural Capital Theory and Masculinity

Cultural capital theory refers to the practice by which dominant groups utilize culture to exclude subordinate groups from accessing power and resources that they possess (Bourdieu, 1984). Dominant groups associate certain cultural tastes, behaviors and mannerisms with different classes and in turn use these as gatekeeping mechanisms to keep subordinate groups from entering their institutions and networks (DiMaggio, 1982). Most studies on cultural capital

concentrate almost exclusively on the relationship between culture and socio-economic outcomes (DiMaggio, 1982; Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985; Beisel, 1990; Bryson, 1996; Sullivan, 2001). However, such approaches are limited in two respects. First, they overlook how individuals may use cultural capital to acquire *non-economic* forms of capital. Second, they problematically assume that socially marginalized groups lack cultural capital. For example, Carter (2005) revealed that working-class minorities possess “non-dominant” forms of cultural capital that they use to mediate the distribution of social status in their neighborhoods.

When excluded from dominant forms of power and economic capital, which is the case for many gay racial minorities (Cantú, 1999; Moore, 2006; Decena, 2008), individuals may construct new sites of power relations in which they implement a cultural value system that adapts to their unique needs and resources, spaces that Bourdieu (1996) has termed as “fields.” For example, Reich (2010) demonstrates that masculinity functions as an important form of capital among low-income men of color, a demographic that lacks both economic and racial privilege. Rather than adopting middle-class cultural habits and striving for traditional forms of power (for example, higher education, middle-class occupations), these men painstakingly attempt to elevate their masculine cultural capital through cultural practices that are rewarded in their distinct neighborhood context – wearing flashy clothing, being promiscuous with women and becoming rich through illicit activities (Reich, 2010). These findings illustrate how the meaning and value of cultural capital are context dependent, but they also show how the social construction of symbolic forms of capital, such as masculinity, is shaped by the social position of the individuals invested in maintaining the value system of these fields (Willis, 1977; Carter, 2005).

“Doing” Masculinities: How Race and Sexuality Matter

In line with the cultural capital model, sociologists have found that the way people interact with others, namely their behaviors and practices, reinforce structural inequality between men and women. Across most social arenas in which power is negotiated (for example, the household, the labor market, the political sphere), men have historically asserted their dominance over women (Chodorow, 1978; Mies, 1986; Chafetz, 1991; Lorber and Farrell, 1991). On the one level, gender inequality emerges from the disproportionate allocation of material, social, political, and economic capital between men and women. On another level, this unequal division is maintained and reinforced on the *interactional* level (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Practices and behaviors associated with men, which are characterized as “masculine,” carry greater symbolic value than those associated with women, which in turn are labeled as

“feminine” (Epstein, 1981; Kimmel, 1996; Messner, 2000). However, as West and Zimmerman (1987) note, masculinity and femininity are not practices that are, respectively, innate to men and women, despite the fact that most people conflate gender with biologically based sex differences. Rather, gender is performed and accomplished, and it serves to naturalize and essentialize differences (that are neither natural nor essential) between men and women (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

From childhood to adulthood, males are socialized to act in characteristically masculine ways. Parents, authority figures, and peers applaud males when they act tough, aggressive and unemotional – behaviors associated with “real” men (Kimmel, 1996; Mirande, 1997; Messner, 2000). In contrast, males are publicly sanctioned if they behave in ways commonly associated with women or even if they choose to associate mainly with women over other men (Thorne, 1993; Mirande, 1997). A common technique used to sanction feminine behavior is to brand such men as female or homosexual (Pascoe, 2007). Males who fail to act tough or who show emotion are often told to stop acting like “girls” or “fags,” a practice that further reinforces the subordinate position of both women and homosexuals relative to straight men (Messner, 2000; Pascoe, 2007).

Given the heterogeneity of men – across race, class, religion, geography and sexual orientation – it is important to note that masculinity does not carry the same meaning and value across all social contexts. Rather, there are different types of *masculinities*, each associated with varying degrees of power and privilege. *Hegemonic masculinity* refers to the most dominant form of masculinity valued across nearly every social context (Connell, 1987, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Although men of more disadvantaged backgrounds (for example, minority, working-class, gay) reap certain privileges because of this system, they lack hegemonic masculinity because the masculinity that they deploy cannot often be exchanged for the most dominant forms of power and capital. Ultimately, however, such socially marginalized men often still utilize masculinity to secure important forms of capital in their local context (Reich, 2010).

As such, masculinity maintains value among minority, gay and minority gay individuals, but their boundaries and negotiations of masculinity differ from heterosexual White men (Hooks, 2003; Kelley, 2004). In an ethnography of a public high school, Pascoe (2007) found that the same behaviors that White males used to deem other boys as feminine were the practices that minorities enacted to assert masculinity. For example, White students emasculated other boys who were overly attentive to their physical appearance and who enjoyed dancing. In contrast, African American and Filipino males in the same school flaunted their masculinity through their clothing, grooming and ability to dance. Moreover, minority boys would emasculate their peers by calling them “White,” illustrating how their notions of masculinity were racialized. Interestingly, White peers adhered to minority boundaries of masculinity, as they never

chastised Blacks and Filipinos for engaging in behavior considered “feminine” by Whites’ standards (Pascoe, 2007).

In turn, though popular constructions and understandings of homosexuality often associate gay men with femininity (Chauncey, 1994; Mirande, 1997; Pascoe, 2007; Linneman, 2008), numerous segments of the gay community continue to valorize masculine gender presentation (Harris, 1997; Levine and Kimmel, 1998; Nardi, 1999). Bourdieu (1996) notes that individuals who are excluded from dominant fields create new fields that reproduce and appropriate ideologies of the original system of relations, which has been shown to be the case within gay male social arenas (Nardi, 1999). Many gay men actively promote masculinity as the ideal gender presentation, and at times some even use sexist and homophobic epithets on their feminine counterparts (Harris, 1997). Some gay men even deploy a *hypermasculine* gender presentation to counteract the constant undermining of their manhood and masculinity by *both* heterosexual and homosexual men (Pope *et al*, 2000). In sum, for both men of color and gay men, their negotiation and construction of masculinity intersect with and are simultaneously shaped by their social position as racial and sexual minorities.

Despite the plethora of studies on masculinity about heterosexual and gay White men, and even men of color, there is relatively less empirical research on gender presentation among gay racial minorities. There are several reasons for this. First, in both historical and contemporary times, gay people of color were excluded from mainstream gay social networks and movements, which have provided the basis for most empirical studies on sexual minorities (Díaz, 1997; Guzmán, 2006; Moore, 2006). A second related factor is that researchers have a difficult time locating gay communities of color to study (Moore, 2006). On the one hand, the under-representation of people of color in academia means that many researchers lack the networks with access to and knowledge of minority communities, let alone *gay* minority communities. In addition, most gay people of color revolve their lives around their ethnic and racial communities, not mainstream gay communities (Cantú *et al*, 2009; Moore, 2010). Third, although coming out of the closet is the idealized choice among White, middle-class gays, it is not always the norm for gay people of color (Manalansan, 2000; Decena, 2008; Moore, 2010). Compared with middle-class White gays, gay minorities tend to be more dependent on social, emotional, cultural and economic support from their ethnic/racial communities, which outweighs the benefits of joining mainstream gay social circles, which some find to be racist and classist (Díaz, 1997; Cantú, 1999; Guzmán, 2006; Cantú *et al*, 2009; Moore, 2010). Despite these barriers, an emerging and diverse contingent of queer minority scholars has made important strides to address these gaps in the literature in the past three decades (Luibheid and Cantú, 2005; Cantú *et al*, 2009). One such emerging field of study has focused on the experiences of Latino gay men.

Gay Latino Masculinities

Latino families, cultures and societies in both the United States and Latin America are often stereotyped as being particularly hypermasculine and homophobic relative to other groups (Díaz, 1997; Mirande, 1997). Although widespread across Latinos and non-Latinos alike, this belief problematically implies the existence of a monolithic “Latino masculinity” that negatively affects the lives of Latino gay men (Cantú, 1999). As a result, numerous parties – mainstream gays, HIV/AIDS organizations and Latino gay men themselves – have blamed Latino “culture” for the oppression, isolation and high-risk behaviors that are associated with Latino gay men (Díaz, 1997; Cantú, 1999).

The late Lionel Cantú (1999) astutely critiqued such cultural explanations for masking the underlying structural factors (for example, race, class, legal status) that shape Latino gay men’s lives. Cantú dismisses the idea that Latino gay men are marginalized by an inherently homophobic Latino culture. Rather, he and others argue that Latino gay men’s access to economic resources plays a larger role than culture in influencing their experiences (Carrillo, 1999; Cantú *et al*, 2009). For example, in both the United States and Latin America, Latino gay men who are breadwinners or are financially independent feel the freedom to disclose their sexuality and bring partners to family functions (Carrillo, 1999). In contrast, Latino gay men who lack economic resources may feel the need to keep their sexuality hidden or “tacit” (understood, but not discussed) because they do not want to compromise the social and financial support that they receive from family members (Decena, 2008). Moreover, finding alternative support among mainstream White gays may not be possible because socio-economic, racial or linguistic barriers may isolate them from mainstream gay communities (Cantú *et al*, 2009). Ultimately, these studies suggest that Latino gay men negotiate different aspects of their sexual identity, including gender presentation, *vis-à-vis* multiple fields of power – the immigrant family and community, the mainstream society, and the mainstream gay community (Carrillo, 1999, 2004; Cantú *et al*, 2009).

A number of diverse factors (for example, nativity, generational status, class, race, region) shape the lives of Latino gay men, which in turn facilitates different gay Latino *masculinities*. Tomás Almaguer (2007) discusses Latino masculinity as the embodiment of working-class Mexican men engaged in manual labor, a construction often associated with the Mexican immigrant father figure. Lionel Cantú *et al*, (2009) provides a different image of masculinity in his discussion of Latino gay clubs in Southern California, where men dress in *ranchero* style clothing and dance to *quebraditas* (fast-paced polka-style music). In contrast, Richard T. Rodríguez (2006) and M. Alfredo González (2007) document Latino masculinities that reflect the “oppositional” cultural styles that US-born Latinos encounter as men of color living in the inner city. Rodríguez notes gay men’s valorization of the (often criminalized) west coast Latino gangster sporting

baggy clothing and a cleanly shaven head – a phenomenon he describes as the “queering of the homeboy aesthetic.” Focusing mainly on Puerto Rican gay men, González notes the close association of Latino masculinity and New York hip hop culture, a gender construction closely aligned to that of African American men in the inner city (Carter, 2005). What is common among these different social constructions are the methods by which Latino gay men “do” masculinity. These men perform masculinity through presentation of self, social distancing from femininity and the desiring of a masculine partner, however masculinity may be constructed (Cantú, 1999; Carrillo, 1999; Rodríguez, 2006; Almaguer, 2007; Decena, 2008). In these respects, while the negotiation of gender presentation of Latino gay men is distinct, in some ways the process of doing gender overlaps with those of heterosexual White men, gay White men and heterosexual men of color.

Methodology: Researching Latino Gay Communities

This article draws from 7 months of ethnographic research conducted on the lives of US-born Latino gay men² in Los Angeles. Given that gay communities of color are difficult for researchers to locate (Moore, 2006, 2008), Los Angeles was an ideal context to study Latino gay men’s lives for four primary reasons: the magnitude of the US-born Latino population, the commodification and commercialization of Latino sexuality (as evidenced through the prevalence of Latino-specific gay nightclubs and events), the “institutionalization or mainstreaming” of both gay and Latino spaces and the existence of HIV prevention programs targeting Latinos (Cantú *et al*, 2009, 120). These factors meant there were ample opportunities to locate different social arenas in which I could conduct ethnographic fieldwork and regularly interact with Latino gay men.

Using a grounded theory approach, I began my fieldwork by attending Latino gay nightclub events in West Hollywood (the mecca of Los Angeles gay life) and surrounding areas, such as Hollywood, Long Beach and the San Fernando Valley. After about a month in the field, I became acquainted with three friendship groups comprising US-born Latino gay men. Although it was not my original plan, I became interested in the way that masculinity organized the social lives of these men. In other words, I wanted to see how masculinity was negotiated in the local “web of significance” (Geertz, 1973) that organized the social lives of Latino gay men. Within a week of meeting them, I began accompanying these men to other places beyond nightclub events. While most Latinos in Los Angeles are of Mexican descent, the 15 main respondents that were part of these three groups included men of Mexican³ (9), Salvadoran (3), Puerto Rican (2) and Cuban (1) descent. Nearly all of the men grew up in Southern California neighborhoods with substantial Latino populations, including East Los Angeles, Inglewood, Downey, Santa Ana and the San Fernando

2 It is worth noting that most studies of gay Latino masculinity focus on *immigrant* populations, and there is limited research that systematically focuses on the experiences of US-born gay Latino men. Recent research by Héctor Carrillo (2004) is among the first that systematically compares the experiences of immigrant versus US-born Latino gay men.

3 One respondent was half Mexican, half Filipino.

Valley. Two respondents were Los Angeles transplants, from Sacramento and the Bronx, respectively. However, both had lived in Los Angeles for more than 5 years. Respondents were between the ages of 21 and 30 at the time of my data collection.

Rather than opting to interview a large sample of Latino gay men, I focused on accompanying this relatively smaller sample of men because I wanted to observe directly how Latino gay men negotiate their gender presentation *vis-à-vis* multiple reference points, including mainstream and ethnic-specific gay spaces (for example, gay pride events, art shows, gay eateries), as well as mainstream and ethnic-specific heteronormative spaces (for example, malls, restaurants, neighborhood contexts). As such, my sample is purposive, and I make no claim to representative sampling.

Nonetheless, many of the findings presented in this particular article come primarily from fieldwork in the nightclub events frequented by the men in this study. Although I attended more than fifteen different venues throughout my fieldwork, most data were collected from three weekly events occurring in three establishments in West Hollywood and surrounding areas: Club Caliente, RJ's and Q Lounge.⁴ Given the *relational* nature of both gender and racial identity (Omi and Winant, 1994; Guzmán, 2006; Pascoe, 2007), I chose these venues because their respective clientele, demographic and cultural themes (for example, music, décor) allowed me to observe how Latino gay men do masculinity *vis-à-vis* different reference points. Club Caliente and RJ's were located a few miles east of West Hollywood. Club Caliente was a large club attended mostly by Spanish-speaking Latinos and English-speaking Latinos.⁵ The venue had three dance floors, two that played hip hop and one that played *quebraditas*, *cumbia*, *merengue* and Spanish rock. RJ's was a medium-size club attended mostly by English-speaking Latinos and African Americans, and the club exclusively played hip-hop and pop music. Q Lounge was a lounge and the only venue of the three located in the heart of West Hollywood. Q Lounge had a more multiethnic clientele – about 60 per cent of the patrons were White, and the remaining 40 per cent comprised relatively even numbers of Latinos, Asians and African Americans.⁶ Women rarely attended Club Caliente and RJ's, but about a tenth of Q Lounge's patrons consisted of straight women and lesbians. It was difficult to approximate how many patrons in these venues might have been transgender,⁷ although from my interactions, I rarely encountered individuals who were explicitly open about being transgender or were known by fellow patrons to be transgender. It was the case that Club Caliente held a nightly drag performance in the room that mainly played Spanish music and was occupied primarily by Spanish-speaking patrons; however, my primary respondents paid little attention to these shows.

As a researcher, it is important to discuss my social position *vis-à-vis* the respondents. Guzmán (2006) notes that Latino gay men are at times averse to interacting with gay men who are not Latino. Although I am not Latino myself,

4 The names of these venues are fictitious.

5 Although I did not systematically record the nativity of Club Caliente's attendants, I found that most Spanish-speaking clients were Latino immigrants, whereas most English-speaking clients were Latinos who were either US-born or migrated during childhood.

6 All of the Latino and Asian patrons were English-speaking, suggesting that most were either US-born or individuals who

migrated at a young age. I very rarely encountered Latino and Asian immigrants in Q Lounge.

7 Although respondents occasionally disclosed other patrons as transgender, I opt not to assume named individuals to be transgender, as many transgender prefer to be perceived as the gender that they are publicly presenting (Schilt, 2011).

8 While the term “urban” broadly denotes metropolitan areas, such as Los Angeles and New York, I do not mean to be reductionist in my use of the phrase “urban masculinity.” This descriptor “urban” originated directly from respondents’ descriptions of the hip-hop influenced style of African American and Latino young men from such cities that they aimed to embody in their presentation of self. This is also because the men understood the term “urban” to be a synonym for hip-hop music and

I frequently “passed” as Latino during my fieldwork. This is primarily because I am Filipino, possess a Spanish surname, can casually converse in colloquial Spanish and am often explicitly mistaken as Latino. Even when respondents discovered my ethnicity, they often minimized our racial differences by saying things like, “Filipinos are basically Spanish too,” “Filipinos *look* Latino,” “Filipinos have Spanish blood.” This may explain why many of my respondents granted me generous access to their public and private lives in ways they did not for individuals we encountered who were of other racial backgrounds, particularly Whites and non-Filipino Asians.

Doing “Urban” Masculinity: Presentation of Self among Latino gay Men⁸

The men in my study carefully paid attention to their presentation of self to display their masculinity. Presentation of self included the way they dressed and spoke, as well as the social scenes with which they associated. Doing masculinity was consciously a time-intensive process for respondents. Mateo, a 24-year-old Mexican American from Inglewood, ritualistically spent significant amount of time at the local mall or in his closet to put together an “urban” look for going out to the clubs. He strictly wore baggy jeans made by urban designers (for example, Ecko Unlimited, Sean John) and, no matter the weather, wore basketball jerseys, fitted t-shirts or a white tank top (known colloquially as a “wifebeater”) to flaunt his muscular frame. Each night before going out, Mateo spent close to half an hour cleaning his white sneakers or buffing his light brown Timberland boots. He topped off every outfit with oversized cubic zirconium earrings and flashy necklaces reminiscent of the jewelry worn by male hip-hop artists.

In addition, Mateo meticulously paid attention to his grooming patterns. Although he kept his hair short, he never left the house without making sure his hair was “perfectly lined up” symmetrically on each side. Mateo also consciously groomed his eyebrows. One night while getting ready, he approached his female roommate to pluck his eyebrows, asking her to “make them look clean, but not too thin because people will think I’m gay.” While Mateo and his roommate were both aware that he was going to a gay function that night, his comment about not wanting to “look gay” was more about his desire to not be perceived as a feminine man. This particular valuing of masculine (and devaluing of feminine) presentation of self resembled practices of both straight and gay men of different racial and class backgrounds (Levine and Kimmel, 1998; Pascoe, 2007; Reich, 2010). However, it was distinct in other ways. Mateo and other men in the study paid attention to their appearance to a degree that would be considered feminine and “gay” by the standards of White men (Pascoe, 2007) and even among some Latino immigrant gay men

(Almaguer, 2007). The gender presentations displayed by the men were more comparable to those of men of color from working-class neighborhoods (Reich, 2010). Respondents' desire to flaunt their "bling" in the form of mint condition shoes, a clean haircut and flashy jewelry resembled practices used by African American and Latino men to assert masculinity and used to display an image of power not often associated with men of color from urban neighborhoods (Kelley, 2004; Reich, 2010). These images also departed from the presentations of self documented among Latino immigrant gay men, whose styles tend to be more modest or similar to those in their respective home country (Almaguer, 2007; Cantú *et al*, 2009).

Despite their affinity toward urban masculine presentation, respondents felt that such gender presentations were inappropriate for the mainstream White gay scene in West Hollywood. Although the men acknowledged West Hollywood as the center of gay life in Los Angeles, they also characterized it as more "White," "feminine" and "bougie,"⁹ illustrating their awareness of the racialized, gendered and classed aspects of public space. (In some respect, the critique on class was an ironic one given how much money some of the men spent on clothing and flashy jewelry and given the comparable costs for drinks in West Hollywood and Latino gay parties in the surrounding area.) Consider my conversation with Eric, a 22-year-old Mexican American from East Los Angeles, before going out on a Friday night:

Eric: We're not going to a bar in WeHo [West Hollywood], are we? I think we're going to Club Caliente, right?

Author: Why do you ask?

Eric: 'Cause if we're going to WeHo, I gotta dress more white.

Author: What do you mean by "more white?"

Eric: You know what I mean – tighter fitting v-neck shirt, tighter jeans. But I think we're going to [Club] Caliente.

Eric then pulls out a light blue basketball jersey and a matching light blue Los Angeles Dodgers cap from his closet and walks out into the living room where the group is waiting.

Eric and others noted that such styles of clothing were explicitly banned on the some of the flyers for events in West Hollywood. Previous studies suggest that such restrictions on attire indicate efforts (both explicit and unconscious) to limit attendance of certain racial minorities and/or working class groups (Moore, 2006).

Respondents' awareness of what *not* to wear in West Hollywood demonstrated how respondents felt that Latino and White gay men had qualitatively distinct presentations of self. This sensibility reflected their consciousness of being non-White in a predominantly White middle-class space, a trend shown by other studies of gay racial minorities (Moore, 2010). Some felt West

fashion popularly associated with African Americans, as well as with Latinos to a lesser degree.

9 "Bougie," adapted from the term bourgeois, was a commonly used slang term to denote something as rich or affluent.

10 While these two parties did not exclusively or specifically cater to Latino/as and African Americans, the club promotion staffs (a separate group from the club manager and owner) were comprised mainly of people of color. On the online and flyer advertisements for these events, the models and patrons featured were mainly Latino and Black, and the music played was exclusively hip hop, which traditionally drew mostly minority rather than White crowds.

Hollywood was an unwelcoming, even hostile environment for non-White gay men. Eric's friend Rafa, a 29-year-old Salvadoran American, noted that dressing "too urban" carried a greater risk of exclusion from certain venues in West Hollywood, or worse harassment from police in that area. During my fieldwork, two weekly events in West Hollywood that catered, respectively, to Latina/o and African American gay men and women¹⁰ were abruptly canceled without notice, to the surprise of my respondents. The venue had changed its music selection from hip hop (by mostly Black artists) to pop music (by mostly White top-40 artists). When a respondent approached one of the venue managers, he simply responded that he wanted to "change the vibe." Weeks after this incident, Rafa and I passed by this venue and found it to be visibly emptier compared with the two parties that once housed large numbers of Latino and Black patrons. Rafa commented, "You see, [canceling the events] had nothing to do with business. West Hollywood is just trying to get rid of all the minorities. That's why they stopped playing hip hop. It's so we'll stop coming. They [the venue owners and police] think that we'll just cause trouble." Rafa's critique demonstrated how Latino gay men at times felt unwelcome in West Hollywood, a space often demarcated as a site of social acceptance for the gay community (Faderman and Timmons, 2006). His comments also illustrated a sense of "pan-minority" solidarity that Latino gays felt with other gay people of color when they perceived racial marginalization coming from the White gay community. In sum, respondents' understandings of the relationship between "appropriate" gender presentation and public spaces reflected not only differences in cultural tastes between Latino and White gay men, but also illustrated how Latino gay men negotiate their gender presentation and racialization simultaneously.

Social Distancing: Latino Masculinity as Non-White and Non-"gay"

The boundary that Latino gay men felt between themselves and White gays affected their relationship to the sexual identity "gay," a label they associated with White and feminine gay men. While respondents openly asserted their ethnic and racial identities in everyday conversation (for example, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Latino/Hispanic), many men appeared uncomfortable using "gay" as a self-descriptor. This was particularly the case for Latinos who had just come out of the closet and were new to the Latino gay scene. I accompanied Jaime and Arturo, both Mexican Americans from East Los Angeles, to a birthday party attended by mostly other Latino gay men. Although the two had been in the same fraternity in college, both were in the closet during that time and had only become reacquainted for a few weeks when I first met them. However, Jaime had been out of the closet for about 2 years and Arturo had

only been out for a few months. Halfway through the night, Jaime confronted Arturo about his sexuality:

Jaime, *suspiciously*: I've been seeing you at the clubs all summer. So what's the deal, man? Are you gay or what?

Arturo, visibly nervous, does not respond verbally to Jaime's question and merely shrugs his shoulders.

Jaime: Okay, fine. Well, do you date men?

Arturo: Yeah, I would say that. But I don't really say, "I'm gay."

Like Arturo, many men did not identify as gay in the same open manner that they identified by ethnicity and race. Rather, they offered euphemisms for their sexuality, opting to say, "I date men," or "I sleep with guys." This was partly because of the racialized and gendered connotations of the label "gay." Chris, a 26-year-old Mexican-Filipino American from the San Fernando Valley, commented:

When I think of 'gay,' I think of white. I think of those feminine white guys you see on television, you know, from *Queer Eye from the Straight Guy*.¹¹ You think of those really twinkly [very skinny] guys in tight shirts and tight jeans, or the ones who work as make up artists and hairdressers. When you think of gay people, you automatically think of white guys or guys who act like girls. That's not really me. I don't want to box myself in.

Similar to Chris, many men were resistant to gay identity because of the gendered, racialized, reductionist connotations of the term fit neither their racial experiences as Latino men, nor their self-perceived masculine gender presentation. On a different level, Chris' comments also reflect the structural inequality between White and minority gay men, the latter of whom remain marginalized or practically invisible within mainstream media portrayals of the larger LGBT community (McBride, 2005).

Although respondents generally noted that they grew more comfortable describing themselves as gay over time, many still disassociated themselves from cultural markers associated with White and feminine gay men. Pedro, a 30-year-old Mexican American from South Los Angeles, said he and his friends rarely frequented West Hollywood because the "vibe was so White and the music sucks They only play 'White' music." By "White music," he was referring to top 40 pop and dance hits typical of most West Hollywood venues. Pedro and his group exclusively patronized Club Caliente and RJ's for two reasons. First, they much preferred hip hop music, as it was the "music [they] grew up with in their neighborhood." Second, they felt more comfortable being in gay spaces that were comprised mostly of people of color, a trend shown in previous studies on gay Latinos and Blacks (Guzmán, 2006; Moore, 2010).

11 *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* was a popular television reality show that ran on Bravo from 2003 to 2007. The premise of the show was that five gay men (known as the "fab five"), each designated experts in careers not commonly associated with hegemonic masculinity (for example, fashion, interior design, food and dining, culture, and grooming), would train a "hapless straight man" in these areas to improve their relationships with women (Clarkson, 2005,

236). The idea was that the “fab five,” as homosexual men, possessed special insights to women that straight men lacked. In the most widely cited academic piece on the show, Jay Clarkson (2005, 236) has called this show the “most high profile and perhaps flamboyant mainstreaming of gay men on television to date.”

As highlighted in the previous section, Pedro felt that “Latinos like us” felt out of place in West Hollywood because it was “too bougie and White.”

Although many respondents tended to avoid West Hollywood because it was “too White,” they also avoided gay spaces occupied by Latino immigrant gay men, which they characterized as “too ethnic” or “too Mexican.” My primary respondents rarely stepped foot into the Spanish music room of Club Caliente, or any establishment that catered to gay Latino immigrants. Although they acknowledged being familiar with Spanish music, they also felt cultural and socioeconomic differences between themselves and gay Latino immigrants. They likened this boundary to the generational differences they felt with Latino immigrants in their families and neighborhoods. Philip, a 22-year-old Salvadoran American from the San Fernando Valley, noted that the Latino gay immigrants “reminded [him] of and resembled his dad and uncles, straight out of El Salvador. They’re masculine like the men are in Latin America, but not in the same way like Latinos who grew up here. Here, the Latinos I hang out with are more into the urban look, not the stereotypical Mexican [immigrant] look.” Alan, a 26-year-old Mexican American neighbor and friend of Philip, added, “I can’t relate with them [Latino immigrant gay men] because a lot of the ones I meet in those types of places aren’t educated and don’t speak English.” Although Alan himself grew up in a working class and can speak Spanish, his comment reflected his perception that Latino gay immigrants were, as he noted somewhat guiltily, “less upwardly mobile” than Latino gay men who were born in the United States, in part because of their limited English skills.

Although the men often distinguished themselves from Latino immigrant gay men, they were similar to them with respect to how they felt their immigrant background shaped their gender ideologies. Respondents often policed the gender presentation among their friends, sanctioning those who did not follow masculine gender norms, a practice they often attributed to how they were socialized in their immigrant family. Nearly all respondents mentioned that while growing up older men in their families would punish them for acting feminine or spending too much (platonic) time with women, a practice the men admittedly duplicated among each other. Many employed what Pascoe (2007) has termed the “fag discourse,” a practice in which men label other men as “gay” to bolster their sense of masculinity. Considering the following field excerpt from a night I spent at RJ’s with Oscar, Nick, and Jerry:

Oscar, motioning his head toward the dance floor: Hey check him out, the guy in the wifebeater and red straight-brim LA hat.

Nick: Man, that dude’s a girl. Look at how he’s dancing.

The man Oscar pointed out was dancing erotically with another man. When we turned to him, the man had turned around with his back toward the other man and bent over with his butt rubbing against the other man’s

crotch area.

Nick: Look man, he's a total bottom¹²!

Oscar: Whatever, man. If he weren't dancing he'd look totally straight.

Nick, looking at the other men in his group: Dude, he's a fag.

Jerry: Yeah, man, that guy's such a queen.

Oscar: Fuck you, guys.

This bantering demonstrated how even Latino gay men appropriated homophobic slurs to assert their masculinity. Like the case among straight men (Pascoe, 2007; Kimmel, 2008; Morris, 2008), the disparaging use of gay epithets had less to do with actual sexual preference (as all the men admitted being same-sex oriented) and more to do with policing each others' gender presentation. By highlighting the feminine mannerisms of a man Oscar admired, Nick's comments serve to question Oscar's ability to identify masculinity, which in turn threatened the latter's own masculinity. In turn, Oscar attempts to salvage the situation by noting how the man he noticed can pass as straight at first glance. In many respects, these men construct cultural boundaries of masculinity that are consistent with those of heterosexual men, a practice which further reifies the patriarchal and heteronormative ideology that masculinity is superior to femininity.

12 The bottom refers to the receiving male partner during sexual intercourse. In this interaction, however, the term was not so much meant to convey one's sexual role during intercourse, than it was used as a synonym for "feminine" and/or "passive" (read: non-masculine).

Maintaining Masculinity through Dating Preferences

Similar to previous studies of both White and non-White gay men (Levine and Kimmel, 1998; Guzmán, 2006), respondents' dating preferences helped them maintain their masculinity among friends and family. I accompanied Tommy and Matt, two young gay men from Inglewood and South Los Angeles, respectively, to an art show located a block from Club Caliente. The art show featured the work of Héctor Silva, a Los Angeles-based self-taught Chicano artist well known among Latino gay men throughout the United States. Most of Silva's drawings fuse elements of Catholic religion, prison art, Latino gang life, but his most provocative pieces depict erotic images of *cholos* (Mexican gang members) engaging in both subtle and explicit homosexual acts (see Figures 1 and 2, Silva, 2008). Both Tommy and Matt expressed being attracted to the "homeboy aesthetic" (Rodríguez, 2006) portrayed in Silva's work because they resembled the type of masculinity embodied by the Latino men in their families and neighborhood, some of whom were gang members themselves. Tommy compared his own dating preferences with the subjects of Silva's art pieces:

Tommy, *pointing to the artwork*: See those guys? That's hot.

Author: You like those kind of guys?

Tommy: I *only* date masculine guys.

Figure 1: “Rudy and Frank” by Héctor Silva. Permission obtained from Héctor Silva.

Author: So you would *never* date someone that acted feminine?

Tommy: Hell no. What would people think of me? I’d never date someone that was queeny [sic, overly feminine]. If I wanted to date someone like that, I might as well date a woman.

Regardless of whether Tommy would actually date a feminine man, it is telling that he felt compelled to fervently assert that he “only date[s] masculine guys.” Such a declaration, as well as his immediate devaluing of a feminine partner, illustrated the importance of masculine cultural capital in the lives of respondents. Other respondents echoed Tommy’s sentiments. Ricky, a 29-year-old Puerto Rican from Koreatown, noted “The reason I’m attracted to men is because I want to date a *man*. *That’s* why I’m gay. I’m attracted to *masculinity*. I’m not attracted to someone that’s trying to be a girl inside a man’s body.” As Ricky’s comment demonstrated, dating preferences served as another method to sanction feminine gender presentation. Interestingly, although the men are all same-sex oriented, the homophobic undertones of their comments resemble those used by heterosexual men in previous studies, who continually demeaned men whose behaviors violated masculine gender norms (Pascoe, 2007; Morris, 2008). Although it is important to note that while men chastised femininity among their friends, they at no point engaged in such discourse in the *presence* of feminine gay men. Many of the men had feminine gay friends, but noted they lacked the desire to actually date them.

When evaluating potential partners, respondents also expressed preferences for men in traditionally masculine occupations, while discriminating against those in occupations typically associated with women. Whenever respondents

Figure 2: “My homeboys con La Virgen” by Héctor Silva. Permission obtained from Héctor Silva.

recounted stories of new men they met, they often discussed the occupations of these men. If a potential partner was in law enforcement or in the military, friends responded positively and conveyed their approval. In contrast, respondents automatically dismissed men who worked jobs within industries associated with women or feminine gay men, such as hairdressing, dance and makeup. For example, Javier ridiculed his friend Tommy incessantly about having once dated a hairdresser, with little rebuttal from the latter, who always looked embarrassed each time he was derided. Such feminine occupations were

considered “deal breakers” that disqualified individuals as potential partners to date seriously. Interestingly, respondents also tended to dismiss men who worked in the low-wage service sector or in manual labor, regardless of the gendered connotations of the job.

Respondents also cited deal breakers related to potential partners’ presentation of self. Consider the following field excerpt from an evening spent in West Hollywood with John, a 27-year-old Cuban American from Riverside County:

Before going to Q Lounge, John and I decide to grab a quick drink at Spin, a dive bar located across the street. John leads the way to the second floor of the bar, stops at the top of the steps and says, ‘Oh my God. Everyone here is gay.’ I look at the crowd and most of the men were white and seemed to have generally feminine gender presentation in how they spoke, dressed, and acted. He immediately turns around and leads us back to the first floor. We then decide to grab one drink before making our way to Q Lounge. As we are finishing up, a bald Latino guy with a relatively more masculine demeanor walks in. The man was wearing a plain sweater, jeans, and athletic sneakers that were pretty beat up. I asked John, ‘How about that guy? Would you date him?’ John sized him up from head to toe, stopped his glance at the man’s shoes and said, ‘Not with those shoes I wouldn’t.’

At first, John’s reaction to the crowd at Spin is consistent with the adverse reactions that most respondents had toward White and feminine gay men. However, his reaction toward the masculine Latino patron who entered the bar with dirty sneakers was revelatory of an urban masculine aesthetic discussed in the previous section. Unlike the case with White heterosexual and gay men and Latino immigrant gay men (Levine and Kimmel, 1998; Nardi, 1999; Almaguer, 2007; Pascoe, 2007), attention to the cleanliness of one’s clothing and appearance did not signal femininity for US-born Latino gay men. Rather, it served to elevate someone’s masculinity and level of attractiveness. Francisco, a 30-year-old Mexican American from Van Nuys, discussed how one’s clothing style could counteract a masculine demeanor. He recalled meeting a man named Juan at Club Caliente who seemed “pretty masculine and aggressive.” However, as they spent more time together, Francisco noticed that Juan tended to dress in “stereotypically gay clothing” (for example, super low cut v-neck shirts, feminine style necklaces). Francisco stopped seeing Juan because he “could never be seen in public with a queen.” In other words, by partnering with Juan, Francisco felt that he would compromise others’ perception of him as a masculine man, and thus felt compelled to stop dating him.

Consistent with their stated dating preferences, the Latino gay men in this study generally coupled with others with masculine gender presentation. Although previous studies associate Latino masculinity with a dynamic in which

men assert dominance over their partners (Mirande, 1997; González-López, 2005; Decena *et al*, 2006), this trend did not play out among respondents who were coupled. Most men expressed appreciation when their partners were aggressive, assertive and strong willed – all traits they associated with masculinity (Kimmel, 1996; Messner, 2000). These findings differ from the social organization among Black lesbians documented by Moore (2006), who tend to partner with women of opposite (or at least different) gender presentations. These empirical differences highlight how the social worlds of respective gay communities of color are organized in distinct ways.

The men also noted that having a masculine partner helped them salvage their masculinity among family members who might be put off by their sexual orientation. Although most men were out to their families, they said they tried their best to “not flaunt being gay” at family functions. This included not bringing feminine men, especially partners, to such events. As was the case among previous studies of Latino gay men (Decena, 2008), some men said their sexuality was tacit knowledge. In this respect, choosing masculine partners helped make their sexuality less of a conversation piece among relatives. As Oscar noted, “I could never bring home someone that was the stereotype of a *joto* or *maricón*.¹³ He wouldn’t fit in with the family.” Oscar’s sister Jessica reiterated this point, noting that their parents would be much less accepting of (and even hostile about) Oscar having a feminine boyfriend. Oscar’s story illustrates how Latino gay men feel the need to negotiate the gender dynamics of their ethnic community when navigating their sexual lives.

13 “Joto” and “maricón” are Spanish derogatory terms for homosexual men.

“Manning Up” to Being Gay: Negotiating Meanings of Masculinity

Many men adhered to rigid notions of masculinity as described above. However, a few respondents gradually became more comfortable frequenting West Hollywood venues, interacting more intimately with White and feminine gay men, and even identifying outright as gay to the same level of comfort as they did with their ethnicity. However, such a transition mainly occurred when Latino gay men befriended other gay men of color who were “veteran” patrons of mainstream gay social scenes. These men served as “cultural brokers” (Lee, 2002) who helped them learn to culturally navigate both the White and non-White gay social worlds (c.f., Carter, 2005).

Javier was one such respondent who made this transition. When I first met Javier, he exhibited many characteristics of other Latino gay men in the study. He performed an urban masculinity, distanced himself from White and/or feminine gay social scenes and dated other masculine Latino men. He interacted almost exclusively with other Latino gay men, socialized primarily at Club Caliente and RJ’s (the two predominantly minority venues) and rarely stepped

foot in West Hollywood. In addition, in the first few months of knowing him, I rarely heard Javier identify himself as “gay.”

After 5 months in the field, I noticed that Javier began hanging out with a group of Latino men who seemed to split their social lives between the mainstream scene in West Hollywood and the predominantly Latino scene in Club Caliente. Javier identified closely with these men on several levels. They too grew up in predominantly Latino neighborhoods and generally displayed a masculine gender presentation typically associated with men of color from these urban contexts. However, they differed in that they identified as gay without reticence and even toyed with feminine gender performance, occasionally mimicking both women and feminine gay men in their way of speaking and behaving. For example, they would occasionally greet each other as “Girl” and “Lady” or would apply feminine pronouns (for example, she, her) when referring to each other in casual conversation. Ultimately, however, all considered themselves to be straight-acting gay men. As he spent more time with this group, Javier became as comfortable hanging out in West Hollywood’s venues as he was at Club Caliente or RJ’s. I also noticed Javier claiming his sexual identity more frequently and explicitly. And I also found that Javier unhesitatingly engaged in feminine gender play among his new set of friends. In sum, these men provided a space for Javier to acclimate to mainstream gay social settings and even experiment with feminine gender play he once considered taboo. He felt that he was able to do so because among these men his sense of masculinity would not be questioned or compromised.

Unlike previous studies that discuss Latino gay sexuality as tacit (Decena, 2008), owning up to one’s sexual identity was considered more of a masculine act among Javier’s new social circle. Although these men were most attracted to gay men who could pass as straight, they at times implied closeted men to be “less manly.” One evening, two of Javier’s friends, Nathan and Edgar, were perusing profiles on a gay dating Web site:

Nathan: Yo, are you on this [website]? I’m gonna look you up.

Edgar: Yeah, I’m on there, but haven’t checked it in months.

Nathan begins searching for Edgar’s profile and comes across it.

Nathan: Oh there you are!

Nathan sees that Edgar has identified his sexual orientation as “bisexual” on his page.

Nathan: Bisexual? What the fuck? What are you, nineteen?

At this point, everyone in the room erupts into laughter and Edgar starts to blush.

Edgar: Oh my God, I just put that at first, and I don’t know how to change it, I swear!

Nathan: Whatever, bisexual.

Again, everyone bursts into laughter.

Edgar's claim of bisexuality became a long-running joke among his friends. Even though Edgar's gender presentation was unmistakably masculine, his peers jokingly took stabs at his masculinity because he at one point, even if long in the past, tried to seemingly deny his sexual identity.¹⁴ This bantering demonstrated how Latino gay men appropriated the "fag discourse" to sanction each other's status as out gay men. Unlike other studies that suggest that coming out can disrupt Latino gays' relationships with family (Decena, 2008), these findings show how denying one's sexuality compromised one's masculinity among other Latino gay men.

Toward the end of my fieldwork, Javier went so far as to masculinize the slur "faggot" when confronted by rumors of his sexuality. While we were out one night, he said to me:

Some of the guys in my college fraternity are spreading rumors and starting to talk shit [about my sexuality]. But fuck it. Half the guys in our fraternity aren't even half as masculine as the guys here at Caliente. And so what if they find out? I'd just be like, "I'm a faggot, *and* what? At least I own it. What you gonna do about it?

Javier's appropriation of a gay epithet represented an interesting syncretism of the value systems of mainstream gay communities and his neighborhood context. Mainstream gay movements actively promote coming out as the ideal course of action for all gay people, a strategy that has been critiqued by researchers of minority gay communities (Decena, 2008; Moore, 2010). In turn, in the neighborhoods that Javier and his friends come from, maintaining respect from one's peers is a central component to protecting masculinity (Reich, 2010). As such, "manning up" to being gay represented an example of how the respective cultural value systems of mainstream White gays and of the neighborhood align, rather than contradict, in particular instances.

Making Masculinities across Race and Context

Masculinity shapes the lives of all members of society regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class and even sex (Connell, 1992; Kimmel, 1996; Levine and Kimmel, 1998; Pascoe, 2007). As a form of gender presentation, masculinity serves to naturalize the hierarchy between not only men and women, but also different groups of men (West and Zimmerman, 1987). The unequal social position of different groups of men means there are distinct *masculinities* that are, respectively, associated with varying degrees of privilege. For example, men with racial, economic and political resources possess hegemonic masculinity, as the type of gender presentation they display constitutes the most dominant across most social contexts (Connell, 1995).

14 The men in the study often dismissed the idea of bisexuality as a viable sexual orientation. Rather, they saw it as a cop-out for those who did not want to fully come out of the closet.

Men who are socially marginalized still benefit from this hegemonic masculinity but do not possess it because the masculinity they deploy may be stigmatized in social arenas beyond their immediate context, as is the case among men who are racial minorities, poor, gay or transgender (Reich, 2010; Schilt, 2011). Existing studies of masculinity reflect this inequality – most studies on masculinity have been based on the experiences of straight White men, and gay people of color are among the most overlooked in sociological literature (Moore, 2006; Cantú *et al*, 2009).

Although originally conceptualized to understand the relationship between culture and class reproduction (Bourdieu, 1984), the cultural capital framework has provided a useful tool to understand how socially marginalized groups negotiate identity and power within their local context (Carter, 2005; Reich, 2010). Despite the implications of the cultural capital model, socially marginalized groups, such as racial minorities and gays, possess symbolic currency that they utilize to secure non-economic forms of capital, such as social status (Carter, 2005). Masculinity, in particular, has been cited as an important type of symbolic capital for men who are racial and/or sexual minorities (Guzmán, 2006; Reich, 2010). However, men who possess intersecting identities may be forced to negotiate competing, even contradictory gender value systems when “doing” masculinity.

US-born gay Latino men negotiate the value systems of mainstream US society, their immigrant family and the mainstream (predominantly White) gay community when “doing” masculinity. My findings revealed that Latino men possess a strong sense of ethnic identity, though are more ambivalent about their sexual identity. This is because their gendered and racialized understandings of gay identity and the larger gay community – as both feminine and White – failed to align with their conceptualizations of who they were. Many respondents held on to an urban masculine presentation of self, one that they feel is stigmatized and even criminalized in mainstream gay contexts, such as West Hollywood. As such, many preferred to remain in Latino gay “fields,” in which urban masculinity constituted the ideal aesthetic, similar to one performed by other men of color from urban contexts (Rodríguez, 2006; Pascoe, 2007; Reich, 2010). Moreover, this type of masculinity served as a criterion to determine partner choice, as masculine-looking partners helped respondents maintain their relationships with immigrant family members. In sum, Latino gay men constructed a nuanced form of masculinity within these fields that allowed them to mitigate the contradictions they encountered as US-born racial minorities, as gay within the immigrant family context and as non-Whites within predominantly White gay social worlds.

A limited few learned to culturally straddle the White and non-White social scenes with the help of “cultural brokers,” veteran men of color within mainstream gay settings (Lee, 2002; Carter, 2005). The case of Javier illustrated how cultural brokers were able to build an important bridge for non-White gays

to enter mainstream gay spaces. As a result, Javier's once rigid notions of masculinity were loosened and the two communities he once saw as diametrically opposed – White versus non-White gays – could be more easily navigated. In this respect, Javier's experience provides an important template for bridging social divisions within the gay community, a space in which gay people of color continue to feel excluded based on their race and class background (Moore, 2010). Racial and class schisms within the gay community are not merely culturally based differences, as previous work might suggest (Díaz, 1997). Rather, the schisms are emblematic of the way in which new fields of social relations have adopted some of the racialized, classed and even homophobic ideologies of the dominant society historically critiqued as exclusionary. As gays become more visible to the mainstream society, it has become increasingly important to understand how to minimize social inequalities within the larger LGBT community, so that efforts to secure political rights, such as the recent movements for marriage equality, have a stronger and more diverse political base from which to build momentum.

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