“LOCAS,” RESPECT, AND MASCULINITY

Gender Conformity in Migrant Puerto Rican Gay Masculinities

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In this article, I explore how masculinity and gender nonconformity are viewed by 37 migrant Puerto Rican gay men who had been raised in Puerto Rico and migrated Stateside as adults. Most of these migrant men note the importance of masculinity in their development and interactions with others, particularly other men. They resist identification of themselves as effeminate and distance themselves from locas (effeminate gay men). They associate locas with overt homosexuality, disrespect, and marginality. I argue that migrant Puerto Rican gay masculinities are maintained within the precept of hegemonic masculinity through various social mechanisms, including a gendered construction of male homosexuality; the connection of social and interpersonal respect with masculinity; the socially allowable and pervasive ridicule and punishment of male femininity; and marginalization based on multiple social statuses. Through these interconnected social mechanisms, heteronormative perspectives on gender, gender binaries, and power are incorporated into homonormative migrant Puerto Rican gay masculinities.

Keywords: men/masculinity; race/ethnicity; sexuality

The word loca is used to refer to a homosexual, in particular a feminine homosexual man, among Puerto Ricans and other Caribbeans and Latin Americans (Carrillo 2002; Ramírez 1999). The literal translation of the Spanish word loca is “crazy woman.” This term connotes the society’s
gendered and negative view of homosexuality and its association to femininity. Within many societies, including Puerto Rico, the greatest insults used for men (regardless of sexual orientation) are terms that accuse them of a lack of masculinity (Murray 1995). This has additional meaning in a social system, such as that found in Puerto Rico, where social position in the larger society and interpersonal relationships are based on obtaining and maintaining respect.

There have been social critiques of “respect” as a system that maintains male dominance and intolerance of deviance (Díaz Barriga 2003). Ramírez (1999) notes that there is an expectation within Puerto Rican masculinity that one needs to command respect from others to be a “true” man. Having little respect limits a man’s ability to achieve upward social mobility, to be taken seriously, or to hold positions of power in Puerto Rican society. The need and importance placed on obtaining respect through masculinity is further complicated by Puerto Rico’s colonial status and the racialization of Puerto Ricans Stateside as well as other social markers. Within this system, nonmasculine men become targets for socially sanctioned disrespect, discrimination, and stigmatization (Valencia-Garcia et al. 2008).

Although these expectations of Latin American and Caribbean masculinity have been discussed primarily for heterosexual men, we know little about how Puerto Rican gay men perceive and negotiate their gender and sexuality in the face of these heteronormative ideals and expectations. We also know very little about the significance of gender nonconformity (e.g., locas) in framing Puerto Rican gay masculinities. In fact, we have limited empirical research on Puerto Rican gay masculinities and sexualities in general. Building specifically on the work of Ramírez on Puerto Rican masculinity, this article expands on the emerging research on Latino, Caribbean, and Latin American gay masculinities and contributes to our understanding of heteronormativity and homonormativity.

**HETERONORMATIVITY AND HOMONORMATIVITY**

This article draws on the extensive work by scholars on heteronormativity (e.g., Ingraham 1994, 2002, 2005; Jackson 2005; Kitzinger 2005; Rich 1980; Rosenfeld 2009; Rubin 1984; Vance 1984) and homonormativity (e.g., Bryant 2008; Collins 2009; Duggan 2002; Nardi 2000; Rosenfeld 2009). For more than two decades, scholars have recognized that man/woman and masculinity/femininity are social constructions independent of any particular body (e.g., Butler 1989; Connell 2008; West and Zimmerman 1987). These constructs, however, are dependent on each other to provide
meaning. For example, there is no masculinity without an opposing femininity (Connell 1995). Based on these constructed dichotomies, gender becomes the site for societal and individual power difference, including the privileging of heterosexuality and masculinity.

Heteronormativity refers to the institutions, practices, and norms within society that maintain heterosexuality, gender binaries, and power differentials (Ward and Schneider 2009). As Martin (2009) explains, heteronormativity is the “mundane, everyday ways that heterosexuality is privileged” (190) and defines what is “within the bounds of normal” (191). Within heteronormativity lies a hegemonic masculinity, that is, a “masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (Connell 1995, 76). As such, it is dynamic and acknowledges multiple masculinities and the intersections of other social markers in gender relations. Although gay men, in particular gay men of color, have been marginalized under hegemonic masculinity, it cannot be assumed they will challenge the privileging of masculinity and devaluing of femininity (Ward 2000). Gay men may seek social acceptance and access to social institutions by conforming to certain heteronormative ideals, values, and practices (Duggan 2002; Nardi 2000). This may involve distancing themselves from more marginalized identities and practices (Weiss 2003). As a result, those gay men who do not conform to the bounds of acceptable masculinities may be marginalized not only within heterosexuality but within homosexuality as well. The term homonormativity has been coined to refer to the norms and practices within the gay community that support heteronormativity and marginalize certain forms of gender and sexuality (Bryant 2008).

GENDER AND SEXUALITY AMONG LATINOS AND LATIN AMERICANS

The social science and behavioral science literature refers to gender as a particularly central and rigidly bifurcated system in Latin American and Caribbean societies. Within heterosexuality, two polar gender constructs, machismo and marianismo, serve as its foundation. Machismo represents a form of manhood that is dominant, aggressive, and sexual, while marianismo represents a form of womanhood that is subservient, nurturing, and asexual (Valencia-Garcia et al. 2008). While this dichotomous (“cultural”) portrayal of Latina/os is prevalent in the literature, it has also been critiqued as limited and biased (Baca Zinn 1982; González-López 2004, 2010; Ramírez 1999, 2003). Scholars point to social factors that contribute
to gender variations throughout Latin American and Caribbean societies that are ignored in these generalizations (Melhuus and Stølen 1996).

Similarly, the literature on Latino, Latin American, and Caribbean male homosexuality highlights gender (and gender binaries) as an important component in sexual identity. Sexual practices are gendered by the society and used to determine who is perceived as a homosexual. The male partner who is sexually penetrated (pasivo) is seen as homosexual while the sexual penetrator (activo) can maintain a heterosexual identity\(^2\) (Almaguer 1991; Carrier 1976; Carrillo 2002; Murray 2002; Ramírez 1999, 2003). Therefore, the “true” homosexual takes a “female” position. He who assumes the “male” position (activo) is allowed to claim heterosexuality regardless of having sex with another man. As with machismo and marianismo, this dichotomized and generalized depiction of Latin American same-sex sexuality has been similarly complicated (see Cantú 2000; Jeffries 2009; Vidal-Ortiz et al. 2010). There is, however, little research on how Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino gay men view themselves in terms of gender, in particular masculinity and gender nonconformity.

Some studies have provided insights into the significance of gender conformity in Latino, Latin American, and Caribbean gay masculinities. Ramírez, García, and Solano’s (2003) research on coming-out in Puerto Rico examines the degree of comfort with a gay sexual identity, though it does not address issues of gender directly. Even so, the men in their study generally try to conceal their sexuality and pass as “heterosexual” men. Kurtz (1999), who studied Puerto Rican and Cuban gay men in Miami, notes the importance placed on exhibiting masculinity and distancing from effeminacy. These men “dreaded” the “effeminate fairy” as the representative of homosexuality (Kurtz 1999). Carrillo’s (2003) work in Mexico focuses on emerging masculine identities among gay men, and he finds that “[being] masculine was extremely valued by these men because it allowed them to retain the status of regular men—to prevent others from questioning their manhood and avoid being stigmatized for their difference” (354). These masculine Mexican gay men want to be perceived as “regular” or “normal” men to better fit into work and family contexts. A few also directly blame effeminate men for stigmatizing homosexuality; as one put it, “I believe they are responsible for much of society’s rejection of homosexuals” (356). In emphasizing hegemonic masculinity, Mexican gay men challenge the myth of the unmanly effeminate homosexual and undermine exclusive heterosexual male claims to masculinity. The findings from these studies raise interesting questions about Latino and Latin American gay masculinities, particularly in terms of the importance of distancing from gender nonconformity.
There has been a tendency to use cultural arguments in lieu of other types of social analysis to address issues of heteronormativity and masculinity within the Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino contexts. There are, however, social forces that contribute to adherence to different forms and ideals of masculinity and the privileging of hegemonic masculinity. In the case of Puerto Ricans, there are particular social and political contexts that support heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity.

THE PUERTO RICAN SOCIETY AND CONTEXT

Puerto Rican society is both a part of and separate from both U.S. society and Latin American and Caribbean societies. Puerto Rico is not a nation in the classical definition of the term since it is not sovereign. It was first a possession of Spain, and since 1898, a possession of the United States. Puerto Ricans have struggled, sometimes fiercely, to maintain their Latin American and Caribbean identity (Duany 2003). Puerto Ricans negotiate their identity as colonial subjects of the United States and as citizens in the United States. Therefore, when discussing issues of gender, gender conformity, and sexual orientation, both Latin American/Caribbean and U.S. contexts and discourses frame Puerto Rican experiences.

It has been noted that nationalistic discourses revolve around issues of heteronormativity, manhood, and womanhood (Hardin 2002; Nagel 2003). This fact may have particular significance in Puerto Rican society given its continuous history as a colonized state (Grosfoguel 2003). As Connell (1998, 13) notes, “the impact of colonialism on the construction of masculinity among the colonized is less documented, but there is every reason to believe it was severe.” Puerto Rico’s colonial resistance to U.S. domination has involved the state vigorously supporting heteronormativity and upholding traditional gender binaries and values (Crespo-Kebler 2001; Picó 1980). As such, the importance placed on masculinity by Puerto Rican men is intertwined with their ethno-nationality.

Ramírez’s (1999) book *What It Means To Be a Man: Reflections on Puerto Rican Masculinity* is one of the few contemporary works on Puerto Rican masculinity. Ramírez notes that Puerto Rican men focus primarily on more powerful men in their competitions for masculinity. This involves distancing themselves from women and men marginalized by class, race, and sexuality. Ramírez (2003) describes respect as a prevailing system in the establishment of social position among and between Puerto Rican men. He defines respect as “a proper demeanor in social encounters, both how we represent ourselves to others and how we respond to their
presentations” (240). Underlying respect is an awareness of one’s own social position both within the larger society and within the social encounter. Respect is equated with social power. A lack of respect shows a lack of power within the society and limits social opportunities for upward mobility.

In Puerto Rico, gay men face a great deal of social pressure to conform and hide their sexuality (Ramírez, García, and Solano 2003). Migration may ease some of the social pressures to conform; however, moving Stateside may lead to other forms of discrimination. Stateside, Puerto Ricans have been racialized and discriminated against based on cultural, historical, and geopolitical factors (Aranda and Rebollo-Gil 2004; LaFountain-Stokes 2005; Vidal-Ortiz 2004). Men of color may align themselves to heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinities to minimize the negative racial attributions to their masculinity (McGuffey 2008). Thus, conformity toward a hegemonic masculinity may reflect multiple and overlapping social pressures whether based on sexuality, ethnicity/race, and/or social class.

In this article, I address how masculinity and gender nonconformity are viewed by migrant Puerto Rican gay men. I also explore the underlying social mechanisms that support their perspectives on masculinity and gender nonconformity. As such, this article will expand on the work of Ramírez (2003) on Puerto Rican masculinity as well as the emerging research on Latino, Caribbean, and Latin American gay men.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

This article is based on interview data collected in New York City and in Greater Hartford (Connecticut) from 2003 to 2006 with 37 participants who identified predominantly as gay men. These data are part of a larger study I conducted with 74 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Puerto Rican migrants on issues related to gender and sexuality. The inclusion criteria for the study were that participants needed to have been raised in Puerto Rico and migrated Stateside as adults, be older than age 18 years at the time of the interview, identify as LGBT or engage in same-sex sexuality, and have migrated at least one year prior to the interview. This study was supported by a Social Science Research Council Post-Doctoral Sexuality Research Fellowship and a faculty grant from the University of Connecticut. The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the university and followed all ethical guidelines for fieldwork and interviewing.

I used my professional and social networks within the Latina/o and LGBT communities in New York City and Greater Hartford, Connecticut, to
identity initial venues, resources, and individuals to assist with recruitment. I searched through available LGBT listings, advertisements, and event announcements, in particular those targeted at LGBT Latina/os. I contacted major organizations specifically servicing Latina/os. I attended Puerto Rican events (e.g., the Puerto Rican parades) as well as LGBT events (e.g., June pride events, dances) to distribute flyers in English and Spanish. Flyers were placed in LGBT and Latina/o service agencies, and in LGBT and Latino bars, clubs, and community centers. Once initial volunteers were obtained, snowball sampling was also used to recruit additional participants. Snowball sampling achieved limited results because the majority of volunteers did not know of others who fit the study criteria. This necessitated my continuously returning to different venues for new contacts. Through three years of fieldwork, I was able to obtain a purposeful sample from multiple venues, walks of life, geographical locations, ages, and socioeconomic statuses.

Thirty-five of the participants identified as gay men; two identified as bisexual. Their ages ranged from the mid-20s to mid-50s. Participants were distributed across three broad socioeconomic categories. The first group (n = 16) consisted of middle- and upper-middle class professionals who possessed a college, graduate, or professional degree. These men had expendable incomes and a few were wealthy. The second group (n = 13) consisted of those who were working-class. They had some high school, a high school diploma, or some college education and worked in various steady jobs such as clerical assistants, hospital assistants, outreach workers, human services, janitorial services, and delivery services. They lived more financially restricted lives with no accumulated wealth. The last group (n = 8) consisted of those who were poor; that is, they were without steady employment, lacked stable housing, or were dependent on some form of public assistance and social services (e.g., SSI or unemployment). Several of these individuals had physical health (including HIV/AIDS) and/or mental health issues, including a history of drug use. A few of them had specifically migrated to the States to access certain services or treatment for their conditions.

Interviews covered issues such as relationships with family members, community, friends, and social networks; sexual identity; gender identity; ethnic identity; coming-out; sexual partnering; sexual experiences; growing up in Puerto Rico; rationale for leaving Puerto Rico; and adjustment to living in the States. My personal background allowed me to be both an insider and outsider in this research. I am middle-class Latina professional who was raised by working-class parents who spoke no English and had less than a sixth-grade education. They had migrated to New York City
when I was a child. As such, I could draw from a variety of class as well as migrant experiences in my own life, in addition to my involvement with the LGBT community, to bridge some of the differences and develop confianza (a bond of trust). I also encouraged participants to ask me any questions about my background and experiences to establish a reciprocal and open relationship.

I conducted all the interviews face-to-face. Participants received ten dollars to assist with any incidental costs related to participating in the interview (e.g., travel and food). The interviews lasted a minimum of 90 minutes. All the interviews were audio-taped. I transcribed some of the audiotapes while graduate research assistants transcribed others. All transcriptions were double-checked by me for accuracy and completeness of the interviews. The interview was conducted in Spanish or English (or Spanglish) depending on the participant’s preference.

I analyzed the interviews using an issue-focused thematic analysis approach (Weiss 1994). All interview transcriptions were entered into a qualitative data management program, NVivo 7.0. I began coding based on references to masculinity, gender nonconformity, and homosexuality. As themes or nuances emerged, I expanded my coding schema. These included but were not limited to respect, marginality, social advancement, and public depictions. Analysis was an iterative process in which I returned to the full transcripts many times to understand the context of participants’ narratives (Riessman 2003).

RESULTS

Three main themes arose from the analysis of the narratives on masculinity and gender nonconformity: (1) The connection of masculinity with respect in the larger Puerto Rican society and among these gay men; (2) A distancing from locas (effeminate gay men) and their connection to marginality; and (3) La loca en la plaza: societal lessons on gender conformity, homosexuality, and marginalization. Embedded within and across these themes are underlying social mechanisms that support their perspectives on masculinity and gender nonconformity.

Masculinities, Respect, and Homosexuality

Most of the participants report that their personal development and negotiation of their masculinity and sexuality exist apart from the world of women. They speak of women, however, as part of their larger social
and family networks. Some of the men note having particular close relationships with women, both heterosexual and lesbian. Women are not part of their discussions related to masculinity and homosexuality. Their memories of growing up in Puerto Rico reveal a gendered separation between a man’s world (outside the house) as compared to a woman’s world (connected to home). As Guillermo remembers:

When I was little I was discouraged from hanging around my girl cousins or girls in general. I was always told [by family and others], girls in the house, boys outside the house. . . . I think for them being with girls all the time if you are a boy means that you will become effeminate and a homosexual. You need to be with boys, outside of the house, to learn to be a man.

Similarly, Tito recalls:

I remember my father thinking there was something wrong with me because I did not like fighting with other boys. He kept saying that if I could not fight boys and win, then I was nobody. I would never be respected. I would be stepped on. Men cannot to be weak and be respected. . . . Homosexuals are seen [in Puerto Rican society] as feminine and weak.

For these Puerto Rican gay men, it is only in a man’s world where masculinity can be proven or enacted, and there are significant social divides between men and women, masculinity and femininity and heterosexual and homosexual. Puerto Rican society strongly associates effeminacy (or gender nonconformity) with homosexuality. Their narratives reveal a hierarchy of masculinities within Puerto Rican society that places gay men at the bottom. They also speak of a hierarchy among gay masculinities in which gay masculinity is equated with respect, power, and social standing the more closely it conforms to hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. Two older respondents believe that “true” masculinity (la masculinidad verdadera) is only achievable by those who identify as heterosexual men. This is the case for Mauricio:

My boyfriend, he is married, but we have been together for 10 years. He is this very traditional Puerto Rican man. He is the super[intendent] of my building. I am the godfather of one of his daughters. . . . I have always been attracted to heterosexual men because I like my men “bien macho.” He likes that I don’t act like a woman and that I am masculine since I can be with his family for Christmas and we can go out at night and weekends as men just having a beer on the corner without people talking.
In recounting this relationship, Mauricio does not question his heterosexual partner’s sexual orientation. He explains to me that all men are very sexual (unlike women) and that they may find sexual relationships with other men easy if their manhood is not undermined. He also feels that men are more discreet about their sexual involvements, in particular those with other men. Such involvements do not create as much trouble as affairs with women. All this supports Mauricio’s belief that bien macho (very masculine) men can have sex with men and still be heterosexual.

Most of the men in this study, unlike Mauricio, believe that a man who identifies as gay can be as masculine as a heterosexual man. For example, Miguel states:

Of course, there are homosexual men who are very masculine; they can be more masculine than heterosexual men. . . . Also, there are heterosexual men who have sex with men. So you see, these things are not just all homosexual men are mariquitas and all heterosexual men are these machos.

These gay men, however, vary in their beliefs about the “true” sexual orientation of a man who has sex with another man regardless of their claims to be heterosexual or masculine. Typically, younger men question it more than older men. Roberto, who was 29 years old at the time of our interview, reports:

I have been approached by Puerto Rican men and other men who are supposedly straight [to have sex]. . . . Some of them are married. . . . Look, I think that it is hard to admit you are gay and get respected especially in Puerto Rico or even here. It is easier to get married and sleep around with men. You don’t have to deal with the downside to being gay.

There are differences in where each of the men places certain forms of masculinity in terms of his own particular hierarchy. Yet within all these hierarchies of Puerto Rican gay masculinities, the effeminate gay man (the loca) is either at the lowest rung or set apart in a separate category.

A Distancing from Locas and Marginality

Almost all of the migrant Puerto Rican gay men place themselves within a range of what they describe as appropriate forms of masculinities. Most of them do not identify as particularly feminine or gender nonconforming. Moreover, they resist such identification and in some cases vehemently.
This is the case even in situations where the participant is perceived or labeled as more “effeminate” or as not very masculine by others, as is the case with Tomás:

No, no, no. I don’t consider myself to be feminine; I don’t consider myself to be this big macho man either. I would say I am in the middle. I don’t like men who are too feminine or “obvio” (obviously gay). I try not to be like that. I am very careful about how I present myself to people and when, you know, friends try to joke with me and call me by a woman’s name, I stop them right there. . . . I know I like to dress up nice and wear my cologne and jewelry but I do not go overboard. I try to maintain tasteful and with a lot of dignity. I am still a man.

In his narrative, Tomás rejects any connection of his behavior to femininity. He further distances himself from femininity by making it clear that he does not “like” femininity in gay men, which he also connects to overt homosexuality. Tomás acknowledges that his presentation of self is inconsistent with what he understands to be, in his words, a “macho” man. Yet he feels that he enacts a form of acceptable masculinity that is still deserving of respect. As such, he reacts to his friends trying to call him by a woman’s name and thus connecting him to femininity by immediately stopping them. This is a way to let them know that they have crossed a line in terms of respect. He then asserts his right to be respected through his claim to appropriate masculinity.

Most of the Puerto Rican gay men in this study resist categorization as feminine and in particular as locas. They view locas as not sufficiently masculine and therefore not deserving of respect. Locas tend to be associated with what most believe is a stereotype of homosexuals. According to some of the men interviewed, this stereotype feeds the larger society’s disrespect of all homosexual men. Their identification with masculinity, even by simply claiming to be a man, gives them the right to be respected in the larger society with the possibility of full integration into mainstream society. As Carlito put it:

Personally, these locas annoy me. They are loud and obnoxious with all those feathers. They act more like women than men. I think, why do you even say you are a man if you don’t act like one? All this, calling themselves by women’s names, it turns me off. I think they make everyone think that is what homosexuals are like and that is not true. We are not like that. We present ourselves more seriously, more like men.
Justin expresses similar disdain:

I just think that men that act like *mariquitas*, they don’t care what people say about them. They don’t care that people know they are gay. They don’t care what impression they give. They don’t care but many times I noticed that they work in places that allow them to behave that way or they are always losing jobs. When you work in a place that is not gay or where people expect you to act like a man, you cannot be like that.

These narratives also portray “*locas*” and gender nonconformists as stereotypes contrary to those images expected of gay men who want to achieve respect and social position.

Justin and many other men view *locas* and other gender nonconformists as disrespectful of social mores and as living in the margins of the larger society. They are described as either completely socially and occupationally immersed in “el ambiente” (LGBT world), or simply without stable mainstream jobs or access to social advancement. Given that most of the men report migrating Stateside to pursue economic and educational opportunities (Asencio and Acosta 2009), this connection of *locas* with lack of mainstream jobs, stability, or social advancement is particularly troubling to them.

Some of the middle- and working-class participants describe *locas* as being “*baja clase*” (lower class), “vulgar,” “loud,” and marginal personalities in addition to being gender nonconforming. Alejandro reports:

I was in this [gay] party for my friend when this *loca* suddenly shows up “*con una griteria*” (yelling loudly and dramatically). It was incredible. . . . He did not fit in the group. . . . *era baja clase* (it was lower class).

Some men, like Ramón, see *locas* not so much as men but as gender nonconformists or marginal personalities who happen to be gay:

I worry about when people point to *locas* as being about homosexuality. Some of these people have serious psychological issues. They are problematic personalities. . . . what they do is not about homosexuality. Many of them are really out there. I think our community [LGBT] allows for these personalities to be included in a way they would never be outside.

Those respondents who are poor are less likely than those who are working class or middle class to refer to *locas* as lower class. Yet they too note that *locas* are connected to greater social undesirability and marginalization, as Manuel notes:
The clinic has a group of *locas* who are there all the time. . . . I don’t want to be connected with them. I just want to get my medicines and leave. . . . The staff looks down at them [*locas*].

Similarly, Marco reports:

They [*locas*] bring problems with them. The people I deal with, they don’t like them. They bring too much attention [in the streets].

Many of the Puerto Rican migrants distance themselves from *locas* for fear of increasing their own marginalization in the larger society. Many of the men speak of having to overcome multiple social barriers to their acceptance and social mobility, including Stateside, where they are all racialized.

Nelson’s experience is typical:

I came here to get a good job, to work hard, and to advance. As a Puerto Rican man you are judged here [Stateside]. . . . They don’t respect you and if you are dark with an accent than you are even lower and if you are a homosexual. . . . Ay Dios! [Oh, God!]

Several men refer to what they describe as a common Puerto Rican saying, “*mejor un drogadicto que un pato*” (better a drug addict than a faggot). This is a reference to homosexuals, in particular *locas*, having one of the lowest statuses in the society.

**La Loca En La Plaza: Societal Lessons on Gender Conformity, Homosexuality, and Marginality**

Migrant Puerto Rican gay masculinities are framed by the larger society’s disrespect, abuse, and social ostracism of gender nonconformity. The community and family reactions to men’s femininity in Puerto Rico serve as early and continuous lessons about gender nonconformity, homosexuality, respect, and social mobility. Many of the men state that their first memories of learning about homosexuality and what it means to be homosexual in Puerto Rico were based on seeing “*la loca en la plaza*.” This figure is described as a homosexual man or transgendered woman who seems to be part of every town. While they report few if any direct conversations about homosexuality within their families, the social and family reactions and comments to these assumed or known homosexuals fill the silences.

Jamie remembers:

I remember the first time I noticed *una loca en la plaza* of my little town. I remember it because I was trying to understand why this man was wearing
a dress and had lipstick and mascara. . . . I was with my mother who pulled me away. I saw other men whistle at him and he would smile and shake his culo (ass) at them then they would start cursing at him and throwing things. . . . I was horrified. When I ask my mother about it, she just said he was a maricón and that is how maricones were and that I should avoid them.

For many men, the image of “la loca en la plaza” persisted long beyond childhood. These images are their understandings of homosexuality, its connection to gender nonconformity and the social ridicule, punishment, and ostracism it brings. Jorge’s experience is similar:

When I was little, I remember throwing a rock at a loca. I was playing with other boys. . . . One of the boys spotted this loca who was always hanging around and threw something. I just went along but I remember all the people [adults] around just laughing.

Jorge explains that though this was not something that was discussed openly with the other boys, somehow they knew it was alright to do it.

The gay men in this study also speak of other public images or depictions of homosexuals they remember as they were growing up. These images reinforce the societal association of homosexuality with gender nonconformity as well as the socially condoned disrespect and ridicule. As Pablo notes:

Every time I would hear from people about maricones o mariquitas . . . wearing dresses or makeup and moving like a woman was part of the image. . . . In television, every time they had a homosexual—and that is still true today just look at the Spanish televisions shows in Telemundo, Don Francisco, and others—every time there is a homosexual he is very feminine, extremely feminine, and he has all these gestures and wants to be treated like a woman and everyone laughs at them because of that. . . . We are not shown as masculine men.

Like Pablo, most of the men make reference to the constant ridiculing of homosexuals through exaggerated representations of effeminacy. These images serve as constant reminders that homosexuality is equated with gender nonconformity and disrespect.

Equally important, these images have real-life implications, creating stereotypes that Puerto Rican gay men have to manage to achieve respect. For example, as Leo suggests:

People always assume I got AIDS because I was irresponsible. They assume homosexuals don’t respect themselves because of the way we are portrayed, moving like women, going after men. . . . I am not any more irresponsible than any other man, I just got infected.
Many of the men discuss having rarely seen public images of masculine homosexual men. They believe that such figures would command social respect, as Mateo suggests: “We cannot be seen as powerful and serious men. That would mean you would have to respect us.”

A few of these men also suggest that this masculine homosexual would be more threatening to the larger society. They believe he would be difficult to ridicule. They also believe that a masculine homosexual image would shift the social discourse away from gender nonconformity to male sexuality. They reason that Puerto Rican heterosexual men’s sexuality could also be questioned if this shift occurred. As David puts it:

Look, right now, Puerto Rican men can fuck around with men and think themselves as not homosexual because they act macho and have a wife or girlfriend to show the world. . . . If Puerto Ricans start realizing that does not mean anything because most gay men are as masculine as heterosexual men, you are not going to get away with saying you are not gay when you fuck a man.

David, as others, believe that the society has a vested interest in maintaining gay men at the margins through their depiction as feminine and not respectable. For many of the men I interviewed, debunking stereotypes linking homosexuality and gender nonconformity has become a key strategy to allow themselves to be taken seriously and integrated into the larger Puerto Rican and U.S. society.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Most of the migrant Puerto Rican gay men in this study consider themselves to be gender conforming within the bounds of acceptable forms of masculinities. Moreover, most of the men are critical of gender nonconforming gay men (locas). In a variety of ways, some more extreme than others, they distance themselves from those they identify as locas, or effeminate homosexual men. They associate gender nonconformity in men with disrespect, lack of social advancement, marginality, and overt homosexuality. Most of these men also report witnessing social ridicule and punishment of gender nonconformity within their families, communities, and through public depictions. From these experiences, they internalize the importance of masculinity in commanding societal respect, avoiding punishment and creating opportunities for social advancement.
Most of these men negotiate multiple marginalized statuses, in particular as racialized colonial migrants Stateside. Maintaining a normative masculine identity and persona, they believe, is one way to prevent further marginalization based on gender normativity. Since these men report migrating to the States for social opportunities and advancement, they may be more sensitive to or concerned about issues of masculinity, gender nonconformity, and marginalization. In this research, most of the Puerto Rican men explicitly distinguish between a gay identity, which they apply to themselves, and a nonconforming gender identity of the loca, which they reject. Their gay identity is still bound to a hegemonic masculinity through various social mechanisms, including a gendered construction of male homosexuality; the connection of social and interpersonal respect with masculinity as integral to men’s social advancement; the socially allowable and pervasive ridicule and punishment of male femininity; and marginalization based on multiple social statuses. Through these interconnected social mechanisms heteronormative perspectives on gender, gender binaries, and power are incorporated into homonormative migrant Puerto Rican gay masculinities.

Ramírez’s (2003) work addresses the dominant masculine ideology in Puerto Rico, but he also notes that this masculine ideology is shared across many societies, in particular the Caribbean, Latin American, and the Mediterranean. Therefore, it is not surprising that these findings resonate with those of Carrillo (2003) on Mexican gay masculinities in Mexico as well as Kurtz’s (1999) work with Puerto Rican and Cuban gay men in Miami. The literature on Puerto Rican masculinity, gender in the Caribbean and Latin American context, and marginalized masculinities as well as the findings from this study suggest that among these populations of gay men, there are considerable and overlapping social pressures to conform to a hegemonic masculinity.

The importance placed on masculinity and the distancing from femininity has been noted among white non-Latino gay men in the United States as well in other societies (Duggan 2002; Nardi 2000; Weiss 2003). As such, it may not be so much a question of its existence but the degree to which it is found (and socially fostered) and the nuances associated with masculinity and gender nonconformity among gay men. A great deal of research is still needed on this subject. The findings in this article, however, contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how masculinity and gender nonconformity are viewed by migrant Puerto Rican gay men and some of the social mechanisms underlying their gender conformity. In this way, it expands on the emerging research on Latino, Caribbean, and Latin American gay masculinities, as well as gay masculinities in general, and to the larger discussion on heteronormativity and homonormativity.
NOTES

1. I use the term Stateside to describe the Puerto Rican population living in the United States, outside of Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or other U.S. territories. According to Falcón, “The term is less ambiguous than other terms usually used, such as ‘mainland Puerto Ricans,’ ‘Puerto Ricans in the United States,’ ‘U.S.-based Puerto Ricans,’ ‘the Puerto Rican diaspora,’ and so on, which given Puerto Rico’s political relationship with the United States and the presence of Puerto Ricans in foreign countries can be imprecise in many respects” (2004, 2).

2. This may be a larger phenomenon in relation to masculinity and same-sex sexuality discussed as well with Black men on the “down-low” (Phillips 2005) and white “dude-sex” (Ward 2008) and also earlier works such as Humphreys’ classic and controversial study, Tearoom Trade (1975). When associated with men of color, however, these observations tend to be pathologized, exoticized, and overgeneralized.

3. Ramón Grosfoguel (1997) notes that “ethno-nationality” would be a better term for understanding the Puerto Rican experience as a colonized “nation” as well as an ethnic group in the States.

4. The two bisexual participants have been exclusively involved with male partners for many years prior to their interviews. For this article, I refer to the participants as “gay” to note their acknowledgment of their same-sex sexuality.

5. Mariquita and maricón are pejorative Spanish terms for a gay man. They are derived from the same root as marianism (La Fountain-Stokes 2007; Valencia-Garcia et al. 2008). Like loca, they connote a gendered and negative view of homosexuality.

6. See note 5.

REFERENCES


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