

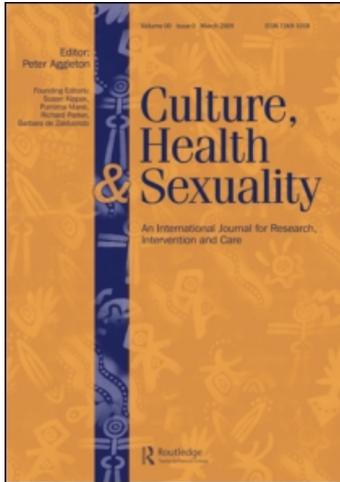
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### Identity, desire and truth: homosociality and homoeroticism in Mexican migrant communities in the USA

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## Identity, desire and truth: homosociality and homoeroticism in Mexican migrant communities in the USA

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This paper examines the construction of a homoerotic social scene among Mexican migrants in California. It analyses the discourses of migrant men in the cities of San Diego and Fresno who identify themselves as heterosexual and have not had sexual experiences with men and those of members of civil society organisations doing HIV prevention work with migrant men, to show how an identity-based model of sexuality used by the HIV prevention organisations is counter to the strategic, non-identity-based model constructed by migrant men. With this incongruence as its starting point, the paper offers a critique both of the epistemological factors underlying the category of 'men who have sex with men' and the logic running through HIV prevention discourses that adhere to the Foucauldian notion of the deployment of sexuality, which demands both truth and coherence in subjects' sexuality.

**Keywords:** migrant; homosexuality; HIV prevention; masculinity; Mexico

### Introduction

This paper describes findings from a study of social and homoerotic relations among Mexican migrant communities in the USA. It analyses the discourses used by different social actors within this setting to show how meanings associated with sex between men need to be understood within the context in which it takes place. The paper concludes that the values and meanings ascribed to sex between men vary substantially and are dependent upon the socio-symbolic and inter-subjective spaces that these men inhabit. For this reason, it is important for institutions working with this population to understand this discursive grid so as to more effectively offer information and/or services and not stigmatise these men through inappropriate reconstructions of their experience.

The findings described in this paper are relevant to HIV prevention work and the public policies that underpin them, in both migrants' communities of origin and destination. These strategies will be ineffective if they fail to engage with the complex symbolic context within which migrant men have sex with other men. As Díaz and Ayala (1999) point out, the HIV epidemic is rooted in oppressive social, cultural and structural factors,

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such as poverty, racism and homophobia, that comprise a web of limitations and vulnerabilities (Castañeda and Zavella 2003; Consejo Nacional de Población 2005a, 2005b; Maternowska et al. 2010; Rhodes et al. 2010; Solorio, Currier, and Cunningham 2004; Zavella and Castañeda 2005). Therefore, in analysing the experiences of Mexican migrant communities in the USA, risk-laden behaviours must be understood within the cultural constructs that give them meaning, justify them and/or promote them (Díaz and Ayala 1999). These cultural constructs are in turn understood through the reconstruction of the discursive grid that a community develops about certain forms of sexuality. At its root, scholars, policymakers and HIV prevention workers must question the relevance of separating meaning from practice.

In both the USA and Mexico, men who have sex with other men that are among those most affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Recent data show that the rate of infection in Mexico among this group is 11% compared to 0.37% among the general population (Centro Nacional para la Prevención y el Control del VIH/SIDA 2009). In a recent study, infection rates were shown to be 11% among Mexican men who have sex with men and 15% among male sex workers (Magis et al. 2008).

Of the 135,003 cumulative AIDS cases reported in Mexico up until November 2009, 82% were men and 78.1% were individuals between the ages of 15 and 44 years. Sexual transmission was the cause of 92.2% of cumulative AIDS cases reported in Mexico (Centro Nacional para la Prevención y el Control del VIH/SIDA 2009). Of all reported AIDS cases in Mexico until 2000, 12.7% were individuals who had previously lived in the USA (Magis et al. 2004). When asked about the number of sexual partners they had during the previous year, migrant men reported a higher number of partners than non-migrants (3.3 versus 1.8). In the USA itself, 92% of the 9424 AIDS cases reported up until 1999 among California residents who self-identified as Mexicans were men (Sánchez et al. 2004). Research suggests that the risk of contracting HIV is higher among men born in Mexico than among Mexican-American men (Solorio, Currier, and Cunningham 2004).

### **The limits of categories: identity and difference**

At least two central trends can be discerned in studies about sexuality.<sup>1</sup> A behavioural epidemiological approach organises sexuality around specific forms of behaviour to establish cause and effect. An alternative approach links sexual practices (which are, above all, social practices) to identities and tries to connect the perceptions that subjects develop about themselves to their sexual practices. Within this system, identity is expected to explain sexuality. Linking both approaches is a theoretical construct that has been widely used in studies of HIV: namely, the concept of ‘men who have sex with other men’.<sup>2</sup>

What Foucault (1978) termed the ‘deployment of sexuality’ (p. 139) brings together the body, identity, desire, anatomy and truth to create an epistemological system according to a productive, disciplining logic. In this case, the category ‘men who have sex with other men’ enforces gender integrity – it will always be men who have sex with an ‘other’ – that remains unchanged. The category of men who have sex with men precludes a questioning both of the coherence of gender identity and the status of otherness and difference (Braidotti 2000, Butler 1990, 1993, 2005). In addition, this category is restricted to only certain forms of behaviour – to discrete and differentiated groups that do something. Thus, sexuality becomes de-contextualised, ahistorical and apolitical. The category men who have sex with other men removes the dimension of desire and ignores the power relations that are expressed through sexuality.

## Methodology

This paper draws on findings from a research project carried out in Mexico and the USA in 2003 and 2004, which examined the vulnerability of Mexican migrants to HIV. The project was qualitative and ethnographic in nature and used various research methods including in-depth interviews, group discussions and participatory observation. Work was carried out at 11 sites: in the cities of Fresno and San Diego, California, both of which have a large concentration of Mexican migrants; in the cities of Ecuandureo, Gómez Farías, Chilchota, Tangancícuaro y Zamora in Michoacán; and the cities of Zimatlán, San Pablo Huixtepec, Teotitlán del Valle and Oaxaca in Oaxaca, both Mexican States with high rates of migration. In each site, researchers worked with multiple informant groups: migrants' wives, health officials and healthcare workers, members of non-governmental organisations, community leaders and sex workers, both male and female. In addition, the research included informants with diverse experiences of migration.

From this universe, the authors of this article selected only men with experiences of migration residing in Fresno and San Diego, California, between the ages of 15 and 75. These men did not assume a homosexual identity and did not openly indicate having had sexual relations with other men.<sup>3</sup> Informants had migrated from both rural and urban regions of the states of Oaxaca and Michoacan, Mexico, and came from working-class backgrounds (e.g. farmers and manual labourers). The research project included 92 in-depth interviews from among this group, which were taped with each respondent's consent, while maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. Before starting the interview, respondents were informed of their right to stop the interview at any time and not to answer any questions they did not want to. Additionally, researchers also interviewed 16 community leaders and members of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Fresno and San Diego.<sup>4</sup> Once transcribed, interviews were coded using Atlas Ti 4.2 software with coding guides designed by each local research teams.

## Results

### *They know. They have seen it. The discourse of migrant men*

Mexican migrant men in the USA can cite stories, identify places, outline causes and speak to the dangers of homosexuality and homoerotic relations between men, because they have heard about it or seen it happen. In these men's discourse, the terminology is typical of Mexico: they talk about *jotos* (fags),<sup>5</sup> *mayates* (topmen) and *manita caída* (limp-wristed men). In contrast, homosexuality appears as a term proposed by the interviewers rather than as a category of the interviewees' own discourse.<sup>6</sup> Thus, even for informants residing in the USA, Mexican sexual imagery predominates in the discourse men use, transmitted orally through individuals' informal socialisation:

I have seen that 'fags' are more reserved. A bunch of homosexuals come here to the park on Sundays and show off their wares. (Aldo, 23, Oaxaca, rural, Fresno)

Respondent (R): The guys call them *mayates*.

Interviewer (I): And what does that mean?

R: Well, that they like transvestites, that they're bisexual, but instead of saying bisexual, you say *mayate* (Antonio, 25, Michoacán, rural, San Diego)

Even though respondents said they had never participated in same-sex sexual practices, they also indicated that sexual relations between men are a part of migrants' day-to-day experiences. They did not talk about homosexual practices as something distant or

unknown to them, they did not even censure discussion of the topic. Rather, they talked about things they have witnessed directly or indirectly. Their stories constitute a transnational history of sexuality forged in transit between Mexico and the USA: one man had been expelled from the community because he got involved with men, other men who died of AIDS in their hometown:

- R: One of them lived here. But he left; he liked to get involved with men and they ran him out.  
 I: And did anybody accept?  
 R: Yes, they put him on all fours [a position that would allow him to be sexually penetrated].  
 I: Did they pay him?  
 R: No, no way they were gonna pay him! (Andrés, 40, Michoacán, urban, San Diego)  
 I: Have you ever heard of AIDS?  
 R: I've heard that some people, even from here, from town, have died of AIDS, mainly homosexuals. (Luis, 35, Michoacán, rural, Fresno)

### *A map for desire: topographies and topologies*

Migrant men develop a sexual topography of the USA in their discourse that intersects with another developed for Mexico. These topographies are made possible by similarities between the countries (e.g. 'homosexuals' reside in both) and by establishing differences within each country. For example, one of the interviewees (Victor, 42) who lived in Fresno said that 'the lodestone [for homosexuals] is San Francisco':

- I: Have you also heard of homosexuals?  
 R: They're wherever you look, both there and here. There are plenty of them. (Fernando, 55, Oaxaca, rural, San Diego)

The lodestone is San Francisco. There are a few of them here, but the lodestone is San Francisco. It's just a manner of speaking, really, but, well, they have marriages between one man and another. They're getting married there now. (Víctor, 42, Oaxaca, rural, Fresno)

The lodestone here not only refers to a place in which there are large numbers of gay men, but also signifies the space where they are the most politically and culturally visible. In this sense, the identification of San Francisco as both paradigmatic and mythical embodies a political discourse and expresses a cultural genesis: 'they' originate from that place – homosexuality, gay culture, same-sex marriage.

This topography of countries and cities is also linked to a topology of behaviours, preferences and identities. Migrant men say that some 'like homosexuals' and others do not. Certain people prefer engaging sexually only with homosexuals and others reject them openly. So active participation in these relations is organised along the lines of tastes and preferences, not identity. Nevertheless, a continuum of identities is also constructed: between 'homosexuals' and 'men'. 'Homosexuals' seek out 'men' to 'do them', with identification here being related to intent. Here, sex intersects with a demonstrative will to enunciate an identity. Similarly, 'men' participate in sex with other men for pleasure and by choice and maintain an unsullied, unquestioned masculine identity:

Well, there are people who like homosexuals, and there are people who don't. It's a matter of taste. Some people always run around only with that sort, and others can't stand them. It depends on the person, too. (Fernando, 55, Oaxaca, rural, San Diego)

- R: The only thing I've noticed is that here, sometimes people come around looking for ... well, that 'business' with men. You see it a lot.  
 I: What do you mean exactly?  
 R: That lots of times people come around looking for somebody to do relations to them; they come looking for men to have relations with or something like that. I've had the

experience of people talkin' to me, and I've seen other people coming around like that, like. (Álvaro, 27, Michoacán, urban, San Diego)

The social scene constructed here intersects a topography of place with a topology of sexual preferences, behaviours and identities. In the above comments, no one speaks of himself, only of others: some seek out, others do and still others reject. It is as though this scene can only be described if one stays out of it, safe from its implications and complications. These scenarios are constructed as a space of otherness: it is other people who carry out homosexual practices, who have certain identities or tastes. If censorship exists, it operates in this context and excludes the subjects from the social scene they describe, which becomes a smokescreen and a reflection of otherness:

I think that you don't learn that. I came here when I was 17 and there were a lot of pachucos before. Now, there are cholos. And I didn't catch any of that. It's not catching; you catch it if you want. I haven't even taken on the customs, and I've been here more than 40 years. I'm still from here. I'm the same here and there. I'm a citizen here, but I'm the same. I feel the same as before. I feel Mexican. (Esteban, 57, Oaxaca, rural, San Diego)

Constructing the 'other' can establish one's own sense of belonging, rootedness and ability to make choices. The topography of countries and the topology of identities intersects here to highlight the interviewee's personal choices: 'I never caught it because I didn't want to'. Faced with the threat that comes with interacting in a new socio-cultural context, one's will and sense of belonging are used as defences. Through a topographical lens, nationality here guarantees that nothing changes even if many other objective transformations occur. The interviewee Esteban, 57, indicates that he feels Mexican and nothing about him has changed despite his 40-year residence in the USA. Similarly, sexuality is constructed as a solid reference point similar to that of nationality: homosexuality is neither catching nor learned, in the same way that one does not stop being Mexican while living in the USA. Thus, sexuality and nationality become subjective anchors, permanent reference points for identity that stop the passage of time and shield the individual from otherness:

- I: What do you think of men having sexual relations with other men?  
 R: Well, not me. That's why I like women for that job; a man with a man just isn't the same. How are you going to put your hand in there? You can't, and a woman knows. You're on the right road. How are you gonna hold on, one man to another? How are you gonna grab his breasts? (Diego, 28, Michoacán, urban, Fresno)

Finally, topography and topology intersect with the body, creating an anatomical map that makes it possible to separate out male and female bodies to distinguish preferences. A man's body is missing something. Its anatomy is insufficient for a specific desire. 'One man to another' is not the same precisely because of their physical equivalence. A woman is 'the right road': his hands find what they are looking for and desire is sparked by a body that acquiesces and confirms it. In this sense, the body becomes a map that organises desire in the same way that geographic maps delineate nations and social maps differentiate identities and sexual preferences. At the end of the day, differences will be mapped out, and similarities – sexual, cultural and political – are established in the body itself.

### *What is the price? Money, desire and identity*

In migrant men's discourse, money is both the justification and the objective of homoerotic relations. It is what connects men who proclaim a masculine identity and a preference for women with 'homosexuals' who are attributed as having a preference for

men. Thus, engaging with 'homosexuals' becomes a form of survival and way of earning a living for migrant men:

- I: Have you heard that they pay homosexuals, or do they pay?  
 R: I've heard that they pay, but I'm not really very up on that. I've just heard people talking sometimes. Some people just run around with limp-wristed men. Some have become really cagey, and they run around with them and charge them for it. (Fernando, 55, Oaxaca, rural, San Diego)  
 I: In exchange for what?  
 R: Well, everything, oral sex and all that.  
 I: Do they tell you this directly?  
 R: Yes. They say openly, you know what, give me something and I'll do you orally and you're gonna like it, and like that, and if you want it from behind, it'll be more money.  
 I: How much are we talking about?  
 R: I think it must be more money because once you've got the gay on the hook he's gonna want it. (Adrián, 25, Oaxaca, urban, San Diego)

Money allows 'men' and 'homosexuals' to form a contract and a rate scale is established based on the sexual practice: oral sex will be one price and anal penetration another. Desire and sex are thus 'managed' because men are seen as in control while gays pay money because they 'want it'. Topologically, pleasure is for gays and identity for men. Agency is split in two directions: that of 'homosexuals' who seek the fulfilment of a desire and that of 'men' who want to obtain a non-sexual benefit. Money allows the two groups to intersect.

Money provides a way of interacting with the homoerotic social scene without identifying with it. Since homosexuals will pay for sex with other men, it is being a 'man' that makes it possible to participate tangentially in this scene and the monetary transaction creates further distinctions between men and gays. Thus, if money connects, identity separates. This social scene encompasses different sets of borders, the crossing of which intersects bodies and agency in ways that allow subjects to participate and absent themselves at the same time. It is a scene constructed among men that is laid out more like a labyrinth than a stage.<sup>7</sup> In this way – while at a strictly descriptive level, these are men who have sex with other men – the homoerotic social scene complicates and blurs everything. Behaviour inserts itself onto a social map of identities, preferences, contracts and aversions that organise sexuality.

For this reason, before one looks at behaviours in a clinical way, it is necessary to understand the social constructions that make these behaviours possible in ways that justify and even conceal them. In the previous analysis of money and sex, only non-sexual benefits are mentioned and never desire. Although physical actions are the same, oral sex, penetration etc., it is clearly stated that some participate for pleasure and out of excitement while others do not desire the acts but participate in exchange for money or favours. This is how identities are constructed and the meanings of corporeality are configured.

The exchange of sex for money may constitute a socialised practice among migrant men. Networks of contacts are established and a single individual may seek out several men. One interviewee tells a story that illustrates this:

- R: They told me about a guy called the 'Portuguese'. Supposedly, several men have gone with him and some have even told me that they have had relations with him and that he pays them with money.  
 I: How much money are we talking about?  
 R: I don't know if it's just talk. One of them told me that he had been given a hundred dollars for the service. He just says that the guy took him there and got him to do a little cleaning,

and then he sat him down to watch TV and offered him a beer, and then started hinting around. He was kind of bragging. (Manuel, 28, Michoacán, urban, Fresno)

The objective here is sex and they all know it. But the interviewee brandished about a gamut of reasons for making the initial contact. The exact story may change but it is important to highlight that this is an example of the social discourse which makes it possible to share information about ways of getting money for sex. The guest in this case can boast about payment received and services rendered, because money and even a subjective gratification is acquired. These practices do not breach his masculine identity since a profit was made from what is most 'natural' and proper: his manhood.

### ***'They know the risks, but they don't take care of themselves'. The discourse of Civil Society Organisations***

The discourse of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working with migrant men adds another dimension to the homoerotic scene amongst Mexican migrant men. Their perspective is that of an outsider. They attempt to intervene in the scene by providing prevention and tools for self-care, but intervention wields a moral judgment.

#### *A will to truth: describing the homoerotic scene and enunciating set identities*

The discourse developed by CSOs and their staff has, in our view, three central characteristics: it describes the social scene, it attempts to uncover the true motivations and desires behind men who participate in the scene and it tries to connect identities with behaviour. Some migrant men participate in the homoerotic scene in a tangential way without personally committing to it, while taking advantage of its benefits. In the eyes of CSO respondents, however, migrants' justifications for their participation are interpreted as lies and self-delusion.

Participation in the homoerotic scene is described as a trajectory that correlates with migration, which involves the basic instincts and desire of these migrant men. The explanation is psychological: there is something in them that is inhibited in their places of origin that becomes uninhibited when they arrive in the USA. 'Homosexuality' is something that is brought with them, which surfaces as they reside in a new country. This process of disinhibition is described by CSO staff as dangerously accentuated by the use of alcohol and leads to loss of conscientiousness and dulling of the senses:

Here, individuals become disinhibited. If he has problems of homosexual behaviour and fears of homosexual behaviour, he lets his hair down. And that's where he allows himself activity with someone of the same sex. What he doesn't know is how to take care of himself; if he's under the influence of alcohol, he is much less likely to take care of himself. He's not aware. His senses aren't intact; he's not taking care of himself, his physical body and his integrity. (Andrea, 43, CSO member, Fresno)

In the above, Andrea describes two factors that can lead to disinhibition: one is the socio-political factor of living in a new cultural context, the other is socio-cultural, involving the use of alcohol. Once again, topography and topology intersect. In this geography, alcohol is a factor similar to money, as described previously, because it justifies and validates behaviour. This discourse of disinhibition is, however, also linked to another involving scarcity – given the absence of women and the urgency of desire, the only remaining possibility is to have sexual relations with other men. If there are no 'prostitutes', you can always find a 'homosexual':

The only place you can have a good time is the cantina, and this man went looking. By chance, that day, he didn't see any prostitutes, but he did run into a homosexual. So, he picked him up! He didn't see any other remedy [to his problem]. He didn't know what he was risking; he didn't know what was going on in his life. He didn't know that what he had there was probably AIDS, death. He was buying certain death. (Jaime, 35, CSO member, San Diego)

Civil Society Organisation respondents discussed a hierarchy of identities in ways that seek coherence between gender and desire. The above interviewee links hegemonic gender identities with heterosexuality (Butler 1990, 1993): 'this man went looking. By chance ... he didn't find a prostitute, but he did run into a homosexual'. The respondent says that the man he is describing could not see any other remedy for the illness that desire itself represents (in this case, homosexual desire). But not only that – he also 'bought certain death' by risking exposure to HIV. Given the urgency of his desire and the lack of available women, the migrant opts for a homosexual and thus chooses the worst 'remedy' he could find. The 'homosexual' is established as a subject on the border between life and death and a permanent, circulating threat:

For the homosexuals, it's a favour, and for him, a release. There have been cases, for example, of one man from Salinas. There was an article about it a few years ago. Seven or eight men were living alone together in a house, let's say, in an apartment. One goes to the cantina and takes a homosexual home with him. Well, from there, others take advantage of the opportunity and get into it with him, but violently, very rudely, because they haven't had relations with women. (Luisa, 33, CSO member, San Diego)

In these discourses, the men's urgent needs grants a 'favour' to homosexuals, who take advantage of the release of the men. Concurrently, the 'men' can release their violence against the homosexual, given the latter's abject and liminal status.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, civil society interviewees state that migrant men who have sex with men fail to accept their identity. Instead, they perceive themselves in accordance with the Mexican and Latin American sexual imaginary, which distinguishes the individual who penetrates from the one who is penetrated. Thus, the one who penetrates is not considered 'homosexual' or 'gay', but the one who is penetrated does acquire these labels:<sup>9</sup>

The Mexicans are increasing more now. Bisexuals, lots of bisexuals, because Mexicans think that if you are the one doing the bugging, you're not gay. As long as you don't get buggered, there's no problem. They think they're big machos as long as they're the buggerer, but they don't accept being gay. (Luis, 40, CSO member, Fresno)

While migrants believe they are still machos even though they penetrate other men, the CSO interviewee suggests that these men do not recognise their gay preference and identity. This interpretation highlights the disjunction between a secular – particularly rural – imaginary to a more recent sexology. The latter maintains that identity coincides with behaviour and behind every practice there is an identity waiting to be revealed. On the contrary, migrants employ a different understanding that makes possible a disjunction between practice and meaning, identity and behaviour and desire and sexuality. Civil Society Organisation staff put forth a modern discourse, legitimised by scientific and medical overtones, which imposes disciplinary impacts on migrants' sexualities and identities.

In this sense, the discourses of CSOs are linked to a will to truth on the topic of sex (Foucault 1978). This will demands subjective and behavioural coherence and seeks to solidify identities and denounce accommodation. In reality, migrants relate strategically to the homoerotic scene because they can find in it either monetary subsistence or a different way of experiencing sexuality and desire. However, the will to truth wielded by CSOs denounces these strategies as dangerous and false. While migrants use specific non-acknowledgement to allow participation in homoerotic practices without acquiring an

identity commitment, CSO interviewees denounce this non-acknowledgement as 'dishonest'. This dissonance creates a fissure through which HIV can spread:

I have even heard about clandestine places where they go to have sexual relations even between men. Some do know that it's with a man and others say that they don't know. I think it's really hard. They call these places glory holes. These people know that on the other side of the curtain there's somebody, but they don't know who it is. I think they're just playing dumb because of course they know. They supposedly penetrate and they don't know what they're penetrating. But there's a very clear difference between an anus and a vagina. We know these places exist. Sometimes they aren't single men. They have their partners here and they go to these places anyway. (Estela, 28, CSO member, Fresno)

Once one of these people tested HIV-positive and when they were interviewing him to find out how he got it, the first thing he said was, 'I don't know. Well, yes, I did go to that place, but I didn't know it was a man.' Later in the interview, he said 'Yes, I knew it was a man.' But the initial response is that they're going there in all innocence. (Luis, 40, CSO member, Fresno)

The prevention discourse of CSOs intervenes here and gives each person a precise and discrete identity that coincides strictly with behaviour, not taking into account the dynamics of desire and strategic forms of subjectivities, which skirt the issue of identity and meaning. Again, the deployment of sexuality as portrayed by Foucault (1978) is reproduced here. This deployment condenses what had been disparate elements until the proliferation of nineteenth century European paradigms: the body, identity, desire, behaviour, biography, illnesses and destinies. The prevention discourse of CSOs requires that migrant men, who are heirs to a common sense sexual knowledge, enter into this deployment of sexuality where they must enunciate a coherent truth about themselves that is linked to their sexual practices.

#### *'Hunters of men': prostitution among migrants*

As we have seen, these organisations' discourses are divergent from those expressed by migrant men themselves. Yet the two coincide in identifying the exchange of sex for money as one reason why men have homoerotic relations. It was already highlighted that money was one avenue through which 'men' and 'homosexuals' justified certain practices. The interpretation of this exchange, however, is different for migrant men and CSOs. The migrant men indicate that they satisfy the desire of the 'homosexuals' but do not perceive this activity to be prostitution. By contrast, for members of CSOs, this activity is clearly prostitution:

Many migrants tend to prostitute themselves as a way of getting ready cash. There are places where you can see them clearly prostituting themselves. Balboa Park, for example. Go there in the afternoon or evening and you will see migrants who are easy prey for American homosexuals. For a penniless, hungry migrant – just imagine, he's already paid bribes in every customs station, he's gone through a whole bottleneck – they go to these places because they see others hooking up. For some migrants it's a way of getting money. (María, 45, CSO member, San Diego)

Prostitution is subject to socio-historic and political definitions. It is therefore important to interpret this bifurcation of perceptions amongst migrant men and CSOs as indicative of different ways of experimenting with and signifying sexuality. Migrant men do not classify the exchange of sex for money as prostitution, they do not assume a job identity or lay a moral judgment upon a stigmatised activity. Paradoxically, the exchange of money precludes migrants from describing these interactions as prostitution. Providing money in exchange for sex is a way in which homosexuals indicate a desire and an identity. By contrast, he who receives payment remains a 'man'. The homosexual identity is conferred

only to the party who pays for sex. If the term prostitution were used to describe this scenario, these roles would be reversed and the identity of man would be associated with the homosexual who pays:

Here, for example, in Balboa Park, if you go there, there's like a circle where men or just anybody is driving around. You can go to the park and you'll always see single men – they might be married; many are married men with families, but they live a secret life. The surprising thing for me is that so many men are driving around by themselves, and they drive around and around the park. Because, like I said, it's a park well known for prostitution. (Esteban, 35, CSO member, San Diego)

Here is a case in which migrants' discourse coincides with that of CSO members because, for the latter, it is the homosexuals who 'hunt out' indigent migrants. Civil Society Organisation interviewees discuss the 'secret lives' uncovered in particular city locations: married men seeking out migrants in parks and stalkers who go round and round. The discourse of CSOs creates an abstract and abject figure of the homosexual – men who are ready to fall upon their helpless 'prey' in the confines of a city.

One can see in these discourses that homosexuals possess a distinguishable identity and emerge not only as dangerous and without subjective identity of their own, but also as people with insistent and unsatisfied desire who have no history and do not belong anywhere. Thus, the moral judgment that CSO members place upon the sexual practices and identity of migrant men is parallel to the ubiquitous and foreboding figure of the homosexual.

## Conclusion

This paper argues that sexual practices cannot be understood without considering the social and symbolic spaces in which they occur: linked to gender and sexual identities and relationships. It describes a scene which may be dubbed 'homoerotic' and analyses two different interpretations of this scene. One is comprised of the discourses of migrant men who do not participate in homoerotic relations but who know about them and talk about the actors involved. The other represents the discourse of civil society organisations whose goal is to arm migrants with HIV prevention tools. The authors have intentionally left out the discourses of men who do have sex with other men to establish that the scene is established around and beyond them.

The opinions of these two groups include both elements of commonality and divergence, but the key feature to bear in mind is that they represent very different and even contradictory symbolic and political undertakings. The migrant men who took part in this study organise their relationship to homoeroticism, in part, as a survival strategy and an erotic experience. They do not become homosexuals. By constituting the homosexual as a radical otherness, but one that can be used or be a source of satisfaction and income, these migrant men relate to the homoerotic scene from the viewpoint of unquestioned masculinity. Identity and desire correspond to the homosexual: it is he who possesses a sexual motivation that makes him seek out 'men' and therefore acquire a specific identity.

For their part, the members of CSOs interviewed explain homoeroticism as a process whereby migrant men progressively lose their inhibitions, prompted both by a cultural shift and by the lack of available women with whom they would 'normally' exercise their sexuality. These respondents evoke a 'will to truth' that demands coherence between behaviour and identity and between desire and sexuality. In accordance with the deployment of sexuality as analysed by Foucault, they develop a discourse that rejects a

strategic approximation to sexuality and the tactical use of behaviour and identities. In this interpretation, behind what subjects do, there is always a truth that has not been acknowledged.

In both discourses, however, money is discussed as one of the principal motives for migrant men to take part in homoerotic relations. For migrant men, money is what permits and justifies sexual interactions with homosexuals. Money dissipates desire while reaffirming identities (that of the man who sells his manhood and of the homosexual who buys it). Members of civil society organisations define these exchanges as 'prostitution' but the migrant men do not. Yet, they both transfer the initiative and responsibility for these transactions to the homosexual. Alternately, they recognise only the migrants' economic needs as the reason for their participation in these sexual transactions. To one, they attribute desire and identity and to the other, vulnerability and marginality.

In the realm of HIV prevention, understandings of sexuality and homoeroticism by 'heterosexual' migrant men and CSO members diverge radically. While the former stress about strategies and tactics, the latter speak in terms of truths and identities. Therefore, messages conveyed between the two groups will be mutually incomprehensible. If a migrant man who participates – or deems it possible to participate – in sexual relations with other men is told that he is therefore 'gay' or homosexual, he will be forced to accept an identity that he did even consider for himself and that violently challenges his own subjective constructions. These mismatched prevention messages will only deepen the chasm between the two groups and HIV prevention efforts will suffer.

Thus, for HIV prevention to be respectful to migrant men's cultural constructions of sexuality, and to avoid becoming a disciplinary entity, these efforts must take into account the discourse of migrant men and their sexual imagery. Prevention strategies should make sense to migrant men and include them, rather than attack or marginalise them. HIV/AIDS prevention work in the USA should be constructed transnationally and consider the cultural tensions implicit in migration. Geographic and administrative borders cannot curtail sexuality. They cannot suspend one's sense of cultural and subjective belonging even though social contexts across borders may be markedly different. Prevention strategies must take into account the fissures, the displacements, the incoherencies and the silences.

Finally, the category discussed at the beginning of this paper, men who have sex with other men, should be reviewed again. How should a specific sexual practice be delineated? By certain bodily movements? By subjective sexual dispositions? By behavioural parameters? When is a practice above all sexual and not social? The analysis offered here affirms that men who have sex with men are more than a collection of behaviours and more than the sum of identities. There are sometimes radical differences that separate men from the otherness, which allow them to interact with each other. The category men who have sex with other men cloaks power and desire and delineates only set behaviours and gender identities. Where are the men that this category describes? Where is the sex that it presumes? For a man to have sex with another man he must participate in a web of social relations, he must situate himself on a map of identities, he must construct his body. So, for a man to have sex with another man, an enormous cultural production is necessary that consists of apparatuses of coherence, truth, fragmentation and fading away. In the context of Mexican migrants in the USA, when a man has sex with another man (or when he has heard about this happening), disparate sexual imaginaries connect and intersect with the crossing of borders – between countries, between cultures and between subjectivities and bodies.

## Notes

1. It is not our intention to cover the complexity and diversity of the field of sexuality, which includes everything from orthodox sexology to radical feminist, gay and queer studies. This paper seeks only to clarify the theoretical and epistemological status of the category 'men who have sex with men'.
2. Current Latin American discussion of this issue is elaborated in Cáceres, Pecheny and Terto (2002), Guajardo (2002) and Núñez (2007).
3. Sexual identity was not a selection criteria for informants. As part of the broader research project, interviewees contacted in relation to their MSM experience were sex workers and they are not included in this article.
4. These were local civil society organisations that promoted community health and/or provided health services to migrant communities. All of the organisations worked in the area of sexual and reproductive health and specifically HIV prevention.
5. *Joto* (fag) is one of the many terms in Mexican Spanish vernacular to describe someone whose appearance or behaviour can be identified as homosexual.
6. It was interviewers who brought up the term homosexuality in conversation and subsequently, interviewees sometimes used the term as well. When interviewees spoke spontaneously about homosexuality they usually used colloquial terms, common in Mexican slang, that refer to sex between men.
7. For an analysis of eroticism and sexuality in Mexico see Parrini (2007) for an in-depth look at the construction of a labyrinthine homoerotic social scene.
8. Kristeva (1989) extensively analyses abjection and its links to subjectivity. Butler (1990) specifically analyses abjection in relation to desire and sexual identities, particularly among gay men and lesbians.
9. For more on this aspect of Latin American sexual imaginary, see, among others: Carrillo (2002), Lancaster (1992), Núñez (2000, 2007), Parker (1999), Parrini (2007) and Prieur (1998).

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## Résumé

Cet article examine la construction d'un monde social homo-érotique parmi des migrants mexicains en Californie. Il analyse les discours de migrants de sexe masculin vivant à San Diego et à Fresno qui s'identifient en tant qu'hétérosexuels et n'ont pas eu d'expériences sexuelles avec d'autres hommes. Il analyse aussi les discours des organisations issues de la société civile qui font un travail de prévention du VIH dans cette population, pour montrer combien le modèle identitaire de sexualité, sur lequel elles basent leurs actions, est en contradiction avec le modèle stratégique non identitaire construit par ces hommes. Avec cette contradiction pour point de départ, l'article propose une critique à la fois des facteurs épistémologiques sous-jacents à la catégorie des 'hommes qui ont des rapports avec des hommes' et de la logique sur laquelle s'appuient les discours inspirés de la notion foucauldienne du déploiement de la sexualité, qui exige aussi bien une vérité qu'une cohérence dans la sexualité des individus.

## **Resumen**

En este artículo examinamos la construcción de un contexto social homoerótico entre emigrantes mexicanos de California. Analizamos por una parte los discursos de hombres emigrantes a las ciudades de San Diego y Fresno que se identifican como heterosexuales y no han tenido ninguna experiencia sexual con hombres, y por otra los discursos de miembros de organizaciones de la sociedad civil que se ocupan de intentar prevenir el HIV entre los emigrantes. Con este análisis queremos demostrar cómo un modelo de la sexualidad basado en la identidad utilizado por organizaciones para la prevención del virus del sida va en contra del modelo estratégico y no basado en la identidad construido por hombres emigrantes. Con esta incongruencia como punto de partida, en este artículo cuestionamos los factores epistemológicos detrás de la categoría de 'hombres que tienen relaciones sexuales con hombres' y la lógica que se utiliza en los discursos para la prevención del VIH que cumplen con la noción foucauldiana de la construcción de la sexualidad, que exige verdad y coherencia en la sexualidad de las personas.