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SILENCE ≠ DEATH: ON NOT-NOT COMING OUT

Joshua Javier Guzmán

Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire among Dominican Immigrant Men by Carlos Ulises Decena. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. Pp. 328, 1 photograph. \$84.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper.

The whirlwind of media attention around gay-youth suicide in the past five years provided an opportune moment for gay liberals to self-righteously claim that “it gets better,”¹ as though the future depends on the disavowal of the conditions that bring many gay youth to contemplate and follow through with suicide in the first place. After sitting through many of the videos posted on Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better” website, one gets a sense that the “It Gets Better” project borrows much of its authority from the promise of happiness activated by the spectacle of coming out of the closet. The foreclosure of tacit relations means it can only get better once you come out as gay.

It seems that in order to participate in the ordered progress the gay- and lesbian-rights movement have attached to the act of *coming out*—that is, the speech act associated not only with the articulation of one’s sexuality but with riding the affective wave known as pride—one must adhere to the strict binarisms of known/unknown, silence/speech, public/private, and shame/pride. Yet, what if we follow Michel Foucault’s assessment of what counts as a speech act: “There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse.”² Here, silence is productive, differentiated, and multiple. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes

in her canonical *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008), “‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it.”³ How might we parcel out the different forms of silences that question the impulse to *know* one’s sexuality through verbal utterances? How does this trouble white gay liberalism’s *need* to know and its subsequent digestion of knowledge into cultural capital? How does one come to know something explicitly that is already known implicitly? These questions set the background for the release of Carlos Ulises Decena’s *Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire among Dominican Immigrant Men*. One aim of the book is to articulate ways of not knowing. In doing so, Decena challenges homonormativity’s jackhammering investment in excavating the spectacle of coming out—an event that pretends to cohere the crisis of indeterminacy within homosexuality.

The book is an ethnographic study into the lives of twenty-five queer Dominican immigrant men living in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City at the turn of the twenty-first century. Decena’s methodology also encompasses auto-ethnography and participant observation, effectively

assembling a rich archive of testimonials and retrospective life stories that will prove useful for Latino and queer scholars alike. Most compelling is Decena’s use of both Spanish and English in his transcription of the interviews and his incorporation of (queer) Dominican vernacular. *Tacit Subjects* moves with every linkage, slippage, and circuitry between the Spanish transcriptions and the English translations of the interviews; it quickly becomes about what is not being said within the disarticulation of Spanish and English. It is the unsaid that sets the conditions of possibility for an alternative subjectivity to emerge; hence the title of Decena’s text: *Tacit Subjects*. The subtitle extends his argument into a critique of language and discourse. The analysis situates itself in-between Spanish and English, whereby the sense of belonging felt by Dominican immigrant men experiencing same-sex desire relies on language’s capacity to open up new and exciting possibilities for connecting and recognizing each other outside the normative confines of discourse. To this end, Decena’s archive “captures ‘being’ as a movement without end, an enabling transitivity” (8).

Decena is transparent in his methodology and self-critical of the interview process to the extent that the narratives collected in this study are mediated through multiple “technologies and bodily organs,”

producing a less than objective text (42). *Tacit Subjects*' virtuosic failure at objectivity underscores the "incompleteness of knowledge production itself" in that the research interview performs the mediations inherent in ways of knowing (43). Decena's participants approached the interview as a moment to rewrite and recreate their experience and their own connections with others, leaving the author (and the reader) to linger in the affective remnants of their testimonial. What Decena does beautifully is avoid the objective pull of ethnography by not only writing about the interview, but writing from the affective coordinates of the interview. Decena's investigation creates, just as much as it is about, the intersections of ethnicity, sexuality, citizenship, and other modes of affective particularities. The analysis demonstrates the relationality among subjects, communities, nation-states, and language while carefully leveraging critiques against (internalized) homophobia, colonialism, racism, sexism, and uplift ideology.

For instance, unlike other forms of Latino studies scholarship, *Tacit Subjects* does not take *dominicanidad* as a stable identity category. In fact, Decena's analysis shows how taxonomic markers such as "Latino" and "Dominican" are contested repertoires, reproduced and restructured by immigrant men in New York City and

in the Dominican Republic and often as a consequence of same-sex encounters under the shadow of empire. For example, chapter 3, "Desencontrando la dominicanidad," begins by showing the ways "history, nationalism, and empire inflect projects of self-making," particularly through the informants' use of the interview process to level critiques against dominicanidad while also reimagining their relationship with the Dominican Republic as immigrants living in New York City (69). The interviews evidence the failed encounters or *desencuentros* with dominicanidad in New York City and the Dominican Republic in so far as living in New York City enabled the informants to reformulate their identities into "being Dominican in a different way" (94). Identification becomes a creative process since the *there* (Dominican Republic) interpenetrates the *here* (New York City) for many of the informants, and in ways that open up dominicanidad beyond the identitarian and into affective and erotic sites of (failed) encounters.

Tacit Subjects expands the archive of queer Latino experiences with new theoretical vocabulary that helps elaborate the fluid and flexible movement of same-sex desire. With an emphasis on body language, Decena reworks the notion of code switching into a queer modality known as "code

swishing” (chapter 5). For Decena, *code swishing* gestures to the “ability of speakers to mobilize and circulate specific and recognizable signs” in order to activate other forms of affective intimacy (142). Code swishing sways and moves queerly as a dissenting gender performance. One queer Latino/a figure described in *Tacit Subjects* is known as “La Loca,” a stylization of the body expressing what Decena calls a “gynographic performative” (chapter 4). Gynographic performatives articulate a visualized form of femininity circulating as excess around the male body. La Loca not only marks the excess of *latinidad* (and *dominicanidad*) against the white normative template, but also transforms excess into a stage whereby queer men negotiate forms of comfort, intimacies, desire, and normative codes of masculinities.

Tacit Subjects’ exploration of the sexual includes investigations in how narratives of machismo, migration, transnationality, and gay cosmopolitanism all come to figure in the construction of the modern gay subject. Chapter 6, “Virando la dominicanidad,” presents us with a case study substantiating a belief that “sex is an educational process” (178). Considering the messiness of sex, from cruising the bar to negotiating roles in bed, many of the informants indicated *machismo*, hypermasculinity under the sign of *latinidad*, as a

differentiator between Dominican men and men of other ethnicities and nationalities. Where *machista* sexual performances usually maintain a hierarchal power dynamic, withdrawing from machista sexual practices became a sign of sexual modernity, horizontality (“democracy in bed”), and progress. To this extent, politicized sex resulted in an idealization of progress and modernity through same-sex desire. A sexual philosophy of openness challenges the figure of the macho by highlighting the coterminous revilement *and* desire for the colonial sexual figure—that Western apparition known as the Dominican macho that haunts the sexual histories of the colonial project. At the same time, a sexual philosophy of openness reaffirms white cosmopolitan notions of democratic sexual relations and homonormative conceptions of social progress. This contradiction is further complicated specifically by Decena’s reflection on his own return to the Dominican Republic (chapter 7) and more generally the subsequent consumption of sex by cultural tourists. Notions of power and mobility, for Decena, are “implicated in the formation and sustenance of hierarchies of desire” that interpellate traveling queer men of color and queer Dominican men (16). Thus, chapter 7 subtracts the white homonormative subject from the equation in an effort to demonstrate how structures of

inequality still persist through the erotic, “making contact and intimacy possible but never completely comfortable” (221).

The incompleteness of tacit knowledge and the added discomfort it causes constitute its viability as a site for alternative forms of contact and intimacy—a multiplicity of potential to know otherwise. The tacit subject (chapter 1) is about openness, fluidity, and contradiction: “[W]hat is tacit is neither secret nor silent” (19). Tacit subjects enact differing degrees of relationality, gestures challenging the individualization of the body and the promise of liberation exalted by the neoliberal world and its gay liberal subjects. Above all, we can glean a profound sense of humility in Decena’s writing and the narratives explored in his book. Decena writes from an affect of humility, which is refreshing considering the mooring of contemporary homonormative rhetoric in the assurance that “it gets better.” *Tacit Subjects* does not purport to know. Instead, *Tacit Subjects* is a reminder that coming out is always partial and never complete; that queerness is yet to be known; and that to belong is, in the end, a swishing in a messy and

unknowable world brimming with potential and always relational.

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NOTES

1. An essay by Jasbir Puar tackles the propensity of neoliberalism to exploit marginal populations. She pays unique attention to the economics of debility and how projects like “It Gets Better” convert queer suicides (especially injuries to white gay men) into cultural capital serving narrative logics of what she has named homonationalism (“Coda: The Cost of Getting Better—Suicide, Sensation, Switchpoints,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 1 [2012]: 149–58).
2. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 27.
3. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 3.