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Prieur, Annick Ingrid

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# Machos, Mistresses, Madonnas

## Contesting the Power of Latin American Gender Imagery



Edited by Marit Melhuus  
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distance themselves from the client and protect their private lives. Thus they consciously assume the identity of the sexual actor.

20. It is curious not only that they attempted to conceal the fact that they were virgins, but that some men recall the attempt as if they pulled it off successfully. Imagine a thirteen-year-old boy going to a prostitute for the first time, acting as if he knows what he is doing. Did they really believe that an experienced prostitute would not be able to tell? I think this is instructive about the construction of their sexual selves rather than an accurate account of the situation.

21. Cornwall and Lindisfarne (eds), p. 3.

## 4

## Domination and Desire: Male Homosexuality and the Construction of Masculinity

in Mexico

*Annick Prieur*

This essay explores the construction of male homo- and bisexuality in Mexico in terms of gendered categories and the production of identities. Masculine-looking bisexual men and effeminate homosexuals use the images of men, of women and, as a separate category, of male homosexuals to construct their respective identities, in distinction to each other. The gender imageries are closely linked to ideas about sexual practices where the basic question is whether one is the penetrator, the penetrated, or both. These ideas are expressed through categorizations and labelling processes, and through sexual practices and sexualized games: there are striking parallels between the practised homosexuality and the homosexuality that is staged in verbal badgering and mockfighting among men, where men attack other men's masculinity by putting them in a passive homosexual role. Value is given to the male who penetrates women or other males, and never lets himself be penetrated. His defence of his own bodily boundaries and his attack on other men's bodies may mirror and symbolize the social competition among men. This construction of a particular form of practised or played male bisexuality allows for particular male, homoerotic pleasures, where the masculine-looking participants are not labelled homosexuals, and are therefore free of stigma; but the stigma-tolerance dichotomy does not



grasp the complexity of the social and sexual interactions. The different practices and games are acted out on the basis of male dominance, which implies the power to define and categorize. The dominated, however, are not passive subjects of domination; they struggle for their dignity through an alternative classification.

#### The Actors and their Classifications of Each Other<sup>1</sup>

I base my essay on fieldwork carried out in Ciudad Nezahualcoyotl, a working-class *barrio* on the outskirts of Mexico City. Between 1988 and 1991 I spent a total of six months with a group of homosexual transvestites, living with them day and night and sharing their daily lives. My host was a former male prostitute who now heads a project for the prevention of AIDS. His house is a meeting-place for the youth of the neighbourhood, so I did not have to look for my informants; they gathered where I was living. These young people have very little privacy – they seem to know almost everything about each other, and carry out most activities openly. Although they knew I was a researcher, my presence did not seem to restrict their behaviour, and I gained insight into the most intimate aspects of their lives. In addition to this participant observation, I have interviewed eleven homosexuals and seven of their bisexual partners. The homosexuals talked very freely, whereas some of the bisexuals seemed somewhat intimidated and gave shorter answers.

Most of the young men who gathered at this house were in their teens or early twenties, and were homo- or bisexual in the strictly descriptive sense of the words: some have sexual relationships with their own biological sex exclusively or almost exclusively; some have relationships with both women and men. When it comes to identities and self-definition the situation is more complicated, but they divide themselves into two distinct groups, and the distinctions between the two groups are indeed visible: some are ordinary-looking masculine youngsters; others are strikingly effeminate. All of the latter use make-up, many wear women's clothes, and some even pass as women without

any problems. Most of them have given their bodies female shapes, whether by external measures like foam-rubber padding or by medical measures such as hormones or implants. All use female nicknames. Their opportunities on the labour market are limited mainly to hairdressing and prostitution. Many have had severe conflicts with their families over their appearance and sexual preferences, and many have stayed away from home for a long time, or still stay away. However, they usually return to live with their parents when the latter stop trying to change their femininity, and many contribute to the household by their earnings as prostitutes. Thus they live rather integrated socially in the sense that they have their share in family life, they live overtly as effeminate homosexuals in their local community, and participate in local events. But their lifestyle has aspects of marginalization such as drinking, drug use, theft and violence, which are part of their daily lives. They are, descriptively speaking, predominantly homosexual, and I will therefore refer to them as 'homosexuals', and to those of them who cross-dress as 'transvestites'.

The ordinary-looking masculine youngsters who hang around with the homosexuals are usually their sexual partners – or the homosexuals hope they will become their sexual partners. These men, whether clients of the prostitutes or leisure-time partners, seem to consider themselves and to be considered by others as 'ordinary' men. I am best acquainted with the leisure-time partners, working-class young men who often live in established relationships with women. They do not form a separate group, nor do they refer to themselves by any special term. But the homosexuals call them *mayates*, a local term for masculine-looking men who have sex with effeminate men. As almost all of them have sexual relationships with women as well, I shall call them bisexuals, but I stress that in so doing I refer exclusively to a bisexual practice, not to any kind of identity linked to it. (We shall see later that the homosexuals use the Spanish word *bisexual* in a very different sense.)

This pattern of homosexual relationships has been described in other Latin American societies, too,<sup>2</sup> and in other studies from Mexico.<sup>3</sup> In Mexico this pattern seems to be typical of the lower strata of the urbanized working class. Middle-class homosexuals



tend to have a more discreet effeminate style, or a very sophisticated masculine style, and they usually have partners like themselves. A homosexual transvestite may even be disgusted by the sight of two men with moustaches kissing each other. In their own eyes, they behave normally: they let a man be a man and a woman be a woman. The middle-class homosexuals are often labelled as cowardly, closeted homosexuals, because they do not show clearly that they are homosexual. The taste, style, and judgements of the working-class homosexuals are particular to them; they do not try to copy the middle-class homosexuals.

The local classifications give a key to the ideas about gender that underlie the identity constructions and the sexual relationships. The efforts of Fidel – also called Fifi – to teach me the local vocabulary can serve as an illustrative example: 'A *mayate* is a man who does it with *jotos*. A *tortilla* is a man who likes to fuck a *joto*, and likes to have the *joto* fuck him. *Bugas* are those who, according to them; don't do it with *jotos* – only with women. Then there are the *heterosexuales*, who like to fuck men – which means *jotas* who like to fuck men. And *bisexuales* are those who fuck men, and the men who fuck *jotos*. They are the *bisexuales mayates*. They are *tortillas*. My experience is that the majority of men that I have been with are *mayates*. And some rare times *bisexuales*. And then *bugas*; the truth is that I don't think they exist any more. Because now any man will be with a *joto* or with a woman.' Perhaps this was not crystal clear, but there is a logic to it.

Locally, the Spanish word *homosexual* is used to denote a man in the woman's role who has sex with a masculine man – ideally, he retains the passive role. Some *homosexuales* are transvestites in the sense that they wear women's clothes, and they are called *vestidas*. Some have a less feminine appearance. They are all called *jotos* or *jotas* – the latter form has a feminine gender, thus placing a stronger emphasis on the feminine. One explanation I have been given for this term is that *joto* is the name of a Spanish dance where men move in ways that are seen as feminine. Or it might refer to a Mexican prison where homosexual inmates were placed in wing J – the letter J being pronounced *jota* in Spanish. Other words are also used, like *gay*, which is used as a synonym for *joto* or *homosexual*. *Puto* – literally whore in the masculine

gender – is used negatively, like 'faggot', but the homosexuals have appropriated the term and may also use it themselves. *Maricón*, however, probably a male-gendered version of *María*, is a pejorative term that they would never use to refer to themselves.

The local use of the Spanish word *bisexual* is as a term for men who have an androgynous appearance – who do not hide the fact that they are men, but have some female characteristics: perhaps just a haircut, a flowered shirt, and a pair of trousers that are a bit high-waisted, or perhaps their movements and voice. They are expected to have sex with men who resemble themselves, then to trade off being active and passive. Masculine men who sleep with other masculine men can also be called *bisexuales*, precisely because they are expected to take part in the same changing of roles. The term, then, refers partially to appearance, partially to sexual practice, and there is an expectation that there is a correlation between appearance and practice. In the local terminology, trading off between being active and passive is called being *internacional*, perhaps because foreigners are supposed to do so, but maybe just because it implies doing an *ida* – a departure, being active – and a *vuelta* – an arrival or a return, being passive. It is also called being a *tortilla* or *tortillera*. A *tortilla* is a corn pancake made by turning the dough between the hands and patting it on both sides; a *tortillera* is the woman who bakes it. The terms express an expectation that there is a correlation between an androgynous appearance and a sexual practice where one is both penetrating and penetrated, that is, acting both like a man and like a woman.

The Spanish word *heterosexual* is rarely used, so many do not have an opinion of what it means, but some think that being *heterosexual* is being a man, or being *normal* – and a man is a man, or is *normal*, as long as he looks like a man and sticks to the active role, regardless of whether he has sex with women or men. I have, for instance, heard the term *la prostitución heterosexual* being used to denote the prostitution of young boys who stick to the active role with their male clients. According to the same logic, Fifi spoke above about *jotos heterosexuales*, meaning homosexuals who like to penetrate men.



A *mayate* is a man who looks like a man and has sex with men who are regarded as *homosexuales*, and usually also with women. He is commonly supposed to play the active part. But some *mayates* are also penetrated by the men they are with, which makes them *tortillas* even though there is nothing feminine about their appearance. They can also be called *mayates bisexuales*. I have been told that the word *mayate* originated as the name of a little beetle that makes a ball out of its own dung, lays its eggs in it, then pushes the ball in front of itself using its snout. This reflects the expectation that *mayates* are supposed to be the active party during anal intercourse. However, most of those who use the word are probably ignorant of this origin.

The term *buga* refers to men who have sex only with women, and are therefore always active. Sometimes the term is also used for men who pretend to have sex only with women, or for men whom the homosexuals find very manly, *hombre-hombre* (man) or *machín* (meaning very *macho*, very male), and whom they would like to seduce, even if the *bugas* would then not really be *bugas* any more.

This terminology usage focuses primarily on sexual actions and roles, which blend with appearances, because appearance is normally seen as a signal of sexual actions and roles. A man's feminine appearance is a signal that he wants to be penetrated, while a masculine appearance connotes a desire to penetrate, and those with a more androgynous appearance are expected to want both. But the choice of object also lies in these terms, because in order to be passive, men need other men; in order to be active, men need women and/or other men. Any dictionary will state that the correct way to use the terms homo-, bi-, and heterosexual is as a reference to practice as it relates to choice of object. But more vulgar usage in other languages, too, is more in line with these examples, placing emphasis on the concrete sexual actions.

Local and more generally used categorizations and understandings are mixed here: the definition of homosexuals as effeminate men who are penetrated by other men corresponds to a more general way of perceiving homosexuals in Mexico. The homosexuals take this as a point of departure, but subdivide themselves into different, smaller categories. They also label and

classify their partners. But their labelling power is weak, and their classifications of their masculine partners are barely known: the masculine men's self-understanding reigns, and they do not see themselves as *mayates*, but as men *tout court*. To be active with a homosexual partner is subsumed under the more general category of being active, which again characterizes male sexual behaviour. This is a reflection of the fact that male dominance implies linguistic dominance,<sup>4</sup> a labelling power that consists of both the power to label and the power not to label.

### The Bisexual Men

We have seen that *mayate* is the term used by the effeminate homosexuals to denote men who have sex with other men without being feminine and without seeing themselves as homosexual. Often their main interest is in women, and to the extent that they are with men, they are with *vestidas* – transvestites – or at least with manifestly effeminate men.

Anybody can be a *mayate*. Even without data from quantitative studies, I would assert that it is not at all unusual for Mexican men from the urban working class to have sexual experience with men, at least during certain periods of their lives. Qualitative studies cannot estimate how widespread this is, but may show how easy it is for effeminate homosexuals to obtain sexual contact with men.<sup>5</sup>

The following examples are from my own fieldwork. An effeminate homosexual can go into the underground during the rush hour and end up pressed against a man who feels him up or lets himself be felt up. I have seen men push forward the minute they see an effeminate homosexual come into the carriage, and they make sure they stand close to him. I have also been present at parties (for instance, a celebration of a daughter's fifteenth birthday) where there is dancing in the street outside the house. The men ask the homosexuals to dance, and they might also pop into the bathroom to have sex with them. In the house where I lived there were always some homosexuals who seduced the man who came to read the electricity meter or the plumber who came to do some work. In the evenings the neighbours often



came knocking, hoping for sex. The homosexuals who have been in prison tell about being raped by all the other inmates, who do it together, in front of each other. Thus it seems that a man can invite another man to dance, or have sex with a more feminine man, without being labelled homosexual and without causing himself identity conflicts.

Some studies indicate that male bisexuality is widespread throughout Latin America, and this has been linked to its relative acceptability. For example, Joseph Carrier writes: 'This lack of stigmatization provides prospective active participants with the important feeling that their masculine self-image is not threatened by their homosexual behavior.'<sup>6</sup> Ana María Alonso and María Teresa Koreck write: 'the active role in *macho-joto* relations carries no stigma'.<sup>7</sup>

Observing the frequency and lack of reserve surrounding these contacts, one could easily be led to believe that bisexual practice is a non-stigmatized and unproblematic kind of behaviour. But this deduction is problematic: one cannot automatically deduce that a phenomenon is accepted merely because it is widespread, particularly not in the sphere of sexual morals. For example, in many parts of the world infidelity is no doubt fairly widespread – without there being any general moral acceptance of it.

My observations indicate that male bisexuality is neither socially accepted nor stigmatized. This polarization does not grasp the complexity of what is happening. Contacts between masculine men and effeminate homosexuals are playing fields for very complicated social games, where one does not necessarily say what one means, nor necessarily mean what one does.

I have noticed that contacts between effeminate homosexuals and masculine men in Mexico are not made too openly – unless it is in a place where everyone is initiated, where all the men do it. The homosexual men's feminine bearing serves to conceal the fact that what is happening is actually a homosexual relationship. To a certain extent, the *muyates* can have sex with men without ever being aware of it. Many *vestidas* look completely like women, even with their clothes off. If they do not let the man touch their intimate parts, they are often capable of having sex without him discovering that he has had anal instead of vaginal

intercourse. But it is probably more common that the men delude themselves, rather than that they are deluded. These are intricate games where the homosexual willingly gives the man the excuses and pretexts he needs.

A common pretext is money: it is by no means unusual for the *muyates* to be the ones who 'prostitute' themselves (this goes, of course, only for leisure-time partners, attractive young men, not for clients in prostitution). But as a rule, these young men 'sell' themselves cheaply. The homosexuals give them money, drinks, food or clothes in exchange for sexual services – just enough to give the young men an alibi; they can pretend they did not enter the sexual relationship because they had a homosexual desire, but simply because they could make some kind of economic gain from it.

In conversations with men who did not know that I knew they had sexual contacts with homosexuals, they denied such contacts. This made it difficult for me to get interviews with *muyates*; they had to know I already knew. Those interviewed knew that I already knew, because they knew I was living with some of their sexual partners who might have told me all about it, and sometimes because I had had the opportunity to watch them pick up a partner.<sup>8</sup> Even so, they systematically downplayed their experiences with homosexuals – compared to what their partners had told me about them. They would insist that it had not happened often, it probably would not happen again, and they got more out of being with a woman. For a couple this was not consistent with my own observations of them; for others it was not consistent with what their partners told me – that these men had had sexual relationships with many of the homosexuals, and had come back for more over a long period of time. Whom should one believe? I have chosen to believe the homosexuals, as I cannot see why they should not tell the truth (they were already labelled homosexuals anyway, and a few experiences more or less would not change anything), and they have given me very plausible explanations for why the bisexual men should want to downplay their homosexual experiences. It is all about maintaining a masculine image. Furthermore, I find this consistent with the way the bisexuals excused themselves in the interviews. 'I was so young,' they would say; 'I didn't yet



know about women's love'; or 'I was drunk, they paid me.' And it was not - oh no! - an emotional attachment. One even told me he reacted with nausea the first time; several said that they could do it only with the lights out, or in certain positions which did not remind them too much of the gender of the other person.

These experiences are treated with discretion, and are usually not spoken of. Pedro told me why he had not told anyone about his experiences, and why no one had ever told him about theirs: 'Maybe people would take it badly, even be repulsed by you, maybe feel so strongly that it makes them sick.' These are pretty forceful words, and they certainly show that to state that male bisexuality is socially acceptable in Mexico is a gross oversimplification.

Bisexual practice, then, is kept secret rather than being accepted. Discretion is coupled with silence. The lack of verbalization is associated with the fact that this activity is not segregated from other activities and relegated to a ghetto. Clark Taylor describes homosexual encounters at public places in Mexico. At nighttime men gather at *plazas*; they may talk a little, drink a little, smoke some marijuana and maybe engage in flirting and joking with homosexuals, and maybe go a little further. Taylor uses Goffman's terminology, and calls these encounters a game. There are players in different roles: effeminate homosexuals, homosexuals who pretend to be manly, thieves who pretend to be homosexuals, police agents who pretend to be hustlers, and so on - and a great many people who either don't notice anything or pretend not to notice anything. Contact is obtained through glances. If words are used, they are code words, indicating whether one is an insider or not. If the game is disclosed, it can be stopped immediately - and nothing has really happened. Taylor does not discuss the psychological consequences, but I believe that this tacit organization of the activity also leaves the participants free to keep it non-verbal and only semi-conscious.<sup>9</sup>

When he explained his reasons for not wanting to talk to anyone about his experiences, Roberto said: 'I'm not a saint or anything. 'Cause I have done it with homosexuals. And I take it as something normal. I don't criticize them, I'm not for or

against. If I tell a woman that I've done it with a homosexual, then she's not going to see it as something normal. But for me it is, 'cause nowadays any man will do it with a homosexual.' What he is saying is that really he just acts like all other men, it is just that women do not know that it is like this, and that is why they would condemn it. And perhaps this is a relatively correct description of the moral climate around male bisexuality: it is a collective secret among men, justified to themselves and among themselves by the fact that there are so many who do it, not because it in itself is seen as morally acceptable. But as Roger Lancaster points out in his study from Nicaragua, this goes also for other small sins - *pecadillos* - like heavy drinking or adultery. Such acts are morally disapproved of, but at the same time they are status-markers of male honour. I would argue that Latin American masculinity is constructed partly in opposition to Christian morality, and that the virtues of humility and willingness to forgive are considered more appropriate for women than for men.

For the *mayates*, the most sensitive aspect of homosexual contacts is the sexual practice. *Mayates* usually claim that they always take the penetrator's role. Of those I interviewed, all answered that they were never penetrated. Yet again, on the basis of what their partners say, I am inclined to believe that several of them were not telling the truth. The homosexuals had told me in advance that no *mayate* would ever admit to having been penetrated, because that is something that cannot be said. This, of course, is a methodological problem, but I believe it is also a finding, as I have now learnt why they cannot admit it: to be passive means to be homosexual, and this in turn means not to be a man.

Daniel lived with an effeminate homosexual for three years. Did he ever feel like a homosexual himself? 'No, because with the guy I lived with, I slept naked, totally naked with him. And he never tried to grab me, I mean around the waist, my hips. Never.' Ricardo said: 'As long as he doesn't touch my bottom it's OK, because then I wouldn't feel like a man, but like a gay. Then I pass from being a *mayate* to being a *joto*.'

To be penetrated marks a transition. Ricardo states that a man who lets himself be penetrated becomes homosexual. As



long as a man is the penetrator, or at least is perceived as such, having a homosexual relationship will not be threatening to his self-image, or to the image others have of him. But no one – except a direct witness – can know what actually happens in bed. Therefore there will always be a doubt connected to homosexual encounters and, thereby, a risk that a man's masculinity may be perceived as impaired. This is one reason for treating such encounters with a lot of discretion.<sup>10</sup>

### The Symbolic Signification of Penetration

Penetration represents a crossing of the body's boundaries. As Mary Douglas<sup>11</sup> has shown, beliefs about pollution and danger are often connected to such crossings. In the case of Mexico, we may see how certain beliefs about penetration are connected to the perception of gender, to gender categories, and to categorizations within each gender (as virgin or woman, as man or homosexual). Men fear becoming homosexual if they are penetrated, and this implies crossing from one category to another. In this sense penetration is seen as a source of pollution – men are polluted with femininity.

In a similar way, a girl who is penetrated 'is made into a woman', according to a common expression in Mexico. She crosses from girlhood, maidenhood, to womanhood, possibly motherhood – an irreversible passage. This is reflected, for instance, in popular songs where a man claims that a woman belongs to him, even if she now lives with somebody else, because '*le hice mujer*' – 'I made her a woman'. A maiden may become a woman and a mother by penetration, and thereby improve her social standing. But if the man abandons her afterwards, and she turns to other men, she risks becoming a whore – a transformation as dramatic as the one the penetrated man is subjected to. Then the penetration has implied some sort of pollution; something sticks to her. Marit Melhuus<sup>12</sup> describes the different representations of women that compose the Mexican imagery of femininity: the Virgin of Guadalupe; the mother; the traitor Malinche; and the bad woman, the whore. All these representations can be linked to acts of penetration or

non-penetration. The unpenetrated virgin, the mother who compensates for the loss of maidenhood with motherhood, Malinche who became the mistress of the conquistador, the whore who has had too many men.

As indicated, penetration is also important for the imagery of masculinity. This might be illustrated by the constant use of references to penetration in verbal badgering among working-class Mexican men. Mexican men are typically homosocial, working together and gathering at public places after work. These gatherings are – according to observers like Octavio Paz, R. Diaz-Guerrero and José Limón<sup>13</sup> – characterized by a wordplay called *el juego de los alburas*. I will take an example from Limón, from a bar in Texas where Mexican men gather to eat *tacos* and drink beer.

Jaime greets Simón, and Simón takes his hand and holds it firmly over his own genital area as he responds to the other's 'How are you?' by saying '¡Pos, chinga ahora me siento a toda madre, gracias!' (Well, fuck, now I feel just great, thank you!). Jaime responds by grabbing Simón's genitals and squeezing them. They end up on the floor, Simón drops his *taco*, and Jaime asks him to say that he loves him. Simón finally says: 'Te quiero, te quiero' (I love you, I love you), but as soon as he is released, he says: 'Te quiero dar en la madre' (I want to beat the hell out of you), playing on the double meaning of 'quiero' as 'I want' or 'I love'. They exchange some semi-mock punches before helping each other up, and then Jaime tells Simón: 'Dejando de chingar, anda a traer otro *taco* y traile uno a tu papa' (All screwing around aside, go get another *taco* and get one for your father).

To name oneself the other's father is a common way of marking one's superiority. And it was Jaime who won this fight. First, Simón tried to put Jaime in the role of the homosexual, by letting him 'caress' his genitals. But Jaime turned the tables and got Simón into the homosexual role by getting him to say he loved Jaime.

According to Paz, the loser in this kind of sexualized game is the one who cannot answer, who has to swallow the other's words – words loaded with sexual aggression. Hence the loser is symbolically raped by the other. Limón regards Paz's



interpretation as condescending, and claims that the aggression is mostly a mockery, and that the play is about solidarity between men, not about humiliation. My interpretation would be that men display their masculinity by putting their fellows in feminine or subordinate positions (which in the Mexican context are the same) – by putting them in the homosexual role. And just as in children's games, the limits between teasing and mobbing, and between mobbing and violence, are not and cannot be clear. While Limón's interpretation of the cases he has observed seems reasonable, not all cases seem to be as good-tempered as these are. In some instances the games create social bonds between all participants; in others only between the participants on the one side.

Eduardo Archetti<sup>14</sup> has shown how Argentinian football supporters try to humiliate and offend the other team by representing them as children or as homosexuals in their songs or their shouting. After a goal the supporters from the winning team sing: 'And now, now, they suck my balls well'. Another team gets the following message: 'Wipe your asshole, we're going to fuck you'. To make it clear that they have no intention of giving the others pleasure, they promise to burst them. Archetti interprets this as a ritual where men's identity is constructed by underscoring the difference between being a man and being a homosexual, where being a man stands for power, strength, independence and authority. Reducing the other to less than a man, to a homosexual, implies an enhancement of one's own masculinity, while showing that the other is unable to defend his masculine identity. Archetti also shows that those who are subject to this labelling do not appreciate it, and that the teasing sometimes goes together with violence.

*El juego de los albuques* is a public ritual where references to the body are used as metaphors.<sup>15</sup> The ass is an area of the body through which one might be humiliated; it is a very sensitive part of the male body.<sup>16</sup> As Paz has put it,<sup>17</sup> the male body is seen as closed, and the female body as open, or as opened by a male. The ass is the place where even a male body might be threatened, might be opened – thus resembling a female body. In this discourse the act of penetration is the most central metaphor, and very often linked to violence. Mexican swear

words tend to focus on rape (in contrast to the more common Latin American focus on the mother's promiscuity or prostitution). The verb *chingar* means everything from pestering to rape; a man may be characterized as a son of a raped woman, or he can be encouraged to rape his mother himself. But to be *chingón*, someone who pesters and rapes, is positive – not sympathetic but smart, cunning, someone who knows how to get along and to gain advantage from others.<sup>18</sup>

But not only are metaphors based on reality, a play with what could really happen, but what happens in reality also refers to metaphors. The practised male homosexuality follows the same pattern as the metaphorical homosexuality. What the men in the Texan bar and the men I have studied have in common is to have been born men, and born into the working class with scant opportunities for social mobility. The only status to be obtained is among equals. Here, among them, a man's masculinity is under constant attack by other men. His defence of his own bodily boundaries and attacks on other men's – whether symbolic attacks like the ones Limón and Archetti described, or the concrete acts of penetration I have described – may mirror and symbolize the social competition among men.

### Domination and Violence

The struggle over the definitions of masculinity is a struggle between men; and given the masculine domination in Mexican society, men also have considerable power over the definitions of femininity. Forms of masculinity and femininity become symbolic capital, contributing to determine positions in the social space.

Pierre Bourdieu<sup>19</sup> writes about how schemes of perception and appreciation are connected to the body, and at the same time linked to a more general, cultural scheme of oppositions between up and down, front and back, right and left, wet and dry, hard and soft, and so on. The divisions of things and of activities between women and men might be seen as arbitrary if they are seen in isolation, but they are given their 'naturalness' through an insertion into this scheme of oppositions; and thereby the



underlying social relations of domination are hidden. These relations are somatized, they are naturalized through an inscription in the mind's schemes of perception and in the bodily *hexis*. Bourdieu shows how the Kabyl (of Algeria) connect all that ranks highest to masculinity. The eyes, the nose, the moustache and the mouth are all elements related to a presentation of the self, and are used in ways that underline one's masculinity. To look somebody in the eyes and to speak in public places is reserved for men. It is against this background that what Bourdieu calls the Mediterranean offence *par excellence* – allusions to male homosexuality – should be understood as linked to the bottom, a feminine and degraded part of the body.

Gérard Mauger and Claude Fossé-Poliak<sup>20</sup> point to how the male body might be used as a principle of domination in youth gangs outside Paris. Subjected to cultural and economic domination, the young men try to impose their own principle of domination, based on physical force and on a 'capital of masculinity'. They dress up and move around like cowboys, they use tattoos, they talk *argot*, they fight, they like hard rock, football and motorbikes. Through this presentation of themselves they express, as Bourdieu says regarding working-class men, a 'practical philosophy of the male body as a sort of power, big and strong, with enormous, imperative, brutal needs'.<sup>21</sup> He claims that if men are forbidden every sort of 'pretension' in matters of culture, language or clothing, it is not only because aesthetic refinement is reserved for women or associated with the bourgeoisie: 'It is also because a surrender to demands perceived as simultaneously feminine and bourgeois appears as the index of a dual repudiation of virility, a twofold submission which ordinary language, naturally conceiving all domination in the logic and lexicon of sexual domination, is predisposed to express.'<sup>22</sup> One of the examples given from ordinary language is *pédé* – faggot. Mauger and Fossé-Poliak see this word as a marker of the distinction from a world in which working-class men have no chance to succeed – but still they claim to be superior to that world, basing their self-esteem on other values, like the male body.

But *pédé* is not merely a metaphor: there *are* homosexuals who are exposed to violence:

And if the homosexuals have been and maybe still are the prime targets of the tough guys, this is not so much a sign of 'repressed homosexual impulses' as because they sum up at the same time, from the tough guys' point of view, the cultural pretension, the financial pretension (first and foremost regarding clothing) and the sexual negation of virility.<sup>23</sup>

Faggot becomes a metaphor for femininity in men, including the pretentious, the refined and fancy, the verbalized and culturally educated as opposed to the strength of the body. This shows that the different social classes' representations of masculinity do not follow the hierarchy of social power, but give a certain superiority to the working-class representation of masculinity, or at least working-class men have an autonomy in their representation of themselves (they do not take over the dominant definition of them as their own definition of themselves).<sup>24</sup> Masculinity as a bodily principle of domination is a tool for resistance against class domination.

The homosexual occupies a central role in the definition of masculinity: in many societies, he is a cultural symbol for the opposite of the masculine man. In Latin America he is often used as a negative label in the upbringing of boys: 'Don't cry, you little faggot'. A more violent use of the expression is quoted by Bech,<sup>25</sup> in the context of the training of Greek soldiers to become torturers under the military junta. The term for the passive homosexual was the favourite invective used by the officers towards the soldiers or by the torturers towards their victims. To label the other a passive homosexual was a humiliation, and at the same time what justified the humiliation. The homosexual is used in the same way in verbal play and mock fights between Mexican men, and by the public at Argentinian soccer games. In the Argentinian examples it was only the masculine, penetrating party who derived any pleasure from the act in the songs, by having his testicle sucked or by penetrating the other. Yet it was only the other, the one who was forced, the one who was passive, who was homosexual.

According to Bourdieu,<sup>26</sup> power and domination imply mastering the categorizations and appreciations, the possibility of enforcing one's judgements as valid. It is the masculine men who define what homosexuality is and who the homosexual is, as they may also define acceptable and unacceptable sexual



behaviour for women. They have the labelling power, as Lorraine Nancel puts it, and may thereby affirm their own masculinity. Their categorizations allow them to escape stigma – in Argentinian football songs as well as Mexican sexual practice. Homosexuality is defined as pertaining only to passive homosexuals: they carry all the shame and guilt, while the active part remains normal, invisible and manly. That is why violent homophobia, *machismo*, and widespread male bisexuality go so well together. The masculine domination, the subordination of the feminine, the degradation of the homosexual – these are the conditions for the homoerotic freedom of masculine men. This is evident in group rapes where men enjoy having sex with homosexuals, while ensuring that they are degraded and condemned. But I believe that relations of domination also structure the more friendly or loving relationships between masculine-looking men and effeminate homosexuals in Mexico, as it is only on the basis of masculine domination that the masculine party may enter these relationships without having his social identity or his self-image threatened. This power gives a licence to pleasure.

#### A Struggle for Dignity

But what, then, about the other part – the effeminate homosexuals? Why do they participate so willingly? Bourdieu<sup>27</sup> claims that the most important form of domination is not coercion but complicity. The dominated share the dominators' schemes of perception and appreciation. The effeminate homosexuals are victims of this symbolic violence, becoming victims of their own categorizations and appreciations. Dominance and masculinity are at stake whenever an effeminate homosexual meets a masculine man – yet these encounters might give both parties love and pleasure, just as love and pleasure are possible in relationships between women and men, blacks and whites, despite the long history of oppression and dominance. On the other hand, the dominated party probably always develops some strategies for gaining dignity from below, some sort of resistance – just as working-class men may use their valorization

of physical force as a resistance against the deprivation of other resources. We may read Melhuus<sup>28</sup> as a description of how female subordination is compensated in Mexican gender imagery by a moral superiority given to women. This is not, of course, a revalorization available to the homosexuals, as they may be neither virgins nor mothers.

The effeminacy of the working-class homosexuals might be interpreted as a result of social pressure,<sup>29</sup> as a way of adapting to a *macho* society. The effeminate homosexuals themselves, however, do not perceive themselves as forced into effeminacy. Quite the contrary: they consider femininity as natural for them, and condemn all kinds of social restrictions that might force homosexuals 'to not play out that part of themselves'. As we have seen, working-class homosexual transvestites may call middle-class homosexuals closeted and cowardly. As middle-class homosexuals are less effeminate, transvestites claim that they hide their homosexuality. Middle-class homosexuals' refusal to be effeminate may be interpreted as an attempt to maintain their social status despite their homosexuality. By contrast, the young homosexuals from the working class have no status to lose. Indeed, they have something to gain by adopting an effeminate style: confronted with middle-class homosexuals, they gain self-respect by referring themselves to the same hierarchy of masculinity as the working-class men do. Transvestites cannot brag about their own masculinity, but then neither can middle-class homosexuals. But transvestites may brag about their sexual partners' masculinity, as indicated by the following example. An effeminate homosexual at a gay disco told me he had just met a middle-class homosexual in the toilet, and the latter had said with heavy contempt, pointing at the former's enormous, artificial buttocks: 'So much oil! It's horrible!' – 'You don't mean that. You'd give a fortune for that ass, even if it was just for one night.' – 'That's what you think?' – 'Of course. You've got no ass at all. And the men I get are real *machines*, while you've got to content yourself with other *tortilleras*.'

*Machines* means very masculine men; *tortilleras* means more androgynous gays who both penetrate and are penetrated. And actually, it is striking that at clubs frequented by working-class homosexuals there are a lot of heterosexual-looking men,



together with the effeminate gays and transvestites, while at more middle-class venues there are very few heterosexual-looking men.

But how do the effeminate gays and transvestites defend themselves against the contempt of their working-class surroundings – their families, neighbours and partners? My overall impression is that there seems to be a firm belief among the working class that effeminate homosexuals are born effeminate and homosexual. They claim that even as small children they wanted to play with their sisters' dolls instead of their own toy cars, that they also played at dressing up in their mother's clothes, and that they felt the urge for sexual contact with men very early. Usually they have had severe conflicts with their families over this, but after a certain time the parents resign themselves, and stop trying to change their son's femininity and homosexuality. The essentialist view on homosexuality and effeminate style is rather tolerant: what cannot be changed must be accepted – although not necessarily appreciated. Moreover, in the area where I did my fieldwork, most transvestites lived with their parents, and contributed to the family household. Earning money and sharing it is a way of gaining respect from relatives. Most of the effeminate homosexuals also have an impressive linguistic competence, and can defend themselves verbally, often through mockery and humour.

But still, when they are with their partners, how do they respond to a situation so loaded with domination and contempt? One strategy is to show that they are smarter than their partners. They will often steal something from them. I do not think those thefts are only economically motivated. From the way they talk about them, I get the firm impression that the important point is to show their own smartness. But the most important strategies concern gender play: effeminate homosexuals use a dual-track strategy to neutralize the loss of male honour. They either refer to their femininity, or they make use of their maleness.

The first strategy is to become female as far as possible by looking like women, acting like women, and often passing as women. Then it is 'only natural' that they should let themselves be penetrated like women – they are women, or almost. An affirmation of their femininity lies in the partners' masculinity, which

they may help to maintain by always taking the passive part in intercourse – or at least, pretending to. In more lasting relationships they often expect their lovers to be rather stereotypical, traditional *machos*, and they may accept a certain subordination – because the more masculine the partner is, the more feminine they feel themselves.

The second strategy is to use their own maleness to deprive their partners of their masculinity. For how can he despise them if he lets himself be penetrated, too?<sup>30</sup> These two strategies, although contradictory, may be combined, as the story of Pancha shows.

Pancha did not want his lover to come to the place where the homosexuals meet, but he did anyway. 'He came, he slept with Mema, he slept with Francisca, he slept with Gloria – and they fucked him. On top of the whole damn thing, they fucked him. So I was embarrassed and didn't want anything more to do with him.' Infidelity is one issue, but letting oneself be penetrated is going over the limit. Pancha had never penetrated his lover. 'I don't care if he lets himself be turned over, what's it to me? It's his asshole and his business, isn't it? But not when I can see it, and even less if it's with the people I hang around with. Because now they're making fun of me. Not of him, but of me.' I am puzzled by this, because I know that Pancha likes to penetrate. But preferably not his lover, because: 'Then I feel that he's less of a man than I am. Just think about it – a queer and me. If I go dressed as a woman with him, then I am a woman and he is a man, right? But then there is no point in me going all stuffed out or wearing a dress or high-heeled shoes or a bra or nylons. If I am to do it as a man, it's better that he wears the skirt.'

The example of Pancha illustrates that it is precisely the contradictory nature of the two strategies that makes them the perfect response to an ambiguous situation. If he juggles the strategies well, he will always be the winner. Rather than being neither woman nor man, the effeminate homosexual tries to be both; he juggles with gender. Femininity is the proof that the homosexual is a victim of his essence; consequently, he cannot be blamed for being penetrated. Still, it is a loss of male honour, and he ends up at the bottom of the pecking order, free prey for male aggression and desire. However, he can turn the tables by



defending himself with his own physical maleness, and deprive other men of their masculinity. This strategy is a defence against the dominant definition of him, by labelling negatively those who label him negatively, in the same way as many other stigmatized groups have tried to disperse the stigma that is put on them.<sup>31</sup>

The story of Pancha also shows that clothes, physical presentation and sexual acts are signs which, taken together, constitute and maintain masculinity and femininity. Gender is composed of signs that refer mutually to each other, so why wear feminine signs if the partner doesn't respect the masculine signs he is supposed to show? The game breaks down, and Pancha must choose between taking off his bra and his foam-rubber padding and finding himself another man. When the rules of the game are not followed, there is no point playing any more.

In all societies genders are constructed through a symbol system inscribed in minds, which most of the time functions automatically and makes us take the social world, with its sexual divisions, as given. This symbolic system refers heavily to 'nature' and to the body, and thereby gives the genders their 'naturalness'. Gendered categories like 'man', 'homosexual', 'woman' and 'maiden' are based on certain ideas about the body, the body's boundaries and bodily practices and, in this Mexican example, first and foremost on ideas about penetration. In other societies the bodily rules and the symbolism connected to the body may be very different, and the specific focus on penetration may not be found. But the symbolic of active versus passive might have a wide validity for the understanding of gender, and within what has a very wide validity is male domination, so deeply inscribed in the schemes of perception and appreciation that it appears to be natural, as Bourdieu states.<sup>32</sup> In the representation of masculinity, the homosexual man serves in Mexico as a symbol of not-male, whether he is physically present or just symbolically represented in a game between men. Thereby, by being the negation of masculinity, he contributes to the definition of it, to the perception of malehood and to the constitution of men's self-images.

Through these representations a fundamental *difference* is created between two kinds of men which, biologically speaking, are the same, and in the homosexual relationships the two parties usually co-operate to maintain this difference. But the possibility that at any moment the other can turn out to be the same as oneself, as only an appearance separates the two, is the reason these relationships are so fragile – that they may so easily switch from love to disgust, as for Pancha; or from sexual pleasure to aggression and violence, as has happened for many bisexual men, with the homosexuals as the victims.

### Notes

1. For a more detailed account of methodological and analytical issues, see Annick Prieur, *Stealing Femininity. Male Homosexuality in Mexico*, Chicago, forthcoming.
2. For Nicaragua, see Roger N. Lancaster, 'Subject Honor and Object Shame: The Construction of Male Homosexuality and Stigma in Nicaragua', *Ethnology*, vol. 27, 1988. For Brazil, see Richard Parker, 'Masculinity, Femininity, and Homosexuality: On the Anthropological Interpretation of Sexual Meanings in Brazil', *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 14, 1986; Richard Parker, 'Youth, Identity, and Homosexuality: The Changing Shape of Sexual Life in Contemporary Brazil', *Journal of Homosexuality* vol. 17 nos 3-4, 1989; Rommel Mendes-Leite, 'Les apparences en jeu', *Sociétés*, no. 17, 1988; Andrea Cornwall, 'Gendered Identities and Gender Ambiguity among Travestis in Salvador, Brazil', in Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne eds, *Dislocating Masculinities: Comparative Ethnographies*, London and New York 1994. For both Brazil and Guatemala, see Frederick L. Whitam and Robin M. Mathy, *Male Homosexuality in Four Societies, Brazil, Guatemala, the Philippines and the United States*, New York 1986; and concerning Chicanos, Tomás Almaguer, 'Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior', *Differences*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1991.
3. See J.M. Carrier, 'Participants in Urban Mexican Male Homosexual Encounters', *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1971; J.M. Carrier, 'Cultural Factors Affecting Urban Mexican Male Homosexual Behavior', *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1976; J.M. Carrier, 'Mexican Male Bisexuality', in Fritz Klein et al., *Bisexualities: Theory and Research*, New York and London 1985; J.M. Carrier, 'Sexual Behavior and Spread of AIDS in Mexico', *Medical Anthropology*, vol. 10, nos 2-3, 1989; Joseph M. Carrier, 'Gay Liberation and Coming-Out in Mexico',



*Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 17, nos 3-4, 1989; Ana María Alonso and María Teresa Koreck, 'Silences: "Hispanics", AIDS, and Sexual Practices', *Differences*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1988; Ian Lumsden, *Homosexualidad, Sociedad y Estado en México*, Mexico City and Toronto 1991; and Clark L. Taylor, 'Mexican Male Homosexual Interaction in Public Contexts', *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 14, 1986.

4. See Lorraine Nencel this volume, Chapter 3 above.
5. Confirmed by Carrier 1985; Alonso and Koreck; and Taylor.
6. Carrier 1985, pp. 77-8.
7. Alonso and Koreck, p. 111.
8. Pierre Bourdieu claims that it is a prerequisite for the interviewer to already know, and that the interviewed knows the interviewer already knows when the interview deals with certain very sensitive issues where it will be too humiliating for the interviewed to admit the truth unless he or she knows the truth is already known (in Pierre Bourdieu *et al.*, *La Misère du monde*, Paris 1994).
9. If this is true, it may explain some of the difficulties involved in reaching bisexual men with AIDS education; many may not admit even to themselves that they are relevant targets.
10. Andrea Cornwall shows that while the majority of the Salvadorian transvestite prostitutes' clients probably want the transvestite to penetrate them, they are still commonly believed to be acting 'as men', as inserters.
11. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, London and New York 1966; and *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, New York 1982.
12. Marit Melhuus, this volume, Chapter 10 below. See also Marit Melhuus, *Todos Tenemos Madre, Dios También: Morality, Meaning and Change in a Mexican Context*, PhD thesis in social anthropology, University of Oslo, 1993.
13. Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad*, Mexico City, Madrid and Buenos Aires [1950] 1980; R. Diaz-Guerrero, 'Adolescence in Mexico. Some Cultural, Psychological and Psychiatric Aspects', *International Mental Research Health Newsletter*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1970; José E. Limón, 'Carne, Carnales and the Carnavalesque: Bakhtinian Batos, Disorder, and Narrative Discourses', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1989.
14. Eduardo Archetti, 'Football og nasjonal etos', in Egil 'Drillo' Olsen, ed., *Football - mer enn et spill*, Oslo 1985; and 'Argentinian Football: A Ritual of Violence?', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1992.
15. Douglas 1966.
16. 'Behind' is *zona sagrada* in other Latin American societies, too, to the point where - according to Eduardo Archetti (personal communication) - while Argentinian parents commonly let their daughters use suppositories or measure their temperature rectally, they never let their sons do so - out of fear that they might enjoy it!

17. Paz, pp. 26-7.
18. On the connotations of *chingar*, see also Melhuus, this volume, Chapter 10 below.
19. Pierre Bourdieu, 'La Domination masculine', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, no. 84, 1990.
20. Gérard Mauger and Claude Fossé-Poliak, 'Les Loubards', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, no. 50, 1983; Gérard Mauger, 'Enquêter en milieu populaire', *Genèses*, no. 6, 1991.
21. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Cambridge, MA and London 1984, p. 192.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 382.
23. Mauger and Fossé-Poliak, p. 66.
24. Bourdieu 1984, p. 384.
25. Henning Bech, *Når mænd mødes. Homoseksualiteten og de homoseksuelle*, Copenhagen 1987, pp. 61-2.
26. Bourdieu 1984.
27. Pierre Bourdieu (with Loïc J.D. Wacquant), *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Cambridge 1992.
28. Melhuus 1993.
29. Lumsden, p. 35.
30. Cornwall found the same judgements of men who are penetrated among Brazilian *travestis*, but takes it simply as a fact that they are sharing the masculinists' attitudes that render them objects of abuse. I believe it is also a defence of the weak: they despise those who despise them, for not living up to their own standards.
31. For instance, drug users who condemn alcohol abuse, thieves who condemn tax fraud, immigrants who state that all are descendants of immigrants, or prostitutes who claim that all women have to sell themselves in one way or another.
32. Bourdieu 1990.