Soaking in Manhood: (Re)Negotiating Masculinities and Sexualities in the Spas of Quito, Ecuador

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In this ethnographic investigation, the narratives of several Ecuadorian males are used to address the current intersections between personal sexual identities and masculinities. The intersections considered often take place within the Ecuadorian spa, an ethnosexual frontier in which heteronormative identities are negotiated against a backdrop of homosocial camaraderie and homoerotic desire. The role of the spa in these negotiations is twofold: it offers a space for men who have sex with men (MSM) to gain culturally requisite sexual experience, and it challenges the stereotypes of MSM as hyper-sexualized by doubling as a homosocial space in which no sexual activity is required. Social scientists have noted the need to understand sexuality as a global dimension of power in which certain groups are privileged over others. Similarly, masculinity scholars have observed the ways in which contrasting studies of men, sexuality, reproduction, and identity help us to explore the global history and diversity of genders and sexualities. With the life histories of the informants who have contributed to this investigation, I explore some of the ways in which contemporary Ecuadorian masculinities are reconstructed in relation to alternative sexualities, where sexual identities do not necessarily align with sexual behavior. Personal identities are bound in time and space, and in these cases, they have been transformed by recent legislation and the emergence of spas.
Soaking in Manhood: (Re)Negotiating Masculinitiies and Sexualities in the Spas of Quito, Ecuador

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Soaking in Manhood: (Re)Negotiating Masculinities and Sexualities in the Spas of Quito, Ecuador

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

SOAKING IN MANHOOD

Where do men who have sex with men go to define themselves as men?

In 1998, the National Assembly of Ecuador voted to decriminalize homosexuality, marking the nation’s first tentative steps towards legal recognition of alternative sexualities. In the years since the legislation passed, members of the LGBT community have no longer had to fear imprisonment due to a sexual liaison with a partner of the same sex, although social stigma remains a concern. With a progressive revision of its constitution ten years later, the government acknowledged the right of its citizens to decide their sexuality, which means members of the population are able to express their sexual and gender identities without fear of prosecution. This has led to an influx of new businesses, such as all-male spas, aimed at the homosexual population. These contemporary sites of homosexual cultural production are a new phenomenon, as previously, gatherings and sexual encounters were restricted to clandestine locations outside of the public view. At first glance, the Ecuadorian spas (there are three presently operating in the nation’s capital) appear to be the equivalent of the gay bathhouses seen in the developed West. From an architectural standpoint, the spa is a hybridization of the bathhouse and the heteronormative saunas found in upscale Ecuadorian apartment buildings, both privileged spaces in which the meanings of manhood are produced and reproduced (Viveros Vigoya 2003). However, this description does not account for the various cultural masculinities performed inside. The spa is a space for male camaraderie, a site for male bonding away from the family and free of the sexual stigma often encountered within the public sphere.
Latin American masculinities are often oversimplified to one word, *machismo*, misguidedly used to describe all the actions and attitudes related to Latin American men. Masculinity scholars note that many feminist theories on gender inequality provide frameworks in which we can develop a contrasting study of men, sexuality, reproduction, and identity, which we can use to explore the global history and diversity of genders and sexualities (Gutmann 2007a). Similarly, social scientists such as Ruth Landes and Lionel Cantú have highlighted the need to understand sexuality as a global dimension of power in which certain groups are privileged over others (Landes 1940; Cantú 2003). In this ethnographic investigation, I use the collected narratives of nine Ecuadorian males to explore the relationships between their sexual identities and the all-male spas of Quito, Ecuador. In this way, I address how localized conceptions of masculinities and sexualities intersect, and how they affect the informants’ daily lives. The spa is a site that offers a space for men who have sex with men (MSM) to gain culturally requisite sexual experience, and it challenges the stereotypical image of MSM as hyper-sexualized by doubling as a space in which no sexual activity is required. With the life histories of the informants who have contributed to this investigation I discuss some of the ways in which contemporary Ecuadorian masculinities are reconstructed in relation to alternative sexualities, where sexual identities do not necessarily align with sexual behavior. Personal identities are bound in time and space, and in these cases, they have been transformed by recent legislation and the emergence of spas.
PERFORMING SEXUALITIES AND MASCULINITIES IN LATIN AMERICA

While sexuality and its myriad expressions may be globally recognized, it is also negotiated. For example, if we recognize the significance of sexuality in the construction of masculinities, we must also recognize its fluidity, understanding that not all sexual acts among same-sex partners are considered signs of homosexuality in all locales. In Latin America, homosexuality may be compartmentalized in both space and time, demarcating the homosexual according to rules and assumptions dramatically different from the North; it is not simply the man who has sex with men, but specifically the anally receptive (rather than the phallicly active) party who is understood as “homosexual” (Murray 1995b). Roger Lancaster and Ruth Landes have both recognized this sharp distinction between sex roles, with Landes arguing that either role may be marked for condemnation (Landes 1940). Lancaster, however, avows that, provided he follows established conventions, the penetrating partner receives no special label or stigma (Lancaster 2003). In these cases, homosexual behavior occurs outside of the simplified gender roles historically recognized within a society, with multiple labels increasingly used in self-reference (Murray 1995a). It is in this spirit that I offer a note on the terminology used throughout this investigation.

The informants in this study have labeled their own personal sexual identities; the labels do not necessarily align with their sexual behavior. Most use the Western labels “gay” and “bisexual” to identify themselves, with a bisexual male being perceived as more masculine than a male who identifies as completely gay. The men who claim to be bisexual may not have sexual encounters with both men and women, but insist their sexuality – here defined as the feelings and attractions felt toward other people – draws them to both males and females. They also attempt
to label members of the transvestite and transgender communities (discussed in greater detail in chapter 4) based on bodies (whether they have had surgeries to alter their bodies), and behavior (whether they cross-dress as an art form or not). Westbrook and Schilt (2014) argue that under an identity-based gender ideology people are identified as members of their chosen gender identity if their claim is considered legitimate by the other people determining their gender. Each of the informants had the opportunity to identify members of these communities on their own, yet their responses are far from consensus answers.

Age and social standing only further complicate discussions of sexual identities and behaviors, as same-sex experimentation is more acceptable among unmarried young (i.e. those without families of their own), but becomes increasingly threatening to reputations with age and economic status. The global economy also affects the ways in sexualities and their relation to the family are viewed, as the need to placate family members and create family units (and thus the need for fatherhood as the pinnacle of masculinity) has severely diminished. John D’Emilio (1997) attests that as more adults are drawn into the free labor system, the forces that propel them into families weaken. Conversely, capitalism also enshrines the family as the source of love, affection, and emotional security, the place where our need for stable, intimate relationships is satisfied. A way to deal with this is through the creation of fictive kinship ties, an available alternative regardless of sexuality.

In the study of masculinities, sexuality is often omitted as a dimension of power integral to its construction. As mentioned previously, Latin American masculinity is often oversimplified to one word: machismo, a misguided catch-all used to describe all things related to Latin American men. While machismo is related to masculinity through its focus on male behaviors, it is only a small part of a larger system of socially constructed masculine identities. Matthew
Gutmann has noted that the term masculinity (and the related concepts of male identity, manhood, manliness and men’s roles) can be defined in four distinct ways, although they often intersect: 1) Masculinity is anything that men think, say and do. If men are involved then so too is masculinity; 2) Masculinity is what men think, say, or do to distinguish themselves as men, achieving masculinity at some times more than at others; 3) Masculinity is a quality that certain men have over others whether ascribed or achieved; 4) Women have an overriding significance in the negotiation of masculinities for most men at most times (Gutmann 2003).

Gutmann’s discussion of the fluctuating meanings of the words macho and machismo shares a great deal of similarity with Andrade’s theories on the Ecuadorian State. He affirms that while society as a whole can be considered macho, definitions and contexts are key (Gutmann 2007b). R.W. Connell (2005) declares that state organizational practices are structured in relation to the reproductive arena, meaning the majority of top office-holders are men due to gender configuring of recruitment and promotion, the internal division of labor and systems of control, policymaking, practical routines, and ways of mobilizing pleasure and consent. As the state is gendered and sexualized by heteronormative decision-making males, women and homosexual males are bound by policies in which they have little control. Dennis Altman (2001) suggests we need a political economy of sexuality which recognizes the interrelationship of political, economic, and cultural structures, and avoids the tendency to see sexuality as private and the political/economic as public. Changes in legislation acknowledging the rights of the local LGBT population show that the heterosexual males in positions of power are listening to the perspectives of grassroots activists and academics even if the power structures remain unequal.

While acknowledging the contributions made by Gutmann and Mara Viveros Vigoya, Xavier Andrade (2001b) argues that there are several themes which must be addressed when
considering Latin American masculinities: questions of fatherhood; change and resistance to change in conceptions of masculinity; the racialization of the masculine; machismo and politics; and the paradox of excess and silence in the language of bodies and sexuality. In the spas, where the dominant conceptions of masculinity are regularly contested, these themes are constantly renegotiated. Much as there is no overarching idea of machismo, there is no overarching masculinity, or corresponding sexuality. Masculinity varies in time, space, and cultural context.

Norma Fuller (1998) has argued that for Latin American males, the ability to start families and protect them from other males is the masculine ideal, supplanting an earlier period of youth characterized by an emphasis on sexual performance and virility. On the other hand, scholars such as Gutmann and Alfredo Mirandé have noted a change in the attitudes of males towards childrearing and gender performance. In their findings, men no longer simply protect families; they are active as parents, as well (Gutmann 2007a, 2007b; Mirandé 1997). Yet in all three studies, there is no accounting for the same-sex encounters that have been recognized in pre-contact civilizations and chronicled in surviving colonial-era documents (Murray 1995c; Sigal 2003). In essence, when recognizing fatherhood’s importance, we are also acknowledging that sexuality is a biologically-based aspect of human behavior, yet forgetting (or ignoring) that it is one subject to extreme modification by culture (Winkleman 1999). For MSM, the spa may be a site for these modifications to take place.

In Ecuador, men conform to the idea of homosocialidad, a point in time and space in which men are able to share moments with other men in order to reflect on ideal masculine behavior. The spa exists as a space for these reflections, outside of the familial gaze and the judgmental eye of the public sphere. Family and sexuality go hand in hand, and their public ties often influence the subjects’ sex lives. Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez (2005) recalls Dennis Altman in
noting that gender and sexuality come together through the family, and family structures themselves are dependent on social and economic structures. The discretion of the spa, while still in the public sphere, helps to alleviate these tensions.

The environment within homosocial spaces is undoubtedly sexually charged, with sex a constant topic of conversation. Viveros Vigoya (2003) theorizes that, by calling attention to male behavior and attitudes towards sexual and reproductive health in various cultural contexts, it is possible to construct new models of family life and gender relations on a more democratic and equal basis. Gutmann (2007a) recognizes this call to action and highlights the work conducted by feminist scholars, noting that many feminist theories of gender inequality help in developing a contrasting study of men, sexuality, reproduction, and masculinity as integral to exploring the history and diversity of gender and sexuality systems across the globe. An intersectional study of these topics, set against the backdrop of homosocial conversation, could be an opening salvo in the development of these feminist ideals.

While there are regional stereotypes applied to the people and places across Ecuador (Guayaquil is characterized as having a more machista [macho] culture than Quito, for example), Andrade (2001a) challenges these myths by noting the appropriation of public spaces on the coast by groups of transvestites and male homosexuals, despite the stigma held against such sexualities. However, these challenges are not new, as Guayaquil’s relationship with alternative sexualities extends to at least the colonial period (Benavides 2002). Over the last few years, Quito’s similar challenges have begun to receive comparable attention in the academic community (Aguirre Arauz 2010; Páez Vacas 2010). The influence of changes made at the national level through the passage of legislation has only just begun to be analyzed.
The spa, with its relatively low entrance fees, is accessible to men regardless of political ties, social prestige, and/or racial and ethnic affiliation. Inside, men may become ethno-adventurers, undertakers of sexual expeditions across ethnic divides for recreational, casual or “exotic” encounters, often more than once, but returning to their sexual home bases after each excursion. The spa, in turn, becomes an ethnosexual frontier, an erotic location and exotic destination constantly penetrated by individuals forging sexual links with ethnic “others” across ethnic borders (Nagel 2003). Much as the masculinity literature lacks careful consideration of sexualities, a proper investigation of the relationship between ethno-homosexualities and masculinities is still needed.

PROJECT SPECIFICS AND METHODOLOGY

In this ethnographic project, I work within the theoretical framework of masculinity posited by Matthew Gutmann (and localized by Xavier Andrade), in order to analyze the narratives of local men active in sites of homoeroticism. Prior to the change in Ecuador’s constitution decriminalizing homosexuality, gatherings among the MSM population were most often discreetly located in movie theaters, parks, abandoned buildings, and private apartments (Paez Vacas 2010; Salgado 2008; Xie and Corrales 2010). The changes in legislation made it possible for relatively new commercial spaces like Quito’s spas: Tulipán Spa, Club Dionisio, and Sauna Oscuro, to operate publicly without legal repercussions.1 While the spas are the primary locations for participant observation, the study would be incomplete without consideration of other homoerotic locales. As such, Video Roma and Supervideo, modern “video stores” known for erotic encounters and private parties for the MSM community, are also addressed. It would
be impossible to complete the project without including the less sexually charged and/or sex-segregated (yet culturally significant) sites, so I also discuss the cafés, cabarets, bars, and nightclubs often frequented by the MSM population. During these sessions, I observed MSM in various segregated situations; in the spas, I observed men in platonic relationships, attempt to develop new friendships, find sexual partners, and engage in sexual activity. I also observed sexual activity in the video stores, although in this arena platonic relationships were missing. In the cafés and bars, I observed platonic relationships. There were similar observations in the cabarets and bars, in addition to men searching for sexual partners and performance by members of the local drag community.

In order to protect the anonymity of my informants and the other patrons and employees of these establishments, I have changed the names of all businesses and participants. In several cases, my sources were more than willing to share their stories with their names attached – peculiarly, they were less willing to have their voices recorded even though they wanted their names used – and they in fact requested it. However, while laws may have changed, many members of the MSM community still face stigma both at home and in the public sphere. After much reflection I concluded that, in order to protect all parties involved from any form of retribution, it is in the best interests of the population to keep the identities of willing participants ambiguous.

Primary contacts for this investigation originated with a key informant met on day one of my fieldwork in the spas: Chucho, a 27-year-old regular patron of the spas with additional connections in the drag queen and cross-dressing communities. All additional participants were drawn from homosocial spaces in which he plays an active role. For example, if a person frequented the same bars and/or social media sites as the key informant, then I considered that
person as a potential source. After a period of time building relationships and fostering trust through socialization and observation in field sites, thirty-three men were approached to share personal narratives. In the end, life histories and sexual narratives were elicited through semi-structured interviews (in English or Spanish as needed) with nine primary informants: three regular patrons of the spas that identify as male in all aspects, three that consider themselves male but also cross-dress for work or pleasure, and three males that prefer the use of social media over physical spaces to meet potential sexual partners and platonic MSM friends (Luengo Baeza 2011). The interviews that took place in a stationary setting such as an apartment were typed up on a laptop in the moment with the participants’ full knowledge and consent. Interviews that took place in inconvenient settings such as spas, on the other hand, had to be reconstructed as soon as they were completed using hand-written field notes and a fresh memory to maximize accuracy. In most cases this method worked well. However, if any details were still unclear, the participants were almost always accessible for an update or clarification.

Analyzing the data acquired during participant observation in homosocial spaces and crafting the interview guidelines to assemble the informant narratives allowed me to explore several questions: 1) How do males in the spas differentiate between potential sexual partners and platonic relationships? 2) Do racialized bodies affect patterns of socialization? 3) What are the factors that allow some MSM to frequent spas while others avoid them? 4) Do these factors originate in the public or private sphere? and 5) What roles do the women in the informants’ lives play in which negotiations?

During the course of my socialization with the participants, I decided to include three additional sections in the ethnography. In these cases, I took a phenomenological approach to their creation with the intended goal of describing the three spas and the interactions of the
clientele within them in detail. My goal was to capture and document the venues just as I saw them, to facilitate a contextualized reading experience and a clearer portrait of the spas in subsequent chapters. Going to the spas is not only a social experience or a sexual experience; it is also a sensory experience. At any given moment, a patron may be blinded by darkness, bombarded with technological and physical sounds, overpowered by the smell of eucalyptus, or touched by wandering hands, among countless other sensations. The spas are shared by groups of individuals, friends and strangers, yet always experienced individually. Desjarlais and Throop argue “to focus on sensorial aspects of experience from a phenomenological perspective is not to focus myopically on subjective experience…even our most basic experiences of physical objects both evidence and entail a foundational intersubjectivity” (2011: 91). Through these sections of the ethnography the reader can integrate the physical surroundings with the embodied experiences of the informants.

Observing interactions in the spas was absolutely integral to the completion of this project and took place at least four times per week, with additional visits scheduled for special events or by special request of the informants. Observation of behavior in video stores took place during days of increased activity, which were determined during the first month of preliminary fieldwork. Observations of the local nightlife took place between Thursdays and Saturdays and on special occasions in gay clubs and on Wednesday nights, or “Ladies Night,” in heterosexually-oriented clubs. Finally, observation in sites such as cabarets and cafés took place with informants and/or their fictive kin, as needed.
PROJECT TIMETABLE

Fieldwork for this project was conducted in five distinct segments, followed by interstitial periods in which I conducted internet-based research, transcribed interviews in narrative form, and wrote up my preliminary findings. However, prior to entering the field I felt there was a significant factor that needed to be addressed. While many men who have sex with men face stigma from the mainstream heterosexual population, they face additional stigma within the MSM community itself. Both Richard Tewksbury and Jason Whitesel have noted the challenges faced by men who don’t fit into the “gay mold,” i.e. a socially acceptable weight. Tewksbury (2003) argues that while men of different “tiers” or “classes” can be found in gay bathhouses and social clubs, the less physically attractive are at a disadvantage. Whitesel (2014) on the other hand notes that if you are chubby or husky, you are not as popular, and if you are large, you are simply not acknowledged. While my status as a foreigner no doubt helped me in initial conversations with curious patrons, in order to appeal to as many people as possible, I spent several months in the gym prior to field work getting in shape. After all, while it may be somewhat easy to strike up a conversation with potential informants in a bar, it is another thing entirely when you are in a state of undress wearing nothing but a towel!

The investigation began with four weeks of preliminary research in June 2013, internationally recognized as Gay Pride month and, as such, a period of increased activity. It was at this point that I identified the best days for participant observation at each spa and other MSM-influenced homosocial spaces. From October to the end of December 2013, I focused primarily on collecting detailed data on each spa including interior descriptions, marketing techniques, the typical demographic information of their clientele, and social interactions as defined by race and
class. This segment also saw introductions to the fictive kin of my key informant, two of whom became informants themselves, and the completion of the first three semi-structured interviews. The months of December 2013, and January 2014, were devoted to internet encounters. I used social media to forge relationships with more reserved informants who consciously avoid spas and other homosexual/social locales. In addition, the first interviews were analyzed during this period, and I began writing up my preliminary findings.

During the third segment, ranging from mid-February to mid-March 2014, I collected and recorded data on other locales including nightclubs, cafes, video stores, cabarets, and private events. During this phase, I conducted the first in-person meetings and interviews with informants contacted through the internet. I followed this with a second period of analysis and writing up, from mid-April to the end of May 2014, when I analyzed the second set of interviews.

The fourth phase of the project lasted three months, from mid-May 2014, to mid-August 2014. During this period, I recorded the change in the culture of the spas and other homosocial spaces due to the influx of foreign tourists, taking special note of any changes in racialized interactions. My third set of interviews were recorded during this time and analyzed upon my return to the United States from July to mid-December 2014. At this point I began the process of analyzing the entirety of my collected data while maintaining contact with my informants through social media, and began outlining the first chapters of a dissertation draft. The fifth and final scheduled segment of fieldwork lasted for four weeks, from mid-December 2014, to mid-January 2015, and was designed to be a final return for the holiday season, focusing on those informants with tenuous to no familial ties due to their sexuality. While this was originally intended to be the end of field research, I returned to Quito for two weeks in March 2015. In this
visit, the final interviews with primary informants were recorded, and any missing data from the earlier periods of participant observation were addressed. In total, I conducted thirty-nine weeks of on-site field research in Quito.

**NARRATIVES AS INDIVIDUAL AGENCY**

In the writing of this investigation, I crafted individual personal narratives in an attempt to give the informants their own voices. Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008) argue that while common in history, the narrative form can be used in the social sciences as an opportunity to consider human agency. A particular motivation for this stylistic choice is “the desire to examine varieties of individual selfhood and agency ‘from below’ and in practice, as constructed in people’s articulated self-understandings. More specifically, analyses of personal narratives have served to introduce marginalized voices (eg. those of women or globally subaltern people) and they also have provided counternarratives that dispute misleading generalizations or refute universal claims” (2008: 1). Not all men who have sex with men think or behave the same way when faced with similar situations. The informants in this investigation have all grown up in the same culture under the same laws regarding sexual behavior and identity, yet when asked the same questions, I found that their lived experiences were decidedly different. The men go to the spas (or not) for various reasons and have various experiences once inside. Their individual agency is further limited by proximity to family and friends, as they could be ostracized if they verbalized their private thoughts and desires shared in this investigation. Because “what people do and their understandings of why they do what they do are typically at the center of the stories about their lives,” their stories provide unique insight into individual lives in the larger MSM
community of Quito and their interaction with “collective forces and institutions beyond the individual” (2008:3).

INTRODUCTION OF CHAPTERS

Over seventy years ago, Ruth Landes observed the hierarchical distinctions made both within MSM populations and between MSM populations and the larger society (1940). While studies detailing the MSM experience persist, there is scant documentation of the intersection of Latin American masculinities and sexualities. From social circles to business negotiations, in the home and in the wider community, localized cultural ideals of masculinity such as race, homosociality and fatherhood are model expressions of Ecuadorian masculine identities. Yet the effect of sexuality is most often a silence waiting to be filled. This ethnographic investigation aims not only to contribute to current debates on this relationship, but to take them in directions heretofore unaddressed. To do so, I have divided the bulk of this dissertation into four major sections, each divided into four subsections, in which I discuss both the spas and the lives of various individuals that I have encountered within them. I should emphasize that my conclusions are by no means meant as representative or typical of the MSM population of Quito. In fact, it is quite the contrary; by including their stories, I hope to show the variability of self-identity and social choices made by clientele of the spas. Chapter 2 is a discussion of those businesses in Quito in which sexual activity and sexuality play a significant role. Of particular interest are the ways in which these “erotic oases” market masculinity and femininity as a way to draw potential customers in while still protecting them from outside stigma. This is followed up with comprehensive descriptions of each of Quito’s spas. In Chapter 3, I am less concerned with the
physical makeup of the businesses and take closer consideration of the people inside. While some are there for sexual gratification, other are there for the chance to socialize with friends in the MSM community without being scrutinized. Included here are the life stories of three patrons of the spas, each at very different places in their lives. Chapter 4 is a deliberation on a particular segment of the community: cross-dressers. I consider the ways in which their bodies are re-eroticized in the spas from theatrical femininity to a more physical masculine form. While the three life stories provided here are all from performers currently working in the discos of Quito, they are all at different points in their careers. Finally, Chapter 5 addresses those members of the population who have no desire to visit the spas, preferring to use social media and modern technology to meet friends and sexual partners in the MSM community. Tikkanen and Ross argue that men “turn to the internet for the perceived anonymity, accessibility, and affordability, and the internet might be perceived as an acceptable and nonstigmatized way to meet male sexual partners” (2003: 131). In this way, the internet is arguably a modernized (and less controversial) model of Humphry’s (1970) tearoom trade. The stories here were all drawn from people met through social media and interviewed in discreet locations outside of the spas. In exploring these different segments of the population, and looking at the ways masculinities and sexualities intersect among them, my goal is to create a greater understanding of MSM life in Quito for an audience interested in masculinity, sexuality, and/or relations of gender in contemporary Latin America.
CHAPTER 2

THE BUSINESS OF SEX: MARKETING MASCULINITIES AND EROTIC OASES

How can business owners market the business of sex?

In Quito, it is done by highlighting the masculinities and femininities of the employees and potential clientele of the city’s erotic oases. An erotic oasis is a location that is deemed by subculturally-defined standards to be physically and socially safe from exposure, and is used to pursue and act on sexual attractions. It can be public or private, and can include anything from commercially-operated businesses, like bathhouses, to natural environments, like public parks and restrooms, co-opted for sexual encounters (Delph 1978, Humphry 1970, Tewksbury 2003).

In Ecuador, we find two major forms of commercially-operated erotic oases, although there are others that are more limited in scope: the chongos, a local colloquialism for brothels, and the all-male spas. While the marketing of the chongos in Quito is pervasive, as brothels are legal and regulated by the state, gay-themed businesses are faced with a dual burden; they need to market in a way that entices patrons to visit their establishments, but they also need to maintain the privacy of the clientele. The chongos market the femininity of the female sex workers employed by the establishments, while the spas highlight the types of male patrons expected to be in attendance on any given day. In this chapter, I compare and contrast the ways in which masculinity and femininity are exploited to generate clientele – and income – in the chongos and spas, erotically-charged locales devoted to the heterosexual and homosexual males of Quito, respectively. I then consider Ladies Night at Magnolia House, a well-known theme night at a local dance club that acts as a prime location for several prostitutes looking to entice men into visiting their brothels. The discussion next moves to Video Roma and Supervideo, two all-male
video stores known for their theaters, their private parties for the MSM community, and, as they have no signage pinpointing their location, their secrecy. I then survey the ways in which the spas get the word out to potential patrons. Finally, I describe the three currently active spas in detail and discuss the promotional themes they use to generate clientele. While erotic oases may not be for everyone, they are engrained in the fabric of Ecuador’s society, and not likely to disappear anytime soon.

SPAS VERSUS CHONGOS

On a purely superficial level, spas in Ecuador would appear to be the Latin American equivalent to the gay bathhouses seen in North America and Europe (particularly those found in the 1970s), and they are often called as such by unfamiliar travelers. Yet calling them bathhouses is a reductive and inaccurate choice, for it does not account for the changes in cultural context and ideas about masculinity and sexuality that one encounters inside. The most significant difference would be the spa’s dichotomous role as both a homosocial space where no sexual activity occurs, and a site of eroticism where, like the Ecuadorian chongo, sexual performance is both expected and encouraged. The spas also come equipped with financial transactions like those found in the local chongos, although they are limited to the mandatory entrance fees. As a physical acknowledgement of their alternative role as a homosocial convergence point, the spas also include living rooms, lounges, bars, and small cafes for meetings and casual conversations between friends old and new.

The chongo, an operating space for heterosexual desire, acts to reinforce notions of male dominance and the culturally defined need for sexual experience prior to marriage. With sex
work regulated by the state, it is a fairly common practice for men to patronize these businesses. The role of the spa, its nearest equivalent, is twofold: it offers a similar space for men who have sex with men to gain culturally requisite sexual experience, and it challenges stereotypes of the community as preoccupied with sex by doubling as a site for homosocial bonding where no sexual activity is required. In both the spa and the chongo, it is normal for men (both locals and foreign travelers) to go in groups with friends and as individuals. However, in the cases of many men, visits are not casually discussed with the women in their lives.

The group experience of visiting a chongo may be a high-water mark in the public performance of masculinity, as now the male must not only boast about his sexual prowess, but is also expected to perform in a sexual way. In most cases, the experience is not an awkward one for the men, as it illustrates a time in which “technically illegal commercial sex acts are consumed as relatively unproblematic instances of sexual entitlement and male bonding” (Bernstein 2007: 115). Spas and chongos differ slightly in this context. The patronizing of both spas and chongos is a form of male bonding and an experience toward forming masculine group identities. Unlike the chongo, however, there are times in which visiting a spa is a group experience, but the men aren’t expected to sexually perform by their friends, and the lack of sexual activity does not have a negative impact on their perceived manliness among the group. In both the spa and the chongo, there are delineated spaces such as cafes and lounge areas in which sex doesn’t occur at all, and although it is not an explicitly-stated restriction, it is understood by all. The spa can be either a homosocial gathering site, not unlike other sex-segregated spaces, or the site of erotic desire, similar to the chongo. Finally, both spas and chongos give males the opportunity to have those sexual experiences that may be more highly favored by both the individual and the group. This may be presented as experiences with partners that have migrated
from other parts of the country, or from outside of the nation itself, as race and ethnicity often play a significant role in partner selection. In this sense, both the spa and the chongo are ethnosexual frontiers.

Much has been written about the whitening and/or darkening of races to create ideal traits as well as work on the erotic symbolism of women in the Andes.\(^2\) The physical attributes of the individuals involved in the commerce of sex can be integral for both men and women. Whether in a spa or a chongo, bragging rights are presented in the form of experiences with partners that may be particularly valued in their social spheres. In the case of sex workers, the workers’ physicality becomes bodily capital, the “symbolic currency often acquired by members of the dominated fractions of society, who, deprived of other forms of social power, cultivate their bodies as value-producing investments” (Bernstein 2007: 42). Men in these short-term, cross-cultural sexual encounters become ethno-adventurers, the “undertakers of sexual expeditions across ethnic divides for recreational, casual or ‘exotic’ encounters, often more than once, but returning to their sexual home bases after each excursion.” Spas and chongos, in turn, become ethnosexual frontiers, “erotic locations and exotic destinations that are surveilled and supervised, patrolled and policed, regulated and restricted, but that are constantly penetrated by individuals forging sexual links with ethnic Others across ethnic borders” (Nagel 2003: 14).

Although the commercial sex trade is not technically legal in Ecuador, it is both tolerated and regulated by the state, often giving men power over the female body (a power dynamic clearly not reproduced in the spa). According to journalist Dominique Soguel (2009), “Brothels derive their legitimacy not from the law but from a series of health and sanitation certificates from local health authorities that add up to ‘centers of tolerance,’ where prostitution is accepted.” The sex workers in the chongos are required to be tested weekly and given health cards to show
to clients upon request. On the surface, it appears to be working; between 2004 and 2007, for example, the Ministry of Health reports that the country’s HIV-AIDS infection rate more than doubled, with 80 percent linked to heterosexual activity. However, in all cases reported in 2007, only one was linked to a female sex worker. These statistics may be inaccurate, as the Ministry of Health only monitors licensed venues, and unlicensed brothels are numerous. Women and minors are often smuggled into the country, tricked by men through the promise of high-paying jobs and instead forced into indentured servitude and hidden from sight, making actual numbers difficult to ascertain. In actuality, the role of women in the brothels themselves is quite restricted; upon payment for sexual activity, which is most often given in the form of cash or credit cards to male employees as opposed to the women performing the acts, the client is given an alcoholic beverage (there is almost always a drink minimum) and a condom, also provided by a male.

The experience for males in sites of homosexual desire is similar to that of men in chongos. For example, patrons of the spas receive a single condom upon entrance, but they also have the opportunity to buy others, as needed. In addition, while sexual encounters may take place among patrons of the establishments, there are often male sex workers in attendance. In one spa that has since closed, for instance, the sex workers were advertised on the company website along with the other available services. While the anatomy of the men was described in intimate detail, the individual rates were negotiated in person and they were not subjected to the same health and safety restrictions as females in the same line of work. Finally, while the spas are also patronized by foreign travelers, they do not currently enjoy the same name recognition internationally or with the local elites as the chongos. Because of this, the spas have not received the same attention from journalists or the government and remain largely hidden from the
mainstream press. There are, however, other locations that are popular with both heterosexuals and homosexuals with no sexual activity required.

LADIES NIGHT AT MAGNOLIA HOUSE

In 2007, Ladies Night at the Magnolia House was the most popular theme night for heterosexual tourists in all of Quito. Although the dance club is not particularly fancy, and with plenty of other options to choose from in the La Mariscal area of Quito, each Wednesday, you could find scores of mostly foreign students, mostly American, jockeying for a place inside of the club. Women were allowed to enter for free before 10:00 p.m., while their male friends waited patiently outside for their chance to enter, willing to pay the nominal cover charge of ten dollars for two drink tickets and what was sure to be a good time. Doormen and bouncers “checked” I.D.’s at the entrance, although they never turned foreigners (and their money) away due to age. I personally knew several 16-year-old students who went clubbing every night along with their older classmates who were studying in the country with them. If you were a local, or even perceived to be, you would be scrutinized to a greater degree. If you did not know someone inside, meaning a foreigner, you would most often be turned away at the door. Even with the restrictions, the dance club was always packed to capacity, and a good time was had by all. At the end of the night, the mix of American dance music and reggaetón ended, the lights would come up, and dozens of mostly white bodies would file into the street. Ecuadorian children would wait outside, either selling gum and other random sundries, requesting to shine shoes, or begging for spare change. Fees for a ride home in a taxi would be agreed upon with the drivers, and the streets would finally empty, only to start anew the next day.
By 2012 Ladies Night at the Magnolia House was still going strong, although there was a very different vibe and ethnic makeup that persists to this day. Upon arriving in La Mariscal at 8:45 p.m., a line of bodies waiting to get in extends down the block. And these bodies look very different from the ones that you would previously find; while once it was difficult for Ecuadorian partygoers to get through the door, now the line is made up of primarily Ecuadorian men and women. Men no longer have to wait until after 10:00 p.m. to get inside, although they still pay a cover charge. Once inside, the dance club is just as busy as it ever was. The largely local crowd shares the space with the international students and visitors from other Latin American countries. The groups stick to themselves for the most part, coming in contact only when they are trying to squeeze through the crowd. By the end of the night, however, with what can only be described as “liquid courage,” the groups are regularly intermingling, making friends and/or looking for the possible one-night stand. On one particularly enjoyable night, several Argentinian men (and a few Americans) came and asked my permission to speak with my female friend. After exchanging pleasantries, they would walk up to her one at a time and ask if she wanted to go back to their hostels with them. One by one, she respectfully declined, choosing to stay and enjoy herself with our long-term local friends and the homosexual males that regularly gravitated toward her (one in particular is further discussed in chapter 5).

What makes Ladies Night significant? Since its change from an enclave of mostly international heterosexual patrons, Magnolia House has made room for another group: Colombian sex workers living in Quito. With Ladies Night specifically created to entice female patrons – and the men who love them – the sex workers have a defined space to convince men to return to their home chongos. On one particular night, I was approached by three Colombian women, who asked where I was from, what I was drinking, and how long I would be in Quito.
My friend Leito and his girlfriend promptly pulled me aside and impressed upon me the need to be careful because the sex workers often rob the foreigners that they can pinpoint as potential marks. Upon leaving the club, the cars outside were plastered with flyers tucked under the windshield wipers. With pictures of scantily-clad women in provocative poses, the flyers give the addresses of local chongos instead of advertising other dance clubs in the area, marketing to the men that they hope will be enticed into visiting.

**MONETIZING ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITIES**

Even though the spas are largely hidden from the public eye, there are plenty of places for the MSM community to congregate that are much easier to find. Using social media sites and web pages based in Ecuador or hosted by former and current travelers, you find that there are plenty of local businesses either specifically geared toward the LGBT community or actively marketing to them as one of many potential client bases. For example, there are currently several coffee shops, cafes, and restaurants operating in the city that are advertised (in English) as “gay friendly.” There are others that are advertised as “gay-operated and owned,” but they make sure to point out their welcoming environment to the heterosexual community with notes like, “but a lot of straight people visit it,” and “straights are usually more than gays” (www.inquito.com).

In a country with a regular influx of backpackers and eco-tourists, it is only natural that there would also be an abundance of hostels. There are at least 70 hostels available for bookings in Quito at the time of this writing, and although only a few actively promote themselves as gay friendly, most will not turn you (or your dollars) away. These businesses advertise to everyone in order to get the largest clientele possible, but there are also some businesses (besides the spas) that are
geared specifically toward the gay community. There is one small store in the La Mariscal neighborhood, for example, that sells LGBT accessories such as rainbow bracelets and chains and other international symbols of gay pride. The store is squirreled away, not particularly noticeable to passers-by except for the pride flag hanging outside. There are also several gay bars, lounges and discos dotting the city, particularly in La Mariscal. Some of these have remained active for several years, others seem to come and go as quickly as the seasons. Like the spas, many have minimal signage in order to protect the privacy and the safety of their patrons. The clientele is predominantly male, although there are several lesbians who attend regularly. Many of the men are accompanied by their heterosexual female friends. On my first night visiting one disco in particular, at the time the longest running gay disco in all of Quito, I went with four friends: two heterosexual females and two heterosexual males. For most of the night there were only four females in the entire establishment: my two friends and a lesbian couple. Once the night’s drag show had begun, however, the number of heterosexual females had ballooned, and when the show ended most of the ladies just as quickly went on their way. All in attendance were made to feel welcome, much like the Magnolia House today. While we can see a blending of the populations in the disco setting, the same cannot be said for video stores.

Supervideo and Video Roma are more like the spas than any other locale previously mentioned in that they are erotic oases in the heart of Quito with a strictly male clientele. They are also difficult to locate, with little to no signage on their exteriors and very little internet presence. If you do not know exactly where to go and what you are looking for, you may find yourself wandering aimlessly throughout the city. When you do finally uncover their locations and step inside, you discover that you have entered an erotically-charged environment lacking the homosocial camaraderie and charm that you find in the spas.
Supervideo is Quito’s longest running video store dedicated to the MSM community. Originally opening for the day’s business promptly at noon, the success of the establishment has allowed the owners to offer expanded hours. You can now find patrons coming and going starting at 10:00 a.m. – much earlier than the opening of the spas – and continuing until 8:00 p.m., seven days a week. Although the store is located on a main thoroughfare with easy access to public transportation, it is difficult to find, as it is in a nondescript building that looks indistinguishable from other large houses in the area, and there are no signs on the exterior of the building letting you know that you have arrived. Supervideo is located on the second floor and behind a locked entrance; you not only have to find the place, you have to know which doorbell to ring in order to gain access. For those not in the know, the trip may seem daunting and perhaps not worth the effort when there are spas in the area that are much easier to find. Those men who have already found the place, however, have yet another erotic oasis for same-sex sexual encounters free of the stigma found in the public eye. It is no wonder that the company website touts “discreción y seguridad para tu mejor atención.”

Upon arriving at Supervideo, you are buzzed in by an employee. Inside, it is clear that they are trying to create a sexually-charged atmosphere, and friendship and bonding between men is not the establishment’s intent. There are four video theaters with all-male pornographic videos on a constant loop on each screen. There is also a sala de estar, which amounts to a living room or lounge area, and a small snack bar for quick refreshments. Although there are no specific prohibitions to sexual encounters in any areas of the business, they most often take place in the dark room, where sexual activity occurs regularly and is expected. Each room in the establishment also has Wi-Fi access so patrons can contact friends or strangers that may want to meet them there using the internet or social media applications. While the business itself does not
have much of an internet presence (which, for better or worse, helps to maintain discretion), it has a rudimentary website accessible through Quitogay, one of many websites sponsored by ecuadortraveler.com and a clearinghouse for news, events and businesses of interest to the LGBT community of Quito. On Supervideo’s web page, you get barebones information about the establishment, including hours of operation, a phone number, the address, and a small map. There are no pictures of the business, inside or outside, which also helps with safety. At the top of the page are a few stills from pornographic films, although these may not be the films airing once you get inside one of the video theaters. There are no cafes such as you would find in a spa, so if you are looking for any type of platonic friendships Supervideo is probably not the place for you. The same can also be said for Video Roma.

Video Roma is also located in the heart of Quito, and it is easily accessible by public transportation. Unlike Supervideo, however, which provides potential visitors with just enough web-based information to get them in the doors, Video Roma is much more explicit in its online outreach, with several shots of the interior, pornographic images, and details of what to expect once you arrive. Little is left to the imagination, which may be surprising to some, but what is probably most shocking is the fact that it is not just an erotic oasis like Supervideo, but an actual video store.

Opening several hours later than Supervideo, Video Roma opens in the mid-afternoon and stays open later than the spas. Located in an inconspicuous building to protect the privacy of the people inside, the business has a doorbell with a false name printed next to it. The correct doorbell is found on the business’ website, as is the address and three separate phone numbers, a landline and two cell phone numbers on different cellular services. Once you are buzzed in by an employee, a cover charge of three dollars is paid right at the entrance. Inside, you discover
that the business is a legitimate video store, with DVDs and videocassettes available for rent and/or purchase, as well as a sex shop. The shop sells a variety of sex toys and gear for men and, curiously, women. Right in between the videos and the collection of toys – which are organized to suit a variety of tastes, including those of the heterosexual community – is a large glass case with four mannequins, two males and two females. The mannequins are posed in various styles of leather bondage gear. It is clear that the owners are in the business of sex, and this is before even entering the area that has been designated for sexual activity.

Inside Video Roma there is a large living room/lounge area with two enormous black and white couches. The windows are covered to maintain privacy, and the only light in the room comes from two dim table lamps and the television showing all-male pornographic videos. A small coffee table sits in the center of the room with a collection of pornographic magazines. Outside of this room is yet another room showing pornographic videos, but the setup is less like a living room and more like that of a traditional theater, with faux leather seats and a small, tabletop television set. Finally, there are also several dark rooms and crevices, along with a maze leading into these different areas and the potential sexual partners hidden throughout the venue. Video Roma actively highlights all of these spaces on their main web page as well as their Facebook page in order to entice potential patrons. The owners of the company are unafraid to use every marketing tool they have, including male sex workers, which they proudly boast you can pay for at the store or feel free to bring your own.
MARKETING THE SPAS

While the marketing of Quito’s spas and other erotic oases is kept relatively low-key to protect the privacy of their patrons, they still use several techniques to get the word out to potential clients. All of the spas and adult video stores have their own websites, some rudimentary and some quite detailed. All of the websites include pictures of men in various stages of undress and sexual activity; the sites most often use photos and stills of muscular porn stars and rarely of actual men located in Quito. The links to all of the spas’ websites and those of the video stores can be found on the quitogay.net clearinghouse. Each of the spas also has a page on the Facebook social networking site, although updates on the pages are sporadic, at best.

Each of the currently-operating spas holds theme days to keep patrons coming back and interested in the establishments. For example, each spa has two days per week designated as *nudista*, where patrons are not given the traditional towel or apron to wear while walking through the building. Instead, they are given a small hand towel or wash rag to wipe away sweat, as needed. The nudista days are different at each of the spas, indicating that the owners either have some type of arrangement or, at the very least, a mutual understanding of each other’s marketing methods. Other days at the spas may be devoted to young men, where a discount on the entrance fee is given if the patron is between 18 and 24; bring-a-friend days, in which a patron can come with a friend or significant other and one receives fifty percent off the entrance fee; and mystery days, where a special surprise is found in the patron’s locker, such as a coupon for a free drink or a discount to be used on your next visit.

In addition to the above-mentioned marketing techniques, Club Dionisio stays open for a hugely popular all-night event on occasional holidays and random weekends. Patrons are notified
of the events if they are on the Club Dionisio email list. They can also find out through the spa’s Facebook page and, of course, through word-of-mouth. If a man is looking for a same-sex encounter and is tempted try one of these venues he can find any information he needs without having to ask someone in person and risk potential exposure.

In the next three sections, I consider each of Quito’s currently active spas phenomenologically. Desjarlais and Throop (2011: 97) call for “phenomenological approaches in anthropology, realized through ethnographic research methods, that attend at once to the tangible realities of people’s lives and to the often interrelated social, biological, corporeal, sensorial, discursive, cultural, political, economic, psychological, and environmental dimensions of those realities.” Here, I describe the spas as they appear through the subjects’ lived experiences, and I discuss the ways these venues often promote themselves through daily specials and themes.

TULIPÁN SPA

“Siempre pensando en tu comodidad, la que acompañamos con una excelente atención y respeto.”

Of all the erotic oases operating in Quito and marketed to all-male clientele, Tulipán Spa is by far the most popular due to its easily accessible location and variety of men in regular attendance. Located in the tourist-heavy La Mariscal district of Quito, on the outside, the look of Tulipán Spa would be considered non-descript at best, dilapidated at worst. A three-story building with its windows completely covered at all times, Tulipán stands much taller than the buildings around it. The edifice is bound by a small parking lot on one side and a florist’s shop
on the other, with one-story, graffiti-covered partitions separating the building from its neighbors. Nailed to the partition located on the right, there is a small sign hanging above eye level, no bigger than a sheet of paper, with the name of the establishment. In fact, the sign is so small that it would easily be missed if one was inobservant or not actively looking for it. To the left, once again facing the front of the building, there is a heavy black metal door, the entrance to the building. On the left side of that door is what appears to be a grey garage door or a storefront with the metal gate pulled down as one does after closing hours. However, this “door/gate” is actually neither; it does not actually open and lead to anything. There are two parking spaces in front of it, demarcated with a single painted stripe separating them. All other parking is on the street or in the parking lot next door. To get into the building, ring a doorbell that is located next to the black metal door. Inside, the person manning the reception area checks the monitor of the security camera and decide whether or not to let you in. If everything seems to check out, the receptionist holds down a buzzer long enough for you to open the door and come inside.

Inside the spa, the receptionist, always a male, warmly greets you, and if it is raining – Quito has a rainy season and a dry season – offers to take your umbrella. There are three seats set up on the right, and a small counter in front with a chair for the receptionist to sit with an open storage area behind it. Upon payment of the entrance fee, currently nine dollars per visit unless you have some sort of discount (it was eight dollars at the beginning of my fieldwork), the receptionist gives you a key with an elastic attached to it like a makeshift keychain. This elastic has a small number attached to it which corresponds to the assigned locker. Locker numbers are given out in the order of entry; if you are given key number one, do not expect much conversation since you are the first patron of the day. The receptionist than asks for sandal size, although customers are more than welcome to bring their own. To the right of the reception area
are three large trash barrels. At the end of the visit, you leave your used towels and sandals in the corresponding barrel. Right next to these barrels and clearly visible on the left side when first entering the building is the entranceway to the locker room.

With the first of many large potted plants located right in the entranceway of the locker room along the front wall (although occasionally moved between the lockers and replaced with a hair gel station), you begin to get a sense of the atmosphere that Tulipán is trying to convey, at least on the first floor. A large room, there is plenty of space for patrons to change out of their clothes and into a towel provided by the establishment. Except for the area occupied by the plant, the front and left-side walls are completely covered with numbered rows of lockers. The third wall is really a two-thirds length wall, since it opens to the café and gym area, and is also filled with lockers. The fourth wall is about half length, with the opening back to the reception area on one side and a door that leads to the storage area behind the reception desk on the other. This wall is covered from ceiling to floor with a giant mirror. Men are often found primping in the mirror as they prepare to leave the facilities at the end of their visit. In the center of the room are two large, vinyl-covered benches (which actually look more like large ottomans) for men to sit down while changing as needed. Inside the lockers are two large towels, an occasional hand towel, and a single condom. Patrons often take the condom and stick it under the elastic keychain, which they wear around one of their upper arms so as not to lose it. When ready, the patron leaves the locker room and heads directly into the café area.

In Tulipán’s café area, there are several aluminum table and chair sets much like those found in a traditional café. Here, old friends laughing and joking over a soda or beer are found, or new acquaintances getting to know each other for the first time. Looking back diagonally on the left side, there is a small bar set up, with four barstools set in front for patrons to relax. At the
bar, a variety of drinks and light snacks are available for purchase, and coffee is provided free-of-charge. On the wall, right next to the bar, is a large flat screen TV, which, more often than not, is airing the latest soccer (fútbol) game. Next to this TV, between the wall, covered in mirror, and the café area, is the gym equipment. It is rarely used by any of the patrons unless they are trying to impress someone. The machines are facing the wall so the gym enthusiasts can watch themselves as they work out. The wall to the side of the equipment is bare, with several large plants placed in front of it. Next to this partial wall is the Jacuzzi, with room enough for approximately sixteen people. The Jacuzzi is surrounded by plants hanging from the ceiling, and a small stone fixture with water cascading down the front, invoking a sense of serenity and peace which is only betrayed by the loud music – most often electronica or reggaetón – blaring through speakers. The men using the Jacuzzi are always nude unless they wore underwear or speedos under their towels, and they leave their towels and sandals on the banister and three steps leading up to the water. The bathroom facilities are located to the right of the Jacuzzi, and behind them, to the right of the table and chair sets, are the steps leading up to the second floor.

When you get off the stairs at the second floor, there is a large, poster-sized version of the small sign that hangs outside the building. The resident masseuse/male prostitute (further discussed in Chapter 3) often stands in front of the sign, trying to get the attention of potential clients. After taking a few steps to the right and continuing forward, you are facing a long hallway with several doors on the left side and a long, tiled bench extending the length of the wall on the right. There are often many men sitting on this extremely uncomfortable bench or standing around it, chatting, laughing, and generally taking a break from the hot saunas and steam rooms. To the rear are a set of three open showers, with a small wall in the center allowing people to enter from either side. Once again looking to the front, the first door on the left wall,
completely translucent except for the frame, leads into the first of two steam rooms (baños turcos). A large, extremely hot room, the second-floor steam room is often filled with men sitting on the two levels of tiled benches along its periphery. Here, it is quite normal for strangers to strike up a conversation, even though the combination of steam and only one dim, slightly flickering light by the doorway makes visibility extremely difficult. While the translucent door allows some light to filter inside, and it is possible to steal glimpses as the door opens and shuts, there is one area of the steam room where patrons are granted almost total darkness. Located in the wall on the right is a small, rectangular alcove with a low, one-level bench. Men occasionally enter the steam room and head straight for the alcove, waiting for potential sex partners to come in and join them. While on most occasions there is no sexual activity in the rest of this steam room, sex acts performed in the alcove are a regular occurrence. This steam room also has a hand-held showerhead attached to the wall by the door, allowing patrons to cool off before heading to the sauna next door.

The sauna at Tulipán Spa is in no way unique when compared with other saunas around the world. The door is wooden, the same material and color as the wood that makes up the interior, with a Plexiglas window in the top half that men often peer through before entering, possibly for friends that may be inside or a stranger that strikes their fancy. Sitting at the end of the long bench in the hall you can clearly see inside while remaining inconspicuous. The sauna is shaped like a backwards letter “L,” with a bi-level bench inside that could undoubtedly use a paint job, since it has slowly faded from regular use. There are two lights on the ceiling, although only one is ever operational. Inside, men are often in deep conversation since it is much quieter than the steam room next door. In fact, it was in here that I first met Chucho and began the conversation that led to this investigation. While it is relatively quiet, that in no way means it
is without noise; through the door you can hear the sounds of the people conversing in the hallway, and the sounds of sexual activity coming from the “dressing rooms” nearby.

Leaving the sauna and going back into the hallway, on the left is an entryway with an open black iron door that does not reach the ceiling. The sign next to the entranceway reads “Vestidores,” although you would be hard-pressed to find anyone who thinks they are used for changing clothes (especially since the locker room is on the first floor). Walking through the iron door, you enter a hallway with no lights. Attached to the wall on the left (the opposite side of the sauna wall) are two toilet paper rolls used for cleaning up. On the other wall are four doors leading to the dressing rooms. The walls in between the rooms do not reach the ceiling, so it is possible for everyone to hear what is going on around them. Men often stand in this dark hall, waiting for curious potential sex partners to walk through, or trying to catch a glimpse of what is going on in the dressing rooms. Inside each of the rooms is a small, black bed, approximately waist-high, and covered in vinyl. There is a dim light in each of the rooms, although they are most often turned off. There is also a small wastebasket which is used to throw away condoms, paper, or any other refuse that may be left behind. Employees of Tulipán Spa clean these rooms regularly when they are not in use, sweeping, mopping, and using antibacterial spray while paying no mind to the sounds around them. These employees can often be seen trudging back and forth between the second and third floor, where many of the supplies are located.

Climbing the stairs to the third floor, the first door in this large, open area is on the right-hand side. This door is always closed and hides cleaning supplies as well as the laundry machines used to clean the used towels provided to the patrons. Further into the open space and on the left side are three worn-out black chairs attached together on a single frame. On each side are large, decorative plants, conspicuous due to the lack of any other decorative aspects on the
entire floor. When sitting in any one of the three seats, you face a set of three black iron doors. Behind each of these doors is a small individual shower, although on occasion pairs enter together. To the left of these showers is another room with a translucent door, a steam room of a much cooler temperature than the one on the second floor, but more sexually-charged than any other place in the building.

Entering the third-floor steam room, it is clear the installation is much different than the rest of the building, both in design and energy. Walk through the door and look left to right; you are in a dark, narrow, hallway. The hallway is usually filled to capacity with men, making it extremely difficult to navigate. Look straight ahead, and there is a large room with three openings. The partitions between the openings are approximately 39 inches wide, and they are each built into a tile bench that extends to the opposite wall. In this large, open space there are no lights; the only illumination in the steam room comes from what little light manages to filter through the door. Various forms of sexual activity regularly occur here, with large crowds circling in to get the best view possible (often to the detriment of the anthropologist who gets trapped in the crowd with no way out until the session is over, as I discuss in Chapter 3). Back in the steam room hallway, walk down to the left end of the hall, and there is a fourth opening that does not open into the main space. This is a small alcove, and it is completely dark; no light reaches the area at all. Here, the older and/or heavier men often sit on one of the two benches inside the alcove or stand in the dark corner of the entryway, waiting for sex to occur, and rushing over if they hear the sounds of sexual activity. Encounters between two individuals in this alcove often become group affairs as people try to join in, whether the partners have asked them to or not.
Sharing a wall with the steam room hallway is the *sala de videos*, a small rudimentary theater with a large-screen television showing pornographic videos. There is a door made of fabric - it appears to be a homemade curtain - which people often peak around to see who is inside and which movie is currently playing. There are twelve seats set against the left wall in rows of three, attached together like the seats in the hall. Next to the back rows is a plastic patio lounge chair, set against the right wall. The ceiling is covered in a multicolored fabric which appears to have no correlation to any of the other design choices seen throughout the building. There are rarely more than a few men in the theater, and it is even rarer to find any sexual activity occurring, with only the occasional foreign visitor masturbating alone while watching a video and checking to see who may look in the room.

**PROMOTIONAL THEMES**

Although the entry fee was raised by a dollar during the course of fieldwork, the spa still has daily specials throughout the week to entice men to stop by and visit. In fact, this change in price is the only thing that has been updated on the establishment’s website in several years. In all this time, the promotional themes of Tulipán Spa have remained constant. Mondays and Fridays are considered nudista, and on these days instead of finding a towel in your locker to wrap around your waist upon arrival, there is only a small hand towel, along with a single condom. On these two days, the first ten patrons to arrive also receive a 25 percent discount on their entry fee. Tuesdays find a surprise inside of the lockers, ranging from a free massage, to free non-alcoholic beverages, to free entry, to whatever else they happen to think of. If you come accompanied on a Wednesday (friend, partner, etc.), you receive a free snack from the bar.
Thursdays are geared toward the younger crowd, and those men aged 19-24 only pay six dollars to for the day’s entrance. This definitely does not mean that older men are not welcome; older men are often there on Thursdays specifically looking for the younger men. Finally, if you attend on your birthday (and with proper identification), you get free entry as well as free non-alcoholic drinks in celebration of your big day. Tulipán Spa may not be particularly special, but the owners still know what works and at least try to care of their establishment. That same level of care is not found at the next spa, Sauna Oscuro.

SAUSA OSCURO

“Deja volar tu imaginación...”\textsuperscript{10}

While it is debatable whether Tulipán Spa is in need of a remodel (or at the very least a touching up), Sauna Oscuro is a clear-cut example of what happens when the upkeep and routine maintenance of a business is neglected. It is run-down, understaffed, and, with its exposed wires, probably dangerous. While it does not have the number of regular patrons as Tulipán Spa or its reputation among Western tourists, the friendly employees still do their very best to make your visit an enjoyable experience.

Located just one trolley stop away from Tulipán Spa, Sauna Oscuro is located on a hill, directly across from a secondary school whose students are regularly seen socializing on the road while coming to and from class. There are many indigenous street vendors spaced out along the sidewalk on the way to Oscuro’s entrance, far enough apart to know they are not working together but close enough to run and chat with each other in between customers. Before reaching the entrance, you pass a language school several stories tall which can be seen once again from inside
the spa (for better or worse). Finally reaching the entryway to the spa, with a convenience store on the right, and a wall built of large cement rocks on the left, there is an open, faded-black iron doorway which exposes a blue exterior walk-up. Walking through the iron gate, there is a small yard with a single tree and small patches of constantly dying grass. The employee for the day has his car parked in this “courtyard” on the left side, partly on grass, partly on cement. There is no sign signifying what the building is; the only way to identify it is by recognizing the blue façade or knowing the exact address. The door is made of tinted glass, with a lock that could easily be broken with a strong enough pull. To get inside, ring the doorbell which is hanging precipitously by wires on the right side of the door. After checking through the security camera, the employee will personally come and unlock the door to let customers step inside.

Once inside, it becomes instantly clear that the building is a former residence that has been converted into a spa. There are constant reminders of the building’s former purpose, such as random cabinetry, non-working fireplaces, and an out-of-place bathtub with removed showerhead. But first the entry fee needs to be paid. Right inside the doorway and on the right side is the main counter, covered by a glass window with an opening at the countertop, the type that is often found at late-night gas stations in crime-ridden areas. It is unknown why the glass is there, since the door located to the right of it is always propped open. After giving the employee the eight-dollar entrance fee (one dollar less than that at Tulipán Spa), the employee asks for sandal size, although patrons are welcome to bring their own. The sandals are located behind the counter, along with all the other supplies provided to customers. The employee washes down the sandals, and hands over the following items: a towel, an apron, a shampoo packet, a bar of soap, and a single condom. He then asks if you have been to the spa before. If you have not, he gives a short tour of the facilities. Then, you are on your own.
Walking a few steps farther down the hall from the entrance counter, there is a beautiful wooden bar area right next to it on the opposite side of the door. Here a selection of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages is available for purchase, and people can sit and chat with a friend at the two wooden stools in front of the bar. Behind the bar is a large mirror, the first of many located throughout the facilities. If customers do decide they want a drink, the employee from the entrance come over and grab it for them.

Turning around from the bar, take two steps up, and you have entered the main part of the building. Directly in front is a giant mirror in the shape of a large semicircle with a small black sofa sitting below it, and coming from the left are the sounds of a loud television. Turn to the left and walk forward and you have walked into a large living room setup. There are two couches and two chairs upholstered in black vinyl that has been treated to look like leather. At the front of the room there is a large, inoperable cement fireplace with a large television sitting right at its base, with black and white pictures of scantily clad men on each side of the fireplace. A stack of pornographic magazines sits to the left of the television, although the stack looks like it has not been touched in quite some time. Men frequently sit in this area watching soccer, a movie dubbed in Spanish, or the latest telenovela. While this living room may offer a sense of home, behind it things begin to look a little peculiar.

Directly behind the living room, along the left window-lined wall, is Sauna Oscuro’s “gym.” Consisting of three machines – a weight bench, a small elliptical machine, and what may arguably be the tiniest treadmill ever – the machines are in extremely poor condition, with noticeable rust developing on their black metal frames. The white curtains on the windows are tied open to allow sunlight into the space, giving the patrons a glimpse of the very un-picturesque cement wall on the other side of the glass. There are occasional potted plants hanging from the
curtain rods, although it does not seem like much thought was put into their location. To the right of this wall (what would be the wall behind the living room), is a small wall with a large mirror covering its top half.

Opposite the gym equipment is a set of three booths which resemble the booths used in polling stations during election season in the United States. With long, blue curtains that extend to the floor, each of these booths has a computer inside, and a chair for patrons to sit down. Men use the booths to set up dates at the spa, view pornography, or occasionally just surf the web. The booths are rarely used, probably due to the constant foot traffic headed to the locker room area, which is located directly to the left of the first booth.

The locker room area is much smaller than the one located at Tulipán Spa, and is in reality just an alcove with an open entryway. The cube-shaped lockers themselves look quite old, ready to rust over at any minute. They line the three available walls with spaces at each corner. At the corner between the wall to the left and the wall to the front, there is an oddly-shaped cement fireplace built directly into the room and colored an unattractive lime green, similar to the locker room walls. On each side of the entrance are small wooden benches that people use as they are getting dressed/undressed. The one to the right is broken, tilted enough that if small items are left on top, they may roll off onto the cold cement floor. Here, customers change into the small blue aprons provided by the facilities. Approximately nine inches wide with a tiny pocket used to carry a condom or small items, no matter how it is worn, the apron leaves very little to the imagination.

Heading back to the entrance to the living room area, taking a right instead of the left into the living room leads in the direction of the main portion of the spa. To the right is the staircase to the second floor, and directly in front is a translucent plastic door with a metal frame. Stepping through and the sound of bubbling water coming from the Jacuzzi quickly fills the air, but first is
the restroom area, which is a urinal to the left and a small bathroom to the right. Here there are signs promoting safe sex hanging on the walls, and you realize that there were plenty of others that you probably did not notice beforehand. The open “spa” area is found a few steps further. One of the first things to notice in this area is the poorly conceived combination of the original building’s remodel with ill-fitting attachments and shoddy construction. The white and blue-tiled walls appear as if the designers were unable to decide between two patterns, so they went with both. It also appears as if they ran out of the blue tiles halfway through the project, and when they went back for more they were forced to select a different color blue. It is a jarring combination and, frankly, visually unappealing. In front, there are three showers. The second shower has a window built into the wall, showing where the original building ended and the attachment begins. The third shower is actually down three steps, on the same level as the building’s Jacuzzi. The Jacuzzi is large, with room for twelve people. However, there are large holes against the wall that the Jacuzzi is supposed to be attached to, allowing ants and other bugs to crawl through and constantly traverse the whirlpool’s edges. A mural lines the wall behind the Jacuzzi, a picture of a rainbow over water that seems childlike in its design and construction. The water is either excruciatingly hot or slightly above room temperature, depending on the day and time you arrive. The ceiling above the Jacuzzi is made of rectangular glass windows which slope down diagonally. While there are pieces of fabric that cover most of the windows, there are several gaps in the material, allowing the students looking through the windows of the language school next door an almost unobstructed view into the Jacuzzi (I am sure on occasion they have had quite the story to share!). There are exposed wires hanging over the Jacuzzi, used to dangle a light bulb directly above the water. To the left of the Jacuzzi is a set of two sinks with a rectangular mirror hanging in front of them. The soap dispensers
do not work; instead, there is a small tub of liquid soap sitting on the counter that can be used by anyone that walks by.

Going back up the three steps, directly ahead is the entrance to the sauna (the steam room is directly to the left of the entrance). The sauna is not particularly noteworthy as far as saunas go. It is approximately 6.5’ by 10’, with an extremely bright light in the center of the ceiling that can be turned on and off from the outside (it is usually kept turned off). The barrier around the heating coils, to the left of the door, is not attached to the wall; I know from experience that it is often knocked dangerously about when clumsy men pass through.

Off to the side of the sauna is Oscuro’s only steam room. Stepping inside through the translucent door, you quickly get the faint smell of menthol and/or eucalyptus. The space is small, only slightly larger than the sauna next door. There is no functioning light inside the room, and men seem to be more daring with their sexual escapades because of this fact, although it is still rare. The door does not close completely, allowing a thin stream of light to pierce the thick cloud of steam, provided the room is functioning properly, which should not be considered a given. Sitting on the right side of the door is a small, square vent with various potpourri leaves strewn on top of it, providing the smell of peppermint oil that was first noticed. The rest of building is almost conspicuous for its complete lack of odor.

Heading back out of this area and up the stairs, the loud creaking sound betrays the age of the original home that the spa was built in, and the second floor shows it. On the second floor, the music that is pumped throughout the building may very well be at its clearest, although on this floor it is also mixed with the sound of pornography. The music is played in a constant loop of what appears to be four or five compact discs: music in English from the last four decades (disco to 1980’s pop music to 1990’s dance music to 21st century electronica) and a mix of contemporary
salsa. Right at the top of the steps is a blue curtain covering the entry to a room with a poorly painted sign that says “sala de videos” to the left of its entrance. This is Sauna Oscuro’s adult video theater, built in what looks to be a large former bedroom, perhaps the master bedroom. The floor is an old, brown linoleum that has not been waxed in a very long time, if at all. There are two rows of seats: large, spacious sectional couches that curve forward when they reach the wall. The couches are covered in an orange vinyl, treated to look like leather. The rear wall is made up of wooden cabinets and drawers, all evenly painted an unsightly brownish-green color that matches nothing else in the entire building. The other walls are a bland off-white color, with no decorative aspects to speak of. Hanging on the front wall is a large flat screen television of at least fifty inches and the volume set at its maximum level. The videos are not on a loop; the employee at the front desk occasionally checks in to see if the film has finished, but on most occasions patrons will head to the front counter to let them know that the DVD has ended.

Returning to the outside of the video room, there is an open area with three separate doors split between two walls (one wall holds the staircase, and the wall shared with the video room simply has a long rectangular mirror extending its length and no other doorways). Walk to the right upon exiting the video room, and there are two doorways in front. In between these doorways is a comfortable orange-colored chair – it appears to be from the same set as the couches in the video room – with a black and white picture of two half-naked men hanging above it. In front of the chair sits a small wooden end table with a speaker on it, broadcasting the music from the first floor. Sitting in the chair with the speaker aimed right at you, between this music and the sound from the video room, a reasonable person could not fault you for wanting to block your ears.

On the wall next to the left door is a bathroom dating from before the time that the building was transformed into a spa. Inside there is a toilet, a bathroom sink, and a bathtub with the hole
from a showerhead that has since been cut off. There are more signs in the bathroom promoting safe sex, fitting because of their location on the second floor. Directly next to the bathroom, where the two walls meet, is a locked wooden door with paper-covered window. This is the spa’s massage room, not advertised in any other part of the building. There is a black massage table inside and little in the way of ambience or decoration. If there is only one employee working, he also acts as the masseuse, listening for the sound of the doorbell downstairs and heading out if he hears a new customer waiting to enter.

Next to the massage room on the other side of the orange chair is an oddity that can only be described as peculiar to a building that is retrofitted from a house. Here, in the second-floor interior of a former home, is a wrought-iron gate, the type found at the entrance of a cemetery or the end of a long driveway in wealthier Western neighborhoods. While there is a lock on the gate, it usually remains open until the spa’s closing time. Walk through the gate to enter an open space with no lighting to speak of. Directly in front are two rooms, with another room directly to the right. Here the rooms are called *cabinas*, although they are equivalent – and used for the same purpose – to the *vestidores* found at Tulipán Spa. The rooms are small, with the walls painted a bright sky blue, although with no lights the chances of seeing the color are slim. Each of the rooms has a metal, lockable door, and the two rooms in front each have a large window covered by a long, cheaply-made blue curtain. The windows can be opened, although they have no screens to keep out the bugs, and the loud sounds of the passing children coming and going from the school across the street are heard frequently. Many people would get annoyed by all the noise, but the men who use these rooms are there for a singular purpose and would never be deterred by such trivial distractions.
In the corner of each cabina sits a small wastebasket just a few feet away from the head of the bed. There is a twin-sized bed in each room, which amounts to a blue, vinyl-covered mattress laid on the floor with a small wooden frame around the edges. There are also two vinyl-covered bolster pillows to be shared with all three rooms; getting a pillow is essentially first come, first served. The two rooms with windows have the beds pushed up against the windowed wall. The bed in the room to the right, however, has an approximately two-foot wide space to walk along each side. The men who prefer to keep their sexual partners ambiguous choose this room if it is available, since it has no window to filter in any light. Generally, while the discretion found in the spa setting allows a certain amount of anonymity in sexual activity, the pitch black of this cabina takes things to an entirely different level.

MARKETING AND PROMOTION

Tulipán Spa is the most popular all-male spa in Quito due to its centralized location, varied clientele, and its discreet yet effective marketing savvy, but Sauna Oscuro is only one trolley-stop away and also has regularly-scheduled specials and events designed to entice potential visitors. The days and specials can be found on its website. On Thursdays, they offer visitors a free vodka between the hours of 5:00 and 9:00. Thursdays are also nudista, as are Tuesdays, in contrast to the nude Mondays and Fridays found at Tulipán Spa. Sauna Oscuro also advertises its massage services and hours on its website. The going rate is twenty dollars for an hour-long massage, available on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 6:00 to 9:00 and Saturdays from 4:00 to 9:00. At Sauna Oscuro, customers pay a dollar less than Tulipán Spa to get in, but if they prefer a larger crowd this is not the spa for them. Sauna Oscuro is also open overnight to celebrate its anniversary and
on rare special occasions, although these overnight celebrations do not occur regularly or on a fixed schedule. For patrons who are looking for regular overnight events, the place to go is Club Dionisio.

**CLUB DIONISIO**

"*Ven a pasar la noche con nostros...*"11

While Tulipán Spa and Sauna Oscuro are easily accessible to tourists - each is less than a five-minute walk from the nearest trolley stop - getting to Club Dionisio requires a trolley, bus, taxi, or a combination of several modes of transportation. It is not a particularly long walk; at a decent pace, you can get there on foot from the closest trolley stop in under twenty minutes. Whatever the decision, some portion of the journey will be on foot, and feel much longer than it actually is (a lesson I learned the hard way while trudging up and down unevenly-paved Andean hills with asthma to get there). From the directions to the building to its physical location, exaggerated entryway, and disorienting layout, Club Dionisio is simply a maze. The spa is in an upscale neighborhood in the north of Quito, and the closer you get the more apparent the visible contrast is in the appearance of the buildings, compared to those near Tulipán and Oscuro. For someone who does not walk through the area on a regular basis, it is often difficult to remember the correct directions with all the ups-and-downs and twists-and-turns. However, once you pass the four-star rated Hotel Quito – an oddity that was probably deemed architecturally ahead of its time when it was built – the spa is getting close. The hotel is a great signpost for tourists visiting the spa because in this developing city with glass-walled skyscrapers constantly being constructed, the hotel’s exterior looks more retro-futuristic with a Spanish colonial flair. Still all
the locals know the Hotel Quito, so it is a good guide when asking for directions. After a few more turns and short walk downhill along a curved road, you have reached the destination.

When going to Club Dionisio it is important to know exactly which cultural cues to look for, since there is no signage advertising the business to recognize when you have arrived. As is the case in most parts of the world, the rainbow flag is a recognized symbol in the local LGBT community (although the Incan pride flag is almost identical, much to the chagrin of many). You have reached the entrance of Club Dionisio when you see an iron gate with the building’s address painted in white on top of it: a small rainbow sticker adorns each side of the address. The building is very much a part of the residential area that surrounds it, with no difference to the exterior’s facade at all. There is a small cement partition to the left of the gate, approximately six inches wide, and to the left of that is a small parking area also enclosed by iron gates. The gates for the entranceway and the parking area appear very poorly made. Vertical metal planks hang precipitously without reaching the ground, welded in place by a thin metal framework. The gates in front of the parking area are locked by a simple padlock and chain holding the doors closed. On the cement partition between the gates is a doorbell. After looking through the small security camera that hangs on the upper-right corner of the gate, if the employee on-duty deems it safe, he buzzes the customers inside.

Passing through the gate, there is still quite a distance before entering the building, or even reaching the doorway. On the right, is a small manicured lawn surrounded by lush green foliage. To the left, is the inside of the parking area, with each of the parking spots – there are only a handful – separated by faux barbed wire. While the parking spots may have been cement at one point, the entire area now appears to be a large dirt floor. Moving ahead leads to a large, white-tiled staircase. The foliage lines the right side of the stairs, but there are no banisters to
grab for support on either side. At the top of the stairs is a dilapidated washer machine randomly sitting outside, on the right and above the foliage. Turn to the left and there is a translucent door of frosted glass with a metal frame. This is the actual entrance to Club Dionisio. There is another doorbell here, and after another check of the security cameras, the employee behind the counter will finally buzz you in.

Upon entering one encounters an employee behind the modern, semi-clear plastic counter immediately on the right. The walls in this hall are painted a rich, plum color. Looking around you notice that although the establishment does not prominently announce its purpose outside, the constant barrage of rainbow décor and all-male erotic iconography on the inside betray its affiliation with the MSM community. Even the colors of the walls are a part of the motif; it appears they have used every color of the rainbow on the walls, with different colors in each of the myriad rooms. When a customer pays the nine-dollar entrance fee at the counter, the employee hands them a towel off of the modular wood-and-metal rack behind him and asks for the sandal size (as in the other spas you can bring your own). The width of the towel is thin, much thinner than the traditionally-sized towel at Tulipán Spa and slightly wider than the apron worn around Sauna Oscuro. However, no matter the size of the customer, when sitting down the towel is not going to cover much! Still, even at the entrance, you can already tell you are in a much classier venue than both Tulipán Spa and Sauna Oscuro. The ambience screams high-class. Perhaps it is the low light emanating from the two stylish lamps hanging above the counter, or perhaps it’s the color of the walls. Maybe it’s the neighborhood. Whatever it is, it is palpable: this is an upscale spa; a spa that has not been updated in a while, but still, upscale.

Walking a few paces past the counter and down the hall, on the right is a large, angular wooden staircase that leads to the second floor. In front of the staircase stands a mannequin,
which I admit has startled me on more than one occasion. The outfits on the mannequin change regularly, although it is never wearing much. At this writing, it is wearing a speedo, an undersized tank top exposing its perfectly chiseled abs, and a collection of rainbow beaded necklaces, the style of which are found in any Mardi Gras or Carnaval parade. The irony is not lost that the mannequin is actually wearing more clothes than the typical patron (and dressed similarly to the male prostitute that frequents Tulipán Spa).

On the left of the hall is the entrance to the first room, although most people do not enter until they have changed in the locker room farther down the hall. This room appears to be more of a living room or lounge, and it holds the “gym” portion of the spa, as well. Looking in from the hall entrance, the walls are all painted purple except for the wall directly ahead, which is a plastic, translucent wall that attaches to the patio (the length of this wall extends into the bar next door). In the room are several pieces of furniture to sit down and relax, not all of which belong to a matching set. On the left is a single piece of old gym equipment sitting in the corner, and it looks like it has not been used in years, if ever. Next to this is a black leather chair with an old, white coffee table sitting in front of it. Sitting on the table is a collection of very old pornographic magazines for your perusal. Against the translucent wall are two more chairs, one a black leather chair similar to the first, the other an ugly, faux-leather chair in yellow-green that looks like a cross between the first two chairs and a bean bag. In front of the next wall is a long leather couch and one of several entryways into the bar. There is no furniture against the last wall; all of the walls, however, have mirrors of various sizes hanging from them, with frames brightly painted in random colors. The room is lit by two lamps hanging from the ceiling, identical to the ones above the counter at the entrance.
Continue walking forward once stepping back into the hall, and there is another room on the left. This is the entranceway to Club Dionisio’s bar, and it has a much more elaborate setup than the bars seen in the other two spas. The room is not traditionally shaped; the wall to the left of the doorway sticks out at an obtuse angle. The wall with the entranceway is lined with a shelving unit that extends its entire length. This dark brown, wooden unit stands approximately one-meter-high, and the color offers an interesting contrast to the rich maroon walls on the right and left, although the wall above the unit is covered in a basic white paper that feels like newsprint. Sitting on top of the shelving unit are a few random decorations that seem particularly out of place, including a construction hard hat and a collection of three swords of various lengths. The wall to the right has an opening with a single stone step (the entire floor of the bar is made of stone) that leads to the locker room, with a single aluminum table and chair sitting right at the top of the step. Next to the locker room opening are two tall, rectangular faux windows that can also be found on the wall to the left of the room. There are occasional pieces of furniture strewn about in random arrangements in the bar, although they are moved in and out of the room frequently. While the decorations on the periphery of the room may be nice additions, the true centerpiece of the room is the bar.

Set diagonally between the left wall and the long, translucent wall that extends from the lounge next door, Club Dionisio’s bar is distinctly modern, in a style much like the spa’s front counter. Made of metal, glass, and plastic, the bar has a rounded front with a faux wooden panel lining the outside. There are three small rectangular glass windows in the front of the bar, and they are clearly for decorative purposes since they are so low that you could not possibly see through them unless you were on your knees with eyes pressed against the glass. The sides of the bar are designed with clear and translucent plastic stripes inside of a metal frame, with the top of
the bar made of solid glass. Three stools sit in front of the bar. They are identical with black leather seats on metal frames. A grey leather stripe runs through the backs of each stool, somewhat matching the frame of the bar itself. Friends often sit at the bar together, laughing and taking in the scene. Chances are they will eventually leave the bar and head through the doorway near the end of the translucent wall, leading to the spa’s patio.

Club Dionisio’s patio is long and rectangular, and extends the length of the spa itself. Although it is not outside, it is extremely bright during the daytime since the front wall – the wall directly across from the translucent wall – is covered in windows that extend down to approximately two feet off the ground. The windows are covered by light white curtains which always remain closed to protect the modesty of the men inside. Any walls that are not glass are painted sky blue. The room itself is festooned with greenery, with large potted plants and trees lining the red tile floors and hanging from the ceiling. The ambiance is very different from the rest of the building; it feels like walking into an entirely different venue. There are no fancy pieces of furniture on the patio, with one half of the room devoted solely to that cheap white and plastic patio furniture that found pretty much anywhere. The pieces on this patio come in various sizes and include picnic tables, chairs, lounge chairs, and sofas. The other side of the patio is devoted to the spa’s lone Jacuzzi.

The water in the Jacuzzi at Club Dionisio is warm, but not hot. Some people may be disappointed, but the temperature somehow works with the ambience of the room. The bath is constantly overfilled with water that pours over the sides of the Jacuzzi with or without people taking seats inside. The water pressure is better than at any of the other spas and the jets create bubbles so powerful that you cannot see through the water no matter how hard you try. Music plays through speakers on the patio but can barely be heard due to the sound of the bubbling
water. Large enough for eight people, the Jacuzzi is covered in stone blocks with three cement stairs leading into the water. A word of caution to anyone trying to step in: the surrounding floor is extremely slippery from the constant overflow of water, although most people would probably say that it is worth the small risk.

Next door to the bar is Club Dionisio’s locker room. Two entrances lead into the room; one through the main hall and another through the bar. The room is completely white except for the translucent wall that extends all the way from the lounge and a few flourishes from potted plants strategically placed in several corners of the room. Enter through the main hall and directly to the left is a locked cabinet. Made of glass on a black frame, the cabinet holds a selection of items available for purchase ranging from condoms and lubricants to rainbow gay pride accessories, to speedos, tank tops and t-shirts. The selection of products varies depending on the day and item availability. Occasionally, the cabinet is moved to other parts of the spa like the lounge. Back in the locker room, it is noticeably much classier than the locker rooms located in the other spas. There are several pieces of furniture in the room, all covered in white leather, including a small sofa and several ottomans. The largest ottoman has a tear in the leather, which looks as if it may have started small but gradually grew due to lack of care. The lockers themselves are white, although the paint is starting to peel in spots showing the original metallic base. There are not that many considering the size and scope of the venue. The lockers are located in three spots: set in the corner of the front and left walls and on a small partition blocking the entrance to the bar. They are in two rows, one on top of the other, leading to men waiting their turn in order to change in and out of their clothes. Inside the locker is a small hand towel and a single condom. There are also two large poles in the room, and they appear to be part of the frame holding the building up. On one pole the employees post advertisements for
upcoming events, usually printouts of the same ads members receive through email. The other pole is covered in large mirrors so men can fix their clothes and hair as they come and go. The one thing that is missing is the bathroom facilities, located in the restroom next door.

The restrooms are surprisingly inaccessible from the locker room, even though they are located next door to each other. In order to get inside, step back into the main hall, walk a few more steps, and take a left into the next entrance. The care that was taken in designing the rest of the venue evidently did not extend to this room. It is a large space, intriguingly painted a pastel pink with a partially finished white stripe through the middle. A large mirror extends the length of the right wall over the faucets. The rest of the room is taken up by urinals and bathroom stalls without doors. The light is dim as if the owners used a different wattage of bulb only in this room. Leaving the room, you notice the main hall is L-shaped instead of a simple straight corridor. Heading out of the restroom leads directly into several of the spa’s installations.

Walking down this new corridor the first things noticed are the spa’s showers. They are not in an actual room but in a large rectangular area off the left side of the corridor. There are two openings, one at each end, with a partition in between that rises approximately half of the distance between the floor and the ceiling. Here men walking the corridor can clearly see the men in the showers without getting wet themselves. The hooks to hang towels while showering are located on the partition so you may end up face to face with bystanders by no choice of your own. The wall in the shower area is painted blue but slightly darker than the blue walls of the patio. The three shower heads hang directly from the ceiling, and the water is bitterly cold no matter what is done to try and heat it; the showers are only used when absolutely necessary because of this.
Step back into the corridor and take a few steps forward and there are two doors with no more than a few feet separating them on the right side with small windows. Behind both of these doors are the spa’s saunas, mirror reflections of each other. The saunas are much larger than those at Tulipán Spa and Sauna Oscuro, with bright wood paneling and bi-level seating that is much higher off the ground than at the other spas. The only distinction between the two saunas is a negligible difference in room temperature. The last installation on the first floor is the steam room directly at the end of the corridor.

Unlike all the other installations at the spas in Quito, the door on Club Dionisio’s steam room is a massive sliding Plexiglas door. Step inside and the heat and humidity are absolutely stifling! The room is completely white with a couple of small windows right at the edge of the ceiling, set so high that you cannot look through them. The steam is filtered into the room from directly below the bi-level seating and it is so hot you need to move your legs to avoid being burnt. The seating extends around three walls of the square room, and a random white patio chair sits in the corner by the door, for no apparent reason.

As noted previously, there is a massive staircase in the main hall, the only way to reach the second floor. Directly at the top of those stairs is a sofa covered in black vinyl, with end tables on each side. Men are often encountered while sitting on the sofa kissing, laughing, or watching people come and go. From here it is apparent that the stairs actually lead up to a walkway surrounding the stairwell with doorways at seemingly random spots along the walls. From up here, it is possible to see the entire stairwell or look at the absolutely massive rainbow curtain hanging down the wall in front of the sofa, although the people who come up the stairs are probably not looking for drapery.
The first entryway to the left of the sofa is the video theater, designed like an actual theater but on a much smaller scale. The room is completely black, with black walls, ceiling and floor. The floor slopes downward like a true theater, with three rows of three seats. Given the thought put into the room, it is surprising that instead of a large screen at the front of the theater there is only a small television set with a screen no larger than 19 inches. As a result, there are rarely any people in the room and most men only look inside to see who is there, although there is increased activity during the overnight parties.

The next entranceway leads into a literal maze, an area devoted to sexual activity with strangers and known partners. There are lots of hidden alcoves and corners, some covered in black, semi-sheer curtain panels. The walls are dark and there are no lights, facilitating encounters with strangers not spoken to in other parts of the spa. After walking through several times, you are able to figure out the path of the hall, which is actually L-shaped with alcoves. Along the right wall of each hall are three cabinas. They construction is surprisingly shoddy including plywood doors with a simple latch for a lock. Inside, the rooms are each lit by a single dim torchlight. The beds are about half of the width of a twin bed, with what feels like thin foam mattresses covered in blue vinyl. The walls do not extend all the way to the ceiling, so all of the sounds coming from the rooms next to you are audible as well as the noise from the halls. At the very end of the hall are two doorways. The door directly in front leads to an outside balcony, although the only ones who use it are employees (anyone else would be in only a towel). The doorway to the right is covered by a sheer black curtain panel, and leads directly to the main walkway. Walk through this doorway and you are next to the rainbow curtain with the sofa across the walkway in front of you.
ENTICEMENTS AND MARKETING

Club Dionisio uses many of the same marketing techniques to bring in clientele as the other spas, including birthday discounts, free beverages, and bring-a-friend free days. However, the spa’s main attraction is the regularly scheduled overnight parties. The parties are always held on the weekends and are always good for business. Many men stay most of the night looking for whatever adventures they may happen upon. Others may find a comfortable couch and fall asleep as onlookers laugh. Advertisements for upcoming parties are strategically placed on doors and in the locker room, and are posted on the spa’s website, which looks significantly more professional than the websites of the other spas. This website features a slideshow of photos showing images of the spa’s many installations, complete with pictures of local men in underwear or speedos looking directly into the camera, enticing patrons to stop by and join them. You can enter your contact information online to become a member and join their email list. Once on the list, you will be one of the first to hear about upcoming events and specials and see the latest advertisements. Each email also includes a plethora of pornographic images that appear to have been collected from around the internet, and they are definitely not safe to be viewed at work. Members also get special discounts for their birthdays, including a free entry fee and discounts on drinks for several friends. It seems Club Dionisio has everything going for it, except for the massive clientele and prime location of Tulipán Spa.
CHAPTER 2
INTERROGATING SEXUALITIES AND HOMOSOCIAL BONDING IN THE SPAS

It was an early Saturday afternoon in June when I entered the steam room at Tulipán Spa. Since it was summer and Gay Pride Month, I fully expected to find a room full of tourists. Instead, on this day I found just one: a tall, middle-aged Caucasian man. Curious to see how he would interact with the locals, I subtly followed him throughout the spa, careful not to draw any attention to myself. While there were plenty of local men to be found in the spa’s installations, most casually chatting with friends, the visitor was specifically seeking out younger men sitting by themselves. In broken Spanish – actually much more English than Spanish – he repeatedly related the same story to each individual he spoke with. Although not out-of-shape, the visitor still found the need to let the young men know that he used to have a “seis-pack,” until Hurricane Katrina, when he just did not care anymore. Most of the guys nodded and feigned interest, although it was clear in their eyes that they were not really sure what he was saying, or perhaps knew that the devastation of Hurricane Katrina had happened almost a decade earlier and wondered why he was bringing it up now. Either way, after quickly giving his disclaimer, the visitor would ask each of the men if they wanted to go to a cabina and have sex. When they declined, he would move on to the next solitary man he found and recite the same story, even if they were in the same room.

In this chapter, I consider the men, and the interactions between men, in the spas of Quito. In many ways, this chapter shows the similarities between the spas and Western bathhouses, in that “as a social institution bathhouses provide a setting in which men can gather, meet other men (often anonymously), and engage in sexual activity” (Tewksbury 2003: 203).
There are also similarities to Humphry’s (1970) tearoom trade, in that there are recognizable cultural cues for showing interest in sexual activity. However, while sexual activity may take place in the spas, most often in clearly defined spaces, it is not required; this chapter also considers the many men that frequent the sites for homosocial bonding among other members the MSM community without that fear of stigma that is often found in other public spaces. I begin with an ethnographically situated reflection on homosocial bonding in the spas, noting the variable interactions between men who come to the spas together, and the men who meet and become acquaintances once inside. I then discuss the ways in which men gauge interest and desirability in potential mates. It is only natural that this leads into a deliberation on the ways in which boundaries between men are created and crossed. I end with a discussion of the spa’s role as an ethnosexual frontier in which men can have sexual encounters with men of other races, ethnicities and nationalities.

FINDING FRIENDSHIP IN THE SPAS

Arriving to Sauna Oscuro on an early Tuesday afternoon, I was one of the first people through the doors. After exchanging pleasantries with the employee behind the counter (who by this point recognized me as a regular patron), I put my things in my locker and made my way to the Jacuzzi before it became too crowded. No sooner had I sat down and acclimated to the temperature of the water than a tall, husky Peruvian man walked in. With big hair and an even bigger personality, Luis was unapologetically flamboyant. He was covered in jewelry: wrists full of bracelets, several chains around his neck, and a plethora of piercings in each ear. Luis hopped in the Jacuzzi and quickly introduced himself. In little to no time we were deep in conversation,
as if we had known each other for ages. Quickly I learned that he had lived in Quito for two years after moving from Peru with his Ecuadorian partner, although on this day he was alone and did not mention where his *pareja* was. He was disappointed that Tulipán Spa was closed for the day due to a water shortage, since that is where he prefers to go. Recognizing that I was from out of the country, he decided to run down the list of all the discos, clubs and spas that are open in Quito for the gay community, and reminisce about the former Sauna Jengibre which was located near his apartment. I knew that he was trying to be friendly and helpful, and I listened attentively even though I had been studying these locales for quite some time and was quite familiar with them. As quickly as he had joined me in the Jacuzzi he left, and after exploring some of the other installations, he came back to say goodbye before heading home to meet his partner.

There are many men who go to the spas not for sex but for the purely platonic social interactions that can be found with like-minded men, and a sense of community and acceptance without the social stigma. Here, as in the chongos, you can find homosocial bonding among male friends and everything that it entails – joking, camaraderie, sex specific conversations – without the additional surcharge for sexual activity. In fact, if anything the spas are even more of a bargain because they offer special deals on specific days when you can bring a friend with you for half-price or even for free.

Viveros Vigoya (2003) has argued that in Latin America it is important for men to have the time and the space to share moments with other men – outside of the female gaze – in order to reflect on ideal masculine behavior. Homosocial spaces become key to these interactions. She goes on to note several of these all-male venues across Latin America, in particular the working-class *butecos* (bars) of Denise Jardim’s study in Porto Alegre, Brazil (1992). The spas are homosocial spaces like the butecos; they just happen to be for men who have sex with men. While sexual
activity regularly occurs in the spas, and homosociality as a concept refers to same-sex relationships of a non-sexual nature, sex is not requisite, and you can often find other aspects of homosociality within the spas’ walls.

One of the key components of homosocial spaces is the ability for men to joke with each other in a bid to assert their manliness without fear of embarrassment or retribution. When friends go to the spas as a group, laughter constantly fills the air. On one busy Saturday, I witnessed a group of loud young men making their way through the many installations at Tulipán Spa. When one of the men disappeared, the others in the group assumed he had found a sexual partner and went searching for him throughout the building to no avail. It was not until they checked the hall outside of the cabinas and heard his voice in mid-coitus that they knew they had found him. They laughed uproariously, shouting out crass comments about his womanhood and losing his virginity. Once he left the cabinas and rejoined the group, the jokes continued with questions about his pregnancy and how he was going to take care of the baby. Not to be outdone, with a quick laugh he let the others know that he takes care of all his children without any problems, unlike them. The intentions of the group were clear; by challenging the inherent manhood of each other through what I call “jokes of emasculation,” the respondents were asserting their own manliness among other men. This verbal jousting was followed by laughter from the group, and no hard feelings between the individuals involved.

The exchange between the men in this group is not dissimilar to Andrade’s study of homosocialidad in Guayaquil, Ecuador, in which two of his informants, members of a network of young men from a local barrio, spent an evening competing not through words, but by vying for the traditionally male role in a couples’ dance. (Andrade 2001a). This type of joking can be found in all of the spas and other locations designated as sex-segregated. Viveros Vigoya, in quoting
Jardim, would argue that the locales act as a “privileged space for male socialization in which discourse about the meanings of being male are produced and reproduced” (2003: 43). In fact, steam rooms designated for men only are often built into upscale apartment buildings throughout Ecuador. By creating this privileged social space for the male population and not including similar spaces dedicated to women, we see an example of hegemonic patriarchal ideas being built directly into the architecture of the country.

The environment within homosocial spaces is undoubtedly sexually charged, with talk of sex (discussing sexual conquests, general name-calling, etc.) a constant during conversation. The spa is slightly different in this regard as there is no need to brag, boast, or posture among friends about sexual conquests when they may be right there with you during the actual encounter. The same cannot be said for homosocial spaces geared toward the heterosexual community. Frank Browning (1994: 8-9) theorizes that “unlike any accepted culture, gaydom is a social world that none of us has inherited from our parents or families. Because the part of identity that is ‘gay’ emerges from the most powerful and universal of human drives – the imperative of desire – it is inextricably bound to the torments and the delicacies of taboo.” In this sense, the spa is a significant component of gaydom – meaning the social and cultural sphere of homosexuals – and the taboo of public sex is often subverted in ways that are not seen in comparable heterosexual venues. In order to accomplish this, it is first necessary to determine who may be sexually interested and to let them know if you are in fact sexually available.
GAUGING INTEREST AND DESIRABILITY

At Tulipán Spa, there is one individual in particular who has been a regular patron for several years; a bald, middle-aged Ecuadorian man who looks as though he spends every free moment that he is not in the spa working out in the gym. An exhibitionist, he would often be found in the sauna, lying down, towel open, and eyes closed, occasionally peeking to see if anyone was looking. Occasionally, he would move on to one of the private showers on the third floor, yet he would leave the door open so men could watch him from afar. Any other time, you would find him walking back and forth in the dark steam room, never speaking to anyone, save the infrequent “Hola” or a smile and nod of the head as he passed other men whom he recognized as regular attendees, including myself. Several years later he is still at Tulipán, using the same techniques, but now he is quite popular, spending most of his time chatting with friends that he has met during his time in the spa.

When everyone is in a similar state of undress, how is it possible to signal interest in potential mates or increase your own desirability? Some men go to the spas for platonic encounters among old friends and possibly new ones, while other men are there for the more intimate experiences between men that the spa affords. How do men behave when they are looking for more than friendship? Before even meeting a potential mate, one of the things that many men may choose to do is change the way they wear their towel as they move throughout the installations of the spas. In Tulipán Spa, they may take the more traditionally-sized towel that is given to each patron at the counter upon entrance and fold it in half before wrapping it around the body. In this way, they are guaranteed to show more skin – definitely more of their thighs, perhaps their genitals, as well if they sit down – even though they are wearing the same amount of clothing as everyone
else. Others may leave the towel loose as opposed to wrapping it tightly around the body so that it flaps open as they walk throughout the building. Still others may wear the towel slung low around the body so that their pubic hair, or lack thereof, is exposed for onlookers to see. Finally, there are many men who simply sling the towel around their necks as they move through the installations, only wearing it around their waists when they are in the hallways on the move to their next destination. At Sauna Oscuro, where men wear an apron tied around their waists instead of a towel, they may simply change the positioning of the apron’s opening so that it is in the front of the body instead of the side. Others may simply sit down in each of the installations with the apron opened, standing up and retying it if they have not found any one that takes an interest. At Club Dionisio, where the towels are abnormally thin, men simply change the positions in which they sit, perhaps with their legs spread open or their knees pulled up, and their genitals will be exposed for anyone nearby that chooses to look.

Not all men in the spas are wearing towels or aprons, however. At Tulipán Spa on the weekends there is a masseuse/male prostitute who appears to be employed by the spa itself. If he is not, he at the very least has an arrangement with the spa’s management. For the most part he remains stationary, posted on a landing in the stairwell, although he occasionally sits down to chat with friends. While spa employees typically wear polo shirts, pants or shorts, his uniform-of-choice is a tight tank-top and underwear (the irony is not lost that the one person charging money for sex is wearing more clothes than any of the patrons themselves). This prostitute does not gauge interest through words; in order to let his potential clients know that his services are available for purchase, he casually manipulates his genitals while looking at his phone. He is never the first to initiate a conversation or even eye contact, instead allowing the patrons to begin interactions. If he has not had any luck, he visits each installation (both steam rooms, the sauna, and the video room)
and calls out his rates. Once he has a customer/client, he brings them to a private room hidden under the stairwell and behind the front counter.

Depending on the spa and the day of the week, there are discounts and other specials based on age, as well as specials that allow you to bring a friend for free. On these days, groups of young men come to the spas together and have drinks, relax, or search for potential sexual partners, always sharing the details with their friends after the deed is done. But while their goal may be to have an intimate encounter with a desired mate, the sounds or sights of the sexual acts may draw other men looking to watch or join in themselves, with or without the participants’ consent. This leads into a topic that deserves deeper consideration: establishing personal boundaries in the spas.

**FINDING BOUNDARIES**

It is very difficult to judge where individual boundaries begin and end in the spas. Most men whom you encounter are more than willing to casually converse with anyone who starts a conversation, yet it does not mean that they are interested in taking things any further. On rare occasions, a male may see someone in a sauna or a steam room, for example, and after a short exchange, ask “may I join you?” This is most often a sign of sexual interest, and when the initiator moves to the other person’s side they will quickly put a hand on their thigh. If the person is not interested in a sexual encounter and does not want to face the potential awkwardness to be found when the initiator crosses this boundary, in response to the initial question they will decline. This does not happen often, and the initiator usually leaves the room. While on most occasions the men in the spas are respectful of each other’s boundaries, there are always men who are willing to push those boundaries and/or cross them without hesitation. Ultimately, it is up to each individual to
define his own personal boundaries, decide what he is and is not willing to deal with, and communicate those ideals with the men around him.

The cultural cues described may work with patrons looking for consenting sexual partners, but they do not account for awkward encounters that arise with lack of personal space or for predatory patrons that do not take no for an answer. In the spas, there are no “bouncers” or employees around to regulate sexual behavior. In fact, if the business sets no boundaries and the customers are aware of this, it may be part of the allure. The employees can be found behind the counter, the bar, or doing laundry; the only times they enter the installations is to mop the floors on regularly scheduled breaks. If you are a regular in the spas, chances are you have witnessed or been involved in inappropriate encounters.

On one particular occasion in Tulipán Spa, I found myself trapped and unable to extricate myself from the most awkward of situations. It was a busy Saturday and I found myself sitting in a corner, observing the many interactions taking place around me. As I tried to recognize faces in the relative darkness, two young men, hand-in-hand, no older than their early twenties, made their way through the crowd and into my personal space. In no time, they began to have sex, and as the other men heard what was going on, they began to move in for a closer look. At this point, there was no room to move, and the crowd was unwilling to let me through for fear of missing any of the show. The two young men were pressed against my leg, and I was stuck in that spot, in all its awkwardness, until they finished and the crowd dispersed. I made my way out of the spa as fast as I could, wondering if boundaries simply do not exist in the spa, or whether they do exist but the line just had not yet been crossed. I never saw the two men again.

Many predators see this lack of oversight as a titillating opportunity to have sexual experiences that would not be tolerated anywhere else. Since my very first visit to Tulipán Spa,
one particular patron has been there every single time. He is older than most patrons, tall, with grey hair, and I can only assume he is retired since he is there every day. He is also obese, with the towel given to him by the establishment barely fitting around his waist. He stays at the spa from the opening of business to closing time, never conversing with any of the other patrons, and spending all of his time in the third-floor steam room. At first glance, he appears harmless, just another regular client looking to relax and perhaps find a sexual partner. However, his behavior is at best inappropriate and, at worse, sexual molestation. At the slightest sound of sexual activity, he quickly pushes his way past all of the men idly standing in the narrow halls, no small feat due to his girth and an annoyance to everyone in his way. He proceeds to grab the participants’ genitalia, and as they push his hands away from their bodies, he does not stop until they leave and find another more secluded spot that he is either unable to locate or unable to reach. Seeing his methods and behavior on a regular basis, I tried to avoid his path whenever I could. Avoiding the uncomfortable situations encountered in the spa, however, is oftentimes easier said than done.

On yet another occasion I was faced with defining boundaries at Tulipán Spa, but my reaction was much more violent than it had been in the previous encounter. The instigator this time was a middle-aged Afro-Latino man. One of the few men that I encountered in the spas who was taller than I am, the man was skinny, with unruly salt-and-pepper hair. His behavior was somewhat similar to the obese man that was previously mentioned, although even more brazen. As I saw him making his way through the crowds of men relaxing in the various installations, it was clear that he was looking for sexual activity and was not prepared or willing to take no for an answer. He wore his customary towel slung around his neck instead of his waist, his body completely exposed. As he saw men whom he was interested in, usually much younger men who appeared timid and thus easier to prey on (although he made exceptions), he would forcefully grab their arms or hands,
placing them on his genitals. I could see the looks on their faces as they winced. I felt myself starting to get upset and I contemplated whether I should get involved. Eventually, the decision was made for me; as I stood in the hall, he grabbed my hand and put it on his penis. At this point, anger could barely describe the state in which I found myself. I can only assume I was so enraged because I saw how often he had gotten away with his behavior without any consequences. I took his entire arm and threw it against the wall. Quickly, he rushed off to another room. Apparently, predators in the spas get the message about boundaries more quickly when it comes from someone who is willing to defend himself.

EMERGING ETHNOSEXUALITIES

In the summer months, an influx of tourists from around the world visits Ecuador on study abroad programs, for volunteer experiences, ecotourism, or simply for pleasure. A high percentage of the visitors are from Europe and North America. In summer the racial makeup of the spas therefore changes significantly, as incomers interact with brown-skinned locals and the regular patrons gain opportunities for sexual encounters with these fair-skinned foreigners. On both sides of the equation, what we find is the eroticization of ethnic “Others.”

In Latin America, the perceived valuation of bodies is often deeply intertwined with their racial and ethnic makeup. Depending on your point of origin, indigenous bodies and bodies of African descent may be hyper-eroticized or, in most cases, completely ignored. In the chongos, the rates for services are both racialized and set phenotypically, with Colombian women and the rare Anglo women able to charge more than others. Conversely, both indigenous and Afro-Latino women are devalued and, as such, are most likely to charge a base rate. In the spas, a bastion of
homoerotic desire, similar correlations are apparent. For example, in the now-closed Sauna Jengibre, male sex workers regularly advertised themselves on the venue’s website. With photos, clients could see their phenotypic makeup before ever arriving. For potential clients were still unsure, the short bios included with the photos gave details such as ethnic makeup – Colombians were still able to charge more in this setting – preferred sexual position, and penis size. The other spas do not share this information on their web pages, so patrons are left to inquire about race and ethnicity on their own.

In the spas, I have witnessed the eroticization and/or dismissal of ethnic Others by ethno-adventurers on many occasions. On one occasion, at Sauna Oscuro, I walked into the steam room and a well-built, young Afro-Latino male was being fellated simultaneously by two twenty-something mestizo males. This was the only time I have ever seen an Afro-Latino at Oscuro, and he was showered with attention. Upon my arrival, the trio continued their encounter, until the Afro-Latino male suggested that the three of them head up to a cabina to take their encounter further and in private. On another day at Tulipán Spa, I witnessed an African-American study abroad student get consistently rejected by everyone he propositioned, while the tall Caucasian male he came with became the star attraction of the day. And, of course, there was the older Afro-Latino male who was so hyper-sexualized that he did not allow men to make the decision on racialized sexual encounters, but aggressively attempted to make the choice for them.

Patricio Aguirre Arauz (2010) once noted that Quito is a renewed city with an increasingly more open atmosphere. One of the side-effects of that openness is that men from other normatively heterosexual countries are more willing to have same-sex sexual encounters that, in other times and places, they simply would have never considered, despite their secret desires. In many arenas, there is stigma not only based on sexuality, but on race and ethnicity, as well. Those with
intersecting marginalities may find the environment simply oppressive, such as the African-American study abroad student mentioned previously. Others, including his Caucasian classmate, may consider their differences a sexual boon.

ALEJO

“¿De donde eres?” Alejo asked, as he walked from behind me in a steam room not known for conversation.

While some men may take advantage of the spas to have sexual encounters with eroticized Others, there are many men, such as those discussed in the next three sections, who are less interested in racialized bodies and are instead looking for interpersonal chemistry or other forms of connection. Throughout the course of my travels in Quito, and frequently at Tulipán Spa, I was approached with this same question (or some variation thereof) from many different people wondering where I was from, both as an icebreaker to a friendly conversation and as an early attempt at gauging sexual interest. In this case, after setting up a few boundaries - he grabbed my rear end at the same time he asked his question - it was an introduction to a great new friendship and a key source that would prove to be invaluable in helping me understand the cultural cues used in the spas.

“Los estados unidos,” I responded, unsure of where the conversation would take me but happy to have the opportunity to chat.

“Oh, what state are you from?”
“You speak English!” I explained, probably more shocked than I should have been. While I am used to meeting people in Ecuador that have some knowledge of the English language, Alejo’s complete lack of accent took me by surprise.

“Yes, I learned in school and I really like the language. I saw you and I wanted to talk to you, but I was scared. You looked so serious standing there in the corner watching everyone.” After explaining my research and my need for participant observation (while internally acknowledging his comment and taking a mental note that I probably need to relax and loosen up while in the field), we managed to find a quiet area and got to know each other better. I was familiar with the regular clientele and they all gave me a knowing nod or a quick greeting when they saw me, but in all of my visits I had never seen Alejo. Before leaving for the day, we went back to the locker room and exchanged phone numbers so we could continue our conversation in greater depth. The following morning, we exchanged text messages and made arrangements to continue our discussion about his life, the MSM community, and the current climate for working professionals living in Ecuador as a whole. While he believes himself to be very shy, Alejo was actually extremely forthcoming with his thoughts on the hardships of life as a gay man in Quito and, frankly, did not appear to be shy at all.

Alejo moved to Quito from Tungurahua approximately six years ago, after applying for a city job that he found in the newspaper employment ads. For a cytologist with a degree in biochemistry, the job offered considerably more money in Quito than what was available to him in the same job back home. Seeking more financial stability, he and his mother, whom he cares for, headed to the capital. Presently he would be able to make the same amount of money back home if he chose to thanks to changes in the law, but he has grown to prefer life in Quito and, at thirty-five years old, he has no desire to return to Tungurahua at all.
As someone who has spent a great deal of time in the Andes, I would instantly peg Alejo as Andean if I were to meet him on the street, even without his light-brown skin. A lithe man, Alejo is taller than the typical Ecuadorian male, but he has very recognizable Andean features, and his fashion-forward attire gives him the appearance of someone who has seen the world. Alejo considers himself Latino and/or Mestizo, depending on what the situation calls for. “Racial identity can be a tricky thing,” I tell him, as someone who knows all too well the vagaries and confusion that can be involved in choosing one identity over another. He believes that most people of Ecuador consider themselves Mestizo, unless they are black (“negro”), or one of the various etnias that can trace their lineage back to the pre-colonial period. “They are the only true Ecuadorians,” he explains, with what looks to be a hint of pride in his country’s diversity.

Alejo seems to be full of dichotomies. He wears scrubs five days a week, thankful that he does not have to dress up for work, yet dresses impeccably whenever he has time off. He is always looking towards the future and where his travels are going to take him next, yet knows little about present popular culture and spends his free time listening to Nat “King” Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, and other American artists from the distant past. After learning about my research interests, he was adamant that it was okay to use his real name for the project, even though he is completely closeted about his sexuality with his family, friends, and co-workers, and has no desire to ever be exposed. After meeting several times and becoming friends, and thinking about his reactions to being outed or being seen as anything less than masculine in public spaces (he will not even hug another male in public unless it is a member of his family), I decided that it was in his best interests to use an alias. Eventually he relented, and we came to a mutual agreement that he could choose his own name. Thus, “Alejo” was born.
Alejo is very well-educated. While university degrees differ in South America, he has definitely completed post-graduate work by U.S. standards. In Ecuador, his degree is *doctorado nivel 3*. He very much wants to go back to school and get a United States level doctorate that he will be able to use if he ever decides to move abroad, which is a dream of his. Although he does not think so, he speaks English fluently and with no accent, and also speaks intermediate French, enough to carry a conversation, “if I ever move to Canada,” he says. During our time working together and discussing the way he feels about masculinity and sexuality in Ecuador, he enrolled in an English language course to further his speaking skills. He believes that he needs to work on his English in order to get back into a university and take his schooling further. “I am working on my progress,” he says, and I wholeheartedly believe him.

A few days later, we met at the *Ecovia* station downstairs from my apartment and began to chat on our way to Tulipán Spa, and we began to discuss his life in greater detail. Only one day after our initial discussion he went to a school after work and signed up for the English course. As mentioned previously, Alejo is employed as a *cytólogo*, a cytologist. When he found the job in the employment ads, the ad was actually for a job lottery, which he entered and won. He currently works in a hospital five days a week, looking at the cells of patients through his microscope to find cancerous spots or anything else that looks out of the ordinary. I noticed he did not seem like himself when he was telling me this, and asked if he was okay. He admitted that his mother had not been feeling well during the month of March 2015, so he took her to the doctor to be checked out. After a series of tests, he ended up being the cytologist to discover that she had stage 4 advanced cervical cancer. He took a week off from work to take her to get more tests and see other doctors for their opinions, and together they decided to try traditional medicine because they believed his mother was too weak for radiation and chemotherapy. I was
shocked. At this point it became clear that one of the reasons he goes to spas is to help deal with
the stress in his life, and after I suggested this, he agreed. As we talked, he told me that he
considered dropping the English course that he had just excitedly signed up for, but because the
school would not give him a refund he decided to stick with it, letting me know through a call or
a text how each class went.

As we walked into the spa and changed, we began talking about his personal identity and
background on our way into the sauna. He identifies himself as masculine and bisexual, and
appears to take pride in this categorization. In speaking with many individuals in the spas over
the years, I have found that there is a tendency for people to identify as bisexual as opposed to
simply gay. Whether they actually have an attraction to women or say that in order to try and
maintain a masculine identity varies. I have seen many men – and been propositioned by several
– with wedding rings on their fingers. I have also seen several of these closeted men in the
quieter café and locker room areas of the spas on cell phones calls with their wives or girlfriends,
assuring them that they will be home soon.

As Alejo and I sat in the sauna alone, I knew the spa would be getting crowded soon so I
decided to ask some of the more personal questions that he might not want to talk about in front
of other men. Once again, I was surprised at how forthcoming he was with someone he had only
recently met. If there is one thing I have found with the men in Ecuador’s spas, it is that they are
more than happy to chat with foreigners. When I asked if he remembered his first experience
with sex, Alejo said little about it, leading me to believe that it was not a positive experience. It
was not that long ago, since he did not lose his virginity until he was thirty-years old. He said
that he has had experiences with both men and women, although he does not mention if his first
time was with a male or a female. When I wondered whether it had been in a brothel or a spa, he
replied that he has never been to a chongo, and his first time was not at a spa. In fact, he said that he does not like spas, although he has been to all of them and goes fairly regularly. He thinks spas are dirty and unhygienic but, if forced to choose, he prefers Club Dionisio to Tulipán Spa because, although there are fewer people, the clients are older and more mature than the “kids” who frequent Tulipán.

I wanted to know more. We were, after all, sitting in a sauna at Tulipán as he shared this. He said that he does not really have an answer as to why he does not like them even though he is practically a regular. What he does know with certainty, he said, is that he will never make friends with the people that he meets in the spas.

“But you and I are friends,” I said, “and you grabbed my ass before you started a conversation with me.”

“That is different,” he responded. “I saw you and I liked you.”

I wondered if race – or perceived race – may have been a factor. “How do you decide who is a potential sexual partner and who is a friend? Does it have anything to do with the race of the person? I don’t look Ecuadorian.”

“I don’t know. I don’t care about race or anything like that. The only thing that matters is a connection.”

As we moved next door to the steam room, I wondered if he saw any similarities between brothels and spas. Although he had never been to a chongo, they are well-known in Ecuador, and part of the fabric of society. Surely, he must have some thoughts about connections, right?

Maybe not. At first, he said that there are no similarities between the two, but after taking a few minutes to ponder, eyes closed, deeply inhaling the hot and humid air, he decided that the only similarity is that there is sexual activity going on in both places. He certainly has not asked
anyone about the similarities, as the question may have the unintended side effect of outing him. Alejo is closeted with absolutely everyone except for me and his male sexual partners. And he is so secretive that in his mind he is sure that no one even suspects. Not family, not friends, not co-workers. No one.

As we wandered through the halls of Tulipán, more and more people started to arrive. While men started to pair off and find their own private corners, Alejo and I went downstairs to the café, and after a quick trip to my locker to jot down some notes, we bought some sodas and grabbed a table in front of the television. Before we left for the day, I was curious about whether he believed safe sex was common in the spas. While not answering yes or no, he simply shared, “it is up to each person to decide whether they want to use a condom or not.” Although it is clear that Alejo has definite opinions about various facets of LGBT life in Ecuador, he is not always forthright when it comes to the details. As we changed clothes and headed home for the day, he told me that this is because he does not believe it is safe to be open about alternative sexualities in Ecuador. Due to these beliefs, he does not plan on ever coming out or introducing any partner to his family and friends. At that point, we walked outside and said goodbye for the day with the typical fist-bump that he gives to male friends and associates when he is in public.

The next day, Alejo came by my apartment so we could talk some more. Over desserts, I asked about his family life since I knew that being so secretive he would never want to bring them up in a spa. Even though it was just the two of us, I could see in his eyes that he was wary about discussing the subject. For example, he would not mention if he had any brothers or sisters, and never mentioned the relationship between his parents. Because he had already shared that his mother lived with him, I knew that there had to be some disconnection between his
parents. Whether this was due to a romantic separation or through a death is unclear. I did manage to glean some information, however.

The bond that Alejo has with his mother is palpable whenever he brings her up. They are extremely close; as previously mentioned, she lives with him in Quito, along with their two dogs. Although their home does not have any parking, he keeps a car just in case his mother needs to go anywhere. The car is parked several miles away from their home in a lot, and he takes public transportation whenever he needs to get the car, picking his mother up at their home. He said he had a normal childhood, but he does not have any of the same friends that he had when he was younger. He believes this is because he grew up in Tungurahua and moved away. In my mind, I thought this was probably another reason for his connection with his mother; she gave up the life she knew to move away with her son and, in Quito, the only connection to home that they have is each other.

As we packed up our things to head to Club Dionisio, the topic turned from his relationship with his family to that of his family’s religion, and his temperament went from friendly and occasionally reserved to annoyed with a hint of animosity, or possibly anger.

“Does your family practice a religion?” I asked.

“They are all Catholic,” he said, the contempt in his voice made visible by the look across his face.

“You have a serious look on your face, like you are disgusted!”

“I have serious issues with religion. The look is not with you, it is about the topic.”

“Do you practice a religion personally?”

“No!” he said emphatically, with a dismissive motion of his hand. It was clear he did not want to talk about religion like he does with other topics. I decided it was best not to push the
subject. We stayed quiet for most of the trolley ride to the spa, and I thought to myself that I would really regret it if I pushed things too far. As we got off the trolley at our stop and walked the rest of the way, I was relieved to find that this was not the case. However, it was clear that a change of topic was in order.

The doorman buzzed us in through the outer gate and we took the long walkway to the front door. This was my first time coming to Club Dionisio, so I was trying to take it all in and make mental notes. I would never have been able to navigate the maze of roads it took to find the place without Alejo’s company, so I was thankful for our chance encounter just a few short days earlier. I did not want to lose such an integral informant, so I decided to considerably shift gears in my questioning.

“How do you feel about transvestites?” I asked, happy that I still had topics to discuss that are less contentious than religion. As we sat in the hottest steam room that I think I have ever experienced, Alejo made it clear that he does not like transvestites at all, and he seemed to equate transvestites with transgender sex workers. “They are dangerous, they carry knives, and they will rob you so they can have money for surgery. The transvestites are treated badly in Ecuador because everyone knows that they are dangerous.” However, he does not have not have a problem with drag queens, and believes that they are different than transvestites “because they are artists and performers.”

I confess that I was somewhat dubious about his explanation. “So, does a male have to dress in women’s clothing to be considered a transvestite?”

“Yes.”

“And do you think you would know if someone was a transvestite or drag queen if you met them in a spa?”
“Transvestites don’t go to the spas.”

“Of course, they do. I’ve met a few.”

“Really? I have never seen one there. You can tell by their bodies because they have had injections in their bodies so they look like women. You need to watch out for them.” If there was any doubt before, it became abundantly clear that in Alejo’s mind, transvestites and transgender prostitutes are one and the same, and if they are not performing on stage, they should be avoided at all cost.

Alejo was finally ready to take a break from the steam room; practically gasping for air, I had never been more relieved. We headed up to the second floor and took a seat on the unusually cold couch that sits right at the top of the large, angular staircase. It is a great spot to watch people come and go, listen to music and just relax. I asked Alejo if he believes that there is a connection between masculinity and sexual orientation in Ecuador, expecting him to go into some detail. After all, here was a person who goes through great pains to appear nothing less than masculine and heterosexual in public spaces. To my surprise, he believes that there is little to no connection between the two. “The only connection is that men are supposed to act a certain way. If they don’t, then people are going to think they are gay,” he said. “I can’t really explain it. It is just the way it is.”

“So, what about when women are around?” I asked. “Do men still act the same way?”

“Of course, they do. You always have to be masculine or people will think you are gay.” I know that this is not always the case, but I accept that as someone who keeps his personal life so private, Alejo would behave the same way no matter who is present.

“Does that mean women see masculinity the same way as men?”

“Of course, Ronnie!” he said with a laugh. “Now let’s go to the Jacuzzi.”
The temperature of the water, constantly overflowing the walls of the Jacuzzi, could not have been more perfect. As the music played and people came and went past the doors to the covered patio, I asked Alejo about his thoughts on popular culture, social media, and changes in Ecuadorian society. It should come as no surprise that he really did not have any thoughts on the influence of popular culture, although he had heard the movie “Fifty Shades of Grey” would be playing in Ecuador, and he thought it was “crazy.” His experience with social media was rudimentary at best. He keeps Facebook and Skype accounts, but only has about ten friends that he knew in person beforehand, and he only rarely uses the accounts to keep in touch with them. None of his social media friends have been sexual partners, and although he did know about some social media sites that could be used to find partners, he prefers to stick with spas because he thinks there is less of a chance to run into someone he knows. “When you use those applications to meet people, sometimes they use pictures and they are completely different in person,” he shared.

“Have you had any bad experiences meeting men on social media or in the spas?”

“No, because if I go to the spa I can see what they look like and then make my decision.”

With that, it was time to head home. We headed back to the locker room to change, relaxed by the warm bubbling waters of the Jacuzzi. As the doorman said goodbye, Alejo once again shared how worried he was about his mom. Trying to be reassuring, I told him not to worry because everything was going to be okay, but, in my mind, I honestly was not sure.
ANDREW

Not all men remain closeted for the same reasons. There is a variability and diversity of self-presentation that can be influenced by outside forces beyond control. While Alejo and Andrew both remain closeted with family, Alejo maintains a close relationship with his mother. For Andrew, his mother is the major obstacle to his living an open life. I met Andrew one evening in the third-floor steam room at Tulipán Spa. When we met, he instinctively started speaking English, and told me his name with a friendly, disarming smile. I took him at face value, and it was not until the end of the night when he gave me his actual name along with his contact information that I realized he initially gave me an alias. Like Alejo, he is closeted in public, and he was afraid to give me his real name even though he knew I was a visitor from out of the country. Letting him know it was cool, I told him I would keep Andrew as his alias. With a quick laugh, he happily agreed. My encounter with Andrew was emotional, to say the least, due to the current struggles in his work life, home life, and personal life. We took a short walk downstairs to the sauna so we could talk a little without the crowds packing into the steam room, and tried to get to know each other better. After a little back and forth where he would speak to me in English and I would respond in Spanish, we managed to get our languages in sync and have an intense conversation about some of the struggles that closeted men living in Ecuador regularly face.

Andrew is 25 years old. While I am usually taller than most of the men that I come across in Ecuador – I am six feet, while the average height of adult males in Ecuador is five feet, four and a quarter inches – he looks to be even shorter than most. He is Ecuadorian, but says he is a mix like most of the people in Ecuador. He also says he is Latino, but points out that he is mostly
attracted to Americans. His attractions may tie into his struggles, but also to his college education. Andrew is a college graduate, and went to school in the United States at a university in the Pacific Northwest. He does not reveal what his major was, but he desperately wants to return to the U.S. He appears to be despondent living in Ecuador, and whenever he talks about leaving, his mood goes from jovial to a deep sadness.

“What do you do for work?” I asked.

When we first started talking, Andrew mentioned he had a job. When I finally inquired as to what that was, there was a moment of awkward silence. “Why don’t we go somewhere more private to talk?” I suggested, and we headed to one of the cabinas. Alone, with only a dim light to illuminate the small room, he finally shared that he was in training with a major Latin American airline to become a member of the cabin crew. I made the mistake of saying “flight attendant” and quickly learned the error of my ways. According to him, there is a strict gender differential between “flight attendants” and “cabin crew,” with flight attendants strictly female. Continuing, he told me that the previous day he took his final training exam, failed, and was subsequently let go. His lip started to quiver, and soon the tears began to fall.

“You don’t understand. This was like my dream!” he cried.

Ever the pragmatist, I suggested he apply for a job with another airline, but he informed me that in Latin America they have restrictions on the height of the cabin crew. According to him, with a height of perhaps 5’6” (which honestly seemed like a stretch), his chances of getting another shot were slim. And because he is a citizen of Ecuador, he is not eligible to be hired by an airline from the United States. I told him that they often have foreign flight attendants because the airlines have international flights, but he was adamant that he cannot be hired.
As he continued to cry, louder and louder until it started to become uncomfortable, I decided a little bit of tough love was in order. “You need to make a plan,” I said, firmly but concerned. “Give yourself no more than a day to cry, and then tell yourself, ‘Okay, what’s the plan? What am I going to do next?’”

“You’re right,” he agreed, much to my relief. “I can’t stay on the floor forever. I have to pick myself back up.”

As he got himself together, Andrew and I were able to have a good conversation about what his life has been like in the last few years since he returned to Ecuador from college in the United States. Needless to say, he was not happy.

“Ecuador is like a prison! I need to get out of here.”

And this is where his home life and his personal life began to clash. “The United States is so free. San Francisco, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Miami, New York. Here you can’t be yourself. I’ll probably have to marry a woman.”

Andrew identifies as bisexual when asked by someone in the spas, but the thought of marrying a woman horrifies him. “Do you think I would be able to come to the United States if I got married? There is a Puerto Rican guy that wants to marry me.” Initially, I was not sure if he was serious about this marriage or if it was just a sign of his desperation to get out of the country. The guy in question is a man in Puerto Rico that he met online. They have never met in person, but he thinks this may be his only option to leave Ecuador. While he may or may not be serious about the marriage, the latter was his primary goal. I still did not know what it was that made him so desperate to leave; it started to make sense when I asked about his family.

“My family hates gays. My mother really hates the gays. Hates them!”
Andrew began to cry a lot when talking about his family. Even though he still lives at home and they do not have anything against him, they have no idea that he is bisexual or has sexual encounters with men. He emphasizes how much his mother hates the gay community, more so than any other person I have spoken to in Ecuador, but he has no definitive answer as to why she hates them so much. He says the family is religious, practicing Catholics, though they never attend church. He also believes that his family, particularly his mother, uses religion as an excuse to hate gays. In his eyes, religion is the reason why Ecuador is homophobic, and, as such, he has now become a non-believer.

“Tell me about your childhood here in Ecuador. What was your life like?” I ask. “What did you do for fun?”

“I think it was pretty normal. I grew up here in Quito, and we didn’t have to struggle. I studied English a lot, so when I finished high school my family let me go to school in the United States with no problem. We could afford it.”

He began to reminisce. “I remember I used to hang out with all of my friends from school and the kids in the neighborhood. We would go to parties and drink with our friends,” he laughs. “I still have a lot of the same friends, probably because my family still lives in the same house. They just don’t know about any of the gay stuff.”

Sensing that he was beginning to relax, I asked about the status of his relationship with his family today, and he shared that he still lives at home and they do not have any problems with him. However, he once again brought up his mother’s animosity towards the gay community. “My mother hates gay people. Things would be terrible if they knew what I was doing. I want to get away so that I can be myself, but I can’t figure out what to do.” Before he
started to get emotional once more, I tried to offer him suggestions. He listened and assured me he would try.

It was starting to get noisy in our cabina, as the sounds of sexual activity in the surrounding rooms got louder and louder, drowning out our conversation. I suggested we go and take a seat upstairs, and as we were about to sit down outside of the third-floor steam room, Andrew noticed that the video theater was empty. He suggested we sit there instead, and I agreed. With the film playing in the background, I assumed he would not be paying much attention to my questions, but he was surprisingly attentive. It seemed fitting that now was the time to switch gears and ask his opinions about sex and spas.

“Tell me about your first experience with sex,” I asked. With one eye glancing at the large television, he shared that his first time was with another male student at his university in the United States. “We weren’t dating or anything, and it was just a one-time thing. I was the top, and I’ve never been the bottom.” At this point, he told me that he has only had sex with men, “but I am definitely bisexual.” He then reiterated that he does not want to get married to a woman, but he will have to if he stays in Ecuador. The thought of a heterosexual marriage clearly weighs on him.

“So, have you ever been to a chongo?” I wonder.

“Yes, many times. When I was a teenager, I used to go all the time with my friends. I just never had sex with any of the putas.”

“And what about the spas?” I ask. “What do you think of them?”

Much like Alejo, Andrew thinks spas are dirty, although he would go even further and call them “disgusting.” Also like Alejo, he insists that he does not make friends with any of the people he encounters, and when he goes it is specifically for sex. He always goes alone, and
never goes to any other gay-oriented businesses. In fact, he gets nervous whenever he goes to the spas, because although Quito is a large metropolis of several million people, he believes the LGBT community is small and people talk. “I was so nervous the first time I went to a spa! It was right here at Tulipán. I heard about it on the internet, got the address, and came by myself. I usually only have oral sex, but sometimes I will have sex.”

“So, do you think there are similarities between the chongos that you’ve gone to and the spas? Do you think the society here sees them equally?

“I don’t think spas and chongos are the same, even though people have sex in both places. That’s the only thing that’s the same. You have to pay for it in a chongo! In a spa, you don’t have to unless you want to. Plus, people don’t have a problem with chongos, but if they knew about the spas they would hate them!”

It is not lost on me that Andrew is more comfortable talking about sex and society than he is about his family life and personal struggles, even as other men have come into the room and given approving nods to his responses to all of my questions. We took a quick break so he could check out the steam room located right next door to the video theater, and I ran down to my locker to take some quick notes. Once he was finished, we grabbed some seats in the common area outside the doorway.

“So how do you decide who is going to be a sex partner? Does the person’s race matter?”

Andrew says he does not look at race, but reiterated that he likes having sex with Americans. At this point, he appeared to be propositioning me, but when he saw that it was going nowhere, he stopped. I was thankful that he was able to get the hint without things getting awkward once more.

“So, is safe sex common in spas? Have you noticed anything?”
“I think it is because you get free condoms. I always use a condom when I have sex, but I usually just have oral sex in the steam room with the large crowds so no one really notices me.” I found this surprising as he is so fearful about being caught. He also said that he gives a fake name to people that he meets in the spas and only speaks with them to have sex. “I think I’m more open with men that I meet on the internet.” I pondered this for a second, wondering if I had been calling him by an alias all this time, and it turned out I was right; I did not learn his given name until right before I left the spa for the night. I imagine that the other men he encounters still do not know.

With Tulipán Spa getting increasingly crowded (as it is every weekend), we made our way through the throngs of men and went downstairs to the bar for some drinks. Our conversation had shifted to his thoughts on masculinity and society, and whether what it means to be a man is different in the public sphere versus the more intimate setting found in the spas. Andrew’s answers fell into the typical gender stereotypes with very little flexibility.

“I think men are the same everywhere. Men are supposed to take care of their families and work no matter where you go. You know what I mean?”

“Do you think women see masculinity in the same way that men do?” I asked.

“I think women expect men to be able to take care of them.” He often goes back to the differences between straight men and gay men, and how gay men are not considered real men.

“And do men act differently when women are not around? Do you?”

Andrew let out a good laugh. It is clear he put some thought into this topic before I came and asked. “Look,” he began, “men talk about girls and sex a lot when the girls aren’t around. I remember when I was a teenager I would to talk with my friends about sex all the time. All the
time! I would laugh with them and just pretend when they asked me if I had sex. But I think I act the same around men and women, but that’s just me, I guess.”

“Does that mean there is a connection between masculinity and sexuality in Ecuador?”

“I don’t think that there’s a connection between masculinity and sexuality because gay men are discriminated against but straight men are not. People aren’t open about their sexuality because society doesn’t accept it. There’s no way that it will be accepted in Ecuador. That’s why leaving the country is the only way out!” By his response, it appears that in his mind the lines between masculinity, sexuality, and gender performance intersect whether he recognizes it or not. It is worth noting that he never once mentioned discrimination against women, neither heterosexual nor lesbian.

“Is masculinity different in the spas than it is in everyday society?”

“When we’re here in the spas we don’t have to pretend to be straight like we do when we are in public. We don’t have to, but maybe we do anyway. Most of the men that I meet here try to act like ‘real men,’ but I can’t compare the gay men that I see here to anywhere else because I don’t see them in any other places. I don’t talk to them anywhere else because I don’t want to get questions. Come on, let’s go grab a table.” I played it cool, but, in a way, I could not help but feel a little bit sad that he is so scared of being thought of as gay that he is unwilling to even have a public conversation with someone perceived as less than heterosexual. It seemed appropriate to probe further and ask about his thoughts on cross-dressers in public and the spas.

“I think I know already, but can you tell me how you feel about transvestites?”

Andrew clearly holds a degree of animosity towards cross-dressers. “They are disgusting! Men are supposed to dress like men! The *travestis* are part of the reason why society doesn’t like gay people, because they think we all dress like women.” I am a little surprised by his
reaction since he spent years living in the United States, but when I brought this up, he said this is the way he feels and he cannot change it.

“So, do you think there is a difference between transvestites and drag queens?” I asked, thinking he may have a similar opinion to Alejo, with drag queens being performers. But he insists there is no difference between the two. “They both wear women’s clothes!”

“How are they treated here in Ecuador?”

“The travestis are treated just like the rest of the gays. Like shit! But you have to watch out for the prostitutes because they’re dangerous. They rob people all the time. Be careful!” I acknowledged the warning and recognized it as a definite call back to my conversation with Alejo, albeit tinged with more disdain.

“Does a male have to dress in women’s clothing to be considered a transvestite?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And do you think you would know if someone was a transvestite or drag queen if you met them in a spa?”

“Ronnie, of course I would! They are more feminine. I have never seen one in the spa.”

His reasoning does not make any sense, since he said that a transvestite must be dressed in women’s clothes, yet people are not dressed in the spa. Plus, there are plenty of feminine men that do not cross-dress, and plenty of drag queens who go to the spas, whether he realizes it or not. As I finished my soda and Andrew finished his beer, we headed back upstairs to the sauna. There were many more people around, so I decided to shift gears to a topic less liable to offend those within earshot.

“Does the media have any impact on society’s ideas about sexuality here in Ecuador?”
“I don’t think so. I think it can help society in other places, but it doesn’t in Ecuador. I have never seen anything supporting the gay community on television in Ecuador.”

“And what about social media? Do you prefer to meet men through social media on the computer or through the telephone…”? He cuts me off.

“That’s different! I go on the gay sites on the internet all the time. I met the Puerto Rican guy who wants to marry me on gay.com. I come here to the spas when I can, but I’m on the internet all the time. I won’t meet men anywhere else because it’s too risky.”

“So why do you think men choose one way to meet over the others?”

“I don’t know about the other guys, but it’s easier for me to meet men on social media because they don’t need to see my face. It’s safer this way, and they’ll get to see my face once I get to know them.” At this point, he still has not met any of them in person.

“Does this mean that you haven’t had any bad experiences meeting men in the spas or through social media?” I asked. He told me that he has yet to have a bad experience meeting men, and has yet to be caught by anybody that he knows. “Still, I would rather leave the country where I wouldn’t have to worry about being caught.”

At this point it was getting late, and after being at the spa for hours, I was ready to head home. Before I wrapped up and said goodbye, I wanted to know if he had seen any changes in everyday society at all, some glimmer of hope so he would not be so desperate in his situation. He shared with me that he has not seen any, although, clearly, he is not looking. Even after our long conversation, he still thinks his only option is to leave the country.

“So, what changes in society related to sexuality do you still think need to be made?”

“Honestly Ronnie? I don’t know what changes need to be made. I’m not interested in Ecuador anymore, and I just want to leave.”
On that note, he asked me to come upstairs with him to the third-floor steam room once again. I declined, choosing instead to head to the locker room and get dressed. Before I left, he caught up to me so he could give me his contact information; his email and skype addresses, and surprisingly, his real name. I tried to contact him through the methods he gave me the next day, and the day after that, but there was no response. I never heard from him again.

CRISTIAN

Andrew’s relationship with his family is a sharp contrast to the relationship between Cristian and his parents. I first met Cristian before I ever stepped foot in Quito. He posted an ad on Craigslist saying that he was looking to meet “new and interesting people.” The way the ad was written, it appeared that there was a bit of naiveté to him. We emailed back and forth several times in the months before my arrival in Ecuador, and he was always very personable and excited to correspond electronically. When I finally arrived, he was a big help in selecting sites to visit and explore even though he did not think he would be. His excuse? “I don’t know how much I can help,” he would say. “I’m not gay. I’m just trying things.”

In the beginning, Cristian was somewhat leery about exploring facets of the LGBT experience because he is not out to his family members. I admit I was a little surprised, as this was a young man looking to meet people on an MSM message board. He wanted to be sure that whatever happens his name would not be used, which for me was never a problem. Still, while remaining adamant about protecting his identity, he was always gracious, and kept insisting he would be happy to help however he could. I allowed him to choose his own alias, and after a few months, he decided to keep using it for all of his social media accounts. While I originally
believed it was all about hiding his interests from his family, I soon learned he was also hiding
from someone else: a jealous lover.

Cristian recently turned twenty years old, although he looks much, much younger. He is
very light-skinned, with straight black hair pushed up and gelled in a style popular with many of
the young gay men in Quito’s discos and the spas. He feels very connected to Ecuador, with a
noticeable sense of pride in his country whenever he talks about it, and he has never travelled
anywhere else in the world. When asked about his race, he says “ecuatoriano.” Pressed further
he simply adds, “latino, también.” A high school graduate, Cristian did not move on to college,
although he thinks about it sometimes and his parents have tried to convince him. This may have
something to do with the fact that he is unemployed and not particularly looking for work. He
still lives at home, much to the chagrin of his parents. They would not have a problem with this
living arrangement if he contributed in some way or went to school. Instead, he is content to let
them continue providing for him, saying, “They are parents. They are supposed to take care of
their children!”

Cristian and I met in person for the first time outside of Megamaxi, a popular department
store, and chatted over some drinks in the large food court. He is amiable, but at this time he was
anxious to get to Sauna Oscuro, since he did not want to talk about “gay things” out in the open.
“I’m just trying things,” he told me once again. Quickly finishing our sodas, we headed down to
catch the Ecovia before rush hour traffic began. As we waited, he got a quick phone call from his
mother, and I took the opportunity to question him on other topics that he would be more
comfortable speaking about in public. After his call, it was clearly the perfect segue to begin
talking about his family life.
“So, what is your life like at home?” I asked. “You told me that you live with your family. What is that like?”

“I don’t know, normal I guess.” Laughing, he added, “I’ve always lived there so I don’t know what it’s like to be anywhere else!”

“How is your family? What are they like?”

“They’re like everyone else. I live with my mom and dad and my sister. We spend a lot of time together and travel for vacations and to visit family. My sister is still in school. We fight sometimes but usually we don’t have any problems. I don’t have problems with anybody. I just mind my own business and spend time with my friends.”

“And are your friends the same ones you had as a child? What was your childhood like?”

“¡Claro!” he says. “I’m still a child!”

It appears that the naïveté I initially sensed from Cristian may have something to do with the fact that he still considers himself a child. This is in spite of the fact that in many ways he lives the life of an adult. He is allowed to come and go as he pleases without much questioning from his parents. He goes out clubbing and to parties with his friends at night, although when he does it is always to heterosexual discos. And he occasionally takes trips with friends to other parts of the country without any problems at home. Much different than Andrew’s familial relationship, Cristian says his relationship with his parents is good, and I believe him.

We reached our stop on the Ecovia and began walking up the hill to Sauna Oscuro. The spa was not scheduled to open for another fifteen minutes, so we took our time and watched the people coming and going, wondering who may be waiting for the spa to open just like we were.

“What do you think about religion?” I asked, breaking up the silence in the hopes that we were not giving off a strange vibe just staring at people as they continued to pass us.
“Well, my family doesn’t go to church or anything like that. Maybe we are Catholic? I don’t know. I have friends who go to church and I went with them a few times, but that’s it.”

“So, it’s not important to you?”

“Not at all.”

At about this time, we heard the sharp sound of metal grating against metal. One of the employees at Sauna Oscuro had come outside and begun to unlock the gate. We walked across the street, and after exchanging pleasantries with the employee, he followed us inside, went behind the counter, and put together our incidentals. On this occasion, we were the first patrons of the day, and he gave us a two-for-one discount. Knowing that we were the only people there, it was much easier for Cristian to share thoughts about his life than it would be at any other time.

After quickly changing into our aprons, we headed to the sauna. Being the only people there, we could adjust the temperature as we saw fit. In the dim light of the room, I began to ask Cristian about his thoughts on sex and sexuality, both in the spas and society, in general. It was here I began to hear the story of his hidden significant other.

“Do you remember your first experience with sex?” I asked, as a devilish grin slowly formed across his face. He shared that he has only had sex with one person, a much older man. When I asked how old he laughed and said, “52 years.” My eyes must have gotten wide because he laughed harder. “He and I met on the internet. I posted on a message board, and he wrote to me. He is supposed to meet me here today. He wants to meet you.”

“Me? Why does he want to meet me?”

“He is very jealous. It’s not fair because he does whatever he wants, but he is still jealous. It is just the way it is.”
I must confess that I did not know what to expect after hearing this, but curiosity got the best of me, and I began to look forward to meeting this person. Cristian shared once again that this is the only person that he has ever had sex with, and the first time was approximately ten months ago. On their first meeting in person the man brought him to Tulipán Spa, and after a short time walking around (he had never been to a spa before so he did not know what to expect), they went into a cabina for his first time. They have gone back several times since then as well as to the man’s home, but for most encounters, they just meet at one of the local spas.

“What about a chongo?” I asked. Since he said that he is just trying things, I wonder if this meant he has explored any other sites in Quito.

“I’ve never been,” he responded. “I know about them. Everybody knows about them because they are everywhere. But the only place I have been are the spas.”

“So, what do you think of the spas? It sounds like you go to them a lot, so what is the experience like?”

“I am really not sure what to think. I always go with my friend (the older male), so I don’t really get to talk or walk around and meet anyone. It’s like, usually I go to Tulipán, but my friend always wants to me to follow him around. Sometimes we sit and enjoy the sauna and everything else, but most of the time he wants to have sex with everyone, and he wants me to just sit there and wait. It makes me feel strange. I guess I don’t really like it.”

“You never get to talk to anyone? You haven’t met anyone and made any connections?”

“I talk to people sometimes while I’m waiting. I think I am friendly person.”

In all the times that I ran into Cristian in the spas, I always found him either sitting with his friend or sitting in a corner waiting for his friend. In fact, most encounters were uncomfortably similar with a lot of waiting around and a tinge of jealousy. On this occasion, we
had been at Sauna Oscuro for a while and his friend (he still hadn’t shared his name) still had not arrived. “Let’s go to Tulipán,” Cristian suggested as he started back toward the locker room. “He probably went there instead.”

Because Sauna Oscuro and Tulipán Spa are within walking distance of each other, there was no need to head back to the trolley station. We left Sauna Oscuro just as a decent-sized crowd was starting to form, and we began the relatively short walk downhill to Tulipán. Cristian took the time to share some more of his opinions with me. He had clearly gotten more comfortable speaking in public in a short amount of time, and did not seem the least bit concerned about who may have overheard our conversation, although he once again reminded me that he is not open with anyone. While he is not sure if the community as a whole is more open than it was in the past, he noted that now he can look on the internet and find a lot of information on “los gays.” We were buzzed into Tulipán and quickly changed our clothes in the locker room. Cristian grabbed his complementary condom and tossed it into his backpack. “Is safe sex common in the spas?” I asked. “I don’t know,” he replied, and dashed toward the stairs.

It did not take long to find Cristian’s friend since he apparently knew just where to look for him. As I quickly followed him up the stairs, we never bothered to stop and check any of the installations on the second floor. Instead, we raced up to the third floor and went directly to the steam room. Sure enough he was standing in the crowd, right on the other side of the doorway. Quickly closing the door so as not to let any extra light into the room, I was expecting to see the erstwhile couple hug or show some sign of affection; it was clear that their relationship is more than platonic. The greeting that I saw instead was somewhat awkward and slightly sad. While Cristian leaned in for a hug, his friend slightly dodged and reached out for a handshake. The dejected look on Cristian’s face spoke volumes, although he recovered in time to introduce us.
“Ronnie, this is Gabriel,” he said, pleased to finally make the introduction. I extended my hand to Gabriel and said a quick hello. “Wait,” he responded in return, and motioned for us to head back outside of the steam room. “This isn’t going to go well,” I thought to myself, but I quickly found out this would not be the case.

We stepped outside, and Gabriel’s demeanor shifted from somewhat dismissive to downright jovial. “It’s nice to meet you! I am Gabriel. How do you know Cristian?” As my eyes adjusted to the light outside of the steam room, we shook hands and I could not help but notice his disarming smile. I already knew he was decades older than Cristian, but in the light, it was clear he looked the part, as well. Seeing them stand next to each other, they were an odd pairing with Cristian looking almost childlike and Gabriel a fully-grown adult, wearing the years in every crevice on his face. He is about my height, heavyset, with his dark hair starting to rapidly gray. In order to keep Cristian’s business his own, I simply told Gabriel that I was an anthropologist studying culture in Ecuador and that I come back to Ecuador on an annual basis. “That’s interesting!” he replied, and just as quickly as we met he was running off back into the steam room without so much as a goodbye. “Let’s go down to the sauna,” Cristian suggested, and we headed back downstairs.

As we walked into the sauna, the singular couple inside saw us enter and quickly left the room hand-in-hand. We took their vacated seats on the top row, the prime location to people watch through the small window in the door. I began to question Cristian on what he thought it means to be a man in Ecuador. He looked pensive, and after a few moments shared that he just did not know what to say. “I told you I am just trying things,” he repeated, and it lead me to believe that he is equating a masculine identity with a sexual identity. We talked back and forth
for a while, and he came to the conclusion that men act the same all of the time. “Not just in Quito, in all of Ecuador. We are all the same.”

“Does this mean that men will act the same if women are around?”

“I think so. I do.”

“What about when you are here in a spa?”

“Okay, maybe you are right,” he said. “Here things are different. I never really thought about it before until you started asking me about it, but it is true. It is really true! When I come here or to any of the spas, the men do whatever they want. It’s like they have no rules here but they do when they are everywhere else. I don’t know. Maybe they are scared when they are at home or with their friends. Here some of the guys just start touching me, and I don’t know how to tell them to stop. I just sit there and don’t pay attention and they just walk away. They would never do that outside!” While he seemed confident as he explained this to me, I could not help but notice a hint of shyness or embarrassment on his face.

“I’m going to run downstairs to take some notes in my locker,” I told him.

“Okay. I am going back to the steam room upstairs to see what Gabriel is doing. When you finish, look for me there.”

The locker rooms in the spas can get quite busy at the end of a normal work day. The men who arrive earlier in the day often take their time, sometimes sending messages on their phones, sometimes checking their hair in the mirror. Those men who arrive later often appear to be in a rush, simultaneously undressing, joking with friends, and looking to see if they know anyone else in the immediate area. As I tried to take down notes while they were still fresh in my mind, I had to avoid the men coming and going so I would not get in their way. Quickly, I closed my locker, tied the key around my arm and headed back upstairs.
Walking into the third-floor steam room is like walking through a thick fog in the dark of night. The combination of thick steam, faint light, and too many bodies squeezed into a limited amount of space made the task of finding Cristian a difficult one. I saw Gabriel first, although he either did not see me or chose to ignore me. There, deep in a sea of bodies and very much a part of the group, Gabriel was engaged in manual stimulation with a group of guys that appeared to be much younger than him. “He clearly has a type,” I thought to myself, as I made my way through the crowd to see if Cristian was in the room. Sure enough, Cristian was sitting nearby, pushed into a corner and out of the way of most of the sexual activity going on around him. This became a fairly typical sight; on nearly every occasion that I ran into the two of them in the spas, Gabriel would be engaged in some type of sexual encounter while Cristian sat silently nearby.

On this occasion, I squeezed through the men and told him to come downstairs with me. When Gabriel looked up to ask Cristian where he was going, I told him we were going downstairs to work on my project. This must have been an acceptable excuse, because he gave his approval and Cristian went on his way. “Why do you put up with him?” I asked, as we made our way down the stairs. “It’s fine, I guess,” he responded, and we headed over to the café.

I grabbed some money from the wallet in my locker and bought some sodas for the two of us. At a table between the stairs and the Jacuzzi, I asked Cristian about his thoughts on cross-dressers in Ecuador. While he said that he does not like them, his response was not tinged with anger or disgust like it was with Alejo and Andrew. “So, do you believe that there is a difference between drag queens and transvestites?” I asked. “I think they are the same, but I have seen videos of the drag queens performing on YouTube. I have a few friends who are gay and they showed me,” he responded. I was a little shocked since he made it clear that no one knows about
his sexual experimentations. “Do they know that you are ‘just trying things?’” I questioned.

“No,” he maintained, with a smile and a laugh.

Like Alejo and Andrew before him, Cristian believes that the people of Ecuador do not like transvestites. However, unlike them he does not equate cross-dressing with sex workers or the transgender community, and it does not even cross his mind. He believes that wearing women’s clothing is a requirement to be considered a transvestite, and because of this he is not sure whether he would be able to tell if he saw one in the spas or not. “I think I would know, but I’m not sure,” he said. “How could you be sure unless they came out and told you?” After hearing so many different men insist that they would be able to tell whether a man was a transvestite on sight, even if they had never met the person beforehand or seen them cross-dress, Cristian’s comment was somewhat refreshing, and I could not help the small smile that crept up on my face.

While he may be naïve in many respects, Cristian seems to be more open-minded and understanding than many other men in the spas, even if he does not know it. I wondered if the media may have played a part in forging his ideas, but he does not believe that this is the case. “I have never seen anything about the gay community on television,” he said, but admits that he has seen things on the internet. Since he and I first met on the internet, he says that he has met several other men and made friends. Some of these friends are the same ones that he believes do not know about his sexual experimentation. When I asked him why he thinks that they do not know, he curiously responded, “some people just want to experiment.”

Cristian chooses to meet men through social media as opposed to any other method. He has posted ads on many message boards and continues to do so, even while he continues his “relationship” with Gabriel. Besides the occasional man he gets the chance to meet at the spas,
he has also met men through Facebook and the WhatsApp social media application that often comes pre-downloaded on phones in Quito. In the case of WhatsApp, he looks for posts on sites such as Quitogay where people leave their WhatsApp contact information. He then contacts them directly. It must work for him, because he says that he has never had any bad experiences meeting men through social media.

As the evening was winding down and a large group of patrons left the spa en masse, Cristian wondered aloud where Gabriel was, since we had not seen him in some time. Wanting to head home before it got too dark, I asked if he has noticed any changes in Ecuadorian society regarding sex and sexuality. He insisted that he has not noticed any changes, but he also does not have anything to compare it to, since his worldview is limited to the goings on in Ecuador. Still, he is rapidly learning things through the internet even if he does not realize it. Heading back to the locker room so I could pack up my things, I asked if he wanted to catch the trolley together, since it is not safe to be in the streets alone after dark. “That’s okay,” he said. “I am going to wait for Gabriel. We said our goodbyes and I went on my way.

Since our initial meeting in person, I have run into Cristian (and Gabriel) several times in the spas. Sometimes they are together, but in the case of Gabriel, he is usually alone. Cristian and I remain in contact on Facebook, where he can often be found posting videos of musical artists like Britney Spears, Lady Gaga, and Demi Lovato, much like many openly gay young men in Quito. Even still, he continues to affirm that he is “just trying things.” His sexual identity is couched in a heterosexual framework, and any sexual behavior that does not fit in this paradigm is considered non-serious experimentation.

The men considered in this chapter define their personal identities in unique ways that are situated in their surroundings; in these cases, in erotic oases like the spas. They also attempt to
define others using their own assumptions about masculinities and what it means to be a man in Ecuador. They insist that race is never a factor in relationships with potential friends and sexual partners, yet easily identify their own races and ethnicities in general ways that may be inadequate or easily contestable when traveling to other locales. Finally, they struggle to understand or accept the differences between the transvestite and transgender men and women they encounter in the streets, and believe they have never seen them in the spas. However, the members of these communities are dynamic and nuanced. They are more than the stereotypical boxes these informants have placed them in, and in the spas, they are closer than they may think.
CHAPTER 4

NAKED TRANSVESTISM:
NEGOTIATING GENDER PERFORMANCE AND EROTICISM AMONG MEN

“We’re all born naked and the rest is drag.”

-RuPaul

It was a Friday night in early August when I walked into what was arguably Quito’s most popular gay disco. Unlike many of the LGBT hotspots in the United States, there were very few drag queens in attendance this night. In fact, the actual onstage performance included just one. The three others sitting along the wall, drinking, posing for pictures, and generally having a great time were there to support their friend in her weekly gig. One of them was performing a typical female presentation with basic makeup, a small wig, and a patterned dress that looked as if it had been purchased in a local mall. Her friend sitting in the center of the trio was performing a more over-the-top femininity with a big curly wig, red sequined dress, and thick theatrical makeup that made her eyes look much larger than they actually are. Finally, the third member of the group looked to be wearing a stage ensemble that blurred the lines of gender. She was wearing dark, olive green leggings with small boots, a small leather strap wrapped around her midsection and under her nipples, glitter covering every inch of her bare skin, outlandish costume-style makeup in silver and green around her eyes and shimmering green lipstick. Instead of a wig, she was wearing a large green headpiece made of papier-mâché and covered in green fabric that appeared as if it was designed to mimic a bull’s horns. When their friend took the stage, wearing a silver mini-dress, basic makeup, and what I assume was her own hair, they stood up and cheered, never moving to the front of the crowd so as not to take any attention away from the show. At the end of the performance, the group was joined by their friend, and they continued their revelry until it
was almost closing time. About twenty minutes before the lights came up, the members of the group gathered their things and snuck off to a room in the back of the building. When they returned to the main room, two of the girls had removed all their makeup and female garb and were now presenting as effeminate males. The other two did not seem to have a care in the world. Once they stepped outside and into the night, they walked over to a waiting taxi, agreed on a fee with the driver, and went on their way.

What makes a queen a queen? Identification as a drag queen or transvestite is an inherently subjective categorization, as fluid as it is personal. While many would argue that transvestism entails some aspect of cross-gender representation through choice of accoutrement, in the spas of Quito, Ecuador, where the wardrobe of the patrons is reduced to a towel or less, this is not necessarily the case. In the spas, cross-dressing males face an added layer of complexity and scrutiny, as patrons and potential sexual partners who find them undesirable in their cross-gender personas often see them in a new light while in a state of undress, or vice-versa.

In this chapter I consider the ways in which travesti identity is negotiated in public arenas in contemporary Quito. As noted by Connell, because few cross-dressers completely “pass,” there is a certain amount of physical and social risk to public performance (Connell 2005). This risk is elevated when potential bystanders, mates, or clients are unaware of the cultural differences between the drag queen, transvestite, and transgender communities. As such, I begin with a discussion of the current language used to describe and differentiate the communities. I then contemplate the current trends in cross-dressing in urban Ecuador, including the stigma (or lack thereof) surrounding alternative forms of gender representation and expression. Finally, I conclude with a commentary on the ways in which drag queens renegotiate their identities in the spa setting by either keeping their feminine personas hidden from potential mates, or by finding
other ways to express their femininity for the men that find cross-dressers desirable. Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui argues that “too often, in Latin America, the gay and the transvestite are synonymous” (2002: 10). In the spas, this is decidedly not the case.

THE TROUBLE WITH “TRANS”

Ecuador’s relationship with unconventional representations of gender dates to its pre-Hispanic past, as accounts of the role played enchaquirados – a homosexual harem of young male religious/sexual servants – exist as part of the colonial record, albeit overlooked as part of the nation’s official history. The rituals and ceremonial sacrifices of the temple-dwelling enchaquirados were fiercely protected by the priests from outside view, and the boys, raised to dress and live as women from childhood, were known to engage in sexual activity with the priests as a sign of religious sanctity (Benavides 2002). To this day, there are transgender populations of ancestral Ecuadorian heritage, especially in coastal communities, whose experience of gender and sexual diversity is clearly influenced by pre-Hispanic understandings of gender representations and norms. The Enchaquirados de Engabao is the first “trans ethnic” organization that advocates a local form of transgenderism that exists in the provinces of Guayas and Manabí, where inhabitants descend from the manteño-huancavilca pre-Hispanic culture in which gender was quite fluid. As of 2008, Ecuador’s constitution guarantees equality before the law without discrimination on the basis of gender identity. It also goes on to offer the right to “aesthetic freedom,” which has benefitted transgender and transvestite sex workers who in the past were subject to arrest on the grounds of “improper attire” (Jones 2013).
The meanings of “trans” – and subsequently what it means to be trans – are bound in both time and space. While the trans community has been woven into the fabric of society in parts of coastal Ecuador for centuries, in Quito, alternative gender representations remain predominantly marginalized in the public sphere. I argue that this is exacerbated by a lack of differentiation between the drag queen, transvestite, and transgender communities. The term ‘transvestism’ was not coined until the early part of the 20th century and not delineated from transsexualism until the 1960s, although it is fair to say the distinctions are still heavily debated and distorted in many public circles to this day.

Cross-dressing can be defined in myriad ways in myriad situations, but at its most basic we can agree that cross-dressing is an overarching umbrella that covers an array of people, activities, and sexualities, with the subversion of conventional notions of gender performance the resultant goal. In Latin America, those that fall under this umbrella are often known as *travestis*. However, not everyone accepts this catch-all categorization. For example, in their research on sex work and HIV in Mexico, César Infante, et al. take care to differentiate male, travesti, transgender, and transsexual sex workers, while in Brazil, Don Kulick argues that society is gendered as “men” and “not men,” with travestis sharing a gender category with women and homosexuals (Infante, Sosa-Rubi, Magali Cuadra 2009, Kulick 1998).

Transvestism is just one form of cross-dressing. It can be found anywhere from Ancient Greece and Rome to the aristocracy of France to the stages of London. It can be magical and ritualistic, artistic and professional, sexual and erotic. It can be any combination of the above or none at all. What transvestism is not is becoming a woman. In her classic study on transvestism in the United Kingdom, Annie Woodhouse shares that “transvestism does not mean becoming a woman in any sense of the term. Rather, it entails putting on the trappings of femininity (often in
a stereotypical manner with frilly or ‘erotic’ underwear, stilettos and heavy makeup), and relies on constructed appearance and masquerade. As such it bears little relation to reality as experienced by most women in everyday life” (1989: 125). This can be seen in the opening anecdote of the chapter with the girls in the disco performing an exaggerated femininity as drag queens with no pretense of actually being categorized as females.

Coming up in a largely working-class gay community in the United States, or the *ambiente* as it is known in Latin America, the term “tranny” was often used to refer to a transvestite or drag queen. Those who presented and/or identified themselves as transsexual, transgender, or being born into the wrong sex were simply identified as their chosen gender without question. Today, the term tranny has become largely pejorative, or at the very least contentious in the LGBT community. In Latin America, many of those who fall under the travesti umbrella or are in some way affiliated have been influenced by imagery including films, television programming and viral internet clips from the Western world. Today, it is not surprising to hear the term used among drag queens socializing in discos or the occasional sex worker in Quito’s tourist-heavy La Mariscal district.

There is often confusion when attempting to identify and understand gender representations among transvestite and transgender sex workers on the streets of Quito, with many people confusing the two groups or arguing that they are one in the same. It is typical to hear warnings from members of the LGBT community – in my experience, more from gay men than lesbians – to stay away from these sex workers, because they are likely to rob you in order to pay for surgeries to create a permanent feminine aesthetic. Some of the warnings suggest that the sex workers will rob you after they arrive at your apartment or hotel room, while others say they will rob you right on the street. There are also warnings that say they will take photos of you
in compromising positions to blackmail you, and warnings that they keep razorblades hidden in their hair to attack you when you are unprepared to defend yourself.\textsuperscript{15} Whatever the case, what these warnings never do is differentiate between the groups. Woodhouse argues that it may be easier “to consider the transvestite as a person who identifies himself as a man-who-dresses-as-a-woman. In contrast, the transsexual will identify himself as a woman who has the misfortune of a male body; the solution being, in his terms, hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgery” (1989: 19).\textsuperscript{16} While I agree with her assessment of transvestites, I would argue her attempts to define and identify transsexuals are hopelessly dated, as not all transgender males and females believe surgery and hormones are necessary, preferring instead to live their lives in whichever form they see fit.

THE CHANGING FACE OF URBAN TRANSVESTISM IN ECUADOR

Driving through Quito with friends on a Saturday night, we came across a scene involving the local police and several trans sex workers. The sex workers were dressed like stereotypical streetwalkers, wearing short dresses, impossibly high heels, and showing as much skin as possible. I quickly told my friends that we needed to pull over and hide on a side street so we would be able to witness the encounter without obstructing the police or facing their wrath. From our vantage point, which was admittedly hidden behind a car and a small tree, it appeared as if the officers were simply amusing themselves through harassment and intimidation of the girls. The three girls were not going to take the harassment silently, and their shouts and protestations could be heard clearly throughout the area. After several minutes of name-calling between the officers and the sex workers, the girls finally relented, reaching into their purses to
offer their identification cards for inspection. After looking over their identification for the briefest of moments, the officers gave each other a little laugh before returning them. The sex workers were defiant to the end, continuing to yell at the officers even as they got back into their patrol car to leave.

There are many different types of cross-dressers to be found in contemporary Quito, although times and places vary. In order to contemplate the varied nature of transvestism found in the city, it becomes necessary to explore the different avenues that may be taken for cross-gender representation. Says Woodhouse:

To state simply that a transvestite is a person who cross-dresses is, in itself, insufficient, as this fails to identify the aspects which specifically characterize the transvestite. Not all cross-dressers are transvestites. There are drag queens, professional female impersonators, transsexuals and cross-dressed prostitutes, but the transvestite cross-dresses not for money, entertainment, politics, nor because he is convinced that he really is a woman. He does it from perceived need, often expressed as compulsion, and because he enjoys it. (1989: x)

The primary outlets for cross-gender performance in Quito are as drag queens in the discos and as theatrical performers in modern dance troupes. Most of the gay discos have performance nights where one or several drag queens will perform, lip-syncing to songs of their choice as the crowds cheer them on. Some may perform while accepting tips from the crowd, while others have fully-fleshed out routines that are not to be interrupted by excited onlookers. The performers are most often in dresses, makeup and wigs, attempting an exaggerated femininity, although others want to look less like exaggerated females and more like passable women. They may have standing gigs in specific discos, take jobs wherever they can find them, or only
perform in local drag competitions. Unlike many of the drag queens in other parts of the world, most of the drag queens in Quito cannot earn enough money from their performances to make a decent living. They are often considered artists, unlike casual cross-dressers and transvestite sex workers. They may occasionally blur the lines of gender but not as much as the cross-dressers found in the local dance troupes.

In Quito, there are a number of contemporary dance troupes, such as the Colectivo Zeta, that typically create performances for the stage that challenge gender binaries. They instead choose to explore amalgamated representations of gender through androgyny, semi-nudity, and genderfuck. Their performances are highly choreographed with movements representative of both the masculine and the feminine, human and animal, young and old. The dancers in these troupes often perform in pieces of clothing designated for both genders, or neither, such as belt straps and strips of loose fabric worn in atypical ways. They almost always wear makeup, much like the genderfuck protagonists of the 1970’s. Woodhouse includes David Bowie, Alice Cooper and the New York Dolls in this group of famously male recording stars that were unafraid to wear women’s clothes while still idolized for their masculinity (1989: 19). In the 1980’s other male stars like Prince, Boy George, and Pete Burns continued the trend, leading to RuPaul in the early 1990’s reversing the trend, instead being revered for his statuesque femininity. Whereas the stage performances of the drag queens in Quito are attended by a primarily LGBT audience, the theaters used by the dance troupes are filled with art, music and dance aficionados of undefined sexual orientations. In these situations, it is clear who cross-dresses and who does not; in the spas, this is not so easy to determine.
WHEN DRAG QUEENS HIT THE SPAS

Sitting alone in the Jacuzzi at Tulipán Spa one evening, I could not help but notice the solitary older male standing on the staircase and staring down at me. Tall, skinny, and in desperate need of a haircut, he walked up and down the stairs several times, on each occasion conspicuously pausing to look between the iron bars lining the staircase. After the third time, I could not help but feel awkward, and I wished he would just come over and speak instead of making me feel increasingly uncomfortable. Finally, he made his way down the stairs and walked over to the Jacuzzi. Instead of speaking to me as I hoped, he quickly disrobed and climbed in, sitting down directly next to me. Once he put his hand on my thigh, I informed him of my status as a researcher and that I was not looking for any type of sexual encounter. Not ready (or willing) to give up he finally spoke, asking, “Do you like transvestites? I have some pictures.” Realizing he was not going to stop, I quickly got up from my quiet spot in the warm waters of the Jacuzzi and went on my way.

How does one determine who is and who is not a transvestite in the spas, and how do cross-dressers announce their femininity while still presenting themselves as male? While Woodhouse found her access to the transvestite population was made easier due to her womanhood, in my case, I found that my status as a foreign male in the spas interested in the experiences of Ecuadorian men (including cross-dressers) allowed me unfiltered access in almost every conversation I had.

It is not easy to determine who may be a cross-dresser in the spas. Woodhouse argues that cross-dressing “is not deviant in and of itself but only when the reason for its occurrence is not deemed ‘legitimate;’ that is, when time place and audience are inappropriate” (1989: 15).
Whether at a drag show, a theatrical performance, or possibly a dark street corner, seeing transvestites and transgender women and men in Quito is a fairly-normal occurrence, but finding a man in full hair and makeup at a spa would be an unusual sight! The social conventions of the spas dictate that it is a male-oriented space and the people inside will physically present themselves as such even if their personal behavior may be deemed as effeminate. Transvestism on the other hand, is “the performance of gender, a performance of what historically and culturally gets labeled ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’” (Sifuentes-Jáuregui, 2002: 3). You will never find a cross-dresser presenting as such in the spas, so they must find alternative ways to perform their femininity.

Many cross-dressers in the spas, including the drag queens discussed in the following three sections, bring pictures of themselves presenting as females and will keep them in their lockers or stored on their phones, offering to show them to anyone that may be interested. The photographs may be for men curious about their feminine presentation as an art form, for local fans of their shows, and/or for men that are interested in the photos for reasons of a more sexual nature. Woodhouse would argue that this may be important for many cross-dressers and their admirers because “the construction of sexuality does not associate masculine clothing with eroticism” (1989: 142). By selecting the right photographs, the cross-dresser may be able to project a future or otherwise hidden femininity for a potential sexual partner that would only see them in a masculine light in the spa setting.

There are also many cross-dressers, and in particular drag queens, that go to the spas together. They often continue to refer to themselves and each other using female pronouns, although the men around them may continue to refer to them using male pronouns unless told otherwise. Of the three drag queens in the following sections, Lorena is referred to by male
pronouns in the spas, Sofia is referred to mostly by male pronouns, and Carolina is most often referred to by female pronouns in or out of drag, since this is her preferred choice. These distinctions may change when they refer to each other or in conversations with other drag queens, but not when they are discussed by the men around them. The girls are at various stages in their drag careers. Lorena has just made the transition to drag performance, yet she continues to perform with a modern dance troupe on a regular basis. Sofia has been performing in drag for several years and has honed her craft with arguably dozens of performances. Still, Sofia has not been performing anywhere near as long as Carolina, who has been performing as a drag queen longer than most people in Quito, at least according to her. Carolina not only hones her craft on stage but will play and experiment with gender representation whenever the mood strikes her. This may be in her apartment with friends or in public when she is feeling more brazen. While Lorena, Sofia, and Carolina may all be at various performance stages and skill levels and have various other things going on in their lives, they still have at least two things in common: their love of drag and female impersonation and their love of spending time in the spas.

“LORENA”

I first noticed Chucho when he came racing into the Tulipán Spa locker room one Tuesday evening after he finished work for the day. Dressed casually in a colorfully-striped polo shirt and jeans he quickly undressed, wrapped on a towel, and raced upstairs. Throughout the evening, he moved quickly and constantly between installations, and I assumed he was looking for a sexual partner or perhaps some friends he had planned on meeting at the spa. However, I found him introducing himself and chatting with several different men. The conversations
amounted to small talk about their jobs or current events, nothing too serious or too heavy. When he walked back into the sauna for probably the third time and saw that I was sitting in the room alone, our conversation and our friendship began.

“When I saw you, I thought you were Arab.”

I have been called a lot of things in my day, but I must admit, this was a first. “No, I am Puerto Rican and African-American,” I responded.

“What’s your name?”

“Ronnie and you? What’s your name?”

“Chucho.”

And with that auspicious introduction, we began a conversation of several hours. After chatting for a few minutes in the sauna, Chucho suggested that we head downstairs to the Jacuzzi and continue our conversation there. As we walked toward the hot tub, a couple that had been using it for several hours quickly got up and left, giving us plenty of room to relax and talk without fear of anyone overhearing. Our conversation was wide-ranging, encompassing his personal conceptions of gender and sexuality, life in Quito as an openly gay man, and some surprise cross-dressing twists that I never saw coming.

I quickly found that conversing with Chucho set my anthropological mind into overdrive, since he regularly challenges Ecuadorian cultural norms with abandon. Yet he also knows that his thoughts on gender and gender performance are not always shared with mainstream society, so he has learned to navigate between his day job as a government employee and his extracurricular activities. Still, our conversation (and his openness) was made of the stuff that scholars of gender and sexuality in Latin America could only dream of. At twenty-six years old at the time of our first meeting, Chucho looks several years younger than his actual age. Not
particularly tall, he has a lithe yet muscular dancer’s body, and he regularly sits in poses that seem as if they would be painful to anyone without extensive practice. This has less to do with his day job in the municipal government and more to do with his spot as a performer in a local contemporary dance troupe at night. Although he is trained in many techniques including ballroom and modern dance and still enters dance competitions at the national level, his work with the dance troupe is quite different; the group’s contemporary performances and choreography are designed to challenge binary conceptions of gender and sexuality in Latin America.

Originally from the Imbabura province of Ecuador, Chucho came to Quito to go to school, and he loved the city so much that he just never left. He speaks highly about his time in college, noting proudly that he has studied English since he was a child, but he really got into it during his university years. He currently speaks lilted English and can converse for hours, but he still prefers to write in Spanish. He earned a degree in architecture from a well-known Ecuadorian university, and was able to quickly find a job with the municipal government of Quito after graduation, but admits that he still feels unfulfilled with his education. Longingly, he shared: “I really want to go back to school and get a social science degree in the study of gender, but I can’t find the time for school with my job. After work, I usually don’t have a lot of time before I go to rehearsal.”

Chucho openly identifies as gay and is not closeted in any way. His family knows that he is gay, as does his boss and all his female co-workers. They all accept him and his sexuality, except for a single uncle who does not agree with his “choice” and consistently gives him problems. His experience with publicly expressing his sexual identity is different than the previously discussed informants. I realized how lucky he is, and he seemed to realize it, as well.
“I know a lot of gay people in Quito that don’t tell their families anything, but I tell my family everything and they don’t care. They still love me.”

It seemed that Chucho’s family has had a positive impact on his life, so I asked him if he could tell me more about them. “I have a really good relationship with my family,” he said.

“Even though they live in another city, which is all the way in Imbabura, I still go and visit them all the time. Whenever I have a boyfriend and I think the relationship is good, I bring him to visit my family with me. My mother and father still live in the same house that we lived in when I was a kid, and when we go visit them they treat us just like if I had a girlfriend. You can see pictures on my Facebook. It’s like we’re all family.” By all accounts, his relationship with his family is great and they in no way inhibit his behavioral choices. He is not judged for his sexuality and he and his partner are both embraced.

“So, what was your childhood like?” I asked. “I know it was where your parents live and not here in Quito, but what did you for fun?”

“I think my childhood was just like everyone else. I think I was a normal child. I used to go outside and play with my friends all the time. I took dance lessons, and I know that I was a little different than most of the boys that I knew, but none of the kids in my neighborhood ever said anything bad to me about my dancing. In my dance classes, I wasn’t the only boy, and I still talk to a lot of the other boys because we still see each other at dance competitions.”

“Does that mean you still have the same friends now that you did when you were a kid?”

“I have a lot of the same friends, but I’ve lost contact with a lot of people since I moved to Quito. I still try to meet with people when I go back home, and when they come to Quito we spend time together going to discos or restaurants. Sometimes the other dancers will come to my performances. I guess I do have the same friends!”
Chucho clearly has fond memories of his childhood and life with his family and friends, and I started to wonder if his relationships with them played out in such a positive way due to religion or a lack of faith. He and his family consider themselves Catholic although they do not attend regular religious services. And even though he does not go to church, he still wears a cross around his neck—his *santo*—and he never takes it off unless he is in costume for a performance.

“Do you think religion plays an important part in your life?” I asked.

“I don’t think so. I am Catholic. I know I don’t go to church, but I still think I’m Catholic. I just don’t think religion is a significant part of my life. My family, too. Well, except for the religious holidays that are important in Ecuador. You know, sometimes there will be a holiday because of religion and we all get the days off from work. We celebrate that and take a vacation!” he laughs. “Look, I believe religion plays a part in our society in Ecuador, and that is the reason that the gay community has it so hard.”

“But you still wear your santo around your neck,” I noted.

“I know, but that is what we do here. If you look around, you will see that a lot of people wear them. It’s just what we do here. Most of the people probably don’t go to church. They probably don’t even pray.”

“Do you pray? You don’t seem like religion bothers you too much, and you still say that you’re Catholic.”

“I don’t pray all the time, but sometimes. It depends on the situation. If I am at a wedding or a ceremony where there is a priest or someone that wants to pray, then I will.”

As we sat in the Jacuzzi talking, other men, mostly couples, frequently hopped in and out of the water. Chucho made sure to greet everyone even though they have never met. He is clearly comfortable in the spas and in no way worried about running into people from his daily
life. As another couple left the Jacuzzi and we were left alone once more, I began to question him on his ideas about sex, spas, and society, in general.

“Do you remember your first experience with sex?” I asked, and he quickly began to laugh at the memory.

“Yes, I remember!” he responded, still laughing. “I was still a teenager, and it was with one of my friends that was also a dancer. His parents weren’t home, but I don’t remember where they were. Anyway, I was at his house after class one day. We were in his room, and we were the only people there, so we just decided to do it. Neither of us knew what we were doing. I mean we really didn’t know! It was awkward, but now I laugh about it. Whenever I see him when I go back to visit my family, we both laugh about it. I also did some sexual things with some of my cousins, but that wasn’t sex. They don’t talk about it now.”

“So, have you only had sex with men or have you had sex with women, too?”

“Ronnie, I am gay. Why would I have sex with a woman?” It is important to note that Chucho’s sexual identity as gay and his sexual behavior as a man who has sex with men always remain in sync, unlike Alejo and Andrew, who identify as bisexual but only have sex with other males.

“You never know,” I said. “Sometimes things happen. Maybe you weren’t sure you were gay or maybe you just wanted to try it?”

“That’s true sometimes but not for me. I have only had sex with men. I have always known that I am gay, and I am okay with that. I will never have sex with a woman. One time, I went to a bar with some of my co-workers and we got so drunk! One of them asked me to have sex with her, but even though I was drunk, I was still gay!”

“Does this mean you’ve never been to a chongo?”
“No, but I have friends who go, and some of the guys at my job talk about them. I don’t like them. I think they are bad for women. It’s stupid if you think about it. Why are you going to pay a woman to have sex with you? Why can’t you meet someone? Instead you want to pay a woman who is just trying to make money because she doesn’t have another job. I bet if they saw the woman on the street or when they are with their friends, they will pretend they don’t even know her! Men get to have sex, but the women get the stigma. It’s not fair. It’s just like with the gay community; we always get the stigma.”

It is clear Chucho has put a lot of thought into the position held by the chongos in Ecuadorian society, and I cannot help but smile. I wondered if he is just as passionate about the spas and their position in the MSM community. “Can you tell me about your experiences with the spas?” I asked. “What do you think of them?”

“I like the spas. Gay people need a place to go whenever they want. I think the community will have trouble if they are in public, so if they go to the spas they don’t have to worry about it. Like when we have events for gay pride here in Quito, most of the people are happy and having fun, but there are always people who scream mean things and try to mess everything up. It doesn’t happen here. I spend a lot of time coming here to Tulipán when I’m not in a relationship or when I don’t have rehearsal. Sometimes when I have a boyfriend I still come here with him. It doesn’t matter.”

“Does that mean you still remember the first time you came to a spa?”

“It was here! That’s probably why it’s my favorite. I heard about it from some of my gay friends. The first time, I came with just one of my friends, and I was so excited! I couldn’t believe a place like this was real. There’s music, you can have sex, you can meet people, you can do whatever you want! The first time, we just walked around and relaxed. The next time, I came
alone because I already knew what it was like. Now I usually come by myself just in case I meet somebody for sex. If I don’t meet anyone, I keep the condom from the locker just in case I meet someone the next time. You only get one!”

Intrigued by his equally passionate thoughts on the spas and their value to the MSM community, I wondered if he thinks there are similarities between the chongos and the spas. Yet he does not believe the two are comparable, although there is sex in both places. “Society doesn’t care about the chongos and what goes on there because the men like them. If you ask the same people about a gay sauna, they’re going to think it’s disgusting even though they don’t know anything about them, and they have never been to them. It’s going to be disgusting because gay people are there.”

“So, let’s talk about you and the people in the spas,” I said, slightly changing the subject. “How do you decide who you are going to have sex with or who you are going to be friends with? Is it about the color of their skin or something else?”

“It’s nothing like that. I can tell if people want to have sex with me or not by the way they look at me. Sometimes I will start a conversation with people, and if I think we have a connection, maybe we’ll go to a cabina and have sex, but not always. Sometimes, we might just be friends. I don’t care about their race or anything, I am Latino, just like most of the other people in Ecuador, so it’s not important. But I really like Cubans! I can’t help it!”

“Do you meet a lot of Cubans here?” I wondered.

“Not a lot, but I can always tell. I’m really good at that.”

“You thought I was Arab,” I quickly reminded him.

“Okay, maybe I’m not!” he laughed.
Remembering how Chucho mentioned he keeps his spare condoms just in case he may need them on a future date, I asked him whether he believes safe sex is common in the spas. He believes that a lot of people have unprotected sex even though they get a free condom when they arrive because they just do not care. Chucho and I have seen each other in the spas several times, and each time he puts the condom in his bag and closes his locker, walking around without it. I have also seen him leave to have sexual encounters with various men, yet neither he nor the partner have had condoms with them. It appears that he is one of the many men indifferent about safe sex in the spas.

Shifting gears, I asked, “You seem to be really open about your sexuality and you don’t have any problems. Do you think the gay community in Quito in general is more open now than they used to be in the past?”

“I don’t know, maybe? Yes, I guess the community is more open.”

“Is this a good thing or a bad thing?”

“I don’t know. How should I put this?” he pondered. “Look, I still don’t think it’s safe for gay people. Like, I take a taxi everywhere I go after dark because it’s not safe. Everybody does. It’s just something that we do here in Quito. It doesn’t matter if I am just going a few streets and I can walk. I still ride in a taxi. I don’t know if it’s because I think someone will rob me because I’m gay or rob me just because I’m in the street by myself at night. I think it’s good that people are more open, but there are still problems, and I don’t know when that will change.”

“I imagine it’s even harder for drag queens.”

“I know it is! I know lots of drag queens, and they have to be careful. Especially at night when everyone is drunk and leaving the bars.” Clearly our next topic of conversation needed to be a discussion on gender performance and transvestism in Quito.
“You do a lot of things with gender in your dance troupe with the choreography and the costumes,” I said. “How do you feel about transvestites in Quito?”

“I don’t have a problem with the travestis, or transgender people, or drag queens. But I don’t like the prostitutes who are men wearing women’s clothes because they are dangerous!” Like many others, Chucho equates transvestites with the cross-dressing sex workers in Quito, not knowing whether they consider themselves transvestites or transgender. He insisted that they are dangerous, although he thinks all prostitutes on the street are dangerous regardless of gender. I was somewhat surprised since he has given so much thought and consideration to gender representation in his performances and as a potential future scholar. He did note that drag queens are performers, and lots of straight people come to see them perform in shows. However, he also differentiates the performance of gender in his dance troupe with that of drag queens performing in clubs. In the troupe, they like to play with mainstream binary ideas about gender by blurring the lines between male and female. In their shows, the performers dance in an amalgamation of male and female clothing. While drag queens may have some straight audience members in an audience dominated by members of the LGBT community, the dance troupe performs for theater and dance aficionados and a largely mixed audience.

“Do you think you would know if someone in the spas was a drag queen or a transvestite?” I asked, as a spa employee walked over to the Jacuzzi to let us know they were closing for the night.

“I would definitely know if I saw a transvestite or a drag queen here,” he responded. “There aren’t that many drag queens in Quito and I know all of them from going to the discos. Plus, I come here a lot so I recognize a lot of people.” Here, Chucho is treating transvestites and
drag queens as a single category as opposed to differentiating them as he did before. As it turns out, he was much more familiar with drag queens than I previously imagined.

“I can’t believe we are talking about drag queens, because two days ago, I went out in drag for the first time,” he shared.

“Really?” I asked, somewhat incredulous at the odds.

“Yes! Let’s go to the locker room and get dressed so I can show you the pictures from Saturday night on my phone.”

Looking at his pictures, I could not help but notice that for his first time in drag, his aesthetic was quite polished. I can see that in drag, much like the performances of his dance troupe, Chucho is interested in the genderfuck style of presentation. He agreed, but shared that he is currently unsure of how to do this in the gay disco scene as opposed to the theater. On his first foray into the world of drag, he shared that he got help from experienced drag queens in the community with his makeup and clothing (which explains the polished look in his pictures), and he now considers them his mentors.

“So, how was your first experience in drag? Did you like it?”

“It was so much fun! But I need to come up with a name. That’s really important! I still have to figure it out. I want one that really fits my character. I’ll let you know when I come up with something.”

We got dressed, and as we walked out the front door of Tulipán Spa, the employees had already started the cleanup process. Chucho suggested that we continue our conversation at a local deli, and I quickly agreed. He wanted to take a taxi, but I convinced him that we could walk since it was only about five minutes away. On our way there, we continued to discuss his drag debut. Although this was a new and liberating experience for him, he admitted that he is at a
crossroads both internally and within his public life. He shared that he would like to cross-dress as a political act as opposed to simply performing, making sure to note that he still does not consider himself a drag queen (at least not yet), but during the day he has his job with the government, and he is worried that these two sides of his life may not mix. He believes that getting a graduate degree in gender studies at FLACSO or the Universidad de Buenos Aires will help him to alleviate some of these tensions that he is facing.

Over sandwiches and sodas, I asked, “How do you identify your gender?”

“I’m a boy,” he stated succinctly, in English. Even though he does drag, he does not consider himself female and considers his burgeoning drag persona strictly a character. Still, his friends in the drag community sometimes refer to him using female pronouns even when he is not dressed in female attire because they know about his work with his dance troupe. This does not bother him.

“So, how are transvestites treated here in Ecuador?” I asked.

“They are treated like shit just like the gays! The drag queens have it a little bit better because they are performers. On stage everyone will applaud them, but in the street, we are all the same. That’s just the way it is. I would never walk around in drag!” It is clear that Chucho enjoys drag and the personal freedom that he gets from challenging gender norms, but he is still wary about what society may say. His beliefs are intrinsically tied into what he thinks it means to be a man in Ecuador.

“Has what it means to be a man in Ecuador changed?” I asked, wondering if he has seen any changes that mirror what is going on in the rest of the world.

“I’ve actually thought a lot about this. I haven’t seen any changes in the ways that men act. They still act like they always have to be tough, and they don’t care about the gay
community at all. Well, I should say that the straight men I know respect me because they already know me, but it would be different if they just saw me on the street. Gay people still can’t hold hands or kiss in public because they will be hurt or killed. Heterosexual men don’t believe gay men are real men.”

“Is that all men?” I countered.

“It’s most men. Look, I think you can be masculine and gay and heterosexual guys don’t. But I also think that you can’t be a feminine male and be a heterosexual. They probably don’t want to admit they are gay because they know in our country they won’t be accepted.”

“And what about in the spas? I see a lot of different people there.”

“In the spas, everybody has to be a man. That’s the only rule! You’re not treated differently because you’re gay. I talk to everyone whether they are masculine or feminine because in the spas we are all equal.”

“What about when women are around? Do men and women act differently when they’re all together?”

“I know that we all have our own ideas, but I think that women believe men are supposed to be macho and strong, and if they’re not then they must be gay. Men think they need to act macho when women are around or people are going to joke about them. It’s like a big circle! I act the same around everyone because I don’t want to pretend. The girls that I work with talk differently in front of me than other men because they know I’m gay. They are used to me.”

As our conversation began to wind down and the side streets around the deli emptied in the dark of night, I started to wonder if popular culture influenced Chucho’s ideas on sex, sexuality, and what it means to be a man in Quito. “Do you think the media plays a part in society’s ideas about sexuality?” I asked.
“I don’t think the media has any effect on society. Gay people still have it bad. There are gay movies and television shows that they can buy or watch on the internet, but only gay people watch them so it doesn’t change anything.”

“So, what do you think about social media sites like Facebook or message boards? Do you prefer to meet men there or in the spas or somewhere else?”

“I prefer to meet people in person, because you can’t see the real person on the internet. I have Facebook and WhatsApp on my phone, but I only use it to talk to people I already know.”

“You say you don’t use them to meet people, but they are very popular here. Why do you think some people choose to meet online instead of in person?”

“That’s obvious! They go on the internet because they’re afraid of going to gay places where they might be seen. I’ve never had this problem because people don’t need to use the internet if they are out of the closet. That’s why they go to the spas, too. I think you see a lot of married men in the spas because they won’t be caught by their wives.”

Getting up from our seats to throw our garbage in the trash and head home, I asked Chucho what changes he thought society still needed to make in relation to sexuality. His answer seemed so simple, yet hopeful. “I just wish society would be comfortable with the gay community so I can hold hands in public and not worry. I know there are problems, but I think that will change in the future. I hope it will.”

Before leaving the deli, we made sure to exchange information, including Facebook accounts. At this point, Chucho was adamant that he was not going to walk anywhere and insisted I share a taxi with him, although I had no problem taking the short walk back to my apartment. In the back of the taxi, he reminded me that he knows a lot of people and offers to introduce me to them. Upon arriving home I had already received a message from him on
Facebook, saying that he was really happy that I wanted to tell his story. He ended his message by saying, “This is good. I can tell you how I feel in this process.”

Chucho and I have remained in touch through Facebook, chatting about the things that are going on in his life. He contacted me about a week after our first meeting to tell me that he had decided on a name for his character, and to ask me to follow the profile page he created for his alter ego. Seconds later, I received a request to follow a new page: Lorena. In just a few short weeks, he began regularly performing in drag in the local discos, constantly promoting his performances on his personal Facebook page as well as on Lorena’s, just as his mentors in the drag community taught him. He found a partner who came to his performances regularly, although that relationship ended badly after his partner was unfaithful. Since then he began a relationship with his current partner, and in all their time together, he has only promoted a single performance from Lorena. It appears the work he spends challenging gender norms through drag is inherently dependent on his status a single gay male. Sofia does not have the same problem.

“SOFIA”

While Chucho insists his drag persona is simply a character, Sofia’s lives in and out of drag are more fully integrated. I was introduced to Manuel on a Friday night by Chucho, who had invited me to go to a disco with him and his friends. While Chucho was not in drag, Manuel was. The members of our group paid our entrance fees at the door and quickly headed backstage, where Manuel was half-dressed, eyes staring intently at an old mirror while he applied his makeup. There was a big drag show taking place that night and several performers were crowded in the room getting ready for their moments on stage. When Manuel saw Chucho, he
instinctively called him Lorena and began using female pronouns. Chucho, in turn, referred to Manuel by his drag name, Sofia.

Since she has already built a significant following in Quito, Sofia took the stage near the end of the show, and the crowd roared. As she lip-synced and gyrated to a contemporary Latin pop song, the crowd sang along and threw their hands in the air, dutifully acknowledging all the work she put into preparing her routine. After just a few short minutes, the performance was done, and Sofia went backstage until the show was completely finished so she would not steal any focus from the other performers. At the end of the show, Sofia met us at the bar still in drag. Jovially greeting everyone who came up to say hello or congratulate her on a job well done, she gave all her well-wishers a kiss on the cheek, clearly pleased with the reaction her performance provoked. When she finally finished her greetings, Chucho introduced us.

“This is my friend Ronnie,” Chucho shared in Spanish. “He is from the United States, and he’s doing a study on some of the people in the gay community here in Quito and what they think about the spas.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said, with a quick kiss on the cheek. Can I be a part of your study? I have a lot to say!”

“Of course, you can,” I responded. “I am interested in your thoughts.”

“Good!” she replied. “Give me your phone number, and I will give you mine, and you can come to my apartment tomorrow and interview me.” Grabbing a drink, she went on her way to greet more people and bathe in the adoration of her fans.

The next day, I called Sofia in the early afternoon, not sure if she was working or otherwise engaged. Surprisingly, she picked up on the first ring, and recognizing my number
exclaimed, “Hola, Ronnie!” When I responded with an “Hola, Sofia,” she shared, “We’re not in the disco, you can call me Manuel or Manny.”

After quickly giving me his address and some basic directions, I decided it would be easier to just take a taxi so I would not get lost. I arrived at Manuel’s apartment about an hour later, and he had prepared a light lunch including some freshly-squeezed juice. We sat down in the living room, since he did not want to miss the end of his favorite telenovela. Except for the occasional glance at the screen, Manuel was quite attentive and engaged in the conversation and had definite ideas about masculinity and sexuality in Quito.

Manuel is a 36-year-old Latino male. Although he does drag, he is clear that he personally identifies as a gay male. He speaks very limited English, and the few words and phrases he does know he has learned from listening to English music and trying to learn the lyrics, and from watching American television and movies with subtitles in Spanish. He completed his education through high school, but chose not to continue his studies in college. “I hated school,” he said. “Why would I want to do more of it?” Instead of a career that requires a college degree, Manuel’s primary source of income comes from performing as a drag queen in several local discos, and he is always looking to add more gigs. He does not make much money, and when he is really struggling to make ends meet, he will take on other low-paying jobs. But these jobs never last. They are often billed as short-term or day work, but sometimes he will apply for a job that may be listed as long-term and will quit or just stop showing up to work when he has earned the money he needs. “I just cannot be in a regular job. I’ll go crazy! Some people like going to work every day, and that’s good for them. But I like doing drag and being creative. It makes me happy. What’s wrong with that?”
Over lunch, I began to ask Manuel about his family life, including his childhood and any religious affiliations his family may have. His familial situation is fairly typical, with nothing too out of the ordinary as compared to the other informants. “My mother and father are still alive and married, and I have two sisters, and they are both married already. My first sister’s husband is okay. We are not friends or anything, but he does not seem homophobic. My other sister’s husband is different. I can tell that he doesn’t like me. He doesn’t say anything, but I can tell when he looks at me. It’s like he is disgusted. He doesn’t talk to me when our family gets together. He acts like I am not there. My sister and I still talk like families do, but when we do things together like go to lunch or dinner at a restaurant, her husband does not join us.”

“Do they know that you do drag?”

“No! They know that I am gay, but they have never seen me do drag. Everyone else knows, just not my family.” Here he is emphatic that his family does not know about his performances in drag, and I cannot help but notice that while he has come out of one closet, his identity as a drag queen is still hidden in another. This shows that he believes there are levels to the stigma faced by the gay community, with drag queens being lower than a masculine-presenting gay male.

“But your family relationship is okay?”

“Yes. I cannot complain. My roommate doesn’t have a relationship with her family. At least I have something.” I did not know Manuel had a roommate until this moment, but I soon found out that I knew his roommate all along.

“So, what was your childhood like?” I asked. “What did you do for fun?”

“I loved being a child! We used to have so much fun. Being a child, you can be so free and not have to worry about paying stupid bills. My sisters and I still talk about when we were
children. I never wanted to play soccer or do anything with the boys. I was always with the girls.

I spent most of my time with my sisters and their friends in the neighborhood.”

“So, do you have any of the same friends now as an adult that you did when you were a child? Your sisters’ friends, maybe?”

“No, I don’t have the same friends. My sisters tell me about some of our old friends, but I haven’t seen them in many years.”

“Can you tell me about religion?” I asked. “Is religion important in your life, or is it important to your family?”

“Well, I don’t practice religion, but I still believe in God. My family was never serious about religion like a lot of other people. We had pictures of saints in the house when we were kids like a lot of other people, but we didn’t go to church. My mom would probably say we are Catholic, but we never got baptized or anything.”

“Do you think religion is important to society in Ecuador?”

“I do! I think religion is very important in Ecuador. People use religion as an excuse for so many different things. But sometimes it helps. I see a lot of nuns doing things for charity. I love nuns! They don’t bother anyone. They just want to be good people.” With laughter, he adds: “Maybe I should be a nun!”

In probably the worst segue ever, I shifted gears from Manuel envisioning what life would be like as a nun – he decided he wanted to create a nun costume to wear for one of his performances – to discussing his experiences with sex, sexuality, and the spas in Quito.

“Can you tell me about your first experience with sex?” I asked, and he started to giggle.

“I don’t remember the first time!” he responded. The look in his eyes told me that he actually does remember, but he just did not want to share.
“So, have you had experiences with only men? Or women? Men and women?”

Laughing uproariously, Manuel responded, “Only men! Do you really think I would ever have sex with a woman?”

“A lot of people try a lot of different things,” I replied. “Maybe you were curious and wanted to try. Maybe just to experiment?”

“I like to try things, but I don’t want to try having sex with a woman!”

At this point I found out that his roommate had been home all along. From the other room, we heard, “You are so loud, local!” and Manuel laughed even harder.

“He asked if I ever had sex with a woman!” Manuel shouted back. His roommate responded, “Puta, you are a woman!”

After the laughter subsided, and Manuel brought our dishes into the kitchen, I asked if he had ever been to a chongo. After the laughter over my last question I was sure I knew the answer was no. However, he had much more to say than I would have thought.

“I have never actually been to a chongo, but I know so many of the girls. I know a lot of prostitutes. Sometimes they come to the discos to see the shows, and whenever I walk by they always say hello. I think we have a connection because society treats us equally; like shit! They act like we do not exist, so we have that in common. I will always say hello to them when I am in drag or when I’m not. They deserve respect just like everyone else. We do, too.” It is interesting to note that he feels a camaraderie with the female sex workers and thinks of them with high regard, yet he has never been to their place of business even though they have been to his. It is possible that the disconnect is due to the belief that the chongos are place of business built on strict heterosexuality.

“So, you mentioned that you have not been to a chongo, but have you been to the spas?”
“Of course, I love them!”

“What do you think of them?”

“I go all the time. Well, at least once a week. I really like them because they have Jacuzzis and steam rooms and lots of people. When you don’t have a lot of money, you can’t get an apartment in a building with those things. In a spa, you can have those things and still meet new people without paying too much rent. I usually go with my roommate Juan or with some other friends.”

“How do you remember the first time that you went?”

“No. I have been there so many times that I don’t remember.”

“It sounds like you know a lot about the spas since you go all the time, and you know about chongos even though you have never gone to one. Do you think there are similarities between the spas and the chongos?”

“I think they are a little bit equal because of the sex, but they are also different because you have to pay for sex in a chongo. Why pay for it when you can find someone for free?”

“Does Ecuadorian society see them equally?”

“Absolutely not. The chongos are everywhere. Everybody knows about them. No one knows about the spas except the gay community. It’s like a secret.”

“Okay, let’s talk about when you are in the spas. How do you decide who you want to have sex with and who you want to be friends with?”

“Ronnie,” he laughed, “I’ll have sex with anyone.” At this point his roommate shouted from his bedroom, “He likes indios!” and they both laughed. Clearly these two roommates have a great relationship and truly enjoy each other’s company.

“So, tell me, do people usually use condoms in the spas?”
“I think so. They don’t have to pay for them, so they should. I do. If I didn’t, I would probably be dead. Yes, I think they do.”

“You seem to be a very open person, Manuel. You just met me and you are already talking about having sex in spas. Are you this open with everybody?”

“Yes, of course. I have always been this way.”

“Well tell me, what about when you get a job during the day? Are you this open about your sexual identity with them?”

“Okay, that is different. I don’t usually go to the job and say. ‘Hello, I’m gay!’ But I sometimes talk about being a drag queen to the girls. It depends. But I am sure they all know that I’m gay. It’s obvious.”

At this point, Manuel’s roommate came out of the room to introduce himself, and he greeted me with a little scream like we had previously met but had not seen each other for some time. I did not recognize him, but it turned out we had been acquaintances for several years. I had seen Juan, Manuel’s best friend and roommate, perform as his alter ego Carolina several years earlier when I was still a study abroad student. Due to a potentially embarrassing situation at the end of her performance (discussed in detail in the following section), Carolina and I had been acquainted ever since. Here we exchanged pleasantries, and Juan headed out for the day, leaving Manuel and I to continue our conversation.

“So, what is it like with two drag queens living together?”

“It is great! You never have to worry about someone asking why you have women’s clothes. Well, it is good and bad. Carolina leaves clothes everywhere!”

“Do I even need to ask how you feel about transvestites?”

“I am a transvestite! I’m a tranny!”
After explaining a little bit of the controversy surrounding the word “tranny” in the United States, Manuel replied by simply stating, “things are different here. I’m a transvestite and a tranny.” In this case, Manuel chooses to identify in a way that may be deemed contentious in the U.S., but lacks the same connotations among his group of friends.

“Can you tell me if there is a difference between transvestites and drag queens?”

“That’s easy. They are the same, but they are also different. A drag queen is a transvestite, but a transvestite does not have to be a drag queen. A drag queen knows how to perform. A transvestite is just dressed like a woman.”

“So, it is okay to call drag queens transvestites?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And how are drag queens treated in Ecuador?

“Oh, my God, it is dangerous to be a drag queen! If you are not careful, you will get beat up or robbed. It happens all the time!”

“A lot of people have told me that I need to watch out for the transvestite prostitutes on the street. What do you think?”

“It is true that a lot of them carry weapons, but they are just trying to protect themselves! If people spoke to them, they would know that they are not dangerous.” Manuel’s perspective about the dangers on the streets are measured when compared to some of the other informants. In this case, Manuel believes that cross-dressers, in this case drag queens, are the ones that need to worry about being beaten or robbed. On the other hand, he acknowledges the weapons carried by the sex workers but believes they are for defensive purposes.

“And do you think you would know if someone was a transvestite or a drag queen if you met them in a spa?”
“Definitely. I know all the drag queens in Quito, so of course I would know them. And I would know a transvestite because I know how they act.”

At this point, Manuel asked me if I wanted to take a trip with him to one of the local malls to look for some fabric, and I agreed. Waiting at the trolley stop, I saw the glares given to him by several riders, but he took it all in stride, and I could not help but admire his thick skin. The treatment in the fabric store was decidedly different, since the employees seemed to know him as a regular customer. Manuel greeted the three females working that afternoon with kisses on the cheeks, and I could not help but notice that they referred to him as both Manuel and Sofia.

“Do you mind when people call you Sofia when you are not in drag?”

“No, people call me both names, and it’s okay.”

“And what about pronouns? Do you prefer people to call you ‘he’ or she?”

“People usually say ‘he’ when I am dressed like a man and ‘she’ when I am dressed like a woman. Carolina calls me she all the time, but I don’t mind.”

After buying a few different fabrics for a costume that he is still trying to conceptualize, we walked up to the mall’s food court to continue our conversation over desserts. “What does it mean to be a man in Ecuador?” I asked.

After a quick pause, he responded, “men are supposed to be tough, but secretly a lot of men like to have sex with the drag queens.”

“Really?”

“Oh, my God, yes! So many taxi drivers have asked me for sex on my way home from the discos. It happens a lot. They would never ask me in public, but when there is no one around they don’t care. Or on the message boards. They leave a message saying they are looking for travestis, but that is because you don’t see them until they actually come over.”
“Do you think women see masculinity the same way as men?

“I don’t think so. Women are more open. They accept you more than men do. I love going out with women because we have fun together with no problems.”

“And what about when men are together without women. Do they change the ways they act or is it the same?”

“When men are together watch out! Those are the times when drag queens need to be careful, because the men have probably been drinking, and they don’t care what they do.”

At this point, Manuel told me he had to get home to start working on his outfits but asked if I was going to his show that night. I agreed to attend his performance and waited with him until a taxi stopped to give him a ride home. When a taxi finally pulled over, I jokingly told him to make sure he used a condom if the driver was interested, and then headed back to my nearby apartment to relax before heading to the disco that night. During the performance, I saw that Manuel (now Sofia), had used part of the fabric to make a head wrap and matching shawl, which was thrown into the crowd as part of the routine. The crowd appeared to love the show, and Sofia seemed genuinely pleased with the reaction. Since that night, I have seen Sofia perform several times. Each routine is unique, and I have yet to see her wear the same costume twice. She currently posts upcoming gigs to her Facebook page, as well as pictures taken during previous performances and group shots taken with all of her friends backstage, including Carolina.

“CAROLINA”

When Carolina came out of her bedroom during my interview with Manuel, I was surprised by the enthusiastic greeting. I was confused, as well, since I had no idea who she was!
On this occasion, she was presenting as male, although she does present as both male and female depending on her mood, and I had only ever seen her in full female drag. Out of all my informants, I had unwittingly known Carolina the longest, and our connection goes back almost a decade when I still a study abroad student on my very first trip to Quito.

During the final week of my study abroad program, a few of my younger female classmates decided that they wanted to go to a gay disco for the first time before returning home, and I agreed to escort them. I had never been to the disco either, and I was curious to see what it had to offer. As the night wore on, the DJ stopped the music to let the crowd know the show was about to start, and a solitary drag queen, who turned out to be Carolina, took the small stage. Clearly a favorite, the crowd screamed when they saw her as if she was a superstar! The music began, and she gave an amazing performance of a caliber I had not seen in a disco in some time. The highlight of the performance was when she decided to step off the stage and into the crowd. Without warning or prompting, the entire crowd split down the middle like the parting of the Red Sea, forming a runway the likes of which you would find in any fashion show. Carolina walked down the makeshift catwalk, reaching the end and posing as if a dozen photographers were there to take her picture. She headed back up the runway and on to the stage, and the crowd closed as if it never happened. “What did I just see?” my friend exclaimed, and I just smiled.

At the end of her stellar performance, Carolina took a moment to bask in the adoration of the crowd, and went to leave the stage. Shockingly, she either slipped back on her heel or tripped on a step, because she quickly began to fall off the stage…and into my arms. I caught her before she landed on the ground and picked her back up. She quickly said thank you and gave me a kiss on the cheek before heading to her dressing room. “Did that drag queen just kiss you?” my friend
asked, and I just laughed, happy that I had the sense to take a few pictures so I would not forget such an amazing show.

Since that first performance, I have seen Carolina plenty of times over the years during my trips to Ecuador. Each time we see each other, she pretends to start falling (no matter where she is), stops and gives me a kiss on the cheek. We never exchanged names but still remembered each other’s faces; more accurately, Carolina always remembers my face, and I always remember her drag persona.

Carolina, whose real name is Juan, often goes by her drag name in her daily life. She also regularly goes by female pronouns, even if she is presenting a masculine appearance, yet still self-identifies as a gay male. A canny self-promoter, she regularly advertises her drag performances on every website and social media application she can find, and wanted to use her drag name for our conversation. When I mentioned the need to keep things anonymous, she agreed, saying: “I am already famous. They will know it’s me anyway.”

I was approached by Carolina in the disco after one of Sofia’s performances, and she said that she wanted to be interviewed, as well. I told her she could get my number from Sofia, and we could set up a time to get together. I did not expect to get a call in the middle of the night! After they got home from the show and a night of revelry, and I was already in a deep sleep, my cell phone started ringing. Only slightly awake, and not recognizing the number, I said: “Hello? I mean, hola?” From the other end, a clearly drunk Carolina laughed, “Ronnie! I am ready for my interview!” as Sofia laughed in the background. I told her I would call her back the next day, and when I did we agreed to meet in the evening so we could talk. I arrived at the apartment while Sofia was out with friends and Carolina was getting ready for her gig.
Carolina is 42 years old, and has been performing in drag longer than many of the drag queens in Quito. She is also one of the most well-known performers; if you have been to a gay disco in Quito more than once, chances are you have probably seen her on stage or socializing with her friends. Tall on her own, with heels on she absolutely towers over most of the audience at her shows, no stage necessary. She considers herself both Ecuadorian and Latino, but does not think one is more significant than the other. She went to school as far as high school, but does not mention whether she completed her education or not. Her early life was a tumultuous experience, and this may be the reason why school is a sore subject for her.

“What is your family like?” I asked, not realizing the acrimony that she feels for the family that abandoned her.

“I don’t have a relationship with my family. I tried that years ago, but it didn’t work. I haven’t seen them in years! Not my parents or my two brothers. I don’t even know if my parents are still alive! I think they are but I don’t know.”

“What about your childhood? What was that like?”

“It was okay, but I have good memories and bad memories. When I was a young child everything was great! I used to play with all the other kids in my neighborhood. We would all go to school together and come home together, and then play outside for as long as we could. When I started getting older things got harder. People used to call me names because I was feminine. I have always been feminine, but no one cared until we started getting older. Things got hard! I hated school so much.”

“Does that mean you don’t have the same friends from your childhood?”

“I don’t have any of the same friends. They probably wouldn’t recognize me now anyway. It’s better. I don’t need them.”
“So, does your family practice a religion?” I asked, wondering if there might be a connection between religion and her upbringing.

“Yes, they are Catholic.”

“And you? Do you consider yourself Catholic, too?

“No! I am not Catholic and I will never go to church again! My parents used their religion to kick me out!”

“What do you mean when you say they ‘kicked you out?’ For good?” I responded, genuinely curious and concerned.

“When I was a teenager, my family knew I was gay. I didn’t tell them; they just knew because I was very feminine. Everybody knew I was gay. Everybody in the neighborhood. Every day when I came home they would tell me I was going to Hell. Every day! It was mostly my father when he was drinking. One day he told me I had to get out. I was crying, but he still made me leave. I still remember that day. I didn’t have anywhere to go. I stayed with some neighbors and wherever I could.” I can see that she still gets emotional when relaying this story, and I felt a little emotional listening to it.

“So, is religion important here in Ecuador?” I asked.

“It is so important. If you ask anyone they will probably say it’s important. We still take care of all the old churches in Quito Colonial, and people come from all over the world to see them. Religion has been important in Ecuador for a long time.” After a short pause, she added: “Can we talk about something else? I don’t want to think about religion anymore.”

In Carolina’s case, the intersection of religion, familial relationships, and identity-based stigma have had a negative impact on her life. While she was comfortable enough to publicly express her sexual identity, and recognizes that others knew without her specifically telling them,
she had little to no control over the fallout. Her agency was limited by a confluence of religious belief, alcohol, and parental control.

“What do you want to talk about?” I asked, hoping to find a less traumatic experience in her life to discuss.

“The sex questions!” she laughed. “I heard you talking to Sofia about the sex questions, now it’s my turn.”

“Okay,” I laughed, thinking she deserved this change of topic. “Tell me about your first experience with sex.”

“It was a very long time ago. I was 12 or 13 years old.”

“Really?”

“Yes, 12 or 13 years. It was with an older man in my neighborhood. I don’t think any of the other neighbors knew, but it happened a bunch of times.”

“How old was he?”

“I don’t know, but he was much older. He had a house just a few streets away from my home with my family.” I cannot help but noticed the similarity between Carolina’s first sexual experience and the relationship between my informant Cristian and his “friend,” Gabriel.

“Okay, I hate to ask you this question after you and Sofia laughed at me, but have you had experiences with only men?

“That was so funny! Yes, only men. No women, and no experimentation.”

“Fair enough. What about the chongos? Have you ever been to one?”

“I have! I am friends with many prostitutes.”

“What was the chongo like?” I asked, as Carolina stepped into the other room to put on the proper undergarments for her drag ensemble.
“It was during the day, so it was not busy like it is at night or on the weekends. I wasn’t in drag, but I still had on nail polish. I always have on nail polish. Anyway, my friend was going to work at the chongo, so I walked with her. When we got there, we were all inside laughing and having fun. It was like sitting in your apartment with friends. I stayed there until some of the men started coming in and all of the prostitutes had to work.”

“And what about the spas?” I asked. “What do you think of them?”

“I love going to the spas! When I get there, everyone knows me already from my shows. Even the owners know me. They still call me Carolina there even though I’m not dressed. When I go to the spas I stay for hours. If I didn’t know so many people, I probably wouldn’t stay for so long. Plus, I can let everyone know where I am performing so they can come to the shows. It’s a good place for me to advertise.”

“Do you remember the first time you went to one of the spas?”

“No, I have been so many times I don’t remember. But when I first started going I would go with my friends. Now, I go with friends or by myself.”

“Okay, since you’ve been to the spas, and you’ve been to a chongo, do you think there are any similarities between the two?”

“For me personally there are similarities because I have friends in both places. But it is a little bit different because the spas are relaxing and fun. At the chongos it can be fun, but it is more like a job. The women are there for work so it is not relaxing like the spas. Everybody knows about the chongos, but not everybody knows about the spas. Yes, they are different, but I am comfortable at both.”

At this point, Carolina started trying on a few different dresses to see which one would allow her to move around more during her performance. She continued the conversation as she
tried each dress on and did some random legs stretches in the mirror. We both realized it was an odd scene and started to laugh.

“So, let’s say you’re in the spa,” I asked. How do you decide who is a potential sex partner and who might be a new friend? Do you look at their races?”

“I like all men. I don’t care. I have tried sex with all the races.”

“And what about meeting friends?”

“I have not made any friends at the spas. Solo amigos con derechos. I already know so many people there, the only time I talk to anyone new is for sex and maybe to tell them about a performance that I have coming up.”

“So, is safe sex common in the spas?”

“I know a lot of people who don’t like to have sex with condoms. Sometimes I do and sometimes I don’t.”

“And are you open with your sexuality with everyone?”

“Of course, I am. My job is performing in drag so everyone knows. I don’t have to hide from anyone. Not anymore. I won’t pretend for anyone.” Here she equated her sexual identity as a gay male with that of a drag queen, inferring that all drag queens must be gay when this is not necessarily the case.

“Well since you are completely open, what do you think about everyone else? Do you think members of the gay community are more open about their sexuality now than they were in the past? You have been doing drag for a long time, and Quito has a pride parade now and everything, so I am sure you have seen a lot of people…”
“People are definitely more open now and it is really good. Definitely! I think maybe things with my family would be different now than they were when I was a teenager. Many people still have prejudices, but it is the same everywhere, not just Ecuador.”

“Do you think this suggests that what it means to be a man is changing?”

“No, I don’t think that has changed.”

“Then what does it mean to be a man in Ecuador?” I asked, as Carolina finally decided on the right dress for her performance, set it aside and began to work on her makeup.

“Being a man in Ecuador means you’re supposed to be strong, and if you’re not, then you aren’t a real man. It’s shit, but it’s the way it is.”

“And do women see masculinity the same way?”

“Probably. Everybody thinks a man is supposed to be strong. Well, in the gay community we know that everybody isn’t the same, but that’s different.”

“What do you mean when you say that ‘we know that everybody isn’t the same?’”

“You know what I mean. For example, in the spas you see so many people and they are so different. There are masculine men and feminine men and old men and young men. It does not matter. Everyone is there together. In the discos, too. You see a lot of different types of people and we all have fun together.”

“So, are you saying that what it means to be a man is different in the spas or the discos than it is in everyday society?”

After a brief pause, she shared, “It is different, but sometimes things don’t change. For example, in the spas there are many men who try to pretend that they are not feminine, and others that are feminine and act like they do everywhere else. I know I am feminine and I don’t care! If I see any drag queens that I know in the spas, I’ll scream at them, “¡Oye puta!””
“Okay, Carolina. Let’s change subjects and talk about your thoughts on transvestites and drag queens in Quito.”

“Good! I am an expert on this subject. I could be a professor, too!” she laughed.

“How do you feel about transvestites?”

“I love them, of course! People don’t know how hard it really is. It is hard, but at the same time, you also feel a freedom. It is like everyone is looking at you like you are from another world, and you are wearing the same things people wear every day. Walking down the street in drag is a strange experience.”

“So, do you believe that there is a difference between transvestites and drag queens?”

“I am both. Sometimes I wear women’s clothes when I am not performing. I think a transvestite is just a man in women’s clothing, but a drag queen performs in those clothes, it is not just for fun.”

“So, a man has to dress in women’s clothing to be considered a transvestite?”

“Yes. Wait, no! I am always a transvestite and a drag queen no matter what. It’s more than clothes, it is like my identity. If I am dressed like a boy, I am still a drag queen.”

“And do you think you would know if someone was a transvestite or a drag queen if you met them in the spa?”

“Of course! I know all the drag queens. Plus, when we see each other in the spas we always have pictures with us just in case that is what the men like. A lot of men like transvestites so you have to be ready.”

“You always carry pictures of yourself in drag?” I asked incredulously. “I know people do sometimes but all of the time?”
“Always, I keep them on my phone so I can take them out whenever I want. Even if I don’t have any credit on my phone I still have it with me. Sofia does, too. Ask any drag queen. It takes a lot of work to do drag! We are artists so we want to remember what we did. Plus, I don’t like to wear the same outfits when I perform, so I just look at the pictures. It really is a job. It’s fun, and it’s a job, so I am always ready.” Thinking about how drag is just a job for many queens, it appears carrying pictures of themselves can be a personal calling card, and they show them off like their own version of a businessman carrying and handing out business cards.

“Do you prefer to meet men in person and show them pictures of yourself in drag, or do you prefer to meet them using social media on the internet or on your phone?”

“I like to meet people in person. I think the best place is in the discos because then they will know that I do drag and I am famous. They won’t be surprised if they see me in drag later, or if they come to my home and see women’s clothes.”

“You prefer in the discos more than in the spas?”

“Yes. In the spas, I can have sex, but if I want a relationship, it is better at the discos. I meet people in the discos when I am performing all the time. Some men like me in drag. In the spas, I am just wearing a towel like everyone else.”

“Have you ever met anyone using social media?”

“Yes, but it is not something I do very much.”

“And have you had any bad experiences meeting men in the spas or the discos or through social media?”

“I have had lots of bad experiences with men through the years, but I don’t want to think about them. I prefer the good experiences.”
“Okay, I just have one last question before I head home. What changes related to sexuality do you think society in Ecuador still needs to make?”

“I just think Ecuador needs to start accepting gay people more because it’s not fair. Some people are just gay. It should not matter to anybody else.”

With that Carolina and I said goodbye so she could continue the process of getting ready, which takes hours. I headed back to my apartment to rest before heading to the disco for the night’s show. When Carolina stepped on the stage I saw that after trying on several dresses during our conversation, she had changed her mind yet again and chosen one that I had not previously seen. As she performed, the crowd sang along to the lyrics and screamed for every fancy dance move and athletic feat she added to her routine. Once the show was over, Carolina and her friends (including Sophia) remained in the disco drinking, dancing and flirting. They insisted I tag along with them, and after several rounds of free drinks for the group from the bartender, I finally had to say my goodbyes and catch a taxi home while I could still function. I was invited to go out with their group every single weekend I was in Quito (and each time I go back), but on most occasions, I declined because I simply do not have their stamina! Carolina is still performing in and around Quito and occasionally other cities, and as discos close she always has another waiting in the wings to book her. She regularly brags that she is famous in the drag community, and it appears that these are not just idle boasts. She is recognizable, at least locally. If you ever need to know what is going on in the gay community in Quito, chances are you can get answers from her.

The men discussed in this chapter understand the differences between members of the trans communities in ways the first three informants do not and cannot; because transvestism is a lived experience for each of them, they witness firsthand the differences between the groups.
They also experience the subtle everyday discrimination that comes from outsiders assuming all members of the community are dangerous and must therefore be avoided. They are eroticized as masculine and feminine, as men who perform as women, and as men in the spas with the potential to perform as women if the need or attraction is there. They also use the internet as marketing tool, one of the many perks of being able to congregate in virtual spaces.
“I just received this press release. A new sauna for the gay people of Quito…”

On August 6, 2015, País Canela, a Facebook page, website, and clearinghouse for all information of interest to Ecuador’s LGBT population, posted this notice to make the community aware of an all-new spa that had just opened in Quito. The owners chose not to advertise using any of the more traditional marketing tools such as newspaper ads, television and radio commercials, or posters. With over 1200 followers on Facebook and an unquantified number of visitors on the main website, País Canela was able to quickly disseminate the information within the community, and the opening of the spa was considered a huge success, even without using traditional methods of advertisement.

In this chapter, I consider how the internet has given the LGBT community of Quito the ability to congregate in virtual spaces without fear of negative social consequences. I begin with a discussion of the ways in which the internet has become a homosocial meeting place as well as another erotic oasis. I discuss two sites particularly significant to the MSM community in Quito: Gayecuador.com, which combines regional discussion groups with pornographic material, and Quitogay.net, which primarily acts as an informational site, but has a hidden message board for men to leave notes for other men, including demographics, meeting locations, and ways to contact them using other phone-based social media messenger applications such as WhatsApp. I then recount some of the ways that the internet is used in Quito to advertise, educate, and incite activism in the community. For example, Facebook can be used as free publicity for LGBT businesses and to promote local performers, to educate people about issues facing the
community, and to spread awareness about local non-profits and grassroots organizations. It is not always easy for members of the MSM community to meet in person or to discreetly find out about local events and services. For many people the internet can be a lifeline, or a simple validation that they are not alone.

VIRTUAL HOMOSOCIALITY

The internet can be many things for many people. Currently, I am specifically concerned with its status as a potential homosocial space. On the internet, you can easily find sites devoted specifically to men who have sex with men – much like the spas – yet with even more anonymity than the spa affords. In this way, the internet can also be an erotic oasis, albeit a virtual one where bodies can be as fit and as varied as one’s imagination allows. Michael Ross notes that “the internet has sheared away many of the emotional and physical attributes of the physical individual – perhaps the ultimate removal from reproduction – and allowed emotional and physical fulfillment to occur with an electronic partner who may or may not bear much resemblance to the physical partner who is typing at the keyboard” (Ross 2005: 343). Here men do not have to worry about idealized bodies or fitting into a particularly valued “types,” including races, ethnicities, and fetishes. They can simply make things up as they go along.

There are many other reasons why men may choose virtual connections as opposed to meeting in person. On the internet, the coming out process can be subverted, as men may not have to worry about coming out of the closet with close family and friends at all; on the internet, they can be both in and out of the closet, and any other identity they choose to embody (Luengo Baeza 2011). Virtual spaces can also be a way to find partners for sexual experimentation
without subverting accepted sexual identities. In this way, they are not dissimilar to the men, heterosexual and otherwise, looking for anonymous sexual partners in Humphrey’s tearooms. As noted in a study of Swedish males in gay chat rooms, “the contacts established through the internet might be a secure way to experiment with homosexual behavior or emotions without having to have to identify as homosexual or gay. The chat rooms might consequently fulfill the same purpose for these men as the tearooms did for the men in Humphrey’s study” (Tikkanen and Ross, 2003:131). And finally, in their study of Latino men who have sex with men in the United States, Michael Ross, Simon Rosser, Sheryl McCurdy, and Jamie Feldman found several advantages of not having to go to bars, including not having to meet someone’s eyes, expense, preparation, travel time, adverse weather, geographical considerations, and “being able to cruise from the safety and comfort of home” (Ross et al. 2007: 69). In Ecuador, one of these prominent virtual spaces is a social media website called Gayecuador.com.

**Gayecuador.com**

A relatively new website that has only been in business for a few years, Gayecuador.com could aptly be described as “a cross between the MySpace and Facebook social media sites, filtered through a Latin American lens with an X-rated shot in the arm.” The members (and operators) of the site are not interested in providing information on health or laws, or anything considered socially conscious. They have fostered an online community interested in meeting up, having sex, and watching porn. In order to enter the site, a login identification and password have to be selected and then a rudimentary profile has to be created. Those potential members who already have a Facebook profile have the option to simply link the two accounts. Only a minimum amount of information is required, but there is space to personalize the account with
demographic information, current location, activities you enjoy, and what you may be looking for. A profile picture can be uploaded, although it is not required, and any specific information about sexual activity you wish to share can be added. This extra information is also not required, but if it is included the chances of fellow members contacting you increase significantly.

There is one main web page for the site, and any information that you wish to share in a group appears here, to be seen by the site’s entire membership. In order to participate in a conversation with fellow members, there is an option to join groups devoted to specific regions of Ecuador and specific sexual activities. Anything posted in the group will be seen by everyone, and if someone who is not in the group likes what he sees or reads, he must join the group in order to respond. Those who are looking for a more private conversation have the option to send a direct message to other members. Members can also be marked as friends, but this action will also show up on the main page for everyone to see. On any given day you will find several messages on the main page from people asking to meet up at spas, asking for someone to pay their entrance fee into a spa, someone looking to meet in a specific part of the country, or someone letting the collective group know what sexual position they prefer and are looking for. Chances of finding any other topics are slim. On a Friday afternoon, I posted a message (in Spanish) saying, “American in La Mariscal looking to chat with men in Quito about gay life here in Ecuador.” Quickly, I received seven direct messages of a sexual nature from different members before a young man named Carlos contacted me saying he worked nearby and wanted to practice his English. Two of the messages included links to pornographic photos, which are usually placed on the main page.

If you would like to include photos of yourself on Gayecuador.com (or photos purported to be you), you can upload them directly through your account. Instantly they will show up in the
feed along with all the group messages, and the site will say exactly who uploaded the photo. There is a box on the main page of photos placed in order of upload with the name of the person below. Once the photos are no longer in the main feed they are still easily accessible. Most of the photos are of extreme close-ups of genitalia, although some are full body shots in underwear or nothing at all. Many transvestite members of the site post photos of their lower bodies in panties and lingerie as opposed to shots of their faces.

Things are somewhat different when members decide to upload and share videos. The videos uploaded to Gayecuador.com are most often clips of pornographic films less than four minutes in length. A few of the clips are purported to be members of the site masturbating, although there is no way to tell since they are close-up shots of genitals. Peculiarly, in this same collection of clips there are also music videos of artists such as Lady Gaga, Britney Spears and Demi Lovato mixed in with the explicit images. There is a box devoted to the videos that remains on the main page, right above the box with the photos.

The final section of Gayecudor.com is devoted to news stories not specifically of interest to the gay community. This section of the site is very rarely used and does not even appear on the main page. There is a specific link at the top of the site and once you have clicked on it, there is no way to converse on the web page with other members. The news articles do not offer information about upcoming events in the area; for this information and more, the place to go is clearly Quitogay.net.

Quitogay.net

Arguably the most prominent source of information for the LGBT community in Quito, Quitogay.net has been in business for several years and does not appear to be slowing down. It is
essentially a virtual bulletin board, with several notices and advertisements posted on a regular basis. Here you can find information on grassroots organizations, gay movie nights in the city, informational articles, academic conferences, and in a column running down the right side of the page, links to a map and the websites of all of the city’s erotic oases, and, oddly, environmental protection sites.

At the top of the screen, there are several links to further information. The first link, “inicio,” leads to the main page. The second link, labeled “guía,” has contact information including websites, email addresses, and phone numbers for all of the businesses and organizations geared toward the LGBT community, including in other parts of Ecuador. The third link, “cine,” is specifically devoted to Quito’s LGBT monthly movie nights. Under the fourth link, “agenda,” advertisements for upcoming LGBT events are found, and the list always ends with an ad promoting safe sex and condom usage. Both the fifth and sixth links, “focus” and “opinión,” include informational articles taken from other websites and original work written by Quitogay’s operator. The seventh link, “travel,” has information for tourists coming to Ecuador including passport information, modes of transport, what clothes to wear, information about gay life in Ecuador, and how to stay safe while out at night. This is the one section of the site that can be translated from Spanish to English automatically. The final link, “contactos,” is actually the link to the site’s hidden message board.

The site warns that Quitogay’s message board is exclusively for those aged 18 and up, and in order to read and post readers must accept a statement stating that they understand the following:

Quitogay.net does not tolerate pedophilia (sex with minors), the prostitution of minors, child pornography, bestiality, and any other crime sanctioned by national and
international law, and we will offer the information to the authorities for their investigation.

Clicking “Aceptar” leads to a message board visited by almost six thousand people. While there are no pictures included in the messages, the men may leave their email addresses, phone numbers, and WhatsApp contact information. The messages are always thematically similar, with examples like:

“I want to meet mature tops in order to experiment. Write to ____”

“I’m looking for a bottom under 30, WhatsApp ____”

“Hello everyone, I’m new to this. I’m looking for a serious relationship with boys 22-30 years. If you are police or military better. Write to me at my WhatsApp at ____”

“Hello I am looking for BLACK friends, only BLACKS from 20-30 years old, no curious, no femmes, only BLACKS. My telephone and WhatsApp ____, ____ only BLACKS”

Although it has its explicit side, Quitogay.net is primarily an informative site with clout in the community, because it offers information that many times cannot be found anywhere else. However, it is not the only place to find advertisements, education, and activism in support of Quito’s LGBT community.

ADVERTISEMENT, EDUCATION, AND ACTIVISM ON FACEBOOK

With mobile and desktop sites, Facebook is the most popular social media application both globally and in Ecuador where, as of November 2015, 54.8 percent of the population had Facebook user accounts. With such a significant proportion of the general population, it should come as no surprise that Facebook is also a useful tool for getting information out to the LGBT community. It is used as a prominent marketing tool, a method of educating the masses, and a
focal point for grassroots activism among marginalized groups. In this section, I narrate the ways that Facebook has been used for advertisement, education and activism for the interviewees and businesses discussed above.

Advertisement

For the LGBT population of Ecuador, Facebook has become an integral advertising tool for businesses catering to the community, including online sign postings and advertisements for the spas. Each of the spas discussed previously has its own profile on the site with operating hours, the address, and phone numbers. There are advertisements of upcoming events posted regularly and then stored in their online photo albums for posterity. They are also able to reach potential clients from across the globe; their lists of followers show men from many different countries who have probably clicked “like” because they follow updates from mutual friends. The spas rarely send private messages to their followers unless they were contacted previously, but the same cannot be said for profiles of private individuals. Lorena, Sofia, and Carolina all use their Facebook accounts to inform their fans about upcoming shows, offer pictures from previous events, and show off new looks that they are particularly proud of. Abelito posts pictures of his modeling shoots and mainstream advertisements that have featured him. Danilo, who fancies himself a party promoter, posts advertisements for upcoming events on both his personal profile and his promotional page. Diego also has two Facebook pages: one for his personal use, and one used for educating the gay community.
Education

The internet and Facebook have proven to be useful educational tools for local individuals and organizations to inform the LGBT population on social conditions and topics of significant importance to the community. Diego posts daily articles and videos discussing health, discrimination, and spirituality in Ecuador with a focus on the gay community. The spas leave small notes on their main web pages advocating safe sex practices (albeit in a small, barely visible font), but otherwise post no educational information on their Facebook pages. Alejo regularly posts videos of people discussing his preferred political positions and of politicians that he supports, as well as articles on how to properly take care of your pets and links to further information from professionals. If something particularly serious takes place in Quito’s gay community, you can typically find it reported in personal Facebook pages and in the pages of the many activist groups based throughout the city.

Activism

Elizabeth Jay Friedman notes that “the internet is a means for communicating a potent mix of inaccessible information and identity development for marginalized populations” (Friedman 2005: 18). In Ecuador, the internet has helped many grassroots organizations committed to the betterment of the community mobilize at a moment’s notice. One particular group is Fundación Ecuatoriana Equidad, which has organized for marches, parades, petitions, and rallies to protest discrimination and to advocate for equal rights for the LGBT community. Some of the many social causes the group has fought for include same-sex marriage, HIV/AIDS services, and equal adoption rights. They have also organized several beach trips (for a nominal fee) for members of the community, presented research materials at academic conferences, and
they are generally considered an important part of the community. Shockingly, in 2016 it was also through the internet that the LGBT community spread the news of a scandal rocking the organization and its management due to alleged fiscal impropriety. With the case in the hands of prosecutors, and the group’s leaders vowing to vigorously defend their reputations, the results of the investigation are still to be determined. The community-at-large has continued to support the organization in the face of adversity and bad publicity. Here we see that internet activism and outreach go hand-in-hand, for better or worse.

The internet can be an important space for many men to meet other men, and according to Michael Rosenfeld and Reuben Thomas, one of the reasons is because it has “dramatically improved the efficiency of searching for and finding new people outside of one’s preexisting social network” (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012: 524). It can also be an important space for those men who choose not to go to spas. While some men may choose to meet other men on the internet in order to protect their personal identities, mask their sexualities, or create faux physical characteristics to chat with men who would not consider them desirable in person, others make the same decision but for different reasons. In the following sections, I examine the choices of three such individuals who have no problem using the internet to meet men but choose to avoid the spas. Diego actively supports and promotes the spas as an important part of gay life in Quito, yet is devoutly religious and chooses to avoid the spas himself. Abelito feels uncomfortable in the spa setting, but his first choice remains meeting men in person, albeit in other locales. Danilo avoids the spas because he believes he is too recognizable as a party promoter in the local gay community and would not be able to have any intimate encounters. In these examples, the men enjoy homosocial spaces so long as they are not also sexual spaces. Their stories illustrate the
variability of gay men’s sensibilities when initiating intimate relationships and further contradict
the common stereotype of hypersexualized homosexual males.

DIEGO

I first met Diego approximately three years before landing in Quito to learn more about masculinities, sexualities and spas in Ecuador. Using the internet to research other topics of interest to the LGBT community in Quito, I came across one of his several blogs discussing issues as varied as spirituality, travel, the environment, nudism, HIV/AIDS education, and discrimination against and within the gay community. After sending Diego a short email commending him on his work, he suggested we remain in contact through Facebook, where he regularly posts links to articles and videos that he deems important to the LGBT community, helpfully using a profile that bears the name of his main web page. When I first visited in Quito after our meeting online, Diego invited me to come with him to Sunday services at his Adventist church. He is the coordinator of the small congregation, and he enthusiastically tries to bring in new faces whenever he can. I was unable to attend at that first invitation, because of a prior commitment, but Diego did not give up and continued to invite me on every subsequent trip to the country until I finally relented. The congregation was made up of a small group of openly gay Ecuadorian men and the service consisted of a short sermon followed by a couple of hours of group Bible study and discussion. The Bible study took place in a small classroom which was decorated as if it regularly hosts Sunday school classes for young children. We all sat in a circle on uncomfortable classroom chairs as members from the group shared verses from the Bible that spoke to them and the things that were going on in their personal lives. The group was extremely
welcoming, happy to see the first foreigner join their group, and the attendees were accommodating and patient as I struggled to find the right verses in the Spanish-language Bible loaned to me for the day. Afterwards Diego suggested we take a walk through the city while he did his best to answer my questions about issues in Quito’s LGBT community.

Diego is very outgoing and personable and needs to be for his job. He is the owner and primary operator of a thriving ecotourism business. At 46 years old, he has been operating his business for over a decade and has become an expert on both urban and naturistic tourism in Ecuador. He speaks English fluently and can often be found traveling the country with American and European tourists. He uses the internet and social media to market his services both to mainstream travelers and to tourists specifically looking for someone in the LGBT community. He proudly holds a degree in business administration from a well-known Ecuadorian university and regularly uses the tools he learned in school as part of his job, acknowledging that his immaculate record-keeping is a testament to his education. He personally identifies as an openly gay male and makes sure to note that he is sexually versatile. When asked about his race or ethnicity he shared, “I am mestizo, and I think most of the population here in Quito will probably say the same thing.”

“So, tell me a little bit about your interest in religion,” I asked. Did you grow up going to church regularly with your family?”

“When I was young, I went to Catholic church with my family every Sunday and sometimes on other days, too. When I got older, I didn’t feel like I belonged in the church anymore. It wasn’t because of anything anyone said to me, but I started to feel like I wasn’t welcome anymore. It was hard, because God and church are really important to me, but I didn’t feel like I could be myself.”
“Is your family still Catholic?”

“Yes, most of the members of my family still consider themselves Catholic. I don’t know if they all go to church regularly like when we were young, but they are still Catholic.”

“So how did you get back involved in church?”

“Well, I felt like I was missing something, so I did some research and started trying some different church services here in Quito to find one that would work for me. Now I attend services every Sunday when I am not travelling around the country for my job. This was the first church that I found in Quito that really made me feel welcome. Not just welcome for the day, but like I really belonged. They accept the gay community, so I became the coordinator to try and bring in more people.”

“Would you say that religion plays an important role in your personal life?”

“Yes, very important. My faith is very important to me. I think faith is very important to society because it helps us find our values.” It is clear that Diego’s faith and family history go hand-in-hand.

“What else can you tell me about your family? Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“Well, I have two brothers. Our parents died some time ago, but we still have a large family. Lots of uncles and aunts and cousins. I have many nieces and nephews, too. A lot of our family lives in Quito, but I live alone. I don’t mind living by myself, but eventually I will find the right person to spend my life with and we’ll live together.”

“And what about your childhood? What was your life like and what did you and your friends do for fun?”

With a big smile on his face, Diego shared, “I had a great childhood. I went to military school and I loved it! I had the best friends and we had so much fun. I never felt any different
from any of the other kids, and even now that everyone knows I am gay, I am still treated like the same person I was back then.”

“Does that mean that you still have the same friends now that you had when you were in military school?”

“Yes, I have a lot of the same friends, but new friends, too. I still spend time with friends from school, and every year we have a reunion so I still get to see my friends who don’t live in Quito.” It is evident that military school was a positive experience for Diego. A cursory glance at his personal Facebook page shows dozens of photos from his time in school and the many reunions that have taken place since then, including before-and-after pictures. Although he lives alone, he is rarely alone, whether he is traveling for work or spending time with friends.

“And how is your relationship with your family now?”

“I have a great relationship with my family. We all love each other very much. It is a blessing from God.”

Noticing a small café, I suggested we stop for a drink and talk some more. Taking a table by the front window, I asked: “I know this is a change in subject from religion and your family, but can you tell me about your first experience with sex?”

With a slight laugh, he told me, “It was in military school, a very long time ago! It wasn’t anything serious. Mostly we would just touch each other and laugh at night. Occasionally some of us did other things. We were together all the time so of course things happened. Some of my friends still laugh about it.”

“So, have you had experiences with only men, or women, as well?”

“I have had sexual experiences with both men and women, but I haven’t done anything sexual with a woman since I was much younger. I would go with my friends to chongos on
nights when we would go to bars. I don’t drink, but I still had a good time with my friends.” In this case, Diego’s sexual identity and sexual behavior have not always aligned. He still personally identifies as male although he has had sexual encounters with women.

“Is this the only time you have been to a chongo?”

“I’ve been to chongos with my friends many times, just when I was younger. I have never gone by myself, only when I was with my friends and they wanted to go.”

“Okay, we’ve talked about your experiences with chongos, so let’s talk about the spas. What do you think of them?”

“I don’t have a problem with them, but personally, I don’t like to go to them. I don’t go there regularly. I have only been a couple of times.”

“If you have only been a couple of times, does this mean that you remember the first time you went to one?”

“Yes, I do. It was at Sauna Jengibre, but it is closed now. The first time I went, I walked around with one of my friends and we relaxed. I spoke to some of the people there with my friend, but we did not have sex. I know that many people go there because they can’t go anywhere else. I understand the reasons, and that is why I post information about them on my website and on my Facebook page, but it is not for me.”

“I am actually a bit surprised by this.”

“Really, why?”

“Well, I remember you told me before that you are a nudist, right?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I guess I just thought that you would like this type of place where there are men walking around in just a towel or nude.”
“Yes, I know what you mean. If it was just men walking around or relaxing nude, I would like it more. But there are men also having sex. If it was one thing or the other, I would probably like it, but right now I don’t.”

“I wonder, do you find any similarities between the chongos and the spas? Does society see them equally?”

After a brief pause, Diego responded, “You know, in all of my life I never considered the similarities, but now that I think about it, it seems so obvious. They are the same because friends can go together and there is sex in both. They are also different because everyone knows about the chongos but not the spas. Even people in church know about the chongos.”

“So how do you decide who could be a potential sex partner in a spa and who could be a friend? Does it have anything to do with the race or ethnicity of the person?”

“I haven’t had sex in the spas, but I like a lot of different men, and it does not matter what race they are. I have met many different men in person, or on the internet. I have also had sex a couple of times with travelers I met in my job, and in my nudist group from the internet. Not many times, but the point I am trying to make is I don’t care about their race.”

“Do you know if safe sex is common in the spas?”

“You know I take safe sex very seriously. I think of myself as an activist. That’s why I am always posting information about HIV education on my websites. But a lot of gay men here in Ecuador don’t take safe sex seriously. I think it is because they haven’t been educated about how to protect themselves. Not everyone in the community, but some of them.”

“Okay then, let’s talk a little bit about sexuality and masculinity here in Quito, and let’s start with you. Are you open about your sexuality with everyone?”
“Yes, everyone. I don’t have to worry about my job because I don’t have a boss. My family knows, and the members of my church know. There is no need to hide from anyone.” From the short amount of time I have known him, it is hard to imagine Diego ever having to live a closeted life.

“Do you believe that members of the gay community are more open about their sexuality now than they were in the past?”

“Gay men and women are so much more open about their sexuality now than when I was young. When I was young, it was much harder to find people unless you already knew where to look, but we still found ways to meet. It’s a lot easier now that we have fancy bars and discos. And the internet, too.” I found it refreshing to hear from someone that lived through a time when homosocial spaces for gay men in Quito were hard to find and is old enough to still remember.

“So, what does it mean to be a man in Ecuador?” I asked, as we gathered our things and headed back to the church so Diego could take care of some last-minute incidentals. “Do you think what it means to be a man has changed?”

“Here in Ecuador, men make most of the decisions. I don’t think this has changed much, but it has a little. For example, when I was young I didn’t see married women working as much as they do now. There were some jobs, but not like now. That’s good! Now men and women both work and I think that’s okay.”

“Do you think women see masculinity in the same way as men?”

“I do. I think they see it the same because this is what we learn when we are young. It’s part of our culture here in Ecuador. Maybe it’s different in other places, but probably not too much. We’re not that different.”
“And what about when men are alone and there are no women with them? Do you think men act differently when the women aren’t present?”

“I don’t think we act differently when women aren’t with us. I just think we talk about things that we don’t normally talk about in front of women. It’s true for me. I don’t always talk about the same things. It’s normal. It’s probably the same for you, too. You just don’t realize it. We don’t realize it until we actually think about it.”

“Is there a connection between masculinity and sexuality in Ecuador? Or maybe gender and sexuality?” I asked, thinking his answer may be just as thoughtful as his commentary on relationships between men and women.

Diego got quiet for a moment while he pondered the question. After enough contemplation, he responded: “I am not sure there is actually a connection. I think a lot of what we see is all in our heads. I know a lot of people think that gay men are feminine or want to be women, and they think that lesbians want to be men. Of course, it’s not true, but this is just what they think. I know many people who don’t think this way, but many do. I’m not feminine and I am gay, so maybe when they get to know me, they will understand.”

“Okay,” I said. “If that is what you believe about Ecuador in general, is masculinity and what it means to be a man different in the spas?”

“I don’t think it’s different, even though I don’t go there. I think men in the spas can be themselves without worrying about what people will think.”

“Let’s change subjects again,” I suggested. “How do you feel about transvestites?”

“They are okay. Conditions for the transvestites in Ecuador are even harder than they are for the gay community.” Here, Diego is reinforcing what was previously said by Lorena, Sofia, and Carolina about the treatment of cross-dressers in Quito.
“How so? How are they treated differently?”

“It is easier to notice a transvestite than it is to notice a gay person, so there is a greater chance for them to be attacked on the street.”

“Are you attracted to them?”

“No, but that’s okay. I just prefer men that are dressed like men.”

“Do you think there is a difference between transvestites and drag queens?”

“No, there’s no difference. Wait…yes, there is. Drag queens perform and do it for money. Transvestites dress like women, but there is no payment. One is a job, one is not. Unless they are prostitutes, because they get paid, too. There are many transvestite and transgender prostitutes here.”

“So, you believe there is a difference between transvestites and transgender people?”

“Of course, there is! One is a man in women’s clothes, the other is not. Lately, I have been posting a lot of articles and videos about the transgender community on my websites because I think it’s important that people learn.”

“And does a man have to dress in women’s clothing to be considered a transvestite?”

“I think so.”

“Okay then. If a transvestite or a drag queen went to the spas, do you think it would be possible to identify them?”

“I don’t think I would know. I don’t think anybody would know. It wouldn’t be possible because they wouldn’t be dressed. They would look just like everyone else. Maybe that’s good, because everyone would be equal.” It is clear Diego does not have the same issues with cross-gender presentation that earlier informants have expressed. While he may not be attracted to
cross-dressing men or transgender women, he considers them just as significant as other members of the community.

“Okay, let’s talk about popular culture and social media.”

“Okay.”

“Has the media affected Ecuador’s ideas about sexuality?”

“I think it does, but not enough. If we saw more on television, I think it would change a lot of ideas about the community. Sometimes there are reports on television about the gay community. I usually post them online when I see them myself or when someone tells me. I also post articles that I write myself, if I see something that I think I need to talk about. A lot of people read my posts so I know that the information will get out there.”

“Well let me ask you this: do you prefer to meet men through social media sites like on the internet or through your phone, or in places like the spas, or somewhere else?”

“I meet men in a lot of different ways, just not the spas. I’ve never met a sex partner or a relationship partner in the spas. Anywhere else, though.”

“Okay, so in your opinion, what do you think are the reasons why men may choose one way to meet over others?”

“I think it is because some men have more options to meet than others. For example, a lot of men still live with their families, maybe because they are young, or because they just don’t want to live by themselves. They are going to find it more difficult to meet men. Also, if men are not open about their sexuality, they are also going to have a difficult time. Someone who is open about their sexuality has a lot of choices.”

“Have you had any bad experiences meeting men?”
“I have not had bad experiences, but I have met people through social media, and when we met in person we didn’t have a connection. Because of my work, I meet people from around the world, but not all connections work.”

By this point, we had returned to the church, and Diego and I had straightened up the classroom and locked up for the day. He offered me a ride home and I gladly accepted. With about ten minutes left until I arrived back home, I asked him about a few more of his thoughts before we went our separate ways. “Diego,” I said, “I’m sure you know that Ecuador has one of the most progressive constitutions in all of Latin America…”

“Yes, this is true, but it wasn’t always like that. We finally got a new constitution a few years ago.”

“With the changes made in support of gay rights in the constitution, have you seen any changes in everyday society?”

“I haven’t seen any significant changes, because you can’t just change the constitution and think everyone will change right away. But people are more comfortable today than they used to be. There’s still a lot of discrimination, but we have to be patient.”

“What changes do you think still need to be made?”

“The most important thing is that people need to stop discriminating against the gay community, but the gay community also needs to take care of each other.”

With that, Diego and I said our goodbyes for the day, as I walked up to my apartment and he drove off for his next excursion. We have remained in contact for many years, and although I don’t see him in person very often while I’m in Quito due to his travel schedule, whenever I am unsure about something in the community or want to get his take on things, I simply send him a message through Facebook. If he is not traveling in a remote area of the country with a tour
group, he quickly responds. He remains just as active in his church as ever, and as of this writing is still waiting to find the right man. Until then, he remains content in his job traveling the country, happily sharing Ecuador’s diversity with anyone interested.

ABELITO

Like Diego, Abelito also prefers not to meet sexual partners in spas, but for reasons of his own. It was Ladies’ Night at the Magnolia House when I first met Abelito. Socializing with some local friends and Valerie, a former classmate from our time studying abroad, our large group found a spot in the back of the disco, close to a bar, the dancefloor, and the restrooms, but with more room to move and breathe than in the rest of the rest building. As the night wore on and the drinks continued to flow, Valerie found herself dancing alone, avoiding the many men trying to speak with her. Eventually, a tall, skinny, and fairly light-skinned Ecuadorian man walked out of the rest room and immediately started dancing alongside her. They quickly struck up a conversation – in English – and Valerie decided he was cool enough to join our group. He grabbed his two female friends, and after introductions to everyone in the group, they joined us for the rest of the night, making sure to exchange phone numbers with us before heading home.

Abelito is the epitome of transnational, as he frequently moves between New York City, Guayaquil, and Quito, is a legal resident of both the United States and Ecuador, and never stays in one country for too many years. He maintains strong ties in both countries, flying back and forth for family events and celebrations and, using modern technological advances, remains an active participant in familial activities even when he is not physically present. He was quite pleased to run into some Americans at the Magnolia House, which had become a bit of a local
hotspot instead of an international hang out by this point, and he was eager to speak with me about LGBT life in Quito and how it compares to that of the United States. Two days after our initial meeting, when Valerie told him that I was in Quito working on a study, Abelito and I agreed to meet at a local restaurant for lunch where we could discuss the issues on a private outdoor patio before he went to his job.

At 29 years old, Abelito looks much younger than his actual age, and he is often mistaken for someone of barely legal age. He is taller than the average Ecuadorian male, and so skinny that he was affectionately nicknamed “Flaco” as a child by his relatives. His close friends and family still call him by this name. When asked about his race or ethnicity, he begins by calling himself Latino and Hispanic, although he quickly makes it clear that he considers himself Ecuadorian and American, as well. A high school graduate, he chose not to continue his education. He now works at a high-end clothing store in the chic Quicentro Mall in Quito, although he previously worked for a prominent Latin American airline. He has also worked as a professional model for a modeling agency based in Guayaquil, a job that still brings him much pride. When I asked him how he identifies his sexuality, he shared that he self-identifies as a gay male, and his American influence becomes readily apparent in his response: “I’m gay, duh!”

“Can you tell me about your family, Abelito?” I asked, as we watched the throngs of people walking along the Parque Carolina across the street. “Are your parents still together? Any brothers or sisters?”

“I actually have seven brothers and sisters! Five brothers and two sisters. I have a really big family, and they live here in Ecuador and in New York City. Most of my family here in Ecuador still lives in Guayaquil. My mom and dad live there. They still live in the same house from when we were kids.”
“And what about your childhood? What was that like? What did you and your brothers and sisters and your friends do for fun?”

“I had a really fun childhood with lots of friends and family. I grew up in Guayaquil right on the coast of Ecuador, so we spent a lot of time at the beach. We didn’t have a lot of money, but when I was a kid I never really thought about that. When I was a teenager my family moved to New York City, and that’s when I realized that we were poor. After a while, we moved back to Guayaquil, but I started to miss the United States, so I moved back to stay with my aunt and some of my cousins. My parents and my brothers and sisters stayed in Ecuador. When I finally moved back, I decided to move to Quito, and I’ve been here ever since. “

“Do you have any of the same friends now that you did when you were a child?”

“Some. I have a lot of the same friends from when I was younger, but we don’t spend as much time together now. People change. I still have friends from my time in New York, too.”

“And how is your relationship with your family now?”

“Our relationship is good! We spend holidays and birthdays together, and sometimes we get together for no reason at all.”

“And what about your family in New York?”

“Good. It’s all good. My cousin is getting married, and I’m supposed to go back for her wedding later this year.”

It is worth noting that Abelito’s relationship with the entirety of his family has not been impacted at all by his sexual identity. Too often stories are presented of young LGBT men and women committing suicide in the United States after being ostracized or abandoned by their families after coming out. In this study, many informants have decent familial relationships, although they are not all as close as Abelito’s family. In the developed North, we often assume
that Latin American gender roles and performances are binary, and masculinities are unforgiving and immutable, like an inflexible and stereotypical “machismo.” However, Carolina is the only informant that has been completely shunned by family, and Andrew is still angst-ridden living with his unaccepting mother, not knowing for sure whether he will be shunned in the future.

“Okay, so let’s talk a little about religion now,” I told Abelito after noticing the cross around his neck. Does your family practice a religion?”

“They say they do, but they don’t go to church or anything like that. They still say they’re Catholic though. My cousin in New York is getting married in a Catholic wedding ceremony.”

“And what about you? Do you practice a religion? I can see the cross you’re wearing around your neck…”

“I would say I’m Catholic. I know I wear the santo, but I don’t even remember the last time I was in a church.”

“So, would you say religion plays a role in your life personally, or maybe a role in society here in Ecuador?”

“I don’t really see religion having a role in my personal life, even though I wear this cross. I don’t wear it all the time. I know a lot of people who never take their crosses off! It’s common. Ecuador is pretty religious. You see all the churches here! If you ask people, most of them say they’re Catholic. They just don’t pay attention to the rules.”

With dark clouds looming over the city (it was the rainy season, after all), I thought it would be a good idea for us to start discussing some topics of a more personal nature while we still had a degree of privacy on the patio. Something about Abelito led me to believe he would get easily embarrassed, and my suspicions were quickly confirmed.
“Can you tell me about your first experience with sex?” I asked, as he quickly got flustered and his face turned bright red. “Are you okay? You don’t have to answer the question if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s fine. You just took me by surprise. The first time I did anything was with a cousin, but he’s straight. But the first time I really had sex I was 18 or 19. It was in Guayaquil.”

“And have you only had sexual experiences with men, or with women, too?”

“I’ve only had sex with men. I spend a lot of time with women and I have a lot of female friends, but that’s all it is, just friends.”

“So, have you ever been to a chongo, and if you have can you tell me about it?”

“I have been, but I haven’t been. It’s more like I’ve been outside of a chongo. My brothers and my cousins used to go, but I would never go with them. One time, they decided to go while I was with them but I told them I was just going to wait in the car. They went inside, and I fell asleep in the back of the car like I was in my own bed! When they got back and saw me, they laughed and laughed.”

“Okay, instead of the chongos, tell me about your experiences with the spas and saunas. What do you think of them?”

“I don’t really like them. I’ve been to them, but they are not something I get excited about. I’ve never gone by myself, only with my friends. I guess I don’t like them because I don’t want to spend the money. That’s a waste! If one of my friends wants to pay for me, I might go, but I can’t see myself spending money to go looking for sex.”

“Do you remember the first time you went to one of the spas?”

“Yes, it was at Tulipán Spa. I was so uncomfortable, I just followed my friend around the whole time I was there. I’ve also been to one of the overnight parties at Club Dionsiio with some
of my friends, but I was so tired and I just wanted to go home. That was the only overnight party
I’ve ever been to. The first time and the last time.”

“Do you think there are similarities between chongos and spas?”

“I don’t think so.”

“From what you just told me, I can see some similarities with your friends in the spas and
your cousins and brothers in the chongos.”

“Yeah, I guess. Maybe they are the same.”

With a laugh, I offered: “Plus, you get tired at both.”

“It’s true!” he responded, as he laughed right along with me.

“So how do you decide who is a potential sex partner and who is a potential friend? Do
you look at the race of the person, or are you looking for something else?”

“I like white guys. I always have.”

“Is it easy for you to find white guys in Quito?”

“Oh yeah. Wait, I should be more specific. I’m not talking about white guys like from the
United States. Them, too, but what I meant was anyone whiter than me.” It is clear that he is
talking about his sexual attraction to phenotypes and skin tone as opposed to a particular race or
ethnicity.

“And what about safe sex? Do you know if it is common in the spas?”

“I don’t know if it’s common, but I have safe sex. It’s not that hard to be safe. Here in
Quito there are lots of places where you can get condoms for free.”

I wanted to ask Abelito some more about sexuality and sexual identity in Quito, since he
has been able to effortlessly integrate his personal sexual identity with his familial relationships.
“Alright, so let’s talk about sexuality. Are you completely open about your sexuality? For example, are you open with your heterosexual friends, and your family, or your job?”

“I’m completely out of the closet if that’s what you mean. I don’t really bring it up at work. It depends who I’m talking to. My brothers tease me sometimes, but I know they’re only joking around.”

“Do you believe members of the gay community in Quito are more open about their sexuality now than they were in the past?”

“We’re definitely more open here! I can go to a gay bar every night of the week if I want now. It’s more open, but it’s not like it is in the United States.”

As the first raindrops began to fall, I suggested we try and find a secluded table inside to sit down and continue our conversation. Once we found a decent spot and had our drinks refilled, we began a discussion about perceptions of masculinity in Ecuadorian society.

“What does it mean to be a man in Ecuador?”

“It means fucking a lot of bitches and having a bunch of kids!” he laughs.

“What do you mean by that?”

“In my family, it’s normal for the guys to have a lot of children. My brothers have so many kids, and my cousins, too. My aunts and uncles. We have a really big family.”

“Do you think women see masculinity the same way?”

“I do. Women know that men are dogs. If we walked up to a woman right now, we could ask her, ‘Do you think men are dogs?’ I’m sure she’s going to say yes.”

“Okay so what about this: do men act differently when women aren’t around? Do you?”

“I act the same way when I’m with women because most of my friends are women. Men will usually try to get away with stuff when girls are not around like cheating.”
“Now we’ve talked about sexuality, and we’ve talked about masculinity. Is there a connection between masculinity and sexuality in Ecuador?”

“Umm, there is a connection because men aren’t supposed to be gay.” Realizing what he said, he quickly corrected himself: “That’s not what I meant. I meant to say that society doesn’t think men are supposed to be gay.”

“Are ideas about masculinity and what it means to be a man different in the spas than they are in everyday society?”

“The only difference is that men don’t have to pretend to be straight in a spa because everyone there is gay. I’m the same either way because my family knows that I’m gay. Other people don’t have families that accept them.” Here it is clear that not all members of the community have had positive familial relationships like many of the men in this investigation.

“Okay let’s talk about something a little bit different: How do you feel about transvestites?”

“I love them! Drag queens are awesome! You have to go to some of the shows while you’re here in Quito.” I cannot help but notice that he instinctively started talking about drag queens and not any of the other types of cross-dressers in the city. I was somewhat surprised by this, but then I remembered that he has spent so much time in the United States.

“Do you think there is a difference between transvestites and drag queens?”

“Yes, the difference is that you can be a transvestite and just wear women’s clothes, but that doesn’t make you a drag queen. Drag queens perform, and they work really hard at it. A lot of people in the gay community here can watch *RuPaul’s Drag Race* on Netflix now, so they see what they’re doing, and now the shows are getting even better. I love that show. I wish we had more drag queens like that.”
“How are the transvestites in Ecuador treated?” I asked.

“Well, the prostitutes may get beaten up in the street, and no one will even stop them.” Here, he finally mentioned sex workers, and I am intrigued by his answer, since other informants considered the sex workers to be the dangerous ones. His difference of opinion may have something to do with how much he has moved around.

“Does a man have to dress in women’s clothing to be considered a transvestite?”

“Yes, they always wear women’s clothes. It’s up to them, I guess. If they say they want to be trannies, then they’re trannies, I can’t say whether they are or not.”

“I know you move around a lot, but people don’t really use that word anymore because some people think it’s offensive.”

“That’s stupid,” he said succinctly.

“Do you think you would know if someone was a transvestite or drag queen if you met them in a spa?”

“I would only know if the person was a drag queen if I already knew them from outside of the spa, like from a bar. If not, then I don’t think I would know because they wouldn’t be wearing women’s clothes.”

Recognizing that time was running short before Abelito had to start his shift at the store, we moved away from our discussion about transvestites and into a larger talk about the effects of popular culture and social media on the gay community and Ecuadorian society, in general. “Has the media changed Ecuadorian society’s ideas about sexuality?” I asked, curious about his thoughts as someone who regularly crosses borders and experiences different societies.

“I think the media has changed things in the United States, but not in Ecuador. It’s starting to change things, slowly, but it’s not at the same level. Now, it’s really easy to get on the
internet here in Quito. If you don’t have a computer, you probably still have a phone, and there are internet cafes everywhere. People see all the video clips online, and we have television and movies that have subtitles or they’re dubbed over in Spanish. There are options, but they just aren’t influencing people that much yet.”

“And what about social media? Do you prefer to meet men using social media, or somewhere else?”

“I definitely prefer to meet men in person because I’ll know if we have a connection or not. It’s a lot easier to meet people in bars than it is on the internet, but I’ve meet people online, too. Sometimes it’s cool. I’ve actually met a lot of guys online.”

“Okay, so you prefer to meet in bars, but what do think are the reasons men may choose to meet one way over others?”

“I think some people are just too nervous to meet in person. It’s a lot easier to leave a message on the internet, or talk on the phone, than it is to meet a stranger in person. I remember this one time, I was talking to a guy online, but he always had an excuse not to meet in person. We ended up never meeting, and I felt like he just wasted all of my time.”

“Have you had any bad experiences meeting men on social media?”

With a smile, he said, “The only bad experience was with the guy who was too afraid to meet in person!”

“Okay, I know it’s time for you to get going, so I only have one more question. As I’m sure you know, Ecuador has one of the most progressive constitutions in all of Latin America. With the changes that were made in support for gay rights, have you seen any changes in everyday society?”
“I don’t think I’ve seen any major changes, but I also haven’t been looking for any. I’m just living my life the way I always do. I have noticed that when I go out, I see a lot of straight people go to gay discos, and a lot of gay people are going to straight discos. You met me at Ladies Night! Now, this happens all the time and there is never a problem. Look, I know there is still discrimination in our society, but there’s discrimination in the United States, too. Things are getting better, so I can’t complain.”

At the end of our conversation, I walked with Abelito through the mall to his job, and he offered to let me use his employee discount if I saw anything that I wanted to buy. We said our goodbyes, and made plans to get our groups of friends back together for a night of fun before I returned to the United States. While we were not able to meet up again during that trip, we have all maintained contact using Facebook and Skype. About six months after returning home, I received a phone call from New York City, and it was Abelito, finally back in the country for his cousin’s wedding. He first contacted our now mutual friend Valerie to take him and some of his relatives out bar-hopping, but he insisted he was on a budget and wanted to go somewhere with cheap prices, not easy to do in New York City. He then called me in Massachusetts, insisting I take the drive of several hours to New York that evening and join them. I declined, assuring him I would go the next time he was back in the United States. Since he returned to Ecuador, he has begun modeling once more, excitedly posting several pictures from his photoshoots on his Facebook page and eventually copies of advertisements that he has been featured in. He still has not given up his day-job working in the clothing store, however, and he simply takes time off from the job to travel to Guayaquil when he lands a modeling gig. His constant movement between countries and areas of Ecuador gives him a unique perspective on the stigma
surrounding alternative expressions of sexual identity. Danilo also has a unique perspective, but his comes from his time spent on the internet.

**DANilo**

While I was able to find all of my informants for this investigation through various channels, in Danilo’s case he was the one who found me. In what amounted to a virtual snowball sample, Danilo scoured the Facebook profile pages of his friends and acquaintances, sending friend requests to all of their friends, and so on until he reached Facebook’s predetermined limit of five thousand friends. At this time, I was already following the well-known País Canela page, gathering any information I could find on the conditions and experiences of members of the MSM population in Ecuador. Danilo sent me a friend request from the profile page he created for his club promotions business without any prior interaction with me. Upon reading his profile I quickly accepted, intrigued to learn more about this side of the community, but I must confess that the sheer number of postings and messages with virtual flyers became overwhelming. My message folder was so inundated that it was hard to imagine he had time for anything else! I thought if I actually initiated a conversation with him as a person instead of a promoter things would change, so I sent him a message detailing my research interests and asking if he would be available for an interview. Within a few moments, he excitedly responded and sent me another friend request from his personal profile, once again unsolicited. Instead of an influx of advertisements from one profile, I now received twice as many! Danilo posts all of his promotional materials from both profiles and also sends them as group messages to everyone on his list of friends. It can never be said that he does not put in the work to get the word out.
I let Danilo know when I was going to be in Quito and he excitedly invited me to a party he was organizing at a private residence, with an entrance fee of only a few dollars. With the location secret until the time of the party and no organized transportation, I declined. Assuring me that there were no hard feelings, he insisted that we make plans to get together; once I arrived in town, I invited him to my apartment so we could talk. Over drinks he shared that he is very comfortable using his own name for our discussion, since he believes he has a reputation as a “prominent” member of the LGBT population in Quito. I would agree with him because he seems to know everyone in the community – at least those that consider themselves part of the bar and disco scene – and is always in the know as to what is going on. I told him about the need to maintain the anonymity of my informants, and after a little back and forth, we agreed that he would be called Danilo because it is a name close to his heart.

Danilo is 32 years old and self-identifies as a gay male; although he is open about his sexual identity, the same cannot be said about his age. When I initially asked, he in turn asked repeatedly, “how old do I look?” I felt that he looks about his age although he firmly believes he looks much younger, and his vanity became clearer as the day wore on. He considers himself mestizo over any other racial or ethnic category, and he uses this same categorization in all his international travels, particularly to other Latin American countries. A high school graduate, he spent some time several years ago at a university in Quito, but he did not complete a degree and has no regrets about leaving school. When we first met in person he was unemployed but living just as he always has: projecting an air of wealth but living beyond his means. While he fancied himself a club promoter for years, the main disco that he was promoting has shut down. He is now calling himself a DJ although he has never held a job as a disc jockey or learned to properly spin and mix records. He often poses questions to his followers on the internet about potential
locations for new discos he could open in various parts of Quito, asking if they are places people would be interested in visiting. So far it all seems to be wishful thinking on his part. With his lack of steady employment, he not only survives but lives what is arguably a faux-extravagant lifestyle with his parents while they continue to provide for him financially. It seemed appropriate that we began our talk with a discussion of his family life.

“What can you tell me about your family?” I asked. “Are your parents still together? Do you have any brothers and sisters?”

“My parents are still together, although when I was younger I thought they were going to get a divorce. My father was always cheating on my mother. They didn’t think I knew what was going on because I was a child, but I knew. I think kids always know because when the parents try to hide things from them, it only makes them want to find out. For me, my mother was always whispering about things with my aunts or with her friends, and she would tell me to go in the other room. That made me want to know what she was talking about. Even with the problems they never divorced. Eventually, my father stopped and they are still married today.”

“And you’re the only child?”

“Yes, I am the only one.”

“Okay, so tell me about your childhood. What was your life like? I know you mentioned there were some problems with your parents, but what did you do for fun?”

“I didn’t mean that there were a lot of problems with my parents. Most of the time, everything was fine and we were all happy. I think I had a normal childhood. I had friends like everyone else. Sometimes I went on trips with my family, but I mostly spent my time with the other kids in our neighborhood. Just normal things.”

“Do you still have any of the same friends that you did when you were young?”
“No. I still talk to the people in the neighborhood, but we are not friends like we were. It’s not like it used to be. Most of my friends now are in the gay community.”

“So how is your relationship with your family now?”

“My relationship with my family is great! My parents take care of everything for me. They get me everything I want. I like to meet new people and I like to travel, and my parents understand and pay for most of my trips. I was in the Caribbean a couple of months ago, and I went to a bunch of different islands, and then I met my family in Mexico, and they paid for everything. It was amazing. You can see all the pictures on my Facebook page. My family is great!” Indeed, looking at Danilo’s page there are dozens (maybe hundreds) of pictures of him in exotic locales, climbing pyramids, posing on sailboats in expensive clothes, or lounging on white sand beaches among others. I would have worried about the strain on his parents’ finances if not for the dozens of pictures of the whole extended family on trips, as well. Many of their trips coincide with Christian religious holidays, so it seems that religion plays at least a rudimentary role in Danilo’s family life.

“I’ve had a chance to really look at your pictures on Facebook,” I told Danilo when he arrived at my apartment the following day, dressed in expensive clothes and accessories that I doubt I could afford.

“They’re nice, right?” he responded, with a proud smile on his face. “I’ve been to a lot of places and I always take a lot of pictures.”

“But you’re in all of the pictures!” I exclaimed. “There are pictures of you by yourself, you with your family, and you with your friends. A bunch of the pictures you took of yourself! You can barely see the sites.”
Laughing, he responded, “I know! I love to take selfies.” For some reason, I was
surprised “selfies” and the whole culture surrounding them including the ridiculous poses had
made it to Ecuador, but that was probably a bit of naiveté on my part.

“I noticed a lot of the pictures with your family were taken on trips for the holidays, like
Christmas and Easter. Is your family religious?”

“No, I don’t think so. Some of my relatives go to church, but my mom and dad don’t.”

“What kind of church do they go to?” I asked.

“Catholic Church, of course. This is Ecuador.”

“And what about you? Do you practice a religion personally?”

“No, I’m not interested in religion.”

“But do you think religion plays a role in your life at all? All the pictures I saw where
you are on vacation with your family are on holidays like Christmas. Why is that?”

“Religion isn’t important to us, but it is important to Ecuador. If you are ever in Quito
during Christmas or any religious holidays, you will see lots of families in their cars driving to
the coast or to other places for vacation. It is like the whole country shuts down for a few days
and we all celebrate. So, it’s not really about our religion, it’s about our culture.” Indeed, I have
travelled to the coast on several holiday trips and regretted my choice every time I got caught in
the hours of impassable traffic through the Andes on the way back, but never really considered
the potential religious connotations of the getaways.

By this point, it had become clear that Danilo had gotten quite comfortable with me and
my constant barrage of questions. I had not initially noticed, but looking over from the table I
saw that he kicked off his shoes and was hugging a throw pillow while he made himself at home
on the couch. “So why don’t we talk about something different,” I suggested.
“Okay, what do you want to talk about?”

“Why don’t you tell me about your first experience with sex?” I asked.

With a mischievous smile, he shared, “It was a long time ago. My first experience was when I was sixteen years old. I still remember. You never forget. It was with one of my friends that lived in my neighborhood. We were in his bedroom, and then his mother left to go to the store. We were watching a video, but I don’t remember where we got it. We started watching, then we were both masturbating, and then we just did it! We were laughing, but it was fun! After that, we did it all the time.”

“Did your parents know you were gay then? Do they know now?”

“Ronnie, I still remember when I told them. They were sitting in the living room, and I just told them. It was a little uncomfortable because I was so nervous! I didn’t think I would be nervous, but I was. My father was worse than my mom, but I think they knew already so it wasn’t too bad. My mom asked me a few times if I was sure, and it used to frustrate me, but she doesn’t ask anymore. My family respects me.”

“So, have you had experiences with only men or with women, too?”

“Only men. Lots of different types of men. I am versatile.”

“Okay, even though you have only had sex with men, does that mean you have never been to a chongo?”

“Never! Why would I go there? When I was younger, my friends used to go to them, and the next day they would be laughing about it in school and telling all of us what happened. They had to be lying sometimes because they were always talking about it! They probably went some of the time, but not all of the time.” It initially appeared that Danilo has an aversion to the chongos. I wondered to myself why he would think they were so bad, but came to the conclusion
that he is so comfortable in his sexual identity that he would not need to go to a chongo to prove himself to other men.

“So then tell me about your experiences with the spas. What do you think of them?”

“To be honest, I don’t have any problems with the spas, and I don’t judge people when they go because they can do whatever they want. I just can’t go because it will be too strange! Not always, but most of the time. I know too many people! Sometimes I will go if I hear that they are having a party. My friends usually tell me so I go with them, but I don’t do anything. If there is an event, I will let all of my friends know on Facebook so I can support the community. I just can’t do anything there because everyone knows me, so why go?” Danilo’s aversion to the spas is different than his aversion to the chongos. While he does not feel a need to project a heterosexual identity among his peers at the chongo, he has no need to project a homosexual identity at the spa, either.

“Maybe you can make new friends there?” I suggested.

“I don’t think so. I know the whole community already. The times that I went I never met any new friends. There were some people I didn’t know, but I never spoke to them.”

“Well, do you remember the first time you went to a spa?”

“I don’t. It was years ago. I haven’t been to a spa too many times, but I don’t remember the first time I went.”

“Okay, I know you’ve never been to a chongo, but from what you’ve heard, do you think there are any similarities between chongos and spas?”

“I think the only similarity between chongos and spas is that you can have sex with strangers, but that is my opinion.”

“Does Ecuadorian society see them equally?”
“Of course not! Here in Ecuador, everyone accepts the chongos but they would never accept the spas. Never, never, never.”

“And do you know if people use protection when they are having sex in the spas?”

“I think they do, because they get a condom when they go in, and they don’t even have to pay for it. Maybe if they had to pay for them things would be different, but they don’t. That’s one of the good things about the spas.”

Switching gears, I decided to shift the conversation to the daily perceptions of masculinity and sexuality in Ecuadorian society. Based on his responses, there seems to be a clear shift in the ways masculinity and sexuality are performed depending on the location, even among members of the same community.

“I know you are open about your sexuality with your family, and most of your friends are gay, but are you completely open with everyone?”

“Yes, I am. I am completely open with everyone.”

“Do you think members of the gay community here in Quito are more open about their sexuality now than they were in the past?” When I asked Danilo to answer this question, I had no idea how thoughtful his response would be. He shared:

Well, I think the community is more open, but I think there are some people who can’t be open. It’s dangerous! Not everyone has a family like mine, so I understand. I wish everyone could be accepted by their families, but that’s a dream. It is not how it is. At the same time, I see the different people in the parties that I promote and it’s amazing! There are so many people dancing and drinking and everyone is so happy! There are masculine men and feminine men and they are all dancing together without worrying about what other people will think. I think the music brings us all together. Everyone is singing and
having fun. They’re not worrying about anyone from their families finding out that they are gay. They don’t have to worry about being attacked in the streets or people yelling at them. I love it. It’s really special.

Seeing Danilo’s enthusiasm while he is discussing the energy and camaraderie in the discos, it is clear why he devotes so much time to promoting his parties to as many people in the community as possible. His description of the gay party scene in Quito sounds a lot like the enormous gay circuit parties found in major cities across the rest of the world. I am sure that for many people the scene would seem downright idyllic.

“You mentioned masculine men and feminine men together in the discos as if it is something that doesn’t regularly happen.”

“It doesn’t always. That’s why it is so special! You don’t always see that in the community.”

“So, what does it mean to be a man in Ecuador, or to be masculine?”

“Men are strong. They are supposed to be, but if they are not, then they are called gay.”

“Do women see masculinity the same way as men?”

“That’s different. Women are different, because they accept gay people more than men do. Every time I tell a female that I am gay, they never have a problem.”

“And do you think men act differently when women are not around?”

“Of course! But I think that’s normal. I think it is the same with women. Men will talk about women and their bodies and silly things. Women probably talk about men, too.”

“What about you?”

“I talk about people the same. The only time I talk differently is with my family.”
“So, if you think men act differently when women are not around, what happens at the spas? Do men act differently there than they do in everyday society?”

“At the spas, all the guys are trying to be masculine and macho, even though I know a lot of them are feminine. They should just be happy the way they are.”

“Is there a connection between masculinity and sexuality here in Quito?”

“I think a lot of people think gay men are feminine or that they dress like women. That is probably the reason why the men in the spas want to be masculine; it is because this is the only place where they can be gay, and people won’t think they are feminine without knowing them first. They can be whatever they want for a time.” It is interesting to note that Danilo, who is so unapologetically gay and secure in his identity, has conformist ideas of what it means to be a man in Ecuador that fall in line with the traditional stereotypes of Latin American masculinities. He also argued that heterosexual males believe the stereotypical perceptions of homosexual males as effeminate. From what has been seen with other informants in this study, it is clear these ideas are not always valid.

“I’m actually glad you brought up men who dress like women,” I said, as I ran to the kitchen to refresh our drinks.

“Really? Why?”

“Because I wanted to ask you; how do you feel about transvestites?”

“I like them! I am not usually interested in them sexually, but I don’t have problems with them. When I see them, I always say hello. I think they are brave because they can be attacked if they are seen in public.”

“Do you think there is a difference between transvestites and drag queens?”
“No, they are the same. Drag queens perform and make money in the discos, though. They are entertainers.”

“I know you’ve mentioned that transvestites can be attacked, but, in general, how are they treated here in Ecuador?”

“It’s bad, Ronnie. But then you see some of the prostitutes on the street working in the dark. The streets in Quito are dangerous at night for everyone, not just transvestites. But they can be killed! I respect them a lot.”

“Okay, so in your opinion, does a man have to dress in women’s clothing to be considered a transvestite or not?”

Thinking about the question, he decided, “I was going to say ‘yes,’ but I know a lot of drag queens, and they don’t always dress in drag, but they are still drag queens.”

“And do you think you would be able to tell if someone was a transvestite or drag queen if you met them in a spa?”

“I would know, Ronnie, because I know everyone. It’s possible that other people wouldn’t know, because we’re all the same. There are no differences in the spas.”

“Oh, I want to change the subject a little bit. I see the way you dress, and the way you talk about the gay community in Quito. I was just curious if you think the media has affected your ideas…” I began, before I was cut off.

“My ideas about what?” Danilo replied, still actively interested in sharing his thoughts on the state of his cherished community.

“I am curious about your thoughts on the media and its influence on you and the community. Do you think it affects ideas about things like sexuality?”
“I definitely think it does. I know it affects me. I’ve learned a lot about how gay people live around the world, and other people do, too. I spend a lot of time online, and I see what people are wearing and what they are listening to. I go buy a lot of my clothes after I’ve seen the styles online or in magazines. Plus, we can find a lot of films and television shows from the United States if we go to the piratas.23 You can find videos dubbed over in Spanish or with subtitles. A lot of people have Netflix, too. It’s easy to find out what’s going on around the world. You can see some of the influences when the drag queens are performing songs in English, but in reality, they don’t know how to speak any English. I know the media helps us in the community, but I don’t know if it is the same for everyone else. Maybe they would start to understand the community more.”

“And what about the media and your personal life? Do you prefer to meet men through social media like Facebook or WhatsApp or any other app, or maybe in person?”

“I prefer to meet people with apps because I spend so much time online. It’s a lot easier! I’m always sending friend requests to people I don’t know anyway, and it’s easier to talk to people there. Sometimes when you meet people in person, they are so shy that you can’t have a conversation. When you meet on Facebook, for example, sometimes you become friends, sometimes it’s just a date, and sometimes sex, but mostly I just meet new friends. I meet men in person, too, but I still think it is easier online.”

“Do you think there are any other reasons that men may choose to meet one way instead of the others?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they are worried their families are going to find out.”

“And have you had any bad experiences meeting men for the first time?”

“Never.”
“Finally, I just have one last question for you. Do you think your society still needs to make any changes related to sexuality?”

“That’s a big question!” he laughed. “I have a good life here in Ecuador. I can be myself, and I don’t have any problems. But I am not stupid. Other people still need to feel safe. I think it would be nice if partners could hold hands and kiss. That’s not a big deal, right?”

As we briefly pondered that final thought, Danilo put his shoes on and began to gather his things to head home. As I walked him downstairs and to the street, he made me promise that I would go out on the town with him. In the disco his popularity was annoyingly apparent, since he was constantly being pulled to all corners of the building to greet entire groups of people whether we were dancing or conversing. Yet, with the constant stream of free drinks sent his way, his reputation also has its advantages. Currently Danilo still calls himself a DJ although he has no actual job experience, and he has yet to find another club to promote.

The men considered in this chapter use the internet and social media as tools for business pursuits and occasionally as virtual erotic oases. They approach internet encounters with less trepidation than those they would find in the spas. Their reasons for disliking or avoiding the spas are all personal and unique, but there is a significant similarity; if the spas were strictly a social space instead of a social and sexual space, they would not have problems with them. They may not enjoy the spas, but they understand their value to the community, even if the internet remains their preferred meeting site.
CHAPTER 18

CONCLUSION

RENEGOTIATING MASCULINITIES AND SEXUALITIES IN THE SPAS OF QUITO

Me llegó este comunicado,

Nueva sauna para la gente gay de Quito

This research was motivated by a desire to investigate and document the variability of Latin American masculinity and sexuality as evidenced in Quito, Ecuador. The field investigation considered the lives of nine men who regularly redefine the ways they perform masculinities and shift sexual identities. However, this study also provides a commentary on perceptions of personal identity as defined both locally and globally. In the developed West, we often see these intimate facets of our personal identity as rigid and immutable. The same cannot be said for the all the people of Latin America and particularly for the gay male community of Quito. Halperin argues that “identity provides a protective shield against the uneasiness that stigmatized populations often occasion in ‘normal’ people – that is, people who don’t suffer from the stigma in question and come comfortably close to embodying the social norm” (2012: 73). If this is true, how could anyone argue that these shifting identities are false performances when they are, in fact, culturally typical?

On August 6, 2015, at 2:23 p.m., the País Canela Facebook page, a clearinghouse for all information of interest to Ecuador’s LGBT population, posted the message quoted above to much fanfare from its followers, since it made the community aware of an all-new spa that just opened for business in Quito. With well over one hundred positive responses from members of the target population in the local community (and more than a few from abroad) and requests for
more information, the initial advertisement was deemed a success from the spas owners with only a few moments of work and no money spent. The potential customers, in turn, had a new location in which sexual behavior and self-identity would not be judged by mainstream eyes. The protective shield of identity – which Halperin suggests is a means of protection from the “social norm” – is relaxed in the spas of Quito, as can be seen in the rest of the País Canela post:

In a society as conservative as ours, for our own safety we should contribute to these sites of gay encounters. The closing of these sites thrusts us into the streets, a place that can be very hostile and where our lives can be placed at risk.  

Although the reasons that men turn to sexual commerce often vary, I have cited many examples of what Bernstein notes are primary motivations for the consumers of commercial sex, such as “desire for sexual variation, sexual access to partners with preferred ages, racialized bodies and specific physiques, the appeal of an ‘emotion-free’ and clandestine sexual encounter… and the thrill of violating taboos” (2007: 117). The “commerce” in the spas, unlike the chongos, primarily comes from entrance fees collected at the door, although bodily capital remains in play through access to sexual partners and personal desirability, and the few odd sex workers that regularly work their way through the crowds and charge extra based on physical traits.

The social media post announcing the latest spa to open in Quito alludes to the need for spaces free from the risks associated with gay male encounters in public locales. Viveros Vigoya notes that an important dimension of masculine homosociality is its “expression in public spaces, including symbolic spaces of power in which women have traditionally not been present” (Viveros Vigoya 2003: 42). Without the spas, there would be no spaces, outside of discos, for homosociality to be practiced in public by men who have sex with men in Quito. Perceptions of self and models of behavior can be altered by simply walking through the front door. In most
cases, these revised constructions of masculinities and sexualities are not contested by other patrons who are often modifying identities themselves. While some patrons embrace these dynamic transformations, others patrons, such as drag queens, are comfortable with the marginalized but stable identities that they embody in public and in private, and they make efforts to remind new acquaintances and potential sexual mates what they can find once they leave the confines of the spas.

Many cross-dressers, drag queens, and *travestis* publicly embrace the feminine gender performances and presentations that they have been able to cultivate in often difficult (and dangerous) circumstances. Garber argues, and I agree, that “one of the most important aspects of cross-dressing is the way in which it offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of ‘female’ and ‘male,’ whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural” (Garber, 1992: 10). However, not all men are interested in being challenged, not because of what it means for the cross-dressers’ identities, but because of what it means for their personal identities. Some may face their own internal ‘‘transvestite panic’’: the fear on the part of some gay men today… that they themselves will be coded, and dismissed, as effeminate – or worse, as ‘women’” (Garber, 1992: 137). While many men are willing to shift their own sexual identities, at least temporarily, they are not as ready for society to do it for them.

Paez-Vacas argues that there is a difference between cross-dressing and transvestism, in that cross-dressing does not indicate homosexual desire; it is a performative practice built on aesthetics that frees the performer from the constraints of masculinity while simultaneously exaggerating femininity, creating a parody of gender that does not put the performer’s masculinity in doubt (Paez-Vacas, 2010: 32-33). Many people do not recognize these nuanced
differences, conflating many different variations of cross-gender performance with that of transgender women and viewing them all as disturbing, disgusting, and dangerous. For those men who are uncomfortable, unwilling, or possibly ashamed to place themselves in positions of physical or emotional “danger” through socialization with members of the cross-dressing and trans populations, virtual communities can offer a sense of refuge and secrecy that cannot be found in the streets or in the spas.

Patricio Aguirre Arauz argues that homosexuality in Quito is shaped by influences from abroad due to global media such as cable and satellite television and easy access to CDs and DVDs from around the globe (2010: 38). Dating and sexual encounters are also regularly influenced from abroad, since internet sites and social media – largely created outside of Ecuador – are commonly used to search for willing sexual partners and to create virtual identities that can be as masculine or feminine as the user desires at any given time. As Mowlabocus shares, “what lies at the heart of every profile is the question ‘how do I want to be seen?’” (2010: 92). In these virtual spaces, there is never a need for the user to qualify his identity as gay, straight, questioning, since “the user profile also represents a consciously constructed subjectivity that inhabits a space where the natural assumption is that you are gay” (93). Social media sites are an asset for men who are unwilling or unable to articulate a personal gender/sexual identity that is regularly in flux and may not conform with their chosen sexual practices. Of the thirty-three men approached for in-depth interviews as part of this investigation, fewer than half were comfortable enough to share information about their sexual lives that could be seen or read by others, even if their names were removed (and even fewer were willing to give enough information to create a distinct narrative). Some may argue that these virtual sites catering to the gay community have overstayed their welcome, and the locally-created sites come and go at a much faster rate than
those from abroad. However, it is clear that social media – so useful to the LGBT community in Quito and abroad – will not be going away anytime soon. As Mowlabocus shares, “While there is undoubtedly a level of fatigue generated around using such websites, and while they are by no means used by all gay men, dating/sex websites continue to pervade everyday lives of many gay men today, both in Britain and further afield” (2010: 84).

Personal sexual identity is a lived experience. The respondents interviewed in this investigation are constantly renegotiating the performance of masculinities and their sexual identities based on location and immediate social environment. I argue that it is important to emphasize that these performances of masculinities and sexualities are authentic to the men who live them, even when doubted by the people around them. These internal changes will persist, with or without the understanding of others. For example, in most spaces, Alejo presents himself as a masculine, heterosexual male, although he also portrays himself as someone who is sexually inactive. His performances are based on the stigma he believes he will face at his job in a local hospital and with his family, particularly his mother, with whom he shares a strong emotional bond and a home. Generally shy, he refuses to share physical contact with males in public that may be misconstrued as anything less than platonic, usually leaving him with nothing more than a hand shake or fist bump. In the spas, he presents himself as a masculine, bisexual male, playing an exclusively active role in sexual encounters. He avoids creating any lasting ties with the partners he meets for fear of that sexual preferences will be made public. Similarly, he avoids any interaction with males who present as females due to the questions that arise when femininity is expressed on male bodies, although he accepts drag queens as performers and artists. He also avoids transgender females both for their gender presentations and the fear that
they may be prone to violence and petty crime. He has no desire to change his current presentations and preferences in the public sphere.

Like Alejo, Andrew presents himself as a masculine, heterosexual male both in the home and in public arenas, although he finds the thought of actually marrying a female or forging any type of committed, long-term heterosexual relationship horrifying. Unlike informants who actively avoid the spas, while in Ecuador Andrew will only go to the spas to act out his physical desires. His identity is more flexible when he travels abroad and away from his familial orbit, and, in particular, away from his virulently homophobic mother. He is also more at ease with presenting a gay identity through the internet, where he is an avid user of gay social media and frequently makes contacts with gay males, the same males he would most likely avoid in public spaces. If he makes a connection with the right partner through the internet, specifically a male that lives outside of Ecuador, he is willing to trade in his closeted persona for that of a gay male married to another male. In the spas, he presents himself as a masculine, bisexual male who only takes the active role in sexual encounters. In this space, he is outgoing and willing to broach the topic of sex with other males, since he believes he will not encounter them at other times or locales. To protect his identity, he gives an alias to any one that asks. He reacts negatively to men who cross-dress and transgressive expressions of gender in any form, and he avoids them at all cost. Once Andrew is able to leave Ecuador permanently and extricate himself from the homophobia he finds at home, the borders between his public and private presentations may not be as rigid as they are in Quito.

Cristian is not currently willing to commit to any particular labels, although his actions are consistent with those of a young gay or questioning male. He has the support of his family, although they are unaware of his same-sex sexual experimentation and still treat him as a child,
albeit a child with a degree of independence and autonomy. He comes and goes as he pleases, but is still dependent on his parents for food, shelter, and money. He is willing to be seen in public spaces with friends who identify as gay, although their sexuality is kept private. Cristian’s interest in meeting new men for experimentation – or “trying new things,” as he says – is tempered by his unhealthy and questionable relationship with the much older and sexually experienced Gabriel. While they occasionally meet outside of the spas, the extent of Gabriel’s interest in Cristian appears to be as a younger and more desirable sexual trophy and not as an equal partner. In the spas, Cristian presents himself as just another one of the guys and makes attempts to be outgoing and involved with the men around him, but he is most often relegated to lonely corners while Gabriel continues his sexual escapades without him. Their relationship is clearly one of “do as I say, not as I do.” On the internet Cristian takes an active role in his sexual life and pursues men (largely without Gabriel’s knowledge) for what he says are strictly platonic intentions, but the men are always found on websites and message boards that cater to men seeking men. His self-described sexual identity does not align with his personal behavior.

Whereas Cristian may simply be “experimenting,” the same cannot be said for Chucho. Chucho self-identifies as a gay male who is completely open and honest about his sexuality, including with female coworkers, but with his male coworkers he tries to remain discreet, leaving his sexual identity unspoken. He is not conventionally masculine by North American or Ecuadorian ideals, and his free time is spent in pursuit of arguably feminine activities including ballroom and contemporary dance rehearsals. His primary outlet for creative expression is dance and the costuming techniques used in his modern dance troupe, where the lines between masculine/feminine, male/female, and human/animal are regularly blurred and crossed. In his burgeoning role as Lorena, he has found yet another group of like-minded individuals willing to
experiment and regularly traverse gender lines. Unlike Sofia and Carolina, Lorena never self-presents as completely female, avoiding gender binaries in favor of exaggerated femininity and/or androgynous looks that are appropriate for a drag show or disco but would appear unsettling in most other locales. When Chucho is in a relationship, the time he spends performing and promoting his work as Lorena often diminishes depending on whether his partners are looking for a male with very few feminine qualities. As Lorena, Chucho presents as mostly female for her performances and is addressed using female pronouns by her friends and the crowd, but when he goes to the spas, Chucho is strictly male. Most of the other patrons refer to him with masculine pronouns, but when his fellow drag queens are in attendance, their pronoun usage varies. He rarely brings up his alter ego in the spas, but when someone expresses an interest in cross-dressers, he is prepared to show off the pictures he has taken as Lorena that are conveniently saved on his phone. Chucho’s performance as Lorena is not integral to his spa experience or his daily identity, as, in his eyes, Lorena will never be more than a character.

The boundary between drag characterization and daily gender presentation is not as distinct with Manuel and Juan as it is for Chucho. Manuel traverses gender categories on a more frequent basis than Chucho. Whereas Chucho only crosses the gender divide when he is performing as his “character,” Lorena, or as part of his theatrical performances, Manuel’s personal identity includes overt nods to the masculine and the feminine. Most often Manuel presents himself as an effeminate, openly homosexual male. While Chucho has a positive relationship with his family – all of his relatives embrace him regardless of his sexuality – Manuel’s family is not united in support for him. He is able to negotiate familial relationships on an individual basis, such as socializing with his sisters with or without their husbands in attendance. His entire family is aware of his sexuality, yet they are completely unaware of his
drag queen persona or that he cross-dresses, at all. As a child, he had an enjoyable life, free of most of the stigma that comes when a young boy chooses to play with the girls and their toys instead of the typical games with neighborhood boys. Currently, he has been embraced by members of Quito’s LGBT community as an individual and due to his local “fame” performing as Sofia. In the spas, he is comfortable presenting himself as an effeminate male, but like Chucho he remains prepared to show potential mates pictures of himself in drag if they so desire. He is often referred to with female pronouns by members of the LGBT community in and out of drag, and he takes no offense. For most of the other informants, the pronouns remain strictly masculine even when sexual identities shift.

Juan takes a similar stance on pronoun usage to Manuel. He has fully embraced his drag identity as Carolina, and often performs a female presentation even when he is not on stage in the local discos. He does not consider himself transgender; rather, he is simply comfortable with his status as an effeminate male. Unlike many of the other respondents in this investigation, he has no qualms with the transgender community or any other marginalized populations, including sex workers in the local brothels. With an outgoing personality and a fearlessness when it comes to personal sexual identity and gender presentation, he surrounds himself with fictive kin to replace the biological family that has disapproved of him from an early age. In the spas Juan continues to be referred to as Carolina even when he is in a state of undress. He is a well-known figure in the local community and is not avoided by the other patrons. No one appears to uncomfortable with his constant use of feminine pronouns to refer to himself and others. Juan takes his work as a drag queen seriously, and uses his performances as an outlet for creativity. Unlike Chucho, who prefers to blur the lines between male and female self-presentation, Juan prefers a purely feminine aesthetic in his performances and occasionally at home.
While Diego has never been one to cross-dress and is not attracted to cross-dressers in a sexual way, he passes no judgment on transgressive expressions of gender. He considers himself an ally to all facets of the LGBT community and does his best to educate the population on matters of health and safety that he considers important. In his eyes education is the key to making the community safer for everyone. He self-identifies as an openly gay, sexually versatile male, and personally considers himself masculine. He spends plenty of time outdoors due to his work in ecotourism and regularly engages in stereotypically masculine pursuits, such as traversing the rugged terrains of the Amazon rainforest with a machete and driving off-road vehicles with tourists for fun. His time as a boy in military school remains a linchpin in his life that he continues to remember with fondness. Diego’s family is aware of his sexual identity, as are his friends from his military school days, and they collectively remain a supportive anchor in his life. He grew up in a devoutly Catholic family and his faith continues to guide the way he lives his life. He rarely goes to the spas and is steadfastly sexually inactive when he does, only going as an excuse to spend time with friends. In his case, the spa is only a homosocial space and never a sexual space. Still, he understands the value of the spas to the community, and believes they provide a safe haven to men who might be in danger without them.

Like Diego, Abelito spends little time in the spas but for different reasons. Abelito self-identifies as an openly gay male. He has a large family that, like Diego’s, is completely accepting of his sexuality, although his brothers tease him about it in a brotherly way. His behaviors and attitudes about his sexuality and the LGBT community are influenced by his transnational ties to the United States. His deep love for the drag queen community stems from his time in New York City; he recognizes the influence that U.S. drag show conventions have had on the performances he sees in Quito. Abelito prefers to meet men in bars so that he can
gauge a personal connection, but has no problem meeting men via the internet and other social media. He is not fond of the spas, although he most assuredly could find a personal connection there if he wanted to. Still, he finds the idea of paying money for a chance at sex to be preposterous. Danilo’s opposition to spas, however, is markedly different.

Danilo also dislikes the spas but for reasons all his own. In his eyes he is simply too popular in the community to have a good time. He considers himself an openly gay, sexually versatile male. Although he does not categorize himself as consistently masculine or feminine, he appreciates events that bring masculine and feminine gay males together as one community. If there were such a thing as a “gay lifestyle,” Danilo might well fit the stereotypical persona. He spends a great deal of time on the internet, and when he is not using it to promote his parties, he is following the international tastemakers in order to emulate the latest crazes from the worldwide gay community. Although he believes he has a great life in Ecuador, the internet has become an integral connection to the international world, a primer for all his trips abroad and a chance to make friends from abroad. He also finds it easiest to meet sexual partners using the internet since he spends most of his time promoting his parties online anyway. Although there were awkward moments with his parents after his coming out, today he has a close relationship with his parents and his extended family.

Over the course of this investigation the respondents highlighted in this ethnography went through personal changes both large and small. Since my return from the field I have continued to follow their lives through correspondence on Facebook and Skype, and through regular return visits to Ecuador. While they still inform their friends and relatives that I am “an anthropologist and a researcher from the United States,” whenever I return I am usually introduced as a friend. Danilo is currently still unemployed and living off his family, seemingly without a care in the
world. He travels frequently, although his current trips have been with his extended family instead of his friends. After a period of activity on his party promotion Facebook pages, which amounted to pictures of other parties across the globe that he had nothing to do with, it appears that he has given up on his dreams of club ownership and being a DJ. He remains single and not currently looking for employment.

Abelito has continued to move back and forth between Guayaquil and Quito, although it has been some time since he has visited the United States. He excitedly shared with his family and friends that he was moving back to Quito “to start a new chapter,” but what he did not share with anyone was that he had no plan for what he was going to do when he got there. He headed to Quito without a job, or even a place to live. Upon arrival, he began asking his Facebook friends for a place to stay and was fortunate that he only had to stay in a hostel for a few days before someone gave him a couch to sleep on. He quickly found a new job at the Quicentro Mall (the site of his job during our interview) and an apartment a few weeks later. He recently went through a bout of depression because he said he was lonely in Quito and had not met anyone, but things have taken a turn for the better. He met someone not long ago, and after about two weeks of dating, they moved in together. As of this writing Abelito was on vacation in Guayaquil, introducing his new partner to some of his extended family for the first time.

Diego has continued to advertise and promote his ecotourism business daily, and at a level that seems could only be achieved with the help of an entire advertising staff working for him. He continues to devote his free time to educating members of the LGBT community on social issues that he believes are worthy of consideration. He is still actively involved as a leader in his church and attends whenever he is in Quito. His aversion to the spas has not changed, but it did ignite within him an entrepreneurial spark. Recently he posted a request on Facebook for
someone willing to rent out a space in the north of Quito that he would then convert into a spa. He was unable to find any interested parties, but it shows that while he may be personally uncomfortable in the spas he still sees the value that they hold, both for the MSM community and as a money-making opportunity.

Checking in at a local disco for a night of drag performances, I was excited to see how Carolina and Sofia’s performances and personal styles had evolved since I saw them last. True to form, they both performed as if they were in front of the biggest crowd of their lives, when, in fact, the crowd was sizeable but nothing spectacular. They did not seem to mind, making sure each person in the crowd had a good time and working the room when they (and the other performers) were finished the show. With a big hug from the two of them that left me covered in glitter, they got me a free drink from the bartender and told me how they no longer lived together. To say I was shocked was an understatement. When I asked about the change they initially demurred, but finally shared that they had a falling out over a man. The unnamed suitor had started coming over for regular sexual encounters with Sofia before sleeping with Carolina while Sofia was away. After the fight to end all fights between them, Sofia moved out and is currently living with a female friend, while Carolina has managed to maintain the apartment on her own. They repaired their friendship once they accepted that the suitor was using them both for sex and did not want an actual relationship with either of them. They currently have no plans to become roommates again but they seem just as close as they always were.

Chucho has been with his current partner for over a year, and they now live together. He rarely posts about his drag persona anymore, and “Lorena” has made only a few sporadic appearances at local drag shows since they met. He is still active in his dance troupe and posts pictures of his costumes and of himself on stage with the group, taken by his friends in the
audience at their shows. He finally found the time to go back to college and often posts pictures on Facebook of himself at school and studying with friends, or presenting papers at local conferences. He and his partner, whom he often calls his husband, have recently travelled overseas to Spain for their first international gay pride event. Chucho says he would like to continue traveling, hoping to make his first trip to the Caribbean next to meet his partner’s family.

Cristian is still living at home, supported financially by his family. When I spoke with him on social media before a return visit, he excitedly told me that he had something to tell me but wanted to wait until I arrived so he could tell me in person. I was unsure what his secret could possibly be and could only guess that he had acknowledged his sexual identity and come out of the proverbial closet to his family. The day after I arrived in Quito he met me outside of my apartment so we could go out for lunch. As he grabbed me for a hug, he loudly proclaimed “I finished with Gabriel!” and his candor in public took me aback. I cannot say I was disappointed in his decision, and he seemed quite pleased with himself. When I asked if he was still “trying things,” he shared, “I know I am gay, but I do not like saying it.” He has not explicitly come out to his family but believes that they already know. Unlike Cristian, who is becoming more comfortable with his sexuality and his public presentation and self-identification, Andrew never became comfortable enough to respond to my inquiries through social media.

When I returned from the field Alejo and I initially remained in daily contact through Facebook. At first, he gave me regular updates on his mother’s health status and it appeared he just needed someone to listen while he vented about all the challenges they were facing. Eventually, his messages veered toward the inappropriate and I was forced to withdraw from our daily conversations. About four months after my return from the field I received a message from
him that said, “Hello friend, I’m so sad. Finally, my mother died. Don’t know what I will do with my life.” I felt awful, knowing that it had been only a few months earlier that he first discovered his mother’s cancer under a microscope. Currently, he rarely uses social media anymore, although he may occasionally be found online looking for discrete sexual partners for encounters in his area.

Just as the lives of my respondents have changed, so have the spas. Since my return from the field, Club Dionisio shut down without a word, leading to confusion for the men left ringing the doorbell without getting a response. Tulipán Spa briefly shut down as well, but quickly reopened after issues with their water supply were corrected to the city’s satisfaction. For a time the only spa available in all of Quito was Sauna Oscuro, and they gladly accepted the influx of clientele, without ever repairing any of the issues with their dilapidated installations. The shutdowns were not limited to the spas; the gayecuador.com social media site was also shut down without notice, leading to many more messages on the quitogay.net site than usual and greater use of internationally-designed social media applications. According to several of the respondents, these inconveniences also led to an increase in men going to gay bars, meeting for the first time in person as in days’ past or making plans to meet online before arriving.

This study has demonstrated the flexible, malleable, and dynamic nature of sexual identity and gender presentation in Quito. The tensions between private behaviors and public presentations are often mitigated in spas where internal desires can be expressed without permanent transgressions of identities. These venues are significant departure from the tearoom trade in the public bathrooms considered by Humphry in 1970. Still current members of the MSM community can learn from the tactics and venues used by earlier generations. As Browning notes in his study of culture constructed by gay men in the United States at the end of
the 20th century, “at a minimum – the passage of ritual, belief, and behavior from one generation to the next – is the basic material of cultural regeneration” (1994: 7). Currently, Sauna Jengibre has opened once more, along with two new spas that are still unfamiliar. Whether they become successful or not is largely irrelevant; with or without the spas, the LGBT community of Quito will continue to find ways to adapt to its surroundings, even if it means renegotiating identities or taking cues from times gone by.
ENDNOTES

1 During the course of fieldwork, a fourth spa, Sauna Jengibre, was closed without warning.


3 While it may seem as though several businesses in the Andes have what appear to be LGBT pride flags hanging outside, in most cases the flags are actually flags invoking pride in the Inca empire. Both flags are made of rainbow stripes, although the flag of the Inca (and official flag of Cuzco, Peru), includes a stripe of sky blue between the green and blue stripes.

4 In the decades since the Stonewall riots, the gay club scene has become increasingly diverse with regard to sexual identity. While in the United States holding bachelorette parties in gay clubs has become a trend (much to the chagrin of many isolationist gays), heterosexuals in the gay clubs of Quito are still few and far between.

5 “Discretion and safety for your best attention.”

6 www.quitogay.net

7 In Ecuador, it is more expensive to call a land line from a cell phone than it is to call another cell phone. Charges are also increased when calling from cell-to-cell when the parties are on different cellular services. As most people use phone cards instead of phone contracts, it makes good financial sense to call whichever number shares your service. Video Roma provides business numbers on each of the main cellular services in order to reach the most clients possible.

8 A notable exception to this was the former Sauna Jengibre, which included photographs and descriptions of male prostitutes that frequented the business. Included in these descriptions were the prostitutes’ age, nationality or city of origin, penis size, preferred sexual position, and rates.

9 “Always thinking of your comfort, which we follow with great attention and respect.”
“Let your imagination soar…”

“Come and spend the night with us…”

“Latino, as well.”

Of course!

Murray (1995) defines the ambiente as “the world of those in the know about homosexuality,” which is as close to a universal definition as is likely to be found for a community that is conceptualized differently across the globe. At its most basic, it would probably be equivalent to Browning’s conception of gaydom.

To be fair, heterosexuals in Quito often relay similar warnings about female streetwalkers, although not for the women with positions in the local chongos.

I am aware of the pronoun inconsistencies when referring to male-to-female transsexuals in this segment, and use the original pronoun usage from Woodhouse’s original work.

While Woodhouse’s assertion in this case is recognized and often understandable, she does not state whether she believes this is the case for heterosexuals or homosexuals. I would argue that there are even more people in both communities attracted to a more masculine image, as many internet hook-up sites include the fetishization of suits and/or stereotypical urban street (or “thug”) looks.

“Only friends with benefits.”

“Hey whore!”

https://www.facebook.com/paiscanela/posts/10206233745436806

http://www.internetworldstats.com/south.htm

The following conversation was conducted in English, and was reconstructed from field notes, the interview schedule and memory. Most of the recollection was recorded into a document as
soon as the interview ended and I returned to my apartment in Quito to preserve as many details as possible.

23 In Quito, there are dozens of small businesses, known as piratas, that make most of their money through the sale of bootleg copies of music, movies, and television shows. The products can be found on CD, DVD, and Blu-Ray, and are sold for just a dollar or two per item. In addition, the stores usually sell accessories such as headphones and phone cards.

24 https://www.facebook.com/paiscanela/posts/10206233745436806

25 “En una sociedad tan conservadora como la nuestra, por nuestra propia seguridad, debemos contribuir con la permanencia de los sitios de encuentro gay. El cierre de estos sitios nos volcaría a la calle, un lugar que puede ser tan hostil y en donde nuestra vida se puede poner en riesgo.”
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