



Performing gender in song games among Nicaraguan Miskitu children

Amanda Minks *

Honors College, University of Oklahoma, 1300 Asp. Ave., Norman, OK 73019-6061, United States

Abstract

This article brings together theories of performance and language-in-interaction to interpret the socialization and negotiation of gender and sexuality in children's peer groups. The object of this study are song games played by multilingual, indigenous Miskitu children living on Corn Island, off the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. Ethnographic research and micro-analyses of transcribed song game performances demonstrate that mobile aesthetic forms are both a communicative resource and a framework for the formation and re-formation of subjectivity in social discourse. Through the social "work" accomplished by "play," Miskitu children contribute to an ongoing reshaping of the forms and meanings of gender and sexuality.

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1. Introduction

Like children in many parts of the world, indigenous Miskitu children in Nicaragua spend much of their time in the company and care of older siblings, cousins, and other peers. Song games are a common activity of Miskitu children's play groups, in which older girls often scaffold, or guide, the participation of younger girls and boys, facilitating their

* Tel.: +1 405 325 7415; fax: +1 405 325 7109.

E-mail address: amandaminks@ou.edu

acquisition of linguistic, musical, and kinetic competence.¹ Although song games are an everyday activity, their conventionalized musical and dramatic form creates a performance frame, a context of heightened engagement for both participants and observers. In this paper I analyze several transcribed excerpts of Miskitu children's song games, drawing on the performance paradigm that emerged from the ethnography of speaking (Hymes, 1962; Bauman and Sherzer, 1974), and on recent poststructuralist reworkings of the concept of performativity, initially theorized by Austin (1962).² I begin by outlining this conceptual framework, followed by a discussion of song games as crystallizations of mobility and heterogeneity, phenomena that have broader relevance in Miskitu histories and contemporary gendered practices. The song games analyzed in this paper were recorded on Corn Island, a multilingual and multiethnic community off the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. A brief sketch of local anxious discourses on the transformation of gender norms on Corn Island provides the background for my analyses of particular song game performances. The analyses demonstrate that gender and sexuality are inherently intertwined, and that these modes of being and acting are not pre-determined, but rather co-constructed and embodied in social interaction. The performance of song games, I argue, is an interactive context for experimenting with and socializing gendered and sexual stances and activities.

2. Performance and performativity through song games

Within the framework of the ethnography of speaking, the concept of performance shifts attention from the structure and meaning of isolated, abstract texts to the "interplay between resources and individual competence, within the context of particular situations" (Bauman and Sherzer, 1974, p. 7). Following Hymes (1975), Bauman (1977a) distinguished performance from ordinary communication on the grounds that it is accountable to an audience for a display of communicative competence. Song game performances are indeed subject to evaluations of competence, but it is not always easy to distinguish between performers and audience in this process. Those playing the song game are often as assertive as onlookers in evaluating the performance of fellow players. Evaluations are based not only on skill in execution but also on sometimes conflicting traditions learned in different play groups, neighborhoods, or communities.

What makes song games a part of "tradition" is their dependence on repeated textual, musical, and kinetic forms that are detachable from past contexts and adaptable to new

¹ "Scaffolding" is a Vygotskian concept referring to the process by which an individual achieves a higher level of competence in collaboration with a more skilled partner (Wood et al., 1976). The "expert" and "novice" in this scheme are usually conceptualized as adult and child, respectively, but some researchers have pointed out that peer and sibling interactions are also important contexts for learning and socialization (Corsaro, 1992; Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo, 1989).

² A third, more implicit, framework is the study of performance in ethnomusicology, which was partially shaped by the ethnography of speaking (Herndon and McLeod, 1980; Béhague, 1984). Ethnomusicologists have tended to focus on formal musical performances rather than informal, everyday interactions such as those analyzed here, but several researchers have applied ethnomusicological approaches to children's song games (e.g., Harwood, 1998; Marsh, 2001; Merrill-Mirsky, 1986; Hopkin, 1984).

contexts (cf. Bauman and Briggs, 1990). In the constitutive interaction between text and context, performers and audience, song game performances are fundamentally dialogic and emergent.³ In the course of performance, participants orient towards each other in particular ways, mediated by the game structure and the vernacular discourse in which it is embedded. Their interactive, “interpretive moves” (Feld, 1994, p. 86) signal forms of knowledge, affect, and stance that index broader social and cultural relations; thus the acquisition of competence in song game performance is also the acquisition of social and cultural competence.⁴

In this paper I make a distinction between the *performance* of song games and the *performativity* of certain communicative acts that unfold across the spectrum of social interaction, not only in aesthetically marked genres. Here I draw on Butler’s theory of gender performativity and on Cameron and Kulick’s efforts to bring Butler’s work into empirical studies of language and social interaction (Butler, 1999, 1993, 1997; Cameron and Kulick, 2003). From this perspective, performativity designates what communicative acts *do* in the world, what they produce, and what conditions underlie that production (Cameron and Kulick, 2003, p. 150). Far from being a self-conscious creative act, performativity is the “reiteration of norms that precede, constrain, and exceed the performer” (Butler, 1993, p. 234). The iterability of discourse, that is, its infinite capacity of repetition and recontextualization, is what enables *and* constrains the subject, the social actor. In other words, our capacity for social interaction depends on particular histories of discourse—which I take in the broadest sense to include musical as well as linguistic practices. However, neither the techniques nor the effects of re-animating discourse are pre-determined, and therein lies an ever-present potential for social change (Butler, 1993, 1997; cf. Briggs, 1988, p. 359).

Performance and performativity are analytical terms that may apply to the same expressive act, but they foreground different aspects of communicative practice. Song games are *performances* because they create a social space set aside from everyday interaction; they involve special forms and skills in execution, and allow modes of behavior that may not be common or acceptable in daily life. Song games are *performative* because they produce and reproduce different subjectivities, different positions in social discourse. Repeated over time, these subjectivities have material effects that are not fully within the conscious control of the performer. Gender and sexuality are two kinds of subjectivity (intertwined with others such as race and class) that are not determined from birth, but rather continually co-constructed in social interaction. Performativity foregrounds not only the material effects but also the historicity of discourse, the sense that we are caught up in structures of interpretation that precede and exceed our contemporary acts. Not all social actors participate in performances, in the limited sense defined here, but all participate in performativity, because it is the means by which our behavior becomes recognizable and intelligible to other social actors.

³ On the intellectual lineage of the “emergent” quality of performance and its role in orienting participants, see Bauman and Briggs (1990). On applications of the performance paradigm to children’s folklore, see Bauman (1977b, 1982).

⁴ This formulation is adapted from the paradigm of language socialization, developed by Schieffelin and Ochs (1986). For an elaboration of the relationship between indexicality and socialization, see Ochs (1990); for connections between children’s poetics and adult musical practices, see Schieffelin (1990, pp. 84, 101–105) and Blacking (1967).

3. Mobility and heterogeneity in song games and social life

Through the process of “entextualization,” song games are remembered, re-enacted, and transmitted between people and places (cf. Bauman and Briggs, 1990; Silverstein and Urban, 1996). The formal features that make stretches of discourse memorable, detachable, and reproducible in social life also make them prone to decontextualization in written representations. Thus song games have primarily been the object of “collections” by folklorists who reproduce abstractions of verbal texts and sometimes rhythms and melodies, without demonstrating how song games unfold in social interaction. Researchers who extract and isolate song games from their contexts of performance end up obscuring the local significance of mobile forms and the social and ideological “work” accomplished by “play.” Attention to the “fuzzy fringe of performance,” including the conversations that precede, intercede, and succeed performances, may help to shed light on the significance of recontextualized forms (Briggs, 1988, p. 17; cf. Feld and Fox, 1994). Furthermore, ethnographic and historical research reaching beyond the immediate performance context reveals some of the concrete material and social relations that connect children’s expressive activities to larger social, economic, and political structures and processes (Minks, 2002).

The song game performances presented in this article were recorded in 2003 on Corn Island, some 50 miles off the southern Caribbean coast of Nicaragua.⁵ They are unavoidably shaped by two central (in this case interrelated) social phenomena: the heterogeneity and mobility of people and particular forms of expressive practice. The term “heteroglossia” was coined by Bakhtin (1981) to denote the stratified diversity of languages, speech types, and styles in any individual utterance or social encounter. This kind of diversity is characteristic of communication on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua in general and on Corn Island in particular. Miskitu people are relative newcomers to Corn Island, which until recent years has been home primarily to Creole people with historic ties to England, Jamaica, and the Cayman Islands.⁶ Nicaraguan Miskitu communities are located along the mainland Caribbean coast and up the rivers that lead into it, with a concentration in the northern region. Before the 1980s, only a few Miskitu families lived permanently on Corn Island, working in the lower levels of the coconut and fishing industries. After the 1979 Sandinista revolution, many affluent Creole families left Nicaragua for the US or other parts of the Caribbean. During the same period Miskitu people began moving to the island from the mainland Caribbean coast in larger numbers, looking for work or escaping the violence of the Contra War. More recently, greater numbers of Spanish-speaking Mestizos have also migrated to the island from mainland Nicaragua, making Spanish a much more prominent language than ever before. The local linguistic ecology, then, includes Spanish, Miskitu, and the Creole English continuum (cf. DeCamp, 1971).

⁵ A more extensive study of Miskitu children’s expressive practices in this setting can be found in Minks (2006).

⁶ Corn Island, along with the resource-rich mainland Caribbean coast, had formal and informal political ties to England between the mid-17th and late 19th centuries. The Caribbean coast was annexed by the Nicaraguan nation-state, with US backing, in 1894. During the 1980s it was divided into two autonomous regions of Nicaragua, but the political and economic infrastructure for autonomy is still being negotiated. Ethnic groups in the region include Rama, Ulwa, Mayangna, and Garifuna peoples, in addition to Creoles, Miskitus, and Mestizos. See Gordon (1998) and Hale (1994) for accounts of Creole and Miskitu histories on the coast.

Although the contemporary multicultural and multilingual situation on Corn Island has some unique features, the general process of intercultural exchange is a very old one. Like Creoles, Miskitus have diverse family lineages that include unions among African, indigenous, European, and Asian people, but the dominant narrative of Miskitu identity is one of indigeneity rather than creolization or *mestizaje*.⁷ The maintenance of the Miskitu language over more than three centuries of intermarriage and intercultural exchange is striking evidence of the resilience and adaptability of an indigenous identity. Histories of interculturality are encoded in the Miskitu language through the incorporation of numerous loan words, especially from English. Most English loan words entered Miskitu through contact with Jamaicans in the 19th century, but the process began in the mid-17th century, when Miskitu people formed a close military and social alliance with British buccaneers and settlers (Jamieson, 1999; Holm, 1978). Miskitu people adapted English loan words as indexes of power, cosmopolitanism, and social relations with English-speakers, while maintaining a distinct indigenous identity.⁸ The process was gendered, since Miskitu men traveled more widely than women and acquired more extensive multilingualism. Miskitu women participated in the adaptation of loan words, but during long periods when men were away at sea or working in logging camps, children were raised in Miskitu-centered communities of women and elderly people.

Even in relatively isolated Miskitu villages of the past, children have apparently been quick to pick up new forms of expression from visiting foreigners or returned travelers. Helms, who grew up on the coast as the daughter of missionaries and did anthropological fieldwork there in the 1960s, wrote,

Missionaries indicate that young people in particular imitated foreigners in food, clothing, and leisure activities. Along these lines, and in a lighter vein, a missionary traveling the Río Coco in the early 1920s noted that Sumu children on the Río Was-puk (a tributary of the Río Coco) were singing “London Bridge is Falling Down,” while children in Asang knew a garbled version of the nursery rhyme “Bingo” (Moravian Church 1890–1956, Vol. 11, pp. 367–68). On a moonlit night during the anthropologist’s [Helms’s] stay, playful Asang youngsters performed a version of “London Bridge,” singing to the familiar tune seemingly nonsense syllables which, onlookers asserted, were meant to be English words. (Helms, 1971, pp. 220–221).

A central feature of song games that has facilitated their movement across cultural and linguistic borders is the foregrounding of the poetic function of language over the referential function (Jakobson, 1960; cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Sherzer, 1976; Opie and Opie, 1985). In other words, the sound of the text is more important than its meaning; poetic features make texts memorable and pleasurable even if the meaning is obscure. As early researchers noted [e.g. Newell, 1963 (1884)], song games are historically among the most mobile forms of expressive practice, perhaps not only because of their poetic structures but

⁷ *Mestizaje* is the Spanish word for racial and cultural mixture, part of the historical discourse of identity in the Pacific region of Nicaragua and throughout Latin America. The Asian component of family histories comes from Chinese shopkeepers who immigrated to the Caribbean coast in the 19th and 20th centuries. Most of the Chinese population left Nicaragua after the Revolution, but their surnames are still prominent among both Miskitu and Creole people, along with the common nickname “China” or “Chaini” for any child who is judged to have Asian features.

⁸ Significantly, the most common term of ethnic self-reference—besides “Miskitu”—is the loan word *indyan*.

also because cultural and linguistic boundaries are more easily crossed in play than in more “serious” spheres of interaction. The incorporation of mobile aesthetic forms such as song games into local play and performance has contributed to the heterogeneity of expressive practices on the Caribbean coast and elsewhere.

4. Gender ideologies and transformations

Although the song games in this paper are not “indigenous” Miskitu games, their performance among Miskitu children is framed by cultural expectations of how girls and women should embody affect, and by cultural constraints on women’s displays of sexuality. Miskitu girls and unmarried women are often expected to display *swira*, literally shame or embarrassment, a culturally shaped affective stance that signals subordination or discomfort through the avoidance of body or eye contact (Jamieson, 2000, 1995). Christian women and girls are also expected to be *bawikira*, humble, always deferring to the needs and desires of others, especially men. Miskitu girls’ and women’s attempts to maneuver within these expectations create social tensions that are sometimes expressed in informal contexts of play and performance, where gendered norms of behavior are subject to experimentation and transgression.

Jamieson (2001) has discussed gendered performance genres in Kakabila, a Miskitu community with close Creole ties located in the Pearl Lagoon basin, on the southern Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. For Miskitu people in Kakabila, as on Corn Island, the passage from adolescence to adulthood is achieved through one’s entry into sexual activity and subsequently, through childbirth. The transition from *tiara* (adolescent girl) to *mairin almuk* (adult woman) is fraught with anxiety, surveillance, and cunning as many daughters covertly vie for control over the time in which and the partner with whom they lose their virginity. Jamieson describes various cultural expressions that display and work through these tensions in performance frames set aside from everyday discourse. Two of these expressions in Kakabila—the *mosko* masked dance-play and the song game called “Kiss and Be Done”—clearly facilitate discourse about sexuality in a permissible, pleasurable performance space enacted through music and dance. Another Miskitu cultural expression centered around adolescent sexuality is *grisi siknis* (crazy sickness), described by Jamieson (2001) and Dennis (1985). Characterized by terrifying visions of demons trying to have sex with those afflicted—primarily adolescent girls—*grisi siknis* undoubtedly constructs an other-worldly frame for dramatic enactment that is “performative” in its transformation of subjectivity. However, I would avoid classifying *grisi siknis* as a “performance” in the sense used here because it is apparently involuntary and associated with physical and mental illness.

During my research period on Corn Island, I often heard anxious discussions about women’s and girls’ affective and sexual stances and behaviors. In informal conversations and in official discourses at church and at school, there was the sense that gender norms were in a process of transformation, primarily viewed negatively. Most Miskitu residents of Corn Island attended the Moravian church, a long-established institution on the coast introduced by German missionaries in the 19th century. Public discourse in the Moravian church on Corn Island periodically emphasized the role of men as autonomous heads of households, and the responsibility of women to respect and obey them as such. The need to reiterate this supposed “norm” suggested it was not always carried out in practice, and

in any case the exhortation always seemed ironic to me, given the considerable authority and power wielded by women leaders in the Moravian church (though generally not as ministers). One sermon explicitly discouraged women from reporting abusive husbands to the police, not because the man preaching the sermon condoned male violence, but because he perceived the domestic abuse laws installed in the 1980s as too harsh. He said that today's women, spurred on by the dramatic turmoil of *telenovelas* (Latin American soap operas), were lacking in respect towards their husbands. Women provoked men, he said, to the point of violence, and then when their husbands ended up in jail, they went crying to church leaders to help get them out, a difficult task once the arrest was made.

The influence of *telenovelas* was also invoked during a period of controversy over the behavior of fifth- and sixth-grade girls at the Miskitu-dominated Moravian school. A majority of the girls in this combined class were reportedly failing their exams, displaying insolence towards their superiors, neglecting household chores, and sneaking off to meet boyfriends illicitly. In discussing the problem at a special after-school meeting, parents and teachers expressed shock that schoolgirls would dare to establish romantic liaisons with boys, and they determined that such girls should be pulled out of school and put to work at home or elsewhere. The same expectations applied to girls in high school; their parents reasoned that if girls displayed desires other than getting an education and helping their parents, they did not merit the sacrifices made to put them in school (sacrifices measured in terms of school-related fees and in terms of decreased labor power in the household during school hours).

It is important to point out that equal numbers of boys and girls populated most classrooms on the island (sometimes more girls than boys). Statistics of girls and boys in the schools would suggest gender equity, but in daily life the discourses about schoolgirls' responsibilities and the surveillance of their behavior were strikingly different from schoolboys'. The prominence of anxious discourses about girls generally overshadowed anxious discourses about boys. Boys were not considered as culpable for early pregnancies as were girls. There was some concern about boys' vulnerability to drug use and, ultimately, falling into the stigmatized status of the *rakman*, a crack cocaine-driven thief beholden to no one. However, boys were not the object of the same degree of public anxiety and surveillance.

Many people suggested that *telenovelas* were, in part, to blame for the wayward behavior of girls and women. Critics spoke about girls' minds being in another place, not on their studies or chores, and about girls' admiration for the romantic, tempestuous lives of *telenovela* characters. Other people blamed the Family Laws of the Sandinista period which had outlawed spousal abuse in the home and corporal punishment in the home and school. (Both activities have continued, although not as publicly; corporal punishment at school is quite rare.) One father told me he thought girls had always tended to disobey their parents and run off with boys. The difference now, he said, was that more parents had hopes for their daughters to acquire at least a secondary school education, and this meant postponing romance and motherhood. (These two tended to go hand in hand, since neither sex education nor birth control were readily accessible to girls on Corn Island.) He himself had recently pulled his daughter out of high school because she had disappeared for a couple of days; she said she was staying with a girlfriend, but he suspected otherwise. Better for her to work at home, he said, where they could keep a closer eye on her, and later work at the fishing company in order to contribute to the family income.

5. “Compone niña”: Scaffolding younger players and negotiating game structure

The tensions between gendered desires and social expectations that fueled anxious discourses about women and girls were literally played out in song game performances. The song games most commonly performed among Miskitu children on Corn Island were either in Spanish or (to a lesser extent) Creole English, reflecting the dominant languages of education and the island establishment. In performance, the Spanish or Creole English poetic texts were embedded in a heteroglossic vernacular discourse that varied according to the participants but often included Miskitu, Spanish, and Creole English.

“Compone niña” (“Get ready, girl”) is a circle game in which participants enact stereotypically feminine performances that capture the paradoxical social expectations for women to be both attractive and demure. In the first verse of the song text the *niña*, or girl, is encouraged to primp herself in preparation for the arrival of her seafaring lover, but in the second verse she is accused of being seen on the corner shaking her hips from side to side. Although the character performed, the *niña*, is female, young boys as well as girls may enact this character while playing the game. “Compone niña” is often played by younger children because it is relatively easy to play, with simple movements. The children form a circle holding hands, surrounding a child chosen to enact the role of the *niña*. The *niña* walks around the inside of the circle or the children forming the circle move around the *niña*. When they arrive at the phrase beginning with “meneando,” the *niña* stops in front of whichever player is closest (which is open to some manipulation), shaking his or her hips from side to side. The player who was the principle object of this display becomes the next *niña*.

“Compone niña”

<i>Compone niña compone</i>	Get ready girl, get ready
<i>Ahí viene su marinero</i>	Here comes your sailor
<i>Con este bonito traje</i>	With this pretty dress
<i>Que parece campintero</i>	That looks “campintero”

<i>A la noche yo te vi</i>	Last night I saw you
<i>En la esquina de Wispán</i>	On the corner of Wispán
<i>Meneando la cinturita</i>	Shaking the waist
<i>Para allá y para acá</i>	From there to here
<i>Para allá y para acá</i>	From there to here

In performances of “Compone niña,” Corn Island children always sing the word “campintero” but no one can say exactly what it means. In spite of a poetically shaped tolerance for nonsense, children’s song games also include intelligible lyrics, and to the extent that children understand and interpret lyrics, they do so according to local contexts. The ambivalence between the first and second verses of “Compone niña” evokes a familiar dilemma experienced by Miskitu and other adolescent girls (and observed by their younger siblings): the desire to attract a partner, on one hand, and to maintain one’s reputation as a “good girl,” on the other.

In Transcript A below, Viola is an 11-year-old girl, Saúl is her 6-year-old brother, and Teresa and Chandra are both younger girls about four or five years old.⁹ Teresa and Chandra were invited to join the game even though they were not fully competent in its performance. In line 2, Viola guides Teresa's participation by telling her to hold hands with the players next to her. When the participants sing the text, the little girls' voices audibly trail behind the others, but in continually playing the game and mimicking the older players, the younger ones gradually gain competence. In lines 12–16, there is a brief disagreement about who has had a chance to be in the middle of the circle, and then when they speed up the tempo of performance (spurred by Saúl's prodding), they lose control and the game falls apart. Saúl evaluates the performance saying, "Saura takan!" (it turned out bad), blaming the collapse on the little girl Chandra, and then he and his older sister prod her to try again.

Transcription conventions:

Brackets	[Simultaneous utterances
Single parentheses	()	Unclear or unintelligible utterance
Double parentheses	(())	Transcriber's contextual comments and insertions
Equal sign	=	Interlocking utterances
Repeated colon	:::	Extended utterance
Repeated period	((...))	Ellipsis
Capital letters	SIka	Increased stress for emphasis
Arrows	↑↓	Raised or lowered pitch
Dash	-	Interruption or hesitation
Question mark	?	Raised intonation at the end of a phrase
Italics		Miskitu utterance
Underlined italics		Spanish utterance
Underlined roman		Nicaragua Creole English utterance

Transcript A

- 1 Viola: *Aha, na taim, man takaskaisma, ninara.* ((giggles)) *Isti.* ((pause))
Aha, this time, you're going to stay, outside. ((giggles)) Hurry.
((pause))
- 2 *Na taim. Alks, Teresa, [mihtam.*
This time. Grab, Teresa, [your hand.
- 3 Saúl: [(*Bla ai daukisa, uba.*)
[(I'm getting really dizzy.)
- 4 Viola: *Arait.* ((singing)) *Co:::mpone [niña compone*
Alright. ((singing)) Ge:::t ready, [girl get ready

⁹ All names given for the children are pseudonyms.

- 5 Group: ((singing))
[niña compone
[girl get ready]
- 6 Ahí viene su marinero
Here comes your sailor
- 7 Con este bonito traje que parece campintero
With this pretty dress that looks campintero
- 8 A la noche yo te vi, en la esquina de Wispán
Last night I saw you, on the corner of Wispán
- 9 Meneando la cinturita para allá y para acá.
Shaking your waist from there to here,
- 10 para allá y para acá! ((giggles))
from there to here! ((giggles))
- 11 Viola: ((speaking)) *Na dahn.*
This is done.
- 12 Saúl: *Na taim Chandra dimras kan na?*
This time Chandra didn't go in?
- 13 Viola: *Ah, rait.*
Ah, right.
- 14 Saúl: *An man sin kau dimras!*
And you didn't go in either!
- 15 Viola: *Yang lika pat dimri, yang pas pas=*
I already went in, I first first=
- 16 Saúl: *=Apia! Man dimras kapram=*
=No! You didn't go in=
- 17 Viola: ((singing)) *=Co::: [mpone*
((singing)) *=Ge:::t [ready*
- 18 Group: [pone niña compone
[ready girl get ready]
- 19 Ahí viene su marinero,
Here comes your sailor
- 20 Con [este bonito traje
With [this pretty dress
- 21 Saúl [Isti!
[Hurry!
- 22 Group: que parece campintero ((faster))
that looks campintero ((faster))
- 23 A la noche yo te vi, en la esquina de Wispan
Last night I saw you, on the corner of Wispan
- ((giggling as they lose control; high pitched cry))
- 24 Saúl: *Saura takan!*
It turned out bad!
- 25 Viola: *Isti! Dims, na taim.* ((pause)) *Chandra, bal dims.*
Hurry! Come in, this time. ((pause)) Chandra, come in.
(continued on next page)

- 26 Saúl: *Chandra, bal dîms, kli. ((pause)) Kli, Chandra? Man saura takan ba mihta.*
 Chandra, come in, again. ((pause)) Again, Chandra? Because you made it go bad.
-

Most research on children's song games interprets them as a cooperative activity characteristic of girls' interactive norms that contrasts with norms of boys' activities, which are interpreted as more competitive (e.g., Lomax et al., 1997; Merrill-Mirsky, 1986). Goodwin (1990) and Hughes (1993) have shown how the cooperative/competitive dichotomy can be problematic in US children's games, and it is equally problematic on Corn Island. In the preceding transcript there was a relatively mild argument, but song games are sometimes riven with vicious conflict over what to play, how to play, and who gets to play. In fact, later in this recording, some older girls joined and decided to play a more complex singing game, and they pointedly excluded the younger children, saying they did not know how to play. Of course, the younger children still look on, and sometimes sing under their breath, so they continue learning even in games from which they are excluded.

6. Performativity, interpellation, and gender subversion

When Miskitu boys on Corn Island reach school age, they begin to denigrate song games as an activity for girls. The quintessential boys' game is said to be marbles, but in practice, girls and boys continue to interact as participants and onlookers in both activities.¹⁰ Transcript B comes from a recording made on another day. Saúl and Viola, who were in the first transcript, were playing with 8-year-old boys Melvin and Tobi, as well as a 4-year-old girl, Nelda. Saúl had always enjoyed playing song games directed by his older sister Viola, and at the beginning of the transcript he proposes playing "Compone Niña." Melvin immediately rejects this proposal, saying, "That's a girl's game." This speech act brands "Compone Niña" as an activity undesirable for boys, but that act of labelling is open to interpretation. From Saúl's perspective, saying "Compone Niña" is a girls' game may mean that some girls have to be present, but boys may also participate, and he goes about taking stock of how many boys are present and how many girls. Viola then refigures the act of gender labelling by pointing to the older boys and saying "Ent man mairin?" (Aren't you a girl?). It has the effect of unsettling clear gender divisions and leads to one of the boys turning against another and labelling him as a girl.

Transcript B

- 1 Saúl: *Na taim, bara Compone Niña pulaia?*
 This time, let's play Compone Niña?
- 2 Melvin: *Ah mairin dukia ba.*
 Ah that's a girl's game.
- 3 Saúl: *Bara ba sin mairin kau wal na?*
 Well there are still two girls here too?

¹⁰ See Thorne (1993) for a discussion of the fluctuations of sex-segregation and integration in children's play.

- 4 Viola: *Wika, wika, Nelda bara ba.*
Tell him, tell him, Nelda is there.
- 5 Saúl: *Yuhmpa, waitna wan, tu, tri.*
Three, boys, one two three.
- 6 Viola: *Man wal (man).* ((to Melvin and Tobi)) *Ent man mairin?*
You two. ((to Melvin and Tobi)) Aren't you a girl?
- 7 Melvin: *Oy!*
Oy!
- 8 Viola: *Ent man mairin?* ((laughter))
Aren't you a girl? ((laughter))
- 9 ((to other boys)) *Ent man mairin? Ent man mairin?*
((to other boys)) Aren't you a girl? Aren't you a girl?
- 10 Tobi: *Yang lika ape!*
Not me!
- 11 Viola: [*Ent man mairin?*]
[Aren't you a girl?]
- 12 Melvin: [*Yang waitna.*]
[I'm a boy.]
- 13 Tobi: ((gesturing to Melvin)) *Witin mairin.*
((gesturing to Melvin)) He's a girl.
- 14 Viola: *Arait wel.*
Alright well.
- 15 Melvin: *Ape!*
No!
- 16 Viola: *Arait wel. Compone lika pulas.*
Alright well. Let's play Compone.
- 17 *Redondo daukan. Redondo, redondo redondo.*
Make a circle. Circle, circle circle.
- 18 Melvin: *Puli (bangwina) yang lika mairin naurka pulras.*
I'm not going to play what the girls play.
- 19 Tobi: *Aha, mairin naurka Saúl man lika pulras.*
Aha, Saúl you're not going to play girls' things.
- 20 Viola: *Arait, wel dia pulaia? Dia pulaia?*
Alright, well what are we going to play? What are we going to play?
- 21 Melvin: ((softly)) *Escondite.*
Hide and seek.
- 22 Viola: *Dia pulaia?*
What are we going to play?
- 23 Tobi: *Escondito wiba baha.*
He says hide and seek.
- 24 Viola: *Escondite?*
Hide and seek?
- 25 Melvin: *Au.*
Yeah.

(continued on next page)

- 26 Saúl: *Ba lika ba cochon naurka na.*^a
That's for gays.
- 27 Viola: *Kuning!*
Lie!
- 28 Saúl: *Ba sin simsat.*
That is the same too.
- 29 Viola: *Arait wel, arait wel, yang naikra prakaisna.*
Alright well, alright well, I'm going to close my eyes ((for hide and seek)).

^a Because Miskitu words are generally accented on the first syllable, Miskitu speakers often shift the accent of Spanish loan words to the first syllable; thus *cochón* is pronounced here *cóchon*.

Both Melvin's labelling of "Compone Niña" as a girls' game and the subsequent gender reversals can be viewed as performative acts of "interpellation." This is Althusser's term for the hailing of the subject, the act of naming that compels a response and thus an entry into subjectivity, that is, the positioning of the individual in social discourse (Althusser, 1971; Butler, 1997). Interpellation is central to processes of socialization, and it is interesting to note its effects on Saúl, the youngest boy in this encounter. At the beginning it was Saúl's proposal to play "Compone niña." After the controversy over what it means to play a girls' game and who counts as a girl, Melvin says, "I'm not going to play what the girls play" (line 18). Tobi shifts to the second person pronoun to make a directive, "Aha Saúl you're not going to play girls' things." Saúl gives up on his proposition and then, after someone suggests playing hide and seek, Saúl says, "That's for gays." *Cochón* is a derogatory Nicaraguan term that loosely translates as a homosexual male.¹¹ I doubt that Saúl has a complete understanding of the term, but he knows it is used as a derogatory interpellation, and by making that interpellation he enters into this seemingly sophisticated big-kid discourse linking particular play activities with gendered and sexualized subjectivities.

7. "Ahí Viene el Conejo": Shame and passion among the big kids

As Miskitu children on Corn Island approach adolescence, certain song games are re-established as high-status, cross-sex activities that provide a sanctioned, public space for sexually charged discourse. There is one song game, "Ahí viene el conejo," which is ideally played with both girls and boys, and enacts both male and female subject positions. "Ahí viene el conejo" ("Here comes the rabbit") is also a circle game, but it involves a complex clapping pattern that travels around the circle, like a rabbit, while the text is chanted. There is patterned alternation in the song text between low and high pitches, but the performance is not melodic. An adult told me that the first phrase is supposed to end with the word *suelte*, from *soltar* (to unleash), but the kids always said *suerte* (luck), so I translate it with both meanings. The person whose hand is struck when the last word, *más*, is chanted must choose another person to embrace in some way. When played by younger children, the focus is on acquiring the agility to perform the clapping pattern and to monitor the

¹¹ Lancaster (1992) makes a more detailed analysis of this complex term in western Nicaragua. My conversations on Corn Island suggested that adults there used *cochón* and *cochona* to signify same-gender sexual desires or relations; children had varying interpretations of the terms but understood that they were derogatory.

turn-taking. Among older children and adolescents, however, the game becomes charged with sexual meanings.

Ahí viene el conejo

<i>Ahí viene el conejo de la suerte (suelta)</i>	Here comes the rabbit lucky (unleashed)
<i>Con cara de inocente</i>	With an innocent face
<i>Tu besarás a la chica o al chico</i>	You will kiss the girl or boy
<i>Que te guste más!</i>	You most desire!

Transcripts C and D come from recordings of older Miskitu children, roughly between 10 and 13 years old, during recess at the Moravian school.¹² In this context the older girls directing the game pointedly exclude most of the younger children as well as anyone who lacks the boldness to kiss someone in full view of their peers. It is assumed that people who refuse to kiss have *swira* (shame), which, as I mentioned earlier, is a culturally shaped affective stance signaled by the avoidance of body or eye contact. A person of any age or gender may display *swira*, but it is particularly appropriate to—in many cases, demanded of—adolescent girls interacting with boys who may be potential romantic partners. On Corn Island, this was also an established ideal of behavior, but not always carried out in practice. Some of the older girls who directed song games during recess were extremely boisterous and domineering, not only in this context but in other situations as well. Nevertheless, even the most brazen girls playing “Ahí viene el conejo” never made eye contact with the person they kissed or the person who kissed them (always on the cheek), and their facial expressions remained completely blank while the kiss was enacted. They avoided kissing the same boy twice, lest their participation in the game be judged as romantic interest or availability. A boy, on the other hand, could perform in a more forward manner, and sometimes would choose the same girl over and over again to kiss, much to her chagrin and to onlookers’ amusement.

Transcript C begins with one of the older girls saying “Whoever is ashamed is going to get pulled out [of the game] like a molar tooth,” followed by accusations of shame as well as fear, and a clear mandate to kiss or be excluded. In line 26 Nestor, an older boy with a deeper voice, threatens Donaldo that if he shakes hands with a girl instead of kissing, Nestor will no longer hang out with him (“you’re not going to come around my face, boy, if you do that”). Donaldo succeeds in kissing a girl, and Nestor responds with the affirmation, “Ah, today Donaldo is going with me.” It should be noted that cheek-kissing as an informal greeting is not as common among Miskitu people as it is in many Latin American societies; thus even a cursory kiss may be affectively loaded. Through the social pressure to perform both passion and shame, the song game becomes a medium for the socialization of sexual affect among peers.

¹² The Miskitu-dominated Moravian school included a few children from Creole or Mestizo families. The more extensive use of Spanish in these transcripts can be attributed to the accommodation of non-Miskitu speakers as well as the higher level of Spanish competence among older Miskitu children.

Transcript C

- 1 Kendra: *Ya ai swira briba napa raya tukip daikaia.*
Whoever is ashamed is going to get pulled out like a molar tooth.
- 2 *Ay, rápido, calláte, si va a jugar, jugar, no?*
Ay, hurry, shut up, if you're going to play, play, no?
- 3 Paula: *Ella tiene miedo.*
She's scared.
- 4 Geraldo *Eh, (), tienes pena? ()*
Eh, () are you ashamed? ()
- 5 Shira: *Quien tiene penas que me salgan.*
Whoever is ashamed get away from me.
- 6 Paula: *Beso!*
Kiss!
- 7 Kendra: *Saliste, pues! Saliste! No vas a jugar.*
Get out, then! Get out! You're not going to play.
- 8 Shira: *No están dando la mano. Beso!*
They're not shaking hands. Kiss! ((...))
- 9 Johnny: *() dono nara balan na dono aha?*
() I don't know why you came, I don't know why you came, aha?
- 10 *Dono man pliki baman balan na.*
I don't know why you came just looking here
((if you're not going to kiss)).
- 11 Kendra: *Ai swis swiram brisma kaka takais,*
Leave me if you're ashamed get out,
- 12 *man kiawalaia dia mihtam pas sihbaia!*
you have to kiss, why are you first shaking hands!
- 13 Timo: *Vamo, vamo.* ((pause))
Let's go, let's go. ((pause))
- 14 Johnny: ((rhythmically)) *Mm, ba dono ba dono,*
((rhythmically)) Mm, I don't know about that, I don't
know about that,
- 15 *hombre, neh:::=*
man, neh:::=
- 16 Kendra: =*Isti muns-* ((general laughter and shrieks))
=Hurry- ((general laughter and shrieks))
- 17 Nestor: *Mawan ba ()*
The face ()
- 18 ?: *Isti!*
Hurry!
- 19 Group: *Ahí viene el conejo de la suerte*
Here comes the rabbit unleashed/lucky
- 20 *con cara dinocente,*
with the innocent face
- 21 *tú [besarás a la chico o a la chica que te guste más.*
you [will kiss the boy or the girl you most desire.

- 22 Celia: [Rápido. ((laughter and shrieking))
[Hurry. ((laughter and shrieking))
- 23 ?:
Donaldo! Donaldo!
Donaldo! Donaldo!
- 24 Nestor: Kom an, Donaldo. Kom an Donaldo.
Come on, Donaldo. Come on, Donaldo
- 25 ?:
Lorna ra, Lorna.
To Lorna, to Lorna.
- 26 Nestor: *Donaldo maiwan ra taukma apia buay ba daukma lika.*
Donaldo, you're not going to come around my face, boy,
if you do that ((shake hands)).
- 27 ?:
Donaldo win takma kaia sa. ((Donaldo kisses girl; laughter))
Maybe Donaldo is going to win. ((Donaldo kisses girl; laughter))
- 28 Nestor: *Ah, Donaldo ra yang naiwa yang Donaldo ka- yang wal wisa.*
Ah, Donaldo, today Donaldo is going with me.
- 29
Donaldo ra yang wal wisa.
Donaldo is going with me.
-

Finally, in Transcript D below, it becomes clear how the performance of the player singled out by the clapping routine is judged by onlookers and by other participants as evidence of a particular gendered and sexualized subjectivity. In line 8, Shira comments on the apparent eagerness of a particular boy to kiss the girl of his choice (“when they were still saying “más” he was already walking!”). After the next round of the chanted song text, the girl whose turn it is to choose a mate is on a figurative stage; every aspect of her performance, for example, the amount of time she takes to choose, the person she chooses, and the kind of embrace she enacts, is open to public commentary and critique. She ends up kissing another girl, prompting the derisive interpellation *cochona*, which in this case denotes a sexual relationship between two women. This interpellation becomes musically imbued as several participants rhythmically chant and clap as they repeat “cochona, cochona,” effectively blurring the line between the musical modality of the song text and the spoken modality of the play discourse (cf. List, 1963). In the final part of this excerpt (line 27), a boy is prodded to join the game, with one of the older girls saying, “You think you’re a man?” Another says, “It may be that Ricardo is a man,” that is, if he enacts the sanctioned sexual role by kissing a girl. As this transcript illustrates, it is not only the interpellation that brings participants into sexualized and gendered subjectivities; it is also the performance of the song game that compels a public display of sexual affect.

Transcript D

- 1 Group: *Ahí viene el conejo de la suerte*
Here comes the rabbit unleashed/lucky
- 2
con cara dinocente, tu=
with the innocent face, you=
- 2 Shira
=*Eh!*=
=*Eh!*=

(continued on next page)

- 3 Group: =besarás a la chico o a la chica que te guste más!
=will kiss the boy or the girl you most desire!
- 4 ?:
Aha!
Aha!
- 5 Timo:
Felipe! Felipe!
Felipe! Felipe!
- 6 ?:
Ay ay ay! ((laughter))
Ay ay ay! ((laughter))
- 7 Timo:
Felipe!
Felipe!
- 8 Shira:
() *alkaia kan kau “más” wikan taim pat wapi kan!* ((laughter))
() when they were still saying “más” he was already walking!
((laughter))
- 9 Kendra:
Oke, comenzá.
Okay, start.
- 10 Group:
Ahí viene el conejo de la suerte
Here comes the rabbit unleashed/lucky
- 11
con cara dinocente
with the innocent face
- 12
tú besarás a la chico o a la chica que te guste más.
you will kiss the boy or the girl you most desire.
- 13 Bernicia:
Nahki muni ki kauhras kan?
How is ((the turn)) not falling ((on me))?
- 14 Laura:
Hori gyal.
Hurry girl.
- 15 Shira:
() *Yang baha upla bui ya ba sika!*
() I’m standing by that person, that’s why!
- 16 Tamara:
Eh, hori, man! ((pause))
Eh, hurry, man.
- 17 ?:
() *Janis.*
() *Janis.*
- 18 Kendra:
Wel pula apia kaka sin pulras
Well if you’re not playing you’re not playing,
19
taki naura aisi yabaia taim ba kaikaia.
when you’re going out talking here you’re going to see.
((girl kisses girl))
- 20 ?:
Cochona=
Gay=
21 Paula:
=*Cochona!*
=Gay!
- 22 Tamara:
Cochona!
Gay!
- 23
((rhythmically chanting and clapping))
Cochona! Cochona! Cochona! Cochona!
Gay! Gay! Gay! Gay!

- 24 Ana: Hori! Hori!
Hurry! Hurry!
- 25 Kendra: Start it.
Start it.
- 26 ?: Start.
Start. ((. . .))
- 27 Shira: *Ricardo, waitna katma ani lukma?* ((laughter))
Ricardo, you think you're a man? ((laughter))
- 28 Bernicia: *Bal, Ricardo!* ()
Come on, Ricardo! ()
- 29 Laura: *Ricardo lika waitna-*
Ricardo is a man-
- 30 Ana: *Ricardo lika waitna kaia sa!*
It may be that Ricardo is a man!
-

8. Conclusion

The preceding analyses of song games demonstrate, first of all, the way that gendered and sexual identities are not pre-given but rather co-constructed in social interaction (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1993; Jacoby and Ochs, 1995). As Butler (1999), Eckert (1996), and others have argued, the development of gendered identities or subjectivities is not separable from sexuality. Although I would avoid collapsing different forms of gender and sexual difference into the normative heterosexual matrix that Butler describes and critiques, I agree that marginalized, abjected figures such as the *cochón* and *cochona* are not outside of normative gender construction, but rather help constitute it by providing the necessary terms of comparison or opposition.

The transcripts illustrate how everyday musical and other aesthetic practices create informal performance spaces in which the significance of social acts is publicly displayed, discursively interpreted and contested. The song game creates a shared structure for strategic social action and negotiation.¹³ It also facilitates interaction between children with different linguistic competencies (cf. Ervin-Tripp, 1986); most children on the island know and play these games, whether or not they use Spanish extensively in their everyday lives. Both Jakobson (1968) and Hymes (1962) commented on the early acquisition of the poetic (for Hymes “expressive”) function of language among children, a function that may be heightened when children use a language that is somewhat unfamiliar. The musical, poetic, and kinetic aspects of the games make them pleasurable and memorable. These aesthetic modalities transform everyday discourse into performance, into play, and become part of the range of communicative resources available for both routine and strategic social action.

If performance is interpreted as a more or less self-conscious enactment, performativity is the reiteration of norms that makes performance possible, that makes us intelligible as subjects, as social actors. Both performance and performativity are acts of materialization

¹³ This observation is informed by Goodwin's (1995, 1985, 1998) analyses of children's hopscotch and jumprope games.

(that is, they have material effects), but they work in different ways, which is why Austin described the arts as “parasitic” on the conventions of performativity (1962, p. 22). He excluded artistic utterances from his analysis of performative speech because their effects were not the same as in everyday life; for example, an actor dressed as a minister who says “I pronounce you man and wife” on stage is not, in reality, joining two people in a legal union.

In Bateson’s terms, the performance frame enacts a metacommunicative message that says “this is play; it’s not real” (Bateson, 1972, p. 179). Certainly, if Miskitu girls were caught kissing boys outside the frame of the song game performance, they would be severely punished. The performance frame provides a sanctioned space for imagining and experimenting with gendered and sexual identities, yet this experimentation does have real effects through the formation and re-formation of subjectivity in social discourse. Being called a *cochón* does not make one a *cochón*; being called a girl does not make one a girl. Nevertheless, the transcripts demonstrate that children learn early on in play discourse that the interpellations “*cochón*” and “girl” have derogatory connotations and can be used strategically as such (cf. Cameron and Kulick, 2003, p. 150).

Miskitu children on Corn Island inhabit a different communicative world than that in which their parents matured. Miskitu people have come to Corn Island to open up new possibilities for the future; it has been known as one of the only places in the region where steady work has been available, albeit for limited pay. Parents have higher expectations for their children’s educational and professional achievements than in the past, but the possibility of those achievements depends in part on controlling adolescent sexuality. While romance among adolescents is a contentious object of surveillance and critique, performances of “*Compone niña*” and “*Ahí viene el conejo*” provide a sanctioned space for playing with cross-gender relations and sexuality, themes of universal concern in processes of socialization and reproduction. The particular forms and meanings of gender and sexuality are continually reshaped through the changing communicative resources available to Miskitu children on Corn Island, and through the emergent performances they co-construct.

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