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### Desde la Orilla: Fighting for a Queer Identity in the Dominican Republic

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *DESDE LE ORILLA:* FIGHTING FOR A QUEER IDENTITY IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

ANGELINA TALLAJ

Since the sexual liberation movements in the United States in the 1960s, it has been common to point to how new identities such as “gay” and “lesbian” have been exported to other cultures. However, as these new identities enter other cultures, they don’t simply replace pre-existing models, but rather often coexist in a dialectical and often antagonistic relationship with indigenous concepts and attitudes towards same-sex relations. Works by Tom Boellstorff, Gilbert Herdt, Stephen Murray, and Timothy Wright, among others, have pointed to such complex negotiations in places like Indonesia, Bolivia, and other non-Western countries. The Dominican Republic, while under-researched, is an important case study in the globalization of gay identities. Because it is a country with Mediterranean and African heritage, pervasive migration to the United States and Western Europe, and ubiquitous sex tourism, the Dominican Republic provides an interesting lens to study how globalization does not lead to the withering away of the local views, but how the global interacts with the local.

In this study, I explore Dominican homosexuality and the changes that have happened in Dominican society regarding the notions and enactments of non-normative sexualities during the last decade as new sexual identities are being imported and negotiated. My research has included visiting gay bars in the Dominican Republic and Dominican neighborhoods in New York, interacting with artists and writers, interviewing Dominican men of all types—from masculine to effeminate-looking—as well as Dominicans from all walks of life. I also have tried to read current attitudes towards homosexuality and gayness in Dominican literature, newspapers, and music. While a decade ago homosexuality was

invisible in the mainstream, today homosexual males are more visible, yet primarily as drag queens on TV shows and in the entertainment business. Dominicans of all social classes have come to accept crossdressers as entertainers,<sup>1</sup> but have not really accepted homosexuality as something that could be a "respectable" way of life or as something that could be portrayed as normal in the entertainment world. Since the Western concept of gay identity is contrary to the prevalent Dominican cultural understandings of male homosexuality, homosexuality has gained acceptance as a performance but not as a domestic activity, and this performance, even though it has created some tolerance towards public displays of homosexuality, has, at the same time, helped perpetuate the same old stereotypes that have impeded in the growth of a gay subculture in the Dominican Republic. Even though modern Western gay identities have reached the Dominican Republic and while the term "gay" is familiar to most urban Dominicans, homosexuality in all its forms is still discriminated against. As Gilbert Herdt states in the book *Same Sex, Different Cultures*, the West's identity systems have been exported to other cultures, creating "controversies in developing countries that previously lacked these concepts, having neither the history nor the political traditions that brought them about" (1997, 7). These categories are then re-interpreted in the new locale.

### Prevailing Attitudes

Among many Dominicans, machismo constitutes a central part of everyday interaction and discourse. Dominican males are constantly looking for ways of assuring their friends of their masculinity. In order for this to be achieved, Dominican men often boast about their real or supposed heterosexual conquests and mostly socialize with other men. Dominican masculinity matches Christian Krohn-Hansen's description of "an image of masculinity closely linked to that of the man as a womanizer...one who is always ready to party with his male friends, drinking rum, listening and dancing to music, and telling stories" (1996, 111). By socializing mostly with men, Dominican males develop what queer theorist Eve Sedgwick calls "homosocial" relationships with each other. This solidarity between men is manifested physically since Dominican males greet and treat each other quite warmly, usually with a caress on the head or belly, or a back rubbing gesture. Upon seeing Dominican men interact, outsiders might get the sense that they are erotically attracted to each other, but most times they are just expressing an acute sense of admiration towards the male figure. This physical

warmth is balanced out through making homosexual jokes, even pretending to be gay, calling each other *pájaro* or *maricón*, derogative words that when used with strangers or outside the party atmosphere serve as nasty insults. As Timothy Wright notes in a study of Bolivian attitudes, male homosexuality is a safe topic provided references to it are made in "tones of indignation, repulsion, anger or pity ...including nervous and degrading jokes and tabloid articles about immortality and crime" (2005, 280). In the Dominican Republic, it is the discourses of sexuality rather than the private practices which are most monitored, and the jokes help set boundaries between not only what is public and private, but also between the real and the unreal.

The intense homosociality of Dominican males makes an analysis of these roles complex. Adding to this difficulty is the fact that for Dominicans, as well as for many Mediterraneans, homosexuality is not defined according to one's sex as much as by gender roles. Which role one plays—whether the active (masculine) or passive (feminine)—is more important than the sex of one's partner in defining homosexuality; only the passive partner is considered a homosexual. Appearing to be masculine becomes very important especially in situations when homosociality is enacted. In these cases, homosexual jokes make the male interactions safer and help distract from times when the male admiration gets excessive. Since Dominicans equate homosexuality with passivity (as a synonym for femininity) in the sexual act, imitating an effeminate man at a party serves to emphasize the masculine behavior outside the mocking atmosphere. By making homosexual jokes, Dominican males assure the listener that they don't have the desire to take the passive/feminine role even after treating each other so warmly; they assure the listeners of their masculinity.

According to Dominican popular conceptions, *bugarrones* (not the *maricones* or *pájaros*)<sup>2</sup> are men who have relationships with other men, but only as penetrators. They act masculine and consequently are not considered "gay" since they are neither the receiver in intercourse nor effeminate in public. Nevertheless, studies have shown that while *bugarrones* claim to play only the active role, there is a lot of crossing over to the passive one.<sup>3</sup> This seems to happen especially when *bugarrones* have sexual relationships with foreigners (a common exchange which I discuss below) during which the *bugarrón* wants to please his partner in search of further commitment and possible money. In the book *Latin American Male Homosexualities*, Stephen Murray writes that "in Latin America... a bit more than forty percent of those playing the anal active sex role incorporated the other sex role into their sexual repertoire" (1995: 13). Some of my Dominican gay men informants assured me that a

lot of *bugarrones* do play both roles,<sup>4</sup> but this is kept secret. Since homosexuality and silence have gone hand in hand, one wonders how some gays in the Dominican Republic ever got comfortable pushing the formation of a Western model gay liberation movement, which while still very small is changing Dominican society.

Some urban Dominicans are starting to acknowledge a gay identity, one embraced by individuals of the same biological sex and sexual orientation who do not acknowledge a gender distinction based on roles played. Although an LGTB movement was founded by Dominican activists in 2001, the progress has been slow because of an inability to reach enough Dominicans. Many upper-class Dominicans prefer to keep their homosexuality private, or they marry or live with a "roommate," since revealing their same-sex preference could compromise their status. Lesbian activist Jacqueline Jiménez Polanco states that there are few adult gay men involved in the movement, and "gay men activists are mostly young, students, workers, employees or NGO's members whose participation in the movement has in some cases destroyed their family relations and job positions" (2004, 6). She also says that bisexuals are especially not interested because they can marry and have a "normal" life. Activists tend to be a small minority of intellectuals, many of whom have lived outside the Dominican Republic, especially in New York where a large percentage of the Dominican population lives. While taking their New York queer experience as a point of departure for activism in the Dominican Republic, these activists are challenged with having to shape their moves to meet the challenges of a different society.

Also active in the LGTB movement are the low-class drag queens whose actions offend the elite and whose presence at the marches makes most Dominicans perceive the gay rallies as mere vulgarity. Newspapers reported that the first *Día del orgullo gay* (Gay Pride Day) in 2001 was full of "*chusmas*," or low-class people who behaved in unacceptable ways. While Dominicans have enjoyed drag queen shows in marginal neighborhoods for a long time, most Dominicans have a problem with such public manifestations of gay pride. When drag queens are shown on TV, it is a mockery of that which is disreputable. In this way, the figure of the effeminate *maricón* is serving not to raise consciousness, but to reaffirm the codes of masculinity, to emphasize what "real" men don't do. Since most Dominicans would find it unwise to reveal same-sex desire when it can be done in private, these gay pride marches are not well attended, gay bars are shut down, and in 2001 the rights for gay activists to have a table at the *Feria del Libro* (Book Fair), the main literary event in the Dominican Republic, was denied.

While Dominicans, especially their American and European diasporic communities, are slowly adapting North American and European models of gayness, gay identity is hard to spread among Dominicans on the island because homosexuality in the Dominican Republic is often associated with the underworld. When most Dominicans think of homosexuals, they think not only of crossdressers and transgressed and stigmatized behavior, but also of male prostitutes at the beach, carriers of AIDS, child molesters, and voodoo practitioners. It is precisely these stereotypes that have prevented some of my friends and informants from coming out. They realize that their relatives have no positive gay role models through which to envision them. While nowadays some progressive Dominicans want change, there is confusion as to how to show sexual tolerance. For example, a few *merengue*<sup>5</sup> artists have written supposedly gay-friendly songs, but when one reads between the lines, one finds homophobic aspects to the lyrics. For example, Moreno Negrón released a *merengue* tune in 2006 called "Chichorizo." In this song the singer/narrator falls in love with a drag queen, and after discovering his sex decides to stay with him anyway, a gesture which could denote an acceptance of homosexuality. However, the song refrain goes "The bad thing was that I kissed him," showing a wish to never have done it because it was after liking the kiss that the singer fell in love with the drag queen.

Around the same time, an anthology of gay literature, *Antología de la literatura gay en la República Dominicana*, was published but, as some LGTB activists claimed, it should have been called *Anthology of Gay and Homophobic Literature in the Dominican Republic* since a lot of the short stories and poems reflect Dominican society's misconceptions about homosexuals—as rapists, facilitators of orgies and parties, and sick people without morals—and very few of the pieces deal with healthy gay identities. Even though this focus may not have been the initial intention behind this publication, the pieces were chosen according to whether they used the theme of homosexuality and not whether the authors were gay, and so the anthology was not free of ugly negative stereotypes. In order for the editors to convince writers to be included in the anthology, a preface was written specifying that the authors of the anthology were not gay. This is not surprising since, even in New York where Dominicans are more open towards homosexuals, many writers sent anonymous pieces to the publication of the first Dominican and Dominican-American Lesbian anthology, *Musing under the Moon*, published in 2006. In the preface to the *Anthology of Gay Literature in the Dominican Republic*, the editors do not openly advocate homosexuality but hint at the fact that people in the Dominican Republic are slowly coming out of the closet: "Between the

mocking, conundrum, and festivity, something is cooking. People continue to get out of the closet" (2004, 5).<sup>6</sup> As the editors pointed out, coming out of the closet in the Dominican Republic is still done in a carnivalesque way, and very few gay men and women have been able to incorporate their identity into their lives without having been affected negatively.

The themes treated in the anthology are diverse, but most present stigmatized homosexual behavior. Many of the short stories deal with the shame of having been involved in a homosexual relationship, the fear of being discovered, and the resentment towards the homosexual "other." In some of these, the homosexual is an adult molesting a minor as in the case of a teacher nun who molested so many girls in an all-girls school that the girls divided themselves into two teams: the molested and the unmolested ("El personero"). In the anthology, the tendency to masculinize the lesbian and feminize the gay men is pervasive, still clinging to stereotypical views. In many stories, homosexuality is put within the context of drugs, orgies, the circus, or the carnivalesque, with many scenes happening at night to help emphasize the underground and marginal status of homosexual behavior. In several of the short stories, homosexuality is referred to as an illness, and in one of them, a wife is determined to "cure" the husband who has been having affairs with a man ("Un paso adelante, dos pasos atrás"). In another, homosexuality is explained as a result of a mother's desire to gain revenge on the father by converting his favorite son into a homosexual.

The stigmatization of homosexuality is so pervasive in the Dominican Republic that people avoid being seen in public with a homosexual, even if just talking casually on the street. It was difficult for me to find someone to go to the gay bars with; a close friend feared that he would lose his university professorship, and my heterosexual friends said that they could end up in jail. One friend agreed to go with me only because he said he knew a lot of policemen and that he would be okay in case we got arrested. When asked why the clubs get persecuted, most people assured me that there is a lot of drug trafficking in these places. I personally think that drug trafficking is probably the excuse used to persecute public expressions of homosexuality. In the Dominican Republic, what is condemned is not so much the act but the public expression of it, which is why many artists and writers whom I interviewed think that it is nonsense to create gay art and literature since this would be a way of making one's private life public. When asking about tolerance toward gays, most Dominicans told me that they were very tolerant because they did not beat up homosexuals, and they believed that people could do whatever they wanted as long as their acts remained private.

### The Slow Development of a Gay Subculture

In July of 2001, gay pride was celebrated for the first time in the Dominican Republic. Under the slogan "Llegó la hora" (the time has arrived!) the march was organized by the LGBTIR organization (*Lesbianas, Gay, Bisexuales, Transexuales, Transgéneros, Travestis, Intersexuales, Raras/raros*) which formed after a conference in the same year organized and attended by Dominicans from both New York and the Dominican Republic. At this conference, entitled "Desde la orilla: La Diversidad como reto de la nación democrática" (From the Margins: Diversity as a Challenge to the Democratic Nation), Dominican sexual minorities were academically studied for the first time. Both the conference and the gay pride march were organized after a series of killings and arrests of homosexuals in the Dominican Republic and after the police had closed a few gay bars and a disco. (The latter because of its supposed violation of "noise regulations," which in the Dominican capital is like convicting a Times Square business for using too much electricity in advertising.)

These activists aspire to form a gay subculture similar to that of the United States and to create space for gay men and women to have a sexual life and identity that would not interfere with their public safety or their status. Far from reaching the whole population, the movement is only starting to impact cities where Dominicans are beginning to perceive the "gay" as capable of being a respected person. "Gay" is an identity totally opposed to that of the *maricón*, who continues to be the low-class and discriminated-against homosexual guilty of various supposed transgressions. Gays are supposedly well-behaved because they don't make public displays of femininity and live "discreet" lives. It is, however, only those with education and awareness of other possibilities who are adopting this new form of identity, and this notion of gayness is becoming associated with a small sub-section of the population privileged in terms of education, the opportunity to consume foreign culture, and the means to belong to an international global gay movement. Lower-class Dominicans, on the contrary, remain *maricones*, and their presence in the marches is provoking many with social status to not want to be lumped into the same category. So, until gayness can spread to all social classes, a gay identity won't be fully established in the Dominican Republic. As activist Jacqueline Jiménez Polanco affirms, transgender, transsexuals, and travestites are not welcomed by some "since they represent the underground society" (2004, 7).

A lot of the current changes in the Dominican Republic have been initiated and encouraged from New York. In New York there are many more gay rights organizations than in the Dominican Republic and, in fact, the conference *Desde la orilla* was mostly organized by New York scholars and activists. For decades, gay Dominicans have found space in New York for living a safe life which most keep secret from those back home. This does not mean that violence against gays does not happen in New York Dominican neighborhoods, but New York offers some safety, and from here, activists have enjoyed the freedom to denounce injustices happening in the Dominican Republic. For example, in 2004, Francisco J. Lazala, coordinator of GALDE (Gay and Lesbian Dominican Empowerment Organization), denounced the Cardinal of the Dominican Republic for blaming homosexuals for the pedophilia problems in the Catholic Church. Lazala also publicly accused the seminary of being a "jaula de locas" (a homosexual jail). In January 2007, as I was doing research for this essay, I joined a group of Dominican and Latina lesbian artists and writers in a series of events and workshops to help bring awareness of gay rights to the New York Dominican community. In these events there were short films, art exhibits, musical performances, and workshops. Surprisingly, the events were well attended even though there were still Dominican newspaper reporters who felt uncomfortable reporting on these events. When they came to interview us, we felt they did not know what questions to ask or how to behave with us. Sometimes we felt that they were looking at us with amusement and curiosity. When the report was sent to the Dominican Republic, the word "lesbian" was taken out of the title of the article because supposedly this word cannot be used in Dominican newspapers. Such open celebrations of queerness are not part of the Dominican culture yet.

### Religion and Tourism

In this section, I would like to examine two arenas where Western conceptions of gayness enter into direct contact with alternative visions of sexuality in the Dominican Republic—African-based religion and the tourist industry—and their roles in the development of a gay subculture in the Dominican Republic. The Dominican Republic received a lot of African slaves, and while most of the Dominican population consider themselves Catholic, voodoo (*vudú*) is practiced ubiquitously. In *vudú*, as well as in many other forms of African-based religions in Latin America, homosexuality is accepted and not persecuted as it is in the Catholic Church. While the supposed hostility to same-sex relations has been taken

as a sign of the backwardness of non-Western societies, the truth is that heteronormativity was a product of the West. As Jarrod Hayes reminds us, "heteronormativity [was] exported to Africa through colonization... [and] both the homosexual and homophobia are products of colonialism" (Binnie 2004, 77). While *vudú* is practiced by many marginalized dark-skinned Dominicans, the Catholic Church currently dominates all realms of Dominican society and "the Archbishop of Santo Domingo, the top hierarch of the Dominican Catholic Church, plays the main role in the clergy's homophobic discourse and permanent witch hunt against the gay and lesbian community" (Polanco 2004, 8).

In the Dominican Republic, political hierarchies have persecuted Dominican voodoo because of its connection with dark-skinned poor Dominicans and because *vudú* provides and allows a sexual freedom and gender equality uncharacteristic of the Dominican Republic. While Catholic priests are male, Dominican voodoo has empowered women and homosexual men who make up about 80% of the mediums and are often appointed as leaders of the rituals. As James H. Sweet states, "a specific category of homosexual men has played a crucial role in African spiritual life for hundreds of years" (1996, 186), and in the Dominican Republic, their acceptance as part of this marginalized religion has also contributed to homosexuality being seen as belonging to the lower classes. I have attended many ceremonies of *vudú*, and I am always surprised by not only how many effeminate men are present at the events, but also by how homosexuals hold positions of importance within the religion. This is partly because *vudú* provides an explanation for male homosexuality: when a female deity mounts (or possesses) a man, this man will naturally start to show female characteristics.

One who is skeptical about spirit possession might well wonder if the men who get possessed by female spirits are not just really enjoying being a woman for a while. When a man gets possessed by a female deity, he gets dressed as a woman, puts on make up, and gets to dance with as many men as the "deity" wants to.

The link between homosexuality and African-based religions is revealing because it provides a counterpart to Christian-charged homophobia, and it offers another explanation as to why the Dominican upper (more European) classes have more resistance towards accepting this religion. Conversely, the popularity of *vudú* among Dominican lower and darker classes and the fact that homosexual men have an important role in it, help explain the more liberal attitudes of Dominican lower classes towards homosexuality and the many drag queens who come out of this social class.<sup>7</sup> Western Christian convention does not always hold true

in countries influenced by an influx of African peoples. Even though the Church and the state might persecute homosexuals, on the ground there is more tolerance than we might be led to think. Studying sexualities in the Dominican Republic becomes a vehicle through which to study how pre-modern societies were not, as it commonly assumed, more hostile toward same-sex relations, and to avoid constructing a modern history of homosexuality as a "progressive, even teleological, evolution from pre-modern repression, silence, and invisibility to modern visibility and social freedom" (Murray 1994, 4) epitomized by the contemporary sexual liberation movements of the West. Urban Dominicans are getting attuned to a global Western gay identity, but many rural Dominicans have little need of this form of liberation.

It is primarily urban Dominicans who stigmatize homosexuality by associating it with *vudú*, drag queens, male prostitution, AIDS, and gay sex tourism. During my research, I found many newspaper responses to the gay pride march in which globalization, tourism, and Dominican-American migrants were blamed for bringing these "sinful" things to the island. One respondent said: "It would be a shame if now Latin Americans imitated the corrupt American and European societies. It would better if we copied only what is best for our kids and not what those Dominicanyorks [derogative name for New York Dominicans] and American tourists bring here. Stay strong!" (Diario Libre, De buena tinta 2006). Some conservative Dominicans hope that *machismo* will be able to "save" the country from the invasion of gays, and others hope that Latin America can live up to being "the country of hope," as Pope John Paul II declared it. The Dominican Republic, like the rest of the Caribbean, receives millions of tourists per year, especially from the United States and Europe. While many tourists go there attracted by the weather and the beautiful beaches, many, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike, come for sex tourism.

Many male Dominican prostitutes, even while having a wife and kids, work at the beach areas serving both female and male clients. Even though many of these Dominican men might not consider themselves gay because supposedly they only perform the active sexual role, these men are in contact with many European and American clients who consider themselves and their sexual servants gay. In other words, gay tourism in the Dominican Republic puts sex workers in dialogue with self-identified gays from all over the world who hold multiple ideas as to what constitutes a homosexual. How does the Dominican macho man react when confronting different points of view as to what constitutes a homosexual? How do the meanings and practices change as a result of this

communication? While it is possible that the contact at tourist areas could be leading to an increase in the foreign-imported gay identity and a decrease in the traditional dichotomous view, it is hard to determine or predict accurately the social and cultural effects of these encounters. One thing that is happening is that AIDS is increasing in these areas and so is the association of homosexuality with sex work and AIDS. Whether the sex worker is a *bugarrón*, under-age youth, or hotel employee, "it is in these areas that the highest rates of HIV/AIDS are found." (UNESCO 1999, 15). Because of all these connections of homosexuality with transgressive behavior, *vudú*, lower classes, prostitution, and AIDS, it is really hard to be respected and gay in the Dominican Republic.

### TV, Music and Carnival

When asked whether Dominicans are homophobic, many denied it by pointing to the number of effeminate men, mostly crossdressers, who are present in current Dominican TV shows and *merengue* bands, a new phenomenon of the last seven years or so. While in the Dominican TV and music industries the fascination with crossdressing is new, in carnival, as well as in *vudú*, it has been present for centuries. The main folkloric character in Dominican carnival, Robalagallina (hen stealer), is a man dressed as a woman with pillows underneath his clothes so as to appear to have a big butt and breasts. Robalagallina uses make up and a wig and holds an umbrella while dancing with pronounced hip movements. The large proportions are partly because, following familiar ancient symbolism, this character represents fertility, but this clearly has deeper cultural significance. The practice of crossdressing has been a part of many other carnivals in the Americas. In Brazil, carnival is dominated by crossdressing men and, as James Naylor Green notes in his book *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-century Brazil*, this practice during carnival has led foreigners to sometimes believe that Brazil is a homosexual paradise although quite the contrary is true. Green asserts that a homosexual in Brazil is brutally murdered every 4 days (1999, 3). He further explains how, just as is starting to happen in the Dominican Republic, drag queens in Brazil have become adored public personalities without improving the overall climate for gays. The same way that in the United States people let celebrities cross behavioral boundaries that they would not cross themselves, and where 80s metal bands in drag attracted millions of homophobic fans, in the Dominican Republic, drag queens are enjoyed by even the most macho men.

Nowadays, as we have seen, several *merengue* artists play with an effeminate image or else with gay-themed lyrics. El Jeffrey, who proclaimed that masculine-looking artists do not sell (Hoy 2008), appears on TV wearing girly pink outfits. When a TV reporter asked him about this, he responded: "One day a reporter asked me if I was homosexual, and the next day I appeared wearing pink clothes on TV. It's the art of the business." This sort of spectacle, using crossdressing as a way of enhancing an artist's popularity, is a marketing strategy and one with complex and contradictory repercussions. After the popularity of the *merengue* "Chichorizo," other artists started to take advantage of its popularity, and a whole debate about homosexuality broke out with several music groups responding in music to the controversy. The most meaningful response to "Chichorizo" was a *merengue* that came out in September 2006 called "Pluma pluma gay" (Feather Feather Gay) by a group called Mala Fe. It is very celebratory about gayness and it finishes with a public address announcement: "All our respect to the gay community. Be Happy!" The words encourage homosexuals to get out of the closet:

*Maricón* who, *maricón* you, *maricón* me, *maricón* ah, ah.  
 Courage! to the light if you are a homosexual.  
 Think about it; it's your life, and it does not matter what people say.  
 Courage, courage, How dark is the closet!  
 Get out of there, come here, your destiny is to be happy.  
 Party, feather feather gay....Liberate yourself.  
 That attire is too tight.

These and other responding *merengues*, which all came out in 2006, reflect the current grappling of Dominicans with the new sexual trends. Ironically, after such a blatant pro-gay *merengue* and after Mala Fe appeared on the CD cover dressed in leather pants, silky clothes, full of feathers, and with letters saying "I Am Free," when asked in interviews whether he was gay or not, there was ambivalence in his answers.

Interviewer: Are you gay?  
 Mala Fe: Up to today, no.  
 I: What do you mean until today if you said that people are born gay not become gay?  
 MF: Yes, people are born gay... but sometimes people realize things later.  
 I: Are you preparing your coming out with this production?  
 MF: Could be, could be. Let's stop here...

At least, even after such ambivalent interview, Mala Fe stated that the closet was a sad experience and that people should accept non-normative sexualities. Whether Mala Fe was motivated by a desire to advocate gay rights or win a new audience or both, his *merengue* was the first to talk about homosexuality in such open ways. Mala Fe's image, although also groundbreaking, was not unique since Dominicans had been using drag queens' attires, but no artist ever had publicly said to open up the doors to gays so that they can come out of the closet. Not surprisingly, this supportive *merengue* was more popular among New York Dominicans than among those on the island.

Perhaps Mala Fe's "Pluma pluma gay" has been the most successful attempt so far at speaking openly about gay rights, in some ways more successful than a gay literature anthology, an LGTB movement, and a gay-friendly religion. It would not be the first time that popular music has been a more effective tool for progressive thinking than formalized resistance movements. But on the other hand—as we have seen—sexual politics is intimately connected with class, religion, and race. Because of these complex convergences, Western models of gayness, while not to be avoided, also never will quite fit in the Dominican Republic.

### Author Notes

<sup>1</sup> Drag queens shows have been popular in lower-class neighborhoods long before this recent trend.

<sup>2</sup> *Maricones* and *pájaros* are low-class homosexuals marginalized for their supposedly vulgar behavior. Up to ten years ago (when the gay identity reached the country), this was the only possible identity for a homosexual.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Murray 1995: 13.

<sup>4</sup> The stereotype of Dominican men is indeed that they prefer anal to vaginal sex. When with a woman, it might be used as a form of birth and chastity control.

<sup>5</sup> *Merengue* is a popular music genre considered a symbol of Dominican identity.

<sup>6</sup> All translations from English to Spanish are mine.

<sup>7</sup> This tolerance towards homosexuality is also present in Brazilian African-based religion *candomblé* and Haitian *vodun*.

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