



# Brandeis University Mortimer-Hays Travel Fellowship Report

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Dominican Republic  
2021-2022

A personal narrative on  
**Ancestry, Mariconeria and Divinity in the Dominican Republic**

Y así como todo cambia  
Que yo cambie no es extraño

Cambia, todo cambia  
Cambia, todo cambia  
Cambia, todo cambia  
Cambia, todo cambia

Pero no cambia mi amor  
Por más lejos que me encuentre  
Ni el recuerdo, ni el dolor  
De mi pueblo y de mi gente

Lo que cambió ayer  
Tendrá que cambiar mañana  
Así como cambio yo  
En esta tierra lejana

(Rearranged Lyrics from Mercedes Sosa's "*Todo Cambia*")

## ***INTRO***

Back in New York. I can't see the sky anymore. I can't see the malecon. All I see are tall buildings, industrial structures, rapid movement, and time feeling faster. I would've stood, if I could. No more text on the walls reminding me que "Cristo Viene " o "Dios Es Amor " y "Corre por tu vida " In my process of rematriating to the Dominican Republic, I discovered my calling. Receiving the Mortimer Hays Travel Fellowship from Brandeis University helped unveil things about my capabilities. What I could do. What could be possible. Receiving this fellowship I would say fue un *diosidencia*, my friend Angy would say, it was a godsend. Currently, as I write this, I am still very much processing my time. It changed my life, honestly. I am feeling homesick, truthfully. Not only was I given the opportunity to come home, but I got to witness why home is such a sacred and beautiful place. I got to spend time with my father and family. I met beautiful people and made friends. I tested my boundaries and comfort. Every day was a new day, a new opportunity to step out of my uncomfot, try something new, and explore.

Translating my experience in an academic way was impossible without acknowledging and including my personal transitions and my process of reflection in my work. The first three months living in Santo Domingo, was spent developing my thinking, and conceptualizing. I was feeling uncertain on where I should start. I knew I was capable of putting myself out there and meeting new people but I was also navigating a huge change of routine and place, navigating a relationship with my father as an adult now, plus different ranges of emotions y adaptando me a una vida caribena for the first time. Having moved, I got to understand privilege differently. Most importantly, my personal privilege and positionality in a developing country was important for me to reflect on constantly. Trying to understand experiences and perspectives while also understanding marginalized communities who are contiguously understanding their own experiences in a larger structure. I had to move to a different country to see a different perspective, and the complexities and nuances of another society.

## ***LA GRINGA***

I came with an academic purpose and in that experience, I found humility. Figuring out how to transmute my personal experience and how I'm interpreting the world in front of me into a project required me to understand responsibility in a whole other way when it came to understanding myself as an artist and the work I sought out to create. There was a lot of inner work happening. I was reflecting heavily on my life, my diasporic experience, my parents' transcultural experience, them assimilating to American culture and navigating a new language.

I was reflecting a lot on an excerpt from Justo L. Gonzalez book *Manana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. It made me think of my parents having to leave such a beautiful place.



## By the Waters of Babylon

Finally, Hispanics in this country are a people in exile. Many of us are exiles in the literal, everyday sense. For some reason, we have left our native lands and come to this land. Some of us are political exiles. We are here, in the immediate sense, because we disagreed with the political regime in our countries and the United States offered us refuge—or, in the case of those of us fleeing from right-wing dictatorships whom the United States supported, refuge was not offered, but we took it anyhow. Others are economic refugees. In our lands it was impossible to make a decent living, so we took the opportunity earlier immigrants took and came to the United States. Others are ideological refugees. The propaganda coming out of this country was such that we became convinced that the values of this society were better than those in our own native societies and that therefore we would be more at home here. Most of us are here as a result of a combination of these factors. If, for whatever reasons, the lands of our birth are now permanently lost to us, if we no longer hope to return but have cast our lot in this adoptive land, we are no longer Latin Americans living in exile in the United States but Hispanic Americans, people who have no other land than this, but who nevertheless remain exiles.

Then there are many others who are not exiles in the sense that they left the lands of their birth to come to this nation. They were born here. In many cases, so were their parents and grandparents. But they too are exiles in the deeper sense of living in a land not their own. Although they are U.S. citizens by birth, they are not full citizens, and therefore they are exiles living in a land that remains foreign.

Both groups live in ambiguity. The literal exiles live in the ambiguity between gratitude and anger. We are grateful, because this country has offered us a refuge others did not. But at the same time we are angry, mostly for two reasons: first, because many of us are coming to the bitter realization that even though we have given up the countries of our birth, we shall end our days as exiles, as people who live in a land that is not theirs, that welcomes them up to a point and then shuts the door. Second, we are angry because we are becoming increasingly aware of the degree to which the United States, the land of our refuge, is also the land that created our need for exile in the first place. Political exiles discover the complicity of North American vested interests in the events

Powerful !!!

Feelings of not being Dominican enough surfaced as well. Growing up, I wasn't fortunate enough to be one of those who would travel to DR every summer. It definitely impacted the way I validated my own experience of being Dominican. With raising 5 kids, my mother wasn't able to afford flying us out for the summer. For a lot of reasons, selecting Santo Domingo as my destination of choice was intentional. I understood I had to embody the full experience of being la "extranjera " la "Dominican York" Gringa.

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### ***TAINO, FAMILY.***

As visually beautiful Santo Domingo is, learning about its history really helped grasp an understanding why Dominicans with such limited access to education are less focused on learning about a decolonized Dominican Republic. Colonization, US invasions, neo-imperialism, Trujillismo y Balaguer + the hundred years of slavery and genocide results in systematic poverty, lack of access to quality education, no sex education and deep internalized racism. At times trying to talk about things like sex, Jesus y negritude felt demoralizing. Especially when it came to talking about these specific topics with my family. They would refuse to ruminate on these conversations. How politics is enmeshed with the personal. I couldn't blame them. Talking about colonial and religious conditioning to my family was not it.

I grew interested in learning about my ancestry.

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116 years before the first slaves arrived in the US colonies, they arrived at La Atarazana fort located in La Zona Colonial, Santo Domingo. Santo Domingo was the first christian colonial settlement in the hemisphere, before that it was an indengious settlement. Few people realize that the Dominican Republic was home to the first black people in the Americas. Alfonso Peralta, anthropologist, artist and author of *Karibe Ancestral: Manual De Cultura Ancestral Y Pueblos Originarios del Caribe* would say our story didn't start with Christopher Colon's arrival to *Ayiti/Bohio* in 1492. According to Peralta, the human presence on the island dates back to two thousands years before Christ. The extermination and enslavement of our arawako ancestors is one of the greatest myths in history, that is how the pen of the colonial version of history wrote it, Perlata states. We became *La Hispanolia, Quiesqueya*. Race was being constructed and language was changing. It was necessary for Colon to construct el indio, el negro. It was necessary to depict our ancestors as savages in order to cause division, and to dehumanize them. Our arawako ancestors weren't existing in divisions, in the structures of race and gender before the Europeanos arrived. They were Taino. Family, Kin. Taíno no es pueblo ni una gente, es una palabra arawaka que significa familia, peralta says in her book. It means family.



Scanned Image from *Karibe Ancestral: Manual De Cultura Ancestral Y Pueblos Originarios del Caribe* by Alfonso Peralta

Form. ADM-FIN-CIP-001

Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales

R.A. Cuevas del Pomier  
RECIBO DE INGRESO

No. 2305

Fecha: 07/06/22

Hemos recibido de: Miguel Vargas

La suma de: trescientos pesos

RD\$ 300.00

Por concepto de: Entradas de Cisternas Cuevas del Pomier

☒ Efectivo ☐ Cheque (s) No. \_\_\_\_\_

Banco: \_\_\_\_\_

BLANCO : Original al interesado  
AZUL : Departamento de contabilidad  
AMARILLO : Departamento de tesorería  
ROSADO : Cronológico de área

FIRMA Y SELLO

Colon's arrival happened right when our ancestors were already developing their language and written word. In these cuevas you can find oral history of our arawako ancestors. I got the chance to go to la Cuevas del Pomier, an anthropological reserve in the province of San Cristóbal. I got to see engravings on the rocks. It felt significant being in such a sacred space. Feeling the rocks, being in darkness and hearing the sound of murciélagos flying above me. I didn't realize until



later on, maybe five months living in Santo Domingo, I was undergoing a process of rematriation. I learned this word through a friend Ysanet Batista who I had the pleasure of working with. That encounter too, felt significant, because it's been years since we have seen each other and we happen to be in the motherland together. I had the opportunity to work as the photographer for Ysa's podcast project "*Cooking With My Dominican Ancestors*" picked up by Whetstone Media. We got to travel through DR and talk about the Gastronomy of our food, and our ancestral history beyond food. It was such a transformative time. DR was becoming home.



## *Reclaiming Space*

I spent a lot of time in La Zona. I lived in Santo Domingo Este, en Los Tres Brazos near Rio Ozama. Very different vibe. It contains all the architectural reminders of Christian coloniality and history. The colonial architecture attracts a lot of tourists from across the world to come and witness the national cathedral, the first monasteries, churches and the beautiful colonial houses. For me to get to La Zona, we would always drive through Guachupita. It's visually interesting, how communal and physical space changes as you're on your way from Este to La Zona, it was seeing systematic and structural oppression elsewhere.

With over a billion users today, Instagram users find a way to connect with one another, anywhere it's accessible that is. I began establishing connections with people through the internet and meeting up with friends of friends. Putting myself out there. Parque Duarte was my first encounter. Parque Duarte was very special. Located in La Zona, *El Parque* is where a lot of queer/LGBTQ+ folks gather to socialize and spend time together. Its near the first cathedral of the New World which is surrounded by many active areas for sex work and queer eroticism. Queerness and non-reproductive sex in the Dominican Republic already pose a moral national threat, some would say a spiritual warfare; so to witness a sense of spacial reclamation amongst the community happen in that specific territory is *resistencia*. Resistance. There's this myopic orgullo, this pride some Dominicans have against groups whose expression or marginalized identity don't reflect and represent Dominicaness y patria. Despite DR's strong opposition to mariconeria and sex work around La Zona, it benefits the economy.

I'd like to make note that Westernized constructions of gay identity do not translate in every cultural context and should not be generalized. I kept on thinking of accessibility, how technology influences the production of knowledge globally despite geographical location. I began thinking about the word queer, and it being an English term existing in DR. **Cuir**, is the word I learned is being used in the community. It's queer but translated to spanish. It's Interesting how queer terminology travels transnationally. However, using English-language labels such as gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans only to identify ourselves can have the potential of erasing unique local identities. Como *Maricon*, *Maricona*, *Pajarx*, *Pajaro*. Words that have been used in derogatory and discriminatory ways across hispanic cultures. However, the queer community in DR have been reclaiming the words *Maricon*, *Maricona*, *Pajarx*, *Pajaro*. Making it non offensive in the community. It's like asking ourselves in what ways can it be subversive and liberating rather than oppressive? And I appreciate that.

Receiving this opportunity overall led me to start a queer documentary film towards the end of the year. It will be my first directorial film, it's a visual ethnographic examination of mariconeria in the Dominican Republic. It examines the Dominican experience within critical theory of queerness to investigate personal positionality and understanding of sex, gender, religion, the advancement of technology and the influences of western globalization. Working on this film definitely requires me to visit DR more frequently, but also, dedicate myself to create a body of work that is important and essential for representation.

There's also a portrait series called Audiovisual Cuir, a project portraying queer life in the Dominican Republic as desirable and sacred that I began working on. I was fortunate and trusted

enough to be invited into people's homes and take portraits of them as organically as possible. I am grateful to have been welcomed into their space and exchange words of wisdom and insight. Mainly on sexuality and libertad, a world where folks can co-exist without harm, communal strategies and the social climate changing in DR.

There's a lot of movements happening in the Dominican Republic. One specific example I would mention is *Tokischa*, and Tokischa being one of the most controversial, political dembow artists in DR. A rolling stone article written by Julyssa Lopez says she has become the most provocative superstar in Dominican dembow by making songs that pull no punches about sex, drugs, and queerness. "She's been fined by Dominican officials, threatened with jail time and censorship, and denounced by horrified conservatives" I personally love what is happening in DR. Tokischa. Queer resistance. Community. The youth of DR is the future. Things are to be shaken up. There's a lot of things to be put into question. There's so many reminders of Jesus everywhere. A white Jesus. Cabanas everywhere, strips of them. Sex work and Tourism. Anti abortion laws. Double morality. There's also the codigo penal, a political code that would exempt punishment from discrimination of sexual orientation and gender. Nor would it penalize anyone who refuses to provide or hire a service due to religion or morality. A lot of social and political controversies are happening, but I believe for a reason. I felt like I was in the right time and in the right place to understand these things more critically, in a sociological way.

It was easier for me to work on the queer aspect of my project versus my father's story. There was a lot of emotional labor required, that I did not have at times. For a while, my father's story was the center of my life. I mean, I was separated from my father and he is now having to navigate a relationship with his adult daughter, who he was separated from when she was young. His story is what brought me closer to him.

Towards the end, I had the courage to finally film my father.

### *Synopsis*

*Comiendo Biblia: Un Sobreviviente En El Jumbo De Pan Am* is a visual testimony on the life of my pastor father, Candido Canelo. In this project, I document the testimony of my father who was deported twice from the US. While learning to navigate my relationship with my father after years of being separated, I also find myself dealing with my own personal identity, my findings of Christianity within a theological context, and the after effects of the prison industrial complex and border systems leading to family separation.

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*I want to express my deepest gratitude to the Hays Family and Brandeis University, along City College of New York for this opportunity. Everything did not go as planned, plans transformed, thoughts developed and at times life got in the way. DR was the biggest risk I took in my life. It was well worth it. I got to create so many things in terms of art, I got to spend time with my family and I got to meet a community of people reclaiming space, and y perreando a la misma vez. Thank you for allowing me to come home.*

