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BEING *MALA MALA*: DOCUMENTARY FILM AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF PUERTO RICAN DRAG AND TRANS IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

There is an important number of documentary films focusing on Puerto Rican drag performance and transgender lives. *Mala Mala* (2014) is exemplary in this respect, portraying civil rights activism, labor difficulties, the impact of transnational media, the negotiation of prejudice and stigma, and the great advances of LGBT visibility. By focusing on nine individuals, directors Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles, cinematographer Adam Uhl and editor Sofía Subercaseaux convey many complexities of this experience, including questions of language, body modification, migration, personal relationships, and aging. Some of the film's limitations are its lack of greater representation of trans masculinities and of racial diversity. This article compares *Mala Mala* to several additional productions, proposing that this important corpus be recognized as a coherent whole. It also proposes *mala mala* (very bad, fierce) subjectivities as a form of resistant identity in Puerto Rico.

Keywords: *Mala Mala*, documentary film, LGBT, transgender, transsexual, drag performance, gender variance, body modification, Puerto Rico, diaspora

RESUMEN

Hay un número importante de documentales sobre el transformismo y la experiencia transgénero puertorriqueña. *Mala Mala* (2014) es notable en este sentido, mostrando activismo de derechos civiles, dificultades laborales, el impacto de los medios de comunicación transnacionales, la negociación del prejuicio y el estigma, y los enormes avances de la visibilidad LGBT. Enfocándose en nueve individuos, los directores Antonio Santini y Dan Sickles, el cinematógrafo Adam Uhl y la editora Sofía Subercaseaux captan muchas de las complejidades sobre esta experiencia, incluyendo cuestiones del lenguaje, modificación corporal, migración, relaciones personales y envejecimiento. Algunas de las limitaciones de la película son la parca muestra de masculinidades trans y de diversidad racial. Este artículo compara a *Mala Mala* con varias producciones adicionales, proponiendo que se reconozca la totalidad de este importante corpus. También propone las subjetividades *malas malas* como forma de identidad resistente en Puerto Rico.

Palabras clave: *Mala Mala*, cine documental, LGBT, transgénero, transsexualidad, transformismo, variación de género, modificación corporal, Puerto Rico, diáspora

RÉSUMÉ

Il existe aujourd'hui un grand nombre de documentaires sur le transformisme et l'expérience transgenre portoricaine. *Mala Mala* (2014) mérite, à ce titre, d'être signalé, car ce documentaire met au jour le combat pour les droits civils, les difficultés rencontrées dans le monde du travail, l'impact des médias transnationaux, la négociation des préjugés et des stigmates, ainsi que les grandes avancées qui ont permis de rendre visible les LGBT. En se concentrant sur de nouveaux sujets, les réalisateurs, Antonio Santini et Dan Sickles, le cinématographe Adam Uhl et la monteuse Sofia Subercaseaux parviennent à rendre les complexités de cette expérience, y compris dans ses dimensions langagières, migratoires, physiques (transformations corporelles ou encore vieillissement) et relationnelles. Le film n'aborde toutefois que de manière limitée certains aspects du transformisme, comme la minorité d'hommes trans ou encore la question de la diversité ethnique. Cet article propose une comparaison de *Mala Mala* avec d'autres productions, arguant qu'il s'agit-là d'un corpus à part entière. Nous nous proposons également de montrer que les subjectivités *malas malas* agissent comme des formes de résistance identitaire à Porto Rico.

Mots-clés : *Mala Mala*, documentaire, LGBT, transgenre, transsexualité, transformisme, changement de sexe, transformation corporelle, Porto Rico, diaspora

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The feature-length documentary *Mala Mala* (2014) presents empowering perspectives on the lives of drag performers and transgender and transsexual persons in Puerto Rico, featuring visually appealing, musically enhanced, and deftly edited scenes showcasing nine individuals (April Carrión, Samantha Close, Ivana Fred, Queen Bee Ho', Paxe Caraballo Moll, Alberic Prados, Denise "Sandy" Rivera, Soraya Santiago Solla, and Sophia Voines) plus an additional cast of friends and colleagues.¹ Filmed between 2012 and 2013, the pioneering bilingual film directed by Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles secured the support of leading queer film producers Christine Vachon and Pamela Koffler from Killer Films, who signed on as executive producers; the two have been instrumental to New Queer Cinema in the United States for over two decades (Rich 2013). The documentary screened widely at

national and international film festivals and eventually obtained commercial distribution with Strand Releasing in 2015 after overcoming multiple challenges; many understand that the film benefitted from the current vogue in transgender representation initiated by the coverage of Caitlyn Jenner and Laverne Cox in the United States that same year.²

In some contemporary island queer circles, to be “mala mala” (very bad) can imply a mental state, an attitude, a pose, a lifestyle, a subculture,



Figure 1. Publicity poster for *Mala Mala* (dir. Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles, 2014), Strand Releasing.

a status, a non-desired identification, a way of being a *sinvergüenza* (a shameless person), or a bad subject.³ The documentary's title capitalizes on this in an attempt to resignify (or at the very least, be part of a process of modifying) Puerto Rican understandings about drag and trans experience. The implicit repetition serves as the intensification of a verbal game or inversion: if the gendered assertion "estar mala" (not being well) refers colloquially to menstruation (as a recognition of physical discomfort but also of misogynist stigma), "mala mala" serves as the term "sickening" in recent queer American English to express the exact opposite, that is to say, fabulous or fierce (Clarke 2015). Here, "mala mala" becomes a new way to say "loca" (faggot) or "perra" (bitch) in Spanish queerspeak (Peña 2013:86-90), a sign of admiration, a mark of complicity, an exhortation that maintains a linguistic connection to the abject, to the nature of exclusion in a hostile environment. This very particular usage is a reflection of how language can be a constitutive feature of community identity and self-fashioning and a tool of empowerment and survival, particularly through the process of linguistic reappropriation and resignification.⁴

Mala Mala is marked by its high aesthetic level, which is seemingly informed by slick advertising and commercial film production more than by experimental or more straightforward, bare-bones documentary styles; by the multiplicity of perspectives it offers; by the internal conflicts generated by divergent opinions; and by the open and frank discussion of sexual diversity and gender expression. It has received several awards, including Best Feature Film Audience Award at the 6th Puerto Rico Queer Filmfest (2014); the second place Heineken Audience Award at the Tribeca Film Festival (2014); the Jury Prize for Best Documentary at the Austin Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival (2014); the Best Documentary and Best Director Documentary Awards at the Philadelphia International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (2015); and the Best U.S. Latino Film at the Cinema Tropical Awards (2016). It has also generated some controversy and censorship, including accusations that it oversexualizes and fetishizes trans women's bodies; that it does not do an accurate job contextualizing the complexity of Puerto Rican LGBT history; and that its highly polished visual style and sound editing somehow mask reality and do not accurately represent gritty, challenging experiences such as street-level sex trade.⁵

In this essay, I discuss the generational differences, national background, migratory experience, and the work and professional experiences of the protagonists, including cabaret and nightclub performances, sex work or prostitution and work in the adult film industry, transnational television, and health and civil rights community activism. I also highlight some of the central conflicts or tensions that appear and contextualize

this film in the broader history of Puerto Rican film on this topic. I argue that this documentary is a crucial step in advancing visibility and understanding of the drag and trans experiences; a radical, sex-positive intervention; and a noteworthy development in Puerto Rican film history.

Film Antecedents

Mala Mala forms part of a long but somewhat unknown tradition of film and video representations of drag and trans experience in Puerto Rico and its diaspora (La Fountain-Stokes 2009). Its origins can be dated to 1949 with the appearance of the short documentary *La Fiesta de Santiago, Loíza Aldea, Julio 1949* (now available on YouTube), directed by the well-known anthropologist and cultural activist Ricardo Alegría (the founder of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña), which briefly documents the folkloric character of the *loca* (a man dressed as a supposedly crazy woman or effeminate man) participating in a popular Afro-Caribbean religious celebration that shares some elements with carnival (Fiet 2007; King 2014:44-47). Here, excessive, racially-marked, parodic (and, some could argue, homophobic and misogynist) black femininity is achieved by black Puerto Rican men through the use of black paint on the face and the outlandish padding of the buttocks with large pillows; the breasts are not augmented. As the narration indicates, “En los animados bailes que surgen en las calles, son las locas las que junto a los viejos divierten a los espectadores. Las locas no usan máscara alguna y generalmente llevan la cara pintada de negro” [In the animated dances that appear on the streets, it is the *locas* together with the old men who entertain the onlookers. The *locas* do not use any type of mask and generally have their face painted black]. Unlike traditional women’s make-up, the black face paint is not intended to beautify but rather to intensify strangeness, inversion, and comedy. The voice-over narration does not remark on the padding of the butt, which is clearly visible in the images. This early film has the virtue of documenting drag or cross-dressing as a long-standing, vernacular practice, even if it is one marked by the ambivalence of intentions, centering and perhaps also mocking heteropatriarchy in a local, subaltern context.

Another antecedent is the Mexican-Puerto Rican coproduction *Puerto Rico en Carnaval* (dir. Tino Acosta, 1965) which features the Mexican comedian Tin Tan and the renown Puerto Rican drag performer, musician, and impresario Johnny Rodríguez, who appears dressed as Felisa Rincón de Gautier, the famous mayoress of San Juan better known as doña Fela who was also known to incarcerate *locas* or effeminate homosexuals (Soraya 2014:93-94). Here, Rodríguez appears together with other drag queens at the well-known El Cotorrito Night Club,

which he owned and which was located in Santurce in the 1960s. Multiple scholars have analyzed this film and highlighted the long history of parodic drag in Puerto Rican television, be it homophobic, transphobic, or queer, marked by the presence of figures such as Américo Castellanos in the role of “Floripondia,” Luis Echegoyen as “Cuquita Sabrosura,” Otilio Warrington (Bizcocho) as “Cuca Gómez,” and of drag performers such as Bruno Le Fantastique, Antonio Pantojas, and more recently Dreuxilla Divine.⁶ In this case, we see a fairly stark divide: heterosexual drag (or drag performed for a predominantly heterosexual audience) tends to focus on laughter and entertainment, while more alternative or vanguard representations by gay men such as Pantojas tend to include a more critical edge.⁷ Filmed representations of “gender illusionists” or “female impersonators” at El Cotorrito also highlight the ability of some male performers to “pass” as extremely beautiful women.

This audiovisual media tradition was expanded in the 1990s by several documentaries that included transgender Puerto Rican women in the diaspora, but mostly in situations of abjection or poverty. The well-known *Paris Is Burning* (1990), directed by Jennie Livingston, focused on the experiences of African Americans and Latinxs in New York City, including numerous members of the Puerto Rican House of Xtravaganza.⁸ The lesser-known *The Salt Mines* (1990) and *The Transformation* (1996) also appeared in that decade, directed by Susana Aikin and Carlos Aparicio, and focused on the lives of several homeless Latina trans women in that same city, many of them users of controlled substances and/or sex workers, privileging the experiences of the Puerto Rican Gigi, the Dominican Giovanna and of the Cuban Sara, who lived in abandoned garbage trucks in a salt deposit near the West-Side Manhattan piers.⁹ These documentaries highlighted the precarious economic situation of their protagonists and their complex strategies of survival, which in some cases (specifically in *Paris Is Burning*) included participating in cultural manifestations such as voguing and in competitions known as balls.

More recent films include the mid-length documentary *La aguja/ The Needle* (2012) by Carmen Oquendo-Villar and José Correa Vigier, which focuses on a clandestine beauty clinic in Santurce run by José Quiñones, a retired nurse and drag queen, which is frequented by bodybuilders, housewives, utility men, trans sex workers, local celebrities, and others. This film premiered at the 2012 Puerto Rico Queer FilmFest and received very positive reception from the audience and the critics, but is not in wide circulation given potential legal concerns.¹⁰ Beautifully filmed, skillfully edited, and rich in ambient sounds and local color, *La aguja* is particularly notable as an in-depth character study of Quiñones, including his relationships with his estranged family in San Sebastián; with several of the transgender women whom he befriends, particularly

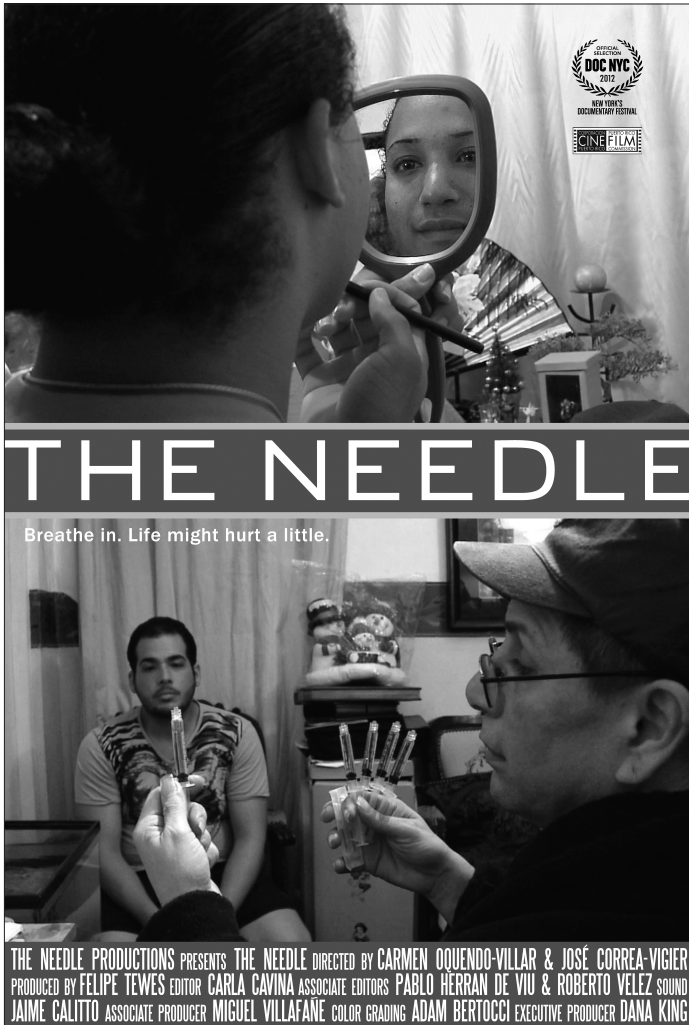


Figure 2. Publicity poster for *La aguja/The Needle* (dir. Carmen Oquendo-Villar and José Correa Viguier, 2012).

Kelly and Maybelline, who become his surrogate daughters; with his many neighbors in Villa Palmeras; and with his multiple pets, including a dog, several cats, cockatiels, chickens, roosters, geese, and turtles. The film is based on careful daily observation, following the model of visual anthropology, does not include talking-head interviews or external voice-over narration, and features a brief appearance by transgender activist Ivana Fred.

While this enumeration confirms the long and complex existence of

this type of film representation, it is also true that *Mala Mala* is pioneering in its exclusive focus on the topic, in the diversity of Puerto Rican representations, in the variety of perspectives that it offers, and in its global circulation, coming closest to *Paris Is Burning* and *La aguja/The Needle*, two fundamental antecedents. It is also unique in that it does not highlight extreme violence or death (as in the case of *Paris Is Burning*, punctuated by the murder of the Puerto Rican sex worker Venus Xtravaganza), abject poverty (as in *The Salt Mines*), or the pathos of aging as in *La aguja*, which concludes with a tragic scene in which Quiñones expresses his loneliness and alienation. In comparison to these films, *Mala Mala* is clearly more upbeat, and reflects a more positive conception of drag and trans experience in Puerto Rico. Its commercial release in movie theaters and on DVD and Netflix also coincided with the release of *Tangerine* (dir. Sean Baker, 2015), a well-received narrative film about trans women of color sex workers in Los Angeles starring the nonprofessional transgender actresses Kitana Kiki Rodríguez (who is Puerto Rican) and Mya Taylor.¹¹ *I Am the Queen* (dir. Henrique Cirne-Lima and Josue Pellot, 2010, commercial release 2015), a feature-length documentary about a small Puerto Rican drag and trans pageant in the Puerto Rican neighborhood of Humboldt Park in Chicago that serves as part of an HIV/AIDS prevention initiative, also presents interesting possibilities for comparison.



Figure 3. Kelly and Quiñones perform at a party in Quiñones's home. Image from *La aguja/The Needle* (dir. Carmen Oquendo-Villar and José Correa Viguier, 2012), courtesy Carmen Oquendo-Villar.

***La isla que se desplaza, el cuerpo que se transforma*
(The Island in Movement, The Body in Transformation)**

Mala Mala is a type of road movie that travels throughout the island, from the west (the municipalities of Moca and Añasco) to San Juan (particularly Santurce) and throughout the metro area (including Carolina) to the tropical rain forest of El Yunque, as a lens that crystalizes the profound contradictions that mark contemporary Puerto Rico before Hurricane María: an idyllic space/place, with attractive persons who live fully inserted in the transnational neoliberal currents promoted by local media (for example, in Puerto Rican news programs such as *Rubén & Co.* transmitted by Univisión that feature the well-known transgender activist and spokesperson Ivana Fred) and fully informed by foreign media productions such as the Hollywood film *Mean Girls* (Alberic Prados's obsession) and the TV reality competition show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, in which the protagonist April Carrión will go on to appear in 2014. Santini, Sickles, and their production team (the American cinematographer and DP Adam Uhl, the Chilean editor Sofía Subercaseaux) use the format of the local road movie (what film scholar Gilberto Blasini has called *automovilidad boricua* or Puerto Rican automobility), specifically sequences filmed in parked and moving vehicles and edits highlighting movement through space, to reveal situations of poverty, oppression, victimization, prejudice, lack of medical access, legal problems (for example, with documents and name change), lack of employment possibilities (something that affects the entire country) and political activism geared to change this situation.¹² Unlike the traditional road movie, which privileges the arrival from one discreet point to another, in *Mala Mala* we see more circular displacements, retracings of locations and spaces, that serve to create a composite view.

Puerto Rico appears in *Mala Mala* as a quickly-moving, highly bilingual locale where many people speak at least some English and at times mix English and Spanish (Alberic, Sandy, Samantha, Paxx, April, as well as Bebo, mother or leader of The Doll House, and drag performer Roberto), and where only a minority only speak Spanish (Ivana, Soraya, Queen Bee Ho'); in this sense, the representation does not exactly correspond to the general linguistic practice on the island, which is dominated by Spanish (Barreto 2001). The film features one transgender American woman (the New Yorker Sophia Voines) who is not Puerto Rican and is only portrayed speaking English; she discusses the challenges she has faced on the island because of its particular gender frameworks, which she perceives stressing rigid duality (masculine men and feminine women). Sophia also remarks on the general lack of awareness of transgender issues on the island, candidly discusses her

feminization processes, demonstrates the injecting of hormones and the ensuing “rush,” humorously lip singing a Barbra Streisand song using a dildo as a microphone. Many of the Puerto Ricans portrayed have lived or traveled to the United States (Samatha, Sandy, April, Soraya) while others have traveled to Ecuador (Ivana). These trips or migrations occur due to personal reasons (Sophia), professional motivations (whether it’s to advance one’s career as a drag entertainer like April or as a porn actress, like Sandy) as well as medical ones (to access hormones, surgery and other treatments, the case of Ivana and Soraya).



Figure 4. Ivana Fred, one of the protagonists of *Mala Mala* (dir. Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles, 2014). Promotional photo, Strand Releasing.

It is an island, as the anthropologist Jorge Duany (2002) would say, marked by *vaivén* (back and forth), what he has called *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move*. This mobile nation includes the crew of the film, composed of Puerto Ricans and Americans such as co-directors Antonio Santini (at the time a 26 year old Puerto Rican who resided in the U.S. whose father is Puerto Rican and mother is Dominican) and Dan Sickles (at the time a 25 year old American from Pennsylvania) and the Chilean Subercaseaux. It is very possible that this focus on bilingual persons (or who at least speak some English) has to do with the transnational character of the production team, with the directors’ interest in creating a film that would have a broader audience and that could circulate in Puerto Rico as much as in the United States and other countries, and with the linguistic prestige of English as a language that is perceived as more directly linked to the modernity of LGBT identities and culture, particularly in the framework of globalization, a controversial situation

critiqued by scholars and activists.¹³ The film's multilingualism also has to do with colonialism, with the very own divided identity of the nation, which lead cultural critic Rubén Ríos Ávila (2014) to title his review "*Estadolibrismo trans*" (Trans Commonwealth) and to affirm that the film is "one of the most provocative explorations regarding the Freely Associated State of Puerto Rico," that space marked by the presence of two flags, two languages, and (at least) two cultural traditions.

Puerto Ricanness appears in *Mala Mala* in many ways: through its images of urban and natural spaces; the rich ambient sound, including coquí frogs as well as merengue music that plays in an open air bar on a coastal town visited by Sandy and her boyfriend Eli; the contemporary music of the soundtrack, with songs by Buscabulla and other young bands; the colloquial and vernacular language; the archival footage, particularly local newscasts and television talk shows; and the political struggles and politicians, including activists as well as elected officials such as the mayoress of San Juan, Carmen Yulín Cruz and state senator Ramón Luis Nieves, both of the Popular Democratic Party (Partido Popular Democrático, PPD), who advocate for maintenance of the commonwealth status, and who appear as strong supporters of the transgender rights cause. The visual experience of this nation on the move is achieved through constant images of persons in movement, who run, walk, drive and ride cars and bicycles and skateboards and even pedal boats in the Condado Lagoon in San Juan. It is a portrait of an island in motion, of people going from one place to another. It is not a film about traffic jams or the frustrations or challenges of immobility. It is about people who are doing everything possible to get to where they want to go, be it through personal reinvention, effort, activism or social transformation; yet it is also a film about frustrations with access to jobs and to health care in Puerto Rico, particularly to hormones and surgery, as Samantha and Paxx discuss at length.

This constant voyage serves as central metaphor of the very own individual processes of transformation of the protagonists, a desire for change that also appears in the name of the group that several of them establish, the Butterflies Trans Foundation, Inc. (BTF), which serves precisely to lobby on behalf of the rights of transgender persons. Unfortunately, the long-term duration of this group is not clear; for example, they have not updated their Facebook page (or have any internet activity) since 2013, suggesting that it was a short-lived initiative that served a very specific purpose in island activism in that year.

Generational Cohorts, Intergenerational Tensions, Labor, and the Law

Mala Mala is a film with lots of young individuals, mostly in their twenties, such as Paxx, Alberic, April, and Queen Bee Ho'; with some in their thirties (Ivana, Samantha, and Sandy); some closer to fifty (Sophia); and one over sixty-five, Bárbara Santiago Solla, better known as Soraya, the (now former) owner of a beauty salon, a former political candidate for the New Progressive Party (PNP) in Carolina (the political party that favors the permanent annexation of Puerto Rico to the United States through statehood) and author of a self-published memoir called *Hecha a mano: disforia de género* [Hand Made: Gender Dysphoria] (2014).



Figure 5. Soraya (Bárbara Santiago Solla), one of the protagonists of *Mala Mala* (dir. Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles, 2014). Promotional photo, Strand Releasing.

This diversity serves to highlight intergenerational tensions, for example, the very marked differences between Ivana and Soraya's visions: Soraya rejects the term transsexual in favor of the medical designation of gender dysphoria, while Ivana embraces transsexuality as a useful category.¹⁴ Soraya also criticizes transgender women who focus obsessively on their physical appearance, something that Soraya herself perhaps did when she was younger (as the inclusion of provocative, sensual photos in the film and in her book suggests) but that she has abandoned as she has aged.¹⁵ As Soraya insists, "El ser mujer tú lo llevas en el corazón y el alma. Muchas se quedan a mitad de camino cuando pierden lustre, no son las Barbies que ellas aspiraban ser. ¿Entonces qué tú eras, una beauty queen o una mujer? A la mujer te la tienes que comer como

venga” [Being a woman is something you carry in your heart and soul. Many of them stop along the way when they lose their attractiveness, they are not the Barbies they wanted to be. So then what were you, a beauty queen or a woman?]. Ivana, on the other hand, is extremely proud of her body (she identifies it as “made in Ecuador,” referring to her cosmetic surgeries), appears scantily clad while exercising at the Condado Lagoon and walking at night in Santurce and is also portrayed bathing naked in a waterfall at the El Yunque National Forest, a choice the filmmakers indicate was her own suggestion but that some viewers have identified as exploitative. This generational diversity is similar to the geographic and to a certain extent class diversity that also appears, for example the contrast between Paxx, Soraya, April, and Alberic’s seemingly middle class status and the working class status of some of the other participants.

One of the central themes of *Mala Mala* is labor: how to earn one’s living, particularly when one does not conform to dominant gender and sexual norms, a topic that Sheilla Rodríguez Madera (2011) explores in the Puerto Rican context in her book *Género trans: transitando por las zonas grises* and that also appears in the short documentary *Desmaquilladas* (dir. Vivian Bruckman Blondet, 2013), a character portrait of a young working-class trans woman called Mitchi created as part of the Santurce Es Ley Neo-DIVEDCO film initiative. *Mala Mala* highlights the differences between transgender women who currently work or have worked in the sex industry, whether it is on the street as prostitutes or in the pornographic film industry in the United States (Sandy) or who work with women on the street, as an HIV/AIDS educator and spokesperson (Ivana); in the beauty and service industry, as the owner of a beauty salon (Soraya) or of bar/nightclub (Sophia); and in the entertainment industry, specifically the girls that do shows (Alberic, April, Queen Bee Ho’, Rochelle Mon Cheri/Roberto, all belonging to The Doll House; Samantha, Kayra Lee Naranjo) but who also have other jobs (for example, Samantha cleans houses near her home in Moca).

The topic of labor discrimination is central: Samantha mentions that she has specialized training as a flight attendant but has never been able to work in that profession. She understands that this has to do with the incongruence between her feminine appearance and the masculine name that appears on her official documents; activism regarding name and gender change policies for official government documents is precisely a major aspect of trans civil rights struggles globally (Currah *et al.* 2006).¹⁶ In Samantha’s case, this biased legal constraint, which also has to do with discriminatory practices in the airline industry (Tiemeyer 2013), is exacerbated by her physical appearance. As she indicates, her body did not respond positively to the underground or illegal female hormones that she had access to; she appears gaunt, as if undernourished, with a

lack of body fat that makes her face and body look sickly. As such, she bears the marks of a frustrated attempt towards corporeal modification, and expresses in her testimony the pain of an individual who has not been able to shape her destiny in the way she would like and who is aware of being perceived as an abject figure, as alien or not human. This comes across from the very beginning of the film, when she states: “The outside of my body might say something, but the inside of my soul is a female. You are your essence. Some people look at me and say, ‘Is that a woman? Is that a man? Is that an alien? What the hell is that?’ I say, ‘Honey, whatever you want me to be.’ I get a little bit of everything.”

Coinciding with what the queer feminist thinker Gayle Rubin



Figure 6. Samantha Close, one of the protagonists of *Mala Mala* (dir. Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles, 2014). Promotional photo, Strand Releasing.

(1984) identifies as a radical theory of sexuality, *Mala Mala* showcases a sex-positive discourse that acknowledges sex work as a common and legitimate form of employment entailing specific challenges. According to Rubin (1984:275),

A radical theory of sex must identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression. Such a theory needs refined conceptual tools which can grasp the subject and hold it in view. It must build rich descriptions of sexuality as it exists in society and history. It requires a convincing critical language that can convey the barbarity of sexual persecution.

The reality and experience of sex work is especially highlighted by Denise “Sandy” Rivera, who worked in Los Angeles for a number of years and earned what she considered was a good salary in the porn film

industry (up to \$40,000 a year), but who emphasizes the difficulties of keeping such a job in the long term, as the industry favors younger, new talent. In *Mala Mala*, Sandy is portrayed working in San Juan in street prostitution and discussing her predicament, as transgender women earn more money if they still have a penis and have not undergone gender reassignment surgery; her somewhat younger boyfriend Eli, who self-identifies in the film as bisexual, seems ambivalent about her current physical status. Ivana Fred, on the other hand, is showcased distributing condoms to sex workers, walking (and perhaps working) the streets with them, and appearing on the media defending their rights and decrying police abuse; she advocates for the legalization of prostitution.¹⁷

Not all of the featured protagonists approve of sex work: the drag performer April Carrión distances herself from the stigma of this profession insisting that drag entertainment has nothing to do with prostitution and that sex workers are simply too lazy to look for other forms of employment, a judgmental and classist affirmation that shows a lack of solidarity. As she states, “If you really want to be a transgender woman, you can get up and take it seriously and look for a job and not stay in your house and complain that the world is harsh... There’s other jobs that staying there and getting paid for sucking a cock.” April also indicates that contestants on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* can go on to make upwards of \$200,000 a year after their appearance on the show. April and Sandy’s discourses appear intercut in the film, highlighting their disagreement through a visual and aural counterpoint.

The film’s incisive labor analysis ties in well with the documentation of the lobbying and the march and speeches in favor of the Senate Project 238 which led to the approval of Law 22 of 2013 (“To Establish the Public Policy of the Government of Puerto Rico Against Discrimination on the Basis of Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity in Employment, Public or Private”).¹⁸ The inclusion of scenes of activism, specifically of trans women such as Ivana Fred, Sandy Rivera, and Lisa Marie Rodríguez Rodríguez testifying during depositions in the Puerto Rican legislature, organizing meetings, developing media for the Butterflies Trans Foundation, and participating in well-attended, massive marches gives political weight to the film and to its message of social transformation, and highlights the filmmakers’ understanding of activism and political participation as tools for social change.¹⁹ The scene of the march, which was held on May 17, 2013 and covered by the press,²⁰ also serves to unify several of the disparate storylines in the documentary (the drag queens from *The Doll House*, the trans men and women), as we actually see many of the protagonists participating collectively in a political event in the same physical space, even if they are not actually portrayed interacting with each other. Here, trans activist Rabiosa Sant Lorans publicly calls

for unity and the overcoming of internal community divisions (“Es el momento de unirnos, de trabajar en grupo, en comunidad. Vamos a dejar de marginarnos”) and discusses the issue of prostitution as one of the only employment possibilities trans women have in a context of rampant labor discrimination (“Porque nosotras no todas somos prostitutas. Y si estamos en las calles, es porque el gobierno no nos permite trabajar”).

Interestingly, leading lesbian and gay activists such as Cecilia La Luz (the founder of the Centro Comunitario LGBTT de Puerto Rico) and Pedro Julio Serrano (the founder of Puerto Rico para Tod@s) also appear in these sequences but are not identified by name, a strategy that serves to reorient our primary focus and counteract what some perceive to be these better-known activists’ “overshadowing” effect (Laureano 2016:225-236). The clear articulation of a defense of all types of employment also places the film at the forefront of sexual rights, overcoming the dominant moralism with regards to these topics. However, what the film does not highlight is how the passage of such laws does not always guarantee actual social change unless accompanied by profound consciousness-raising efforts and legal enforcement. This is a point made by longtime Puerto Rican LGBT rights activist Olga Orraca Paredes (2015a, 2015b), who is not featured in the film but conceptualizes activism as a process that cannot simply focus on specific goals but rather as a durational engagement in social transformation. This also coincides with Dean Spade’s (2015) astute theorizations in his book *Normal Life* about the limits of the law, and the need to embrace alternative tactics in order to improve transgender lives.



Figure 7. Paxx Caraballo Moll, one of the protagonists of *Mala Mala* (dir. Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles, 2014). Promotional photo, Strand Releasing.

Zones of Exclusion: Trans Masculinities, Race, and the Ghosts of the Editing Process

While *Mala Mala* focuses principally on transgender women (persons identified as male at the time of birth who now self-identify as female) and on men who perform in drag, the documentary also includes a fundamental protagonist, the chef Paxx Caraballo Moll, who discusses their experience as a transgender individual, or more specifically, as a person who identifies as being in the middle, genderqueer, who is not a man or a woman.²¹ As Paxx states (in Spanglish), “I’m probably going to stay like this forever, sin un *encasillamiento*. I don’t think I fit a binary way of life. So I’m neither nor neither, I guess I’m happy with that. *No es por fiebre, yo no pedí ser de esta manera, loco. Que simplemente crecí así. Esa es la que hay.*” Their participation and testimony are crucial; the film ideally could have showcased more trans men as well as drag kings (women who perform in masculine guise) and masculine or butch lesbians.

Paxx and their partner Audrey Berry (who also appears in the film) make us want to know more about their lives and about the challenges that they experiment, particularly given the lack of resources such as medical access to testosterone and the lack of a female-to-male (FTM) transgender community when the documentary was filmed. In a particularly poignant bilingual (or Spanglish, code-switching) scene marked by rich use of colloquial, vernacular language, Paxx discusses the predicament of growing a beard without having had chest surgery, which is described as an undesired type of abjection, that of the bearded lady of the circus: “If I had a beard it would be fucking awesome, dude. I would like to wake up without none of this (pointing to their breasts), it would be kind of weird though *porque entonces sería el bearded lady del circo, cabrón*, and I don’t want that shit.”

Paxx’s presence breaks the dominant invisibility about this experience, informs us about some physical challenges and reminds us of historical, early 20th century cases such as that of the intersexual Emelina/Emelino Troche that has been researched by the historian María del Carmen Baerga Santini (2002). Paxx highlights the uncomfortableness of binding female breasts to hide them, particularly on a hot island, when they state: “Lately I don’t want to bind *de verdad* because it hurts so much that it won’t let me breathe. *Te hace un calor cabrón*, it’s hot today, I’m wearing 3, 4 layers right now and still it shows.” They also comment on the relative constraints (lack of medical advancement) of FTM gender reassignment surgery, which is less developed than MTF (male-to-female) genital reconstruction. Paxx’s voice joins that of other FTM transgender Puerto Ricans such as Sebastian Colón-Otero who are advancing the visibility of this group.²²

In spite of its diversity, there are certain racial exclusions in the film that the directors explain as a problem of access, specifically of difficulties filming certain individuals.²³ The protagonists, except perhaps for Ivana, Sandy, and Queen Bee Ho', seem to be mainly white or light skinned (or *trigueña/o*), although in some cases this appearance does not reveal the complexity of Caribbean racial identifications and life histories; some of these persons can be of Afro-Antillean descent with visibly black parents or siblings, a common phenomenon in Puerto Rico (Godreau 2015:177-202). The film privileges a discourse of racial whitening, at least in the very specific case of Alberic Prados (also known for his drag character of Zahara Montiere, and to a lesser extent for his representation of Cassandra La Cubana, not portrayed in the film), who idealizes Marilyn Monroe and the character of Regina George (interpreted by Rachel McAdams in the film *Mean Girls*) and indicates that he would like to look like or emulate them, or rather, that he is them, even when he also idealizes the figure of RuPaul, a commercially successful African American drag performer that is characterized by her use of blond wigs. Alberic has achieved his look through cosmetic surgeries and procedures that have at times caused him great distress and anxiety, particularly when he started to believe that he literally was his drag character or persona (Zahara) and was having a hard time maintaining a critical conception of self. He also expresses a willingness to having female breasts if this was divinely ordained.

In the film, there is an idealization of American whiteness as produced in Hollywood, apparent in Alberic's statements and in the visual representation of April Carrión, that competes with, to a certain extent, the exaltation of the beauty of Latina women as expressed by persons such as Ivana Fred and Queen Bee Ho'. Ivana celebrates her hips and "nargas" (buttocks) in a scene filmed at the Condado Lagoon, marking the difference between dominant Puerto Rican and American aesthetics; this privileging of the lower body as a sign of the feminine coincides with the representation in the Loíza festival documented by Ricardo Alegría in 1949. The racial tension documented in *Mala Mala* has a lot to do with Puerto Rican processes of racial whitening and the rejection of blackness, as Isabelo Zenón Cruz highlights in *Narciso descubre su trasero* (La Fountain-Stokes 2009a:1-18), and is as central to the film as the clashes regarding body conceptualization for trans women (the opposition between Soraya and Ivana) and regarding sex work (the divergent opinions of Sandy and April).

Given this situation, the directors have made a more recent effort to highlight the artist Pipiotah La Koah, a black Puerto Rican drag queen who appears in the initial sequences of the film (during the credits) but who is not identified by name. The *Mala Mala* team released an



Figure 8. Pipiotah La Koah, protagonist of video for “Métele” by Buscabulla (dir. Dan Sickles and Antonio Santini, 2015). Image courtesy Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles.

additional video in 2015 for the film’s song “Métele” by Buscabulla featuring Pipiotah, in which she does her signature dance move, dramatically chest-diving onto the floor. The artist also participated in the commercial premiere of the film at the IFC Center in New York City on July 1, 2015. This important effort ameliorates but does not fully resolve the lack of black representation in the film (that is to say, of visibly dark-skinned black persons, or those easily identifiable as black, in contradistinction to *mulato* or *trigueño* persons), which is part of a more complex history of black exclusions in Puerto Rican film and television (Rivero 2005).

Public screenings of *Mala Mala* have also been a space where persons who were not prominently featured in the film can share their experiences. For example, the drag queen Kayra Lee Naranjo (identified in the credits as a production coordinator) participated in the premiere of the film at the Puerto Rico Queer FilmFest in 2014, specifically at the post-screening party at the Contemporary Art Museum in Santurce. Kayra (also known as Henry) is an activist and community educator in the west of Puerto Rico and is the winner of the Miss Carib 2013 pageant; she was interviewed for the documentary but did not appear in it as a featured subject, although we do see her in scenes with Samantha in Añasco and during the march on the capitol building in San Juan. A similar case is that of another production coordinator, the drag queen Rochelle Mon Chéri (Roberto), who was Alberic Prado’s partner. Kayra and Rochelle were both identified as main protagonists in early publicity materials on

the Kickstarter crowdfunding website that was used to raise funds for the film (see Kickstarter).²⁴ Both were eliminated as lead subjects during the editing process, although they still appear as incidental or minor figures (for example, Roberto discusses his excitement about April's participation in *RuPaul's Drag Race*).²⁵ In a certain way, we can argue that Kayra's and Rochelle's stories (or rather, their absence) haunt the film, as the detritus symbolically left on the editing room floor, or more accurately as discarded bites in a computer's or external hard drive's memory.

Conclusion

Mala Mala is not an exhaustive history of drag or of transgender experience in Puerto Rico or its diaspora and many key drag and trans figures such as Sylvia Rivera (who died in 2002), Christina Hayworth, Antonio Pantojas, Nina Flowers (Jorge Flores), Barbra Herr, Ruddys Martínez, Alex Soto, and Lizza Fernanda (Luis Felipe Díaz, the protagonist of the short documentary *Luis/Lizza*, dir. Joelle González-Laguer, 2015) do not appear. *Mala Mala* is a film that focuses on a limited number of people that the directors were able to film during their five trips to Puerto Rico in 2012-13 and that represent different aspects of the drag and transgender Puerto Rican experience. The representation is complex, diverse, and multifaceted, and presents an interesting cultural and political scene, full of nuances. The film invites spectators to search for more information, for example reading Soraya's memoirs *Hecha a mano: disforia de género*, which complement her testimony in important ways and presents important historical documents regarding her pioneering sex change in the early 1970s, marriage, divorce, and electoral campaign.

A comparison of *Mala Mala* to other influential Puerto Rican trans documentaries also helps to identify its particularities and strengths. It is also important to recognize how all documentaries are inevitably incomplete and/or do not please all spectators. *Paris Is Burning*, for example, still causes controversies more than twenty-five years after its release, as an incident at the Celebrate Brooklyn! 2015 festival demonstrated, when transgender activists of color demanded that the screening be cancelled because of the film's perceived limitations.²⁶ Other documentaries such as *The Salt Mines* and *The Transformation* are relatively marginalized in spite of their important content and high aesthetic value. And others, such as *La aguja/The Needle*, have limited circulation due to legal constraints. *Mala Mala* joins this important group, offering us a fresh and important vision of contemporary Puerto Rican reality.

Notes

- ¹ See Clarke, Gold, Martínez Maldonado, Ríos Ávila, Vega Calles.
- ² See Cipriani, Mattlin, McNary.
- ³ For a useful summary of theoretical debates on Puerto Rican queer shame, see Trigo (2016:151-72).
- ⁴ On queer language, see Leap and Boellstorff; Livia and Hall; Zimman *et al.*
- ⁵ See Sickles regarding his experiences in Ukraine where homophobic vandals burned down the film festival theater that was showing LGBT movies. *Mala Mala* was one of the few films that was not damaged, as copy of film was elsewhere.
- ⁶ See Díaz-Zambrana, Jiménez, and Laureano (2011, 2016). Also see journalistic account by Echevarría Báez.
- ⁷ On Pantojas, see Laureano (2007).
- ⁸ See Goldsby and Hilderbrand.
- ⁹ See Muñoz (1999:162-164).
- ¹⁰ Regarding the positive reception of the film, see Mejías and Ramos Collado.
- ¹¹ A Cinelandia webpage for *Tangerine* identifies Kitana Kiki Rodríguez as Puerto Rican (see Cinelandia). Other sources simply identify her as Latina or do not indicate her ethnicity or describe her as black.
- ¹² See Blasini, “Automovilidades boricuas” (2012a). In his article “Caminos que se bifurcan,” Blasini (2012b) offers an analysis of Latin American road movies.
- ¹³ See Viteri. For a French critique of English-language LGBT hegemony, see Povencher.
- ¹⁴ See Beredjick and Parry.
- ¹⁵ For Sophia Voines’s opinions on body and transitioning issues see Christiansen.
- ¹⁶ For a critique of rights-based frameworks as strategies for transgender empowerment, see Spade.
- ¹⁷ See Melo.
- ¹⁸ See “Aprobado” and Senado de Puerto Rico.

- ¹⁹ Lisa Marie Rodríguez Rodríguez also appears along with Ivana Fred, Bárbara Santiago Solla, and Alexandra Duvont in a short documentary called *Las Muchachas* (dir. Rafael Monserrate and Carlos Maldonado, 2014).
- ²⁰ The film includes archival footage from Univisión showing interviews with self-identified trans women such as Marjorie Mendoza and Rabiosa Sant Lorans, who discuss anti-trans labor discrimination.
- ²¹ Paxx's current preferred gender pronouns are they, them, and theirs. Also see Abi, Dávila, and Kennedy.
- ²² Colón-Otero appears in the HBO Latino film *Habla Women*, 2013. Also see Colón-Otero, Gaglianone.
- ²³ Personal communication, Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles (November 2014).
- ²⁴ The Kickstarter campaign page for *Mala Mala* indicates that 307 persons participated and raised \$30,380. The names of all of the contributors appear in the acknowledgements at the end of the film.
- ²⁵ Personal communication, Antonio Santini (November 2014).
- ²⁶ See Dockray.

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