“Cafecito” with Frank Báez (2024)

Place: University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus

Moderator: Claudia Becerra

Translation: Alejandro Álvarez Nieves

Introduction

VÍCTOR:

Good morning, everyone. Today, we are here with two very special people. This event is part of collaborations between UPR Caribe Digital, which is a digital humanities project located in Room 222, which is the room right after this one, here in this college, with the University of Texas at Austin. It is a residency program with artists, journalists, writers, people of high impact in contemporary culture. Today, we are going to have a conversation between Claudia Becerra and Frank Báez. I’m going to introduce Claudia, and then Claudia is going to introduce Frank.

Claudia Becerra is a writer and educator. Her work has been published in various Puerto Rican media, and beyond, including “La pequeña, Realita”, “Lucerna”, “America invertida”, “Distópica” and the newspaper Claridad. She completed a bachelor’s degree in Hispanic Studies from the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus, and a doctorate in Hispanic Studies, specializing in Latin American Poetry from Brown University. She has published two books of poetry: “Versión del viaje”, published by Editorial Folium in 2018, and Sirena, published by Editorial Riel in 2023. She worked as co-editor of the Puerto Rico Review from 2018 to 2022, where he also published chronicles, essays, and poetry. Currently, she teaches in this college, and is therefore one of its professors. I hope you realize what an honor you have to take a course with this person. I leave the floor to you.

CLAUDIA:

Very well. Well, thank you very much, Víctor. And thank you very much to writer Frank Báez, who is here, next to me, for joining us today. Also, I want to thank UPR Caribe Digital for the invitation, and all the efforts made to organize the event, and above all, its director, who I saw

just now, Nadjah Ríos Villarini, for thinking of us for today's conversation. We're so excited to have you here, Frank.

I'm going to read fragments of your biography, it's a bit long, so I hope you won't be too embarrassed. Well, for recording purposes. So, Francisco "Frank" Leonardo Báez Rosario, born in Santo Domingo in 1978, is Dominican poet, narrator, and chronicler. Recognized for his poetic prowess, he has contributed significantly to the literary scene, obtaining international praise and recognition. Báez's poetic journey includes the award-winning collection "Postales" [Postcards], which won the prestigious Salomé Ureña National Poetry Prize. His poetic exploration extends to works such as "The end of the world has come to my neighborhood" and "Last night I dreamed I was a DJ", [both originally in Spanish and] translated into English. The richness of his poetry also reached the Arab public, through an anthology published by the Egyptian publisher Sef Safa. In the field of fiction, Báez has left an indelible mark with the collection of short stories Págale tú a los psicoanalistas [You pay the psychoanalysts], winner of the International Young Story Prize at the International Book Fair in 2007. His non-fiction work includes three long chronicles collected in La trilogía de los festivals [The festival trilogy], the anthology of chronicles entitled Lo que trajo el mar [What the sea dragged in] and Tejiendo redes: el VIH visto a través de 14 activistas de Latinoamérica [Weaving networks: HIV seen through the eyes of 14 activists from Latin America]. And let's continue... Frank Báez's narrative journey is not limited only to the written word, he explores the intersections of music, audiovisual art, and poetry through the El Hombrecito [The little man] collective, a spoken word band co-founded with the poet Homero Pumarol. Their collaborative project produced three albums: Llegó El Hombrecito [the little man is here], La última vuelta [The last time around],and Fin de la transmisión [End of broadcast]. They have released several live concerts: El Hombrecito: La última vuelta, live at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in the Dominican Republic. El Hombrecito: Radio Hito, El Hombrecito Radio Teatro, live at Casa Teatro in 2019. Báez is not only a literary creator, but also an avid contributor to the cultural soundscape. As a DJ enthusiast, he brings his audience a unique combination of storytelling and musical beats.

Well, I'm going to leave it there, in terms of biography. And to start the conversation I wanted to play you the musical version of one of the poems that we analyzed in class, which is part of the book Postales, "La Marilyn Monroe de Santo Domingo". So, as part of the band El Hombrecito they staged this song, right? A little bit, so let's listen to the recording so that you guys have that experience.

(Audio of "La Marilyn Monroe de Santo Domingo" is played.)

AUDIO:
I am the Marilyn Monroe of Santo Domingo. I am the Marilyn Monroe of Santo Domingo. I'm six feet, four inches tall. Two inches higher when I wear high heels. I have a mole on my butt. I hang out with poets from the eighties. I go out with lucky hustlers, watchmen, models, engineers, plastic artists, weightlifters, lawyers, blondes, officials, sluggers, valet parkers. I'm a regular bingo player. The one who keeps her leaves of grass in her purse and loses herself in nothingness. The one who drinks coffee at bus stops. The macho hunter. The fortune teller. The mega poet. The one who cries at the end of the film without anyone hugging her. I'm a menstruating monster. The one who sits at bars to drink, gets hammered, and looks at all the bitches in disgust. And she burns their skirts with cigarettes when they pass by. The one who wanted to kidnap Anthony Ríos. The one who injects hormones into her legs. I'm the Cicciolina. I am Tiresias. The one who writes butt naked. That woman motel mirrors multiply when they put her in all fours. The one who sits in the back pew of the church with a black eye. Miss Bocachica 1994. The one who smokes on the seawall promenade, watching the boats with lights on. The second-semester Nursing student. The blonde who drives ambulances, public buses, microbuses, tractor-trailers.

(Excerpt from "La Marilyn Monroe de Santo Domingo" ends.)

Poetry Beyond a Recital

CLAUDIA:
Very well, well, there you have a small sample of how Frank and his group took the poem to a version that is more performative, musical. And, taking that into account, I would love for you to

tell us a little about your career. How did you get into writing, music, performance, and above all, how and when did you decide that these genres and disciplines can, and should, converge?

FRANK:

Well, first of all, thank you very much for the invitation. Thanks for coming. I'm very happy to be here. Thank you, Víctor. Thank you, Claudia, really. And well, imagine, you said a lot because it's been several years of process, right? I think it's a generational issue, in a way. The search to express yourself in different genres, right? And I think it's also something very Caribbean. And I think that, in the Dominican Republic, it had a lot to do with crises in which there were no publishers to publish, in which there was no interest in poetry. I remember that no one went to poetry recitals. And I had... Well, my friend Homero Pumarol, and I went to poetry recitals, and only the poets themselves went. It was always the same poets. And I remember, in fact, once they issued an anthology, and then, poets are complicated people. I remember that, every time they handed over the book, the act was supposed to be like they handed you a copy, you read a poem, they gave you the book, and then the next poet came. But what the poets did is that, as they hated each other, they all... because I think they were all men, to top it off... they took the book, and left. They didn't listen to the others, did they? So, I remember that, in the anthology, they made it... It was an anthology that they put out, and they organized it according to age, and I was the youngest. When I arrived in the room, it was only me, because everyone had left. So, there was like, also that. There was no interest in poetry, nor in writing. So, me and Homero, thinking about that, decided to do it differently. Stop doing activities in places where they were normally done, and go to bars, go to open spaces, right? Start mixing the performance a little bit with music, and all that. And to present the same texts that we wrote, but in another... In another context, right? In a different space. And I remember that, also, we realized that if we would say, "Homero Pumarol and Frank Báez will read poetry," people would react: "Oh, no." So, what we invented was a name. We called it "El Hombrecito;" "El Hombrecito is here," was the name of the event. We made posters, we did everything. We did the riskiest thing that could be done at that time, which was charging an entry fee at the door. Imagine, no one went to poetry recitals, and we came up with the idea of charging tickets for people to go to poetry recitals, practically. And... it worked. The place was filled with people and... and people enjoyed it very much. When people pay for something, even if it's not funny, they laugh. I mean, people

kind of feel that money... It's like when you go to see a movie. Perhaps, you are not going to see it on Netflix because... But when you go to the movies you say: "I have to see it, because I already paid the ticket." So, I think that... I tell you; the place was full. We also realized the musical potential recitals had. They had the poems; they had all that. So, the project evolved. We kept the name "El Hombrecito." And then the project took shape, and it became a musical, visual project. It was always a musical, visual, because we worked a lot on the visuals, like video poems and all that. And we did it live, the presentations in different places. And well, we've been doing it for years. We have performed in several countries. In fact, we performed here once. And... And as I say, it was also a generational issue. At that time, writer Rita Indiana also started. Also, she started a musical project. And I think a lot of people are still doing that. There is like a... But I think it's also something very Caribbean related to writing, right?

CLAUDIA:
And how did this process of collaboration with musicians and another poet come about, right? How did you make those decisions? Because it's your text, but it feels like the music and the voice...

FRANK:
Yes, yes...

CLAUDIA:
There's a rapport, isn't there? As if those decisions seem to have been made collectively.

FRANK:
Yes, yes. We did it collectively, which was very rare. But, over time, I realized that all the... All musicians work the same. Like, I realized, too, that most of the songs, a guy writes them and makes: "Uh, oh, oh." And they play and that tune, and after a while, they put lyrics on it. So, there is a melody, of course, that is well identified, and the process was the same. The problem is that the texts already existed.

CLAUDIA:

Of course.

FRANK:
The one about Marilyn is a very old text, much earlier. I was younger than all of you. And then, it came to be about how we were going to give shape to that text. For example, for me the starting point was: “I’m Marilyn Monroe.” At the time, I lived in Chicago, and there was a station called Monroe. And I always hung on to that, because the guy repeated “Monroe.” And I said: “Oh, wow, there’s something here.” So, I’m Marilyn Monroe... Then, the guitarist of our group also told him: “Well, let’s add distortion to that.” But the text gave you something for an epic, epic wave, right? And there, bachata came in a bit, to highlight that, and also highlight the Dominican elements of the character, right? And tell that story a bit like an epic.

CLAUDIA:
And for that moment it’s a metal guitar.

FRANK:
Yes, exactly. There it was a bit like... Like that version of bachata, building it and turning it into heavy metal... Like getting that rage, right? And then undoing it, and going back to bachata again. And I am kind of continuously in that change, depending on what was happening to the voice. So, there is a sort of something here, like a relationship with music. When they’re reading the poems, when they’re kind of trying to... To go to the beat of the poem, right? Like they are... A conversation is established, isn’t it? And we also realized that it is something very close to cinema, because the band has also worked in films, they have worked making film music. Then, we realized that all of that is very close, and that it is not very far from what was done, right? To create concepts and all that. So, it wasn’t very strange. And what we did realize is that, well, I don't know... We always wanted to keep the text above all things. In other words, not to stay that... start making songs per se with choruses, with such an element. But we always wanted the text to be, to be strong. Then the colleague of my group, Homero Pumarol, who is the other poet, suffered a terrible accident like in 2010, and his voice totally changed. Then it went from his normal voice, it seems, it sounds like the voice of a drunk. Then at first, we thought: “Well, this project is not going to continue because he is not fit for this.” But we incorporated him. And now

it seems like people say: “But this is crazy, how does he make that voice?” And it is already his natural voice after suffering the accident.

CLAUDIA:
Right.

FRANK:
So, you can check the project on Spotify. It’s everywhere. And it was... It’s a lot of fun, and it was a possibility, it was a chance to take poetry out of books, and present it in a different way, isn’t it? I always continue writing, because in the end what you can do in the collaborations that you can do... I don’t know, you can do 10 songs a year, but you know, you write more than that. So, I believe that the book is still the option to carry the finished product. So, there was something that García Lorca said. García Lorca said: “Theatre is poetry when it jumps out of the book.” So, I think that poems exist, but they can be incorporated into different media. In other words, you can do theater, you can make music, you can do performance, you can do... With my poems, I take them, I create a base, there with the compute, and I listen to it, and I listen to it, and I memorize it that way.

CLAUDIA:
I see.

FRANK:
But I create the same base for it and all. And suddenly I can make a video over the poem itself, I can work animation, I can work on that. Then, suddenly, the same poem becomes... The poem is a pretext to develop different creative phases. And so, I’ve worked with dancers. That is, with a lot of people from other disciplines who somehow make the poem expand and develop into another aspect that you never thought of.

CLAUDIA:
And it’s very cool, I imagine that maybe now every time you write a poem you’re already imagining what other possibilities there are for that poem.

FRANK:
Aha. Aha.

CLAUDIA:
In other words, the poem does not stay there on the page.

FRANK:
Yes, and it also helps you to think about the poem outside of literature. Sometimes I imagine the poem apart from a... of a comic, for example, with its vignette and its things. So, I can imagine it like this and that gives me a new possibility that you get out, of the idea that you have of poetry, right? And that's because of collaborations that I've been doing, that I can think of it that way. I brought here as an example of something that came out, that an artist from Malaga is called Nono Banderas. And this is the second book we've worked on, and I don't know if you can pass it around...

CLAUDIA:
Of course!

FRANK:
You go through the illustrations, there are several illustrations, so they are very interesting. I've been working with that artist, and there's a certain connection between the visual work he does and the work with the word that I do. Like, in some way, he interprets the poems. And a certain part of the poem that I didn't understand when I did it, from seeing those visuals I say: "Wow, look at that". The poem kind of makes more sense to me, that interpretation that someone else makes of you, of another genre, also helps you to do that, to expand the work. So, I think that what arose from a crisis, that you couldn't take your book to a publisher to have it published, and you had to look for it in another... In another... In another branch of art, it made that poetry become a little more creative. Because already... In other words, I think crisis helps you a little to do that, to rethink and look for new possibilities. When the artist, or the writer, or whatever, right?, has everything figured out, I think it's complicated. I think that you have to have a

difficult time because in difficulty is where new, different things are found. And that, I like that because, I mean, you grow up. I grew up in Santo Domingo, I lived angry, quillao, as we say there. I said, damn, I'm writing these poems that no one will ever read, that will never be published, that never... You want to throw in the towel; you say that you will not continue. So, suddenly, when you think about it... When you get out of the box a little, and you start thinking about new possibilities, this creation gathers strength and grows.

CLAUDIA:

And that's the cool thing about poetry as a genre, isn't it? That is not tied to the poem. That suddenly one can find it in so many places, and in so many artistic currents. That there is that flexibility, I mean. By the way, guys, we're having this conversation, but if you have any ideas, any questions suddenly that are relevant, you may assuredly raise your hand, but we're going to open up a space later for you guys to ask Fran any curiosities you have. Well, I'm going to move on to the second one, it's a little long, but I hope not... lose you here. But I was thinking that one of the most remarkable elements of your work lies in the characters and voices that you build, both in poetry and in prose. I think, again, of "La Marilyn Monroe de Santo Domingo." Also, in the quasi-picaresque voice of "Autorretrato," but which runs through a good part of Postales, doesn't it? And also, in "The kid from Karate Kid," which is a text that we also discuss here in class. On the one hand, I'm interested in knowing how the process of building these diverse voices takes place, right? Which usually show some characters on the outskirts of something. Where do you get your source to build these characters, sometimes marginal, a little… I don't want to call them pathetic, no... but a little, they wallow in their sufferings, etc., etc., in their vulnerabilities?

Speaking from Your Reality

FRANK:

Yes, yes, there's some of that... I think that, yes, of course, right? From my reality, where I come from. Now I saw a Dominican movie, it's called Bachata del Biónico [The bachata of Biónico], and has just won the award of the... the people's choice award in Austin. And it's a very good film, I recommend it. When... Hopefully they will bring it here soon. And... And it's a film about two junkies, two coke heads who are, they have an impressive friendship. One of the coke heads

is an urban artist, now very famous, but they give an incredible performance and a beauty of a movie. And I remember that, during the screening, at the end he asks him a question, kind of in this way: “Why did you take those issues from the community? What did you give back from those films to the community?” And they say: “We live there.”

CLAUDIA:
“What else are we going to talk about?”

FRANK:
So, of course, I think it’s a bit like that... Yes, that’s kind of my reality. When I was growing up, I said: “This reality is not poetic.” What I had around me was not Paris, it was not... You know, it wasn’t like the references you find in books. It was totally the opposite. It was hot, it wasn’t cold, to get inspired, you know. So, it was really a bit of understanding, that the environment I had could... With that you could write poems, with that you could make art. It took me a long time to understand it. That’s why, because my references were totally literary, always. And they were European literary figures, they were Argentine literary figures, just to mention, or Mexican realities... Or American realities that have nothing to do exclusively with mine. So, it was a bit like starting to understand that that environment did belong to me, and that from there I could generate poetry, right?

And I do think so, that's where it comes from, that’s where it comes from. But not only that it was possible to write about them, but how you write, what kind of language you write with. So, one of the things that interested me was writing with the language that I speak, right? And with the language spoken by my environment, and with the language spoken by my family, in fact. Many poems have words from my grandmother, words from me... from an aunt of mine, from my mother. And suddenly, Our Lady of Altagracia appears in a poem. And people, well, say: “Ah, but look, there’s a reference.” And I say: “No, it’s just that I hear my mother’s voice when I hear that poem.” So, there’s a lot of that, like a kind of collage, of that environment, that you try to paste into the poems, right? So that... So that you feel it is yours. I do it for something emotional, because I make a reference to a neighborhood, to a sunset in such a place. And I’ve lived it, and it makes sense that it’s there. And when I read it, I understand that emotion. And I

think that the honesty with which they are placed, in some way, serves the reader, so that, so that they can live it, right? To transmit something, to transmit that, that... What do I know! That innocence. I like to say it that way. So, I think there's that possibility of writing from that environment, but there's also what language you do it with, right? And that was, in itself, the search, that language.

CLAUDIA:
And how do you decide between, well, this is good or a poem, and this is good for a narrative text, a chronicle? How do you make that decision?

Poetry Comes to You

FRANK:
It imposes itself on you, I think poetry is rhythm, basically. Poetry is like mystery, it is something that is imposed on you, the other ones, don't. I can sit down and write a chronicle. If I'm going to write a chronicle about something, I'll write it... I sit down and finish it. But sometimes poetry, no matter how hard you try, comes when it wants to. Yesterday I was talking about how, and well, I wrote it in a poem, that poetry, prose would be like a dog, which you call, it always comes to you, it comes happy and that's it... And you feed it, and you can live together very happily, right? But poetry is like a cat. Poetry is going to come when it wants; you can't call a cat to come to you. It's going to turn around, it's going to leave, it's never going to come over. But when you call a dog, it does so. Then, this is the tragedy of poets, poetry comes when it wants to, and you can have all the possibilities in the world and all the publishing contracts and Bad Bunny wants you to write a song for him. But if that poem doesn't come, it won't, simply. The others do; the rest can be worked on. The rest you can take... It is much more, more manageable. Hemingway had great advice to people who are writing a novel, or are writing a short story, or an essay. He said: "When you know what follows in the next chapter, stop writing, and in the morning, you will have a way to continue, you will have thread to follow." But poetry doesn't work like that. It's a different process.

References in Your Work

CLAUDIA:

Very well, it is imposed on you. Another element that caught my attention is the referential nature of your work. We are continually confronted with quotes and references, books, authors, friends, lovers, music, local or foreign places, but the interesting thing, perhaps lies in how you mix those references, right? And for the same reason, it would seem that you level the value that we usually attribute to certain cultural products. And I am also thinking of Karate Kid, for example, for me, it's impossible not to think of your text now every time I think of the eighties movie. So, there is a process of almost resignification, of that "mainstream" cultural product that we all know. But I can't think of a Dominican's text anymore, can I? Karate Kid. So, how do you handle references? Is there a purpose there to take a large, global reference, and inject it with something that would seem hyperlocal?

FRANK:

Yes, I think it has to do with something cultural, right? We are overwhelmed with references. And we share certain references. And sometimes it scares me, it really scares me because, for example, they translate a book of yours into Arabic, right? And... In Egypt they have no idea what is Karate Kid because they did not watch it, or have no idea of such, such a reference. What about your poem? Your poem survives that scrutiny. I've been lucky enough to have been ... I've had poems and books of mine translated into Bengali, Arabic... Now something into Chinese, into Mandarin is forthcoming. Places where the references are different. So, it's very easy for you to refer to a lot of things, but when you change cultures, what happens? And that's interesting because you tell yourself, this poem is perhaps going to be perceived for 15 years, because everyone is handling the reference at the moment. In other words, you make a reference, as we say, to Karate Kid, but what is going to happen in 20 years, when no one has any idea what it is?

CLAUDIA:

Do you become the original?

FRANK:

Maybe, that's a possibility. But to me one of the... One of the conscious questions I do is to think. We read a lot of poets who wrote 500 years ago, 400 years ago, 300 years ago. Then you read a sonnet by Quevedo, and you think: "How many footnotes are needed for you to understand that sonnet by Quevedo? If they have three notes, in the margin, you say, "Well, okay, I can read three notes." But if you need 45 notes that tell you: "Marilyn Monroe was an artist of the twentieth century." Do you understand? If you get into that, then... You know, pop culture can play against you too. Because references age, and they age very awkwardly. I have realized that there are also references that are going to last hundreds of years. I think Marilyn, for example, is going to last hundreds of years. So, there's a little bit of that. Sometimes, we take references that are very much of the moment, thinking that they are going to remain, and they don't. I'll make it clear, in my time there was a thing called the BlackBerry.

CLAUDIA:
The cell phone?

FRANK:
You didn't live through that. You have no idea what that was. So, I write, "No, because I'm here with my BlackBerry." You will say: "What is he talking about? Is it a drink? Some fruit? What is he talking about?" So, so a lot of references may, now that we're using... You put "Netflix" in a poem. Netflix goes bankrupt in three years. Twenty years later you're talking about Netflix: "What is it? What was that? What was that?" Right? Also, I think that poems are launched into the future. We have the idea of poetry, it's also like a bottle that you throw into the sea and someone is going to pick it up, but they're going to pick it up in the future. That is why, perhaps, poetry is not so much popular music, because poetry is a bet on the future, on a reader who is going to codify it in the future. So, a lot of our bets as poets, as explorers of language, are there. So, we also have to keep that in mind. So, for me it's a game, it's like cooking. It's like I put a little bit of cultural references of the moment, because you also have to understand the time, right? Not all poems are going to be totally abstract, that they don't have any mention of what's happening now. But I put a little bit of that reference. But also, right, I add the literary play, the aesthetic work, the work of rhythm. And all that stuff... In other words, I think every little detail adds to it. So, relying on just one thing I think totally unbalances the poem. It's like

you pouring too much salt on it. In other words, it is a disaster. So, it's like cooking, you know. That balance, right, of the ingredients, to achieve a poem that lasts a little while.

CLAUDIA:

And something that seems cool to me, right? For example, at one point you would mention, or the poetic voice would mention, "L. A.," which one would think: "Ah, well, Los Angeles." But no, it refers to a place in the Dominican Republic. So, there is like a posture, a little funny, ironic...

FRANK:

Oh, sure, yes... Los Alcarrizos

CLAUDIA:

… That changed the expectations of a great country, right? But we also have our LA here, so I kinda liked that play.

FRANK:

Here's a young man who's asking a question.

CLAUDIA:

Ah, go ahead, over here, Gustavo.

Musical Collaborations

GUSTAVO:

Have you, like, thought, through another kind of audience, for example, make on Spotify, for example, maybe an album using your lyrics, but the voices of a person, for example, for Marilyn Monroe, use the voice of a woman who sounds like her, and maybe it's your lyrics? And to do it with a track, a rhythm that attracts other people?

FRANK:

No, no. The idea is that it can be done, because the poem is there. And a little bit what he also said was that... It's a little... Do you want me to repeat the question?

VÍCTOR:
No, it's okay.

FRANK:
Ah, no problem. It's kind of like... and I think this is very important for poets, poems stay here, unlike songs. In the songs you can do covers, and all that. But these poems can come out of nowhere, because they are texts that are there, right? Texts that... Mine exists, but it's not like someone is going to take my text, but the lyrics, and start shaping it. I've written like that, lyrics for singers, for projects and all that, and it's been very, very gratifying, yes.

So, this is a group called Canalón de Timbiquí, which is a group from, from Colombia, that rhythm called "alabao," that they do songs of a religious king, right? It is an Afro community, which is close to Chocó, there in the Pacific, in Colombia. I worked on that album that he released, which was called Trending Tropics. And I worked on five songs, and there are some things that took some concepts. This was taken; this other element was taken. And yes, it's a very interesting job, the problem is that, sometimes, no, they don't take the songs as you want them to. You don't have total control, but it's very, very interesting, yes. It is a process, I think it's very rich. To me the point is like, the good thing about this, about poetry, is that you can publish your book. I have a problem with screenplays, too. Because screenplays, if they are never made, no one is going to read a screenplay. You know, like, no one is going to go to the bookstore to buy a screenplay. And maybe, you can buy one because they made the movie, but if... I mean, what I mean is that the screenplay doesn't exist outside of the film, but a book does. So, both a collection of poems, as a novel, as well as other books, if they base it on your work, it is like they add a new layer to it. So, I like it a little more like that, rather than thinking how to write, how to be a composer, right? Of selling songs, or... Or to be a screenwriter. I would rather that they are based on the work that I do and that transformation takes place, taking it out of books to take it to another genre. I like that, I like that a little bit more. But regarding what you say, of course. It's a bit like that... It's cute. We grew up listening to Joan Manuel Serrat, singing Miguel Hernández

and... And Antonio Machado, and all these Cuban artists. Singing Nicolás Guillén, Dulce María Loynaz... and here I think they have also set Julia de Burgos to music.

CLAUDIA:

Yes, it's very difficult, I mean...

FRANK:

Yes.

CLAUDIA:

For me it is one of the most difficult things, to do it well.

FRANK:

Sometimes, some nonsense comes out.

CLAUDIA:

Yes, yes. And it can be very cheesy.

FRANK:

Yes. Generally, it comes out cheesy. They do that over there. But it is there, and that dialogue is established as in the future.

CLAUDIA:

I see...

FRANK:

That, that's nice.

CLAUDIA:

Mima, for example, is setting poetry by Palos Matos to music, but from a very different place.

Caribbean Gaze

CLAUDIA:

I find it interesting, perhaps, that this combines well with what you mention. Well, I'd love to talk, a little bit, perhaps, about how the Caribbean affects the way you think about your craft as a writer and artist. To what extent does your gaze and your practice respond to the awareness of coming from a small place, from the island's geography and that the sea here, right, is not only this contemplative thing, but it is also a limit, or a way of leaving, no, of leaving the country, the place?

FRANK:

Yes, imagine. I understand a bit of the question, but also as an artist, you know, I don't know another reality. You, perhaps, when you try to think like a European, like what you read in books. Because most of the books you read, unfortunately, come from Europe, they come from the United States, they come from... You know, because... what do I know... I don't know, Arabic, I don't know... So, for example, Spanish or English come more from this type of culture. And of course, you try to emulate that, and you think that's what literature is, for a long time. Until you start to realize that it is not. But then, again, like the Caribbean... I mean, the Caribbean is like my expression, which, sometimes, is not... I did not become interested in literature by reading Caribbean literature.

CLAUDIA:

I see.

FRANK:

I became interested in reading books by Edgar Allan Poe, by a lot of references who came from other cultures. In Edgar Allan Poe, in many texts, the bad guys are always the Black guys. But, at the same time, they are telling you fascinating stories. Horror stories, gothic, that you love... I grew up with that, and I loved them. So, there's a little bit of that. I entered literature like this, reading very international authors, from regions very different from mine. And little by little, I discovered, then, the authors in my own environment. And I... I thought were fabulous, that I like them very much. But, then, I think that just living and being in this reality, in itself, things

gradually happen. For example, as I was saying, if I had sat down to think about these projects: “Oh wow, in five years I’m going to start a band.” I never thought I was going to have a band, and we ended up having a band. I didn’t think I was going to work with filmmakers or visual artists, and the process came naturally. So, I think that... That idea of crisis where things happen casually, spontaneously, that does have a lot of the Caribbean. I believe that the Caribbean is unpredictable. There’s an uncertainty with life here, and I think it has... That it is worth it, that is, to take the plunge. I thought of the term of, like pirates, right? That this is an adventure, and that in the end you are, what do I know, throwing yourself towards those ships that come from Europe, and you are going to steal the gold, and you are going to take it, and you are going to bury it somewhere else. Of course, passing that on to art, right? How do you take all those European references and turn them around here in the Caribbean? So, I like a little bit how to think about it like that, how you can pirate all that European culture, and do it in your own way. And that’s what I’ve done. So, there is a lot of looking at that with irony, of constructing verses and proposing a new, a new look, right? A lot of artists have done it. In other words, Vallejo: “I would like to write, but I...”

CLAUDIA:
I “onion” myself?

FRANK:
“I would like to write, but I become full of onions, me encebollo.” That’s a... That is a parody of López de Vega, who was: “I would like to write, but end up crying.” And he tells her: “I would like to write, but I become full of onions.” So, kinda, we’re always playing around with that a little bit. And it’s a bit like humor, laughter, isn’t it? And trying to find that language of ours, which is an imposed language, as I believe all languages are. They ended up being imposed. If we go to the Tower of Babel and all that stuff. In the end, all languages are imposed. But then, to find out how, between that language that is already imposed on you, how you can “hack” it, and enter your culture, and all that there. Change codes. And so, I think language expands, and it’s worth it. So, in that sense, the Caribbean becomes like a space of renewal, a new space. Because we’re taking all that tradition, all of that stuff that came before, and we’re doing it our way. So, that’s it. In that sense, the Caribbean does have that “power,” that fertility and vitality.

CLAUDIA:

I see. I liked all the programming images here, which also adds like another angle of analysis, right?

FRANK:

Yes.

Dominican on International Circuits

CLAUDIA:

And perhaps, along the same lines, right? Well, you are a writer who has enjoyed a lot of international exposure, in Latin America, Europe, the United States. Your work has also been translated into several languages, perhaps you could talk a little about your experience as a Dominican in these circuits of international circulation and what ideas you have come across about the Caribbean, outside the Caribbean, right?

FRANK:

Yes, of course. It's a bit difficult, I like it... As I said about pirates, I kind of like the challenge of moving around, moving in the world, getting into very strange issues and places where one is not supposed to go, right? And, of course, I've come across a lot of clichés about the Caribbean. The Caribbean is believed to: "Ah, the Caribbean is music, rhythm." It's the cliché they put on you; they always assign you to the panel where they're going to talk about crises, about problems. And I say: "Why don't they put me at the table where they are talking about language?" No, there are European poets who are going to outline that topic, right? So, of course, there is like that, I wouldn't say disdain, but like that way of classifying the work that one does from, from here, from the Caribbean. So, I was in Amsterdam for a while, and I remember a guy who said, and I kind of still think about it because I haven't understood it well. And he said, "I stopped writing poetry so that you can write poetry." I said: "What the fuck, man? What is that shit? I mean, write if you feel like it. I have nothing to do with your problem, write on, because in the end..." But it was a bit like talking about that, that yes, there have always been cultures that

have imposed themselves, that have not given others the opportunity to expand. But in the end, also, that... I say, really my eagerness, a little, is not so much... You want to open yourself to that world. And you think of Spanish, which is a wide-spread language, but I go to the simple things. Really, when you return to it, it's how people there in the Dominican Republic can read the poems. And that can mean something to readers, because all the references are there for Dominicans. The perfect reader of mine, which would be me, would be a Dominican, a neighbor, I don't know... And suddenly, I see that poems reach more people who live in another part of the world, and that is fascinating to me. So, I always thought about that, that idea of Tolstoy's, he said: "Paint your village and you will become universal." So, in that of paint your own village and you will become universal, yes, it really works. Sometimes, perhaps because of that honesty, it reaches a lot of people and connects with them. And you think that your neighbor is going to like poems. No, they are not interested, but they are of interest to people in the Middle East or to someone in a small plot in Sweden. You know, and suddenly you say: "Wow, what power."

CLAUDIA:
What power!

FRANK:
And how strange, too!

CLAUDIA:
And that it translates, right?

FRANK:
Yes, yes.

CLAUDIA:
That there does not have to be an explanatory process either.

FRANK:
Yes, that is something else, the question of translation. Of course, yes. That relationship.

CLAUDIA:

Cool. Well, my last question, maybe I left the last one, to... The most clichéd is the last one. But there is a poem that I liked a lot from Postales, right? “Liza Marí, read my poems,” right? That it is not a descriptive title, but “Liza Marí, read my poems,” there is an imperative. And the lyrical voice defines poetry in a way that I found very peculiar, because it seemed very Caribbean to me in terms of the image, which says: “By the way, don’t listen to the critics, or to the literature professors who will tell you that this is not poetry. Didn’t the rooster, before being called a rooster, crow early in the sun?” I thought it was a very beautiful image, also very local. So almost, like that tension, right? We don’t usually associate a rooster with poetic beauty, do we?

Poetry for Frank Báez

CLAUDIA:

But then, what is poetry for Frank Báez? How do you position yourself here if you were to define the effect you want a text or a poem to have? How do you define it? If you can?

FRANK:

That’s the problem. How to define it with a poem?

CLAUDIA:

I see.

FRANK:

It’s like, it’s super hard. It happened to me... So, I wrote a poem for a magazine that was asking the question: “What is poetry?” Then, as soon as you name it, poetry ceases to be poetry. It’s like music. How do you say what music is, right? Music can be the breath you feel during the night. There’s a rhythm there, and that can be music. And we’ve seen it a lot with the... With experiments, right? Musical, tuneless, that suddenly... I don’t know, Tchaikovsky, right? Stravinsky, with a drop of rain falling, makes... with a pipe, sorry, a broken pipe... a few years ago... An overture. So, defining poetry as the… is impossible. There must be a kind of

relationship between the reader, or whoever reads the poem. I think there is a very strong element of emotion. The poem does, I think it has to have an emotion.

CLAUDIA:
And have you ever been told, “this is not poetry,” regarding any of your poems?

FRANK:
Yes, of course, every day. Of course, every day, every day.

CLAUDIA:
And what do you answer?

FRANK:
No, I think that perhaps it is not a poem according to that person, it is not what he is looking for in poetry. And that is very valid. I think not everyone has to... And I’m scared, I’m totally suspicious of when they take for granted that poem is poetry. I believe that this poem ceases to be poetry when there is already that consensus: “Ah, everyone knows.” When you say, “Why?” And you ask people, “Why do you think this is poetry?” And they tell you, “I don’t know... This and that..” I believe that poetry is continuously transforming, and I believe that when something becomes like an object, I believe that it ceases to be poetry when it becomes an object that radiates poetry, that people think that this is poetry.

CLAUDIA:
It becomes something sacred almost.

FRANK:
Yes, exactly, because you are already entering another terrain. Which is not that of poetry per se. That the terrain of poetry is the terrain of revolution, of transformation. I lived poetry when I was 16 years old. I remember that moment. I was sitting, and my dad was reading a poem by Dylan Thomas, and at one point he says: “The world is half the devil’s, and my own.” I was 16 years old, and that hit me like a slap in the face. And I said: “Wow, and you can write that? Ah,

this is possible.” That’s when it came to me. I remember that I took the book from him, and I was obsessed. That was a poem by Dylan Thomas, and it changed me, and I felt that. And I've felt it a lot of times with poetry, with poets I like. I mean, I think there’s something that really transforms you, right? Music has that too, but to a different extent, doesn't it? But when that emotion comes, when what you really say arrives, you don’t understand it either. You don’t understand. Because the point is that, when you understand, it ceases to be poetry.

CLAUDIA:
I see.

FRANK:
I believe that there is something mysterious, a mystery that is beyond. So, there are many poems that lose their mystery, because it’s like they stereotype it, and what poets need somewhat, in that sense, is like... To disappear. Let those poems be forgotten, to emerge in another era, new, renewed. Because when it returns, the poem becomes something polarized, something that, that everyone... It becomes referential... It ceases to have a revolutionary and transformative impact, right?

CLAUDIA:
And I also think of anti-poetry, I don’t know if Nicanor Parra is a reference there.

FRANK:
Yes, of course, of course. Yes, because it is dialectics. It’s dialectics when you write all those poems about the sea, the sea is this or that, and suddenly there’s a guy who writes: “The sea is ugly.” And when he tells you “the sea is ugly” it is much more poetic than all those praises of the sea and all that. Because, at that point, the poem stops moving, it becomes something immobile. When it's already like the cliché, the normal thing to say.

CLAUDIA:
It is petrified.

FRANK:

Yes, then poetry is nothing like that. Poetry is something mysterious, subterranean, transforming, isn't it? Then... It's difficult, and I don't know, defining it is super complicated. To define it is to stereotype it.

CLAUDIA:

No, I know, it's a bad question, but it has to be asked.

FRANK:

No, no, no. It's a good question. Because, really, that's the big question. Because the big question is: "What am I?" That is the question we all ask ourselves. I don't think there isn't a person here who doesn't ask a question: "What am I?" In other words, they give you the name, you come here to life... Gitz had this question that... "I'm looking for the face I had before I was born." So, it goes a little beyond identity, because it is also an identity that comes from earlier, from the ancestors, right? So, we don't know, that question anymore... But it is the question of poetry, it is the same, and that is the great question. What am I? What is poetry? What...? We don't know anything. But we know there's something, don't we? And, and that... That is the search we are always going to do. I write because of that, because I want to try to understand all that mystery, right? To catch it, to understand where all that comes from. Because they come out for me... All that madness, where does that madness come from?

CLAUDIA:

No, and the image. I mean, again, the verse seems phenomenal to me. The rooster crowed even before he knew he was a rooster, even before he was named a rooster.

FRANK:

Of course, there was a time when I won a prize, and I gave a lot of money in the Dominican Republic. And everybody said: "No, he doesn't deserve it." But it was because it gave a lot of money, if not, no one would have cared. So, everybody, I said: "Well, what am I writing for?" And I thought of my little niece, and I said... And I thought: "No, I write for her, I write for her in the future. So that she can continue reading it in 2090." I think the poem says, "So that she

can continue reading it when she is old." I mean, with that I comply, with that I already feel vindicated, I feel happy, and I can be at peace. When you publish poetry, already... Poetry is always for the future. And I think that when you have that idea, it kind of gives you a faith, too. It gives you a faith in humanity, that we will always continue to exist, right?

CLAUDIA:
And create.

FRANK:
And create. And that this can move someone, to me is incredible. Like people who died a thousand years ago have a text that can excite you, that can make you cry, or that can make you laugh. How can you manipulate a person, blood pressure, blood circulation, with a poem that you wrote a thousand years ago? How can this happen? We talk so much about technology, about those things, but look at how we communicate through the ages, right? That someone is still exciting you, from a totally different culture. And, in fact, there are languages that are totally dead, and what comes to us is translation, of a translation, of a translation, of a translation. And that makes us cry.

CLAUDIA:
Yes, it's a testament to survival, too, isn't it?

FRANK:
Sure, sure. So, this is a super, super interesting thing. Super, super religious, to put it in a way.

CLAUDIA:
We returned to the sacred.

FRANK:
Yes, there is something sacred too... And mysterious, as always. I believe that the art of poetry is mystery. We don't know, and if we do, it's bullshit.

CLAUDIA:

Exactly. Well guys, I'd love to hear from you. If you have questions for Frank, this is the time.

Karate Kid

DANIEL:

Yes, has your opinion of Karate Kid changed.

FRANK:

I haven't seen the series yet... It's a very, very real text. Very... It was a very, that is, very sincere chronicle and there is nothing gimmicky in it. It's very real, but my sister has seen it, the series, and she liked it. My sister appears in the chronicle, and she is like the one who kills the guy, the bad guys and saves my life.

CLAUDIA:

With Carlitos.

FRANK:

But it's like the series, that they tell me that, that the idea is that they play with the fact that the victim was really the blond, right?, in the movie. So, the television series, this one that they have taken from Karate Kid, it's kind of reverses that. But the text also reverses that because, in the end, the great victim of everything was Carlitos himself, who had his life very fucked up, and who ends up migrating, and all that, which is very Caribbean too, isn't it?

CLAUDIA:

Yes, well, and there you humanize the bad guy.

FRANK:

Yes, of course.

CLAUDIA:

A little.

FRANK:

Sure, sure. Yes, yes, that...

CLAUDIA:

So, your opinion hasn’t changed?

FRANK:

No, I don’t think so. But I'm going to see it, yes. I’m going to see it.

CLAUDIA:

Over here, Jan.

Distinguishing Between Prose and Poetry

JAN:

I have one. I found the example you gave of the dog and the cat, of the poem and the chronicles very curious. So, my question is, how do you manage to identify what the idea is to be able to create a poem, and what is the idea that you always have for a text like a chronicle?

FRANK:

Ah, well.

JAN:

How does one idea differ from the other? One that always already has versus one that comes in new.

FRANK:

Yes, yes. You know that sometimes many ideas can be like, like extrapolating. For example, in that text of Karate Kid, now I was thinking, I have a poem that talks about the karate teacher. And of course, I wrote this text as if remembering, but I could not do the other as writing another text, that is, a chronicle, but a story, but a poem. I got it here, let me read it. And then

like... which is also that. What you say, well, this idea is for the lyrical, for poetry, but it can also be... You can take those elements and create other things. There are many ideas that I have, and sometimes I think what can be like the genre in which it can work much better? And of course, it's a question that I... That I make to myself. And in the end, I think it imposes itself as you are working. There are things that... There are things that are from poetry only, which is very impossible to do in anything else, but there are some things that work well in both genres. And sometimes a little bit like I do the two exercises, and I see which one, which one looks better, right? Yes... So, for example, this one, which is called good, no, it doesn't have a name because it's a numbered poem.

And it goes like this: "I saw the tai teacher smile when in a cafeteria on the other side of town, instead of his kimono and his black belt, second Dan, he was wearing an apron. And with those hands with which he had pulverized bricks and broken ribs, he put tomatoes, onions, and pickles on sandwiches and on melts. That square-faced professor who resembled the tough cops in American movies, that sensei who could smash whatever was put in front of him, bricks, logs, skulls, I saw him take a knife and subtly put butter or mayonnaise on customers' sandwiches. And while in the taekwondo lessons he closed his face like a fist, like a window, like the gate of hell, here he extended it and responded by smiling every time customers asked him for the bill or to pass them the saltshaker. How could he split himself in two? How was it possible that he smiled here, all the time, and there remained so serious? I saw the tai teacher when he smiled and then spread butter on a loaf of bread, and I still can't believe it."

And that's it, the poem. And... And it was like finding another possibility to that, but telling it from another, from another place, as from poetry. Instead of doing like: "Now I'm going to do another chronicle related to that." So, I think it is imposed, the idea is imposed as you work on it. Yes. But sometimes you know, many chronicles that you do because they ask you to, you know. Well, everything, everything depends in that sense. Sometimes, they are much more journalistic, but those that are more intimate, right? They can have that possibility of expanding, or of... It all depends on the form it takes, and on the process of the brain, of the head of each one. There is a famous short story by a Dominican author Juan Bosch that he published here at the University of Puerto Rico. He published the... Part of the complete works, he was going to

send a letter to a friend, and he's writing the letter, and all this: "So-and-so, how are you? How are you?" And suddenly, as he was writing the letter, a story came to him, the story came to him. And he went on writing the story, forgot about the letter, and that story is his most famous story. It's called "La Mujer" [the woman]. And in fact, José Luis González has a story that is like a response to the story of "La mujer" by Juan Bosch. But it happened that way, it came to him, and he began to write something else. So, you never know how your head is working. Yes... You have like those intuitions and things, but you end up doing something else. But, nothing, the important thing is to sit down to write, to sit down to write. Not to think so much about the idea, but to sit down to write and let it take shape.

CLAUDIA:
Over there, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH:
Is there any work of yours or any work of yours that you think should get more attention, that it hasn't deserved?

FRANK:
Wow. I think all of it.

FRANK:
Yes. I think more fiction, and now that I'm working more on fiction. I'm working on a novel, and I think I'm entering a little more into that world and... I published a book of short stories and... Like yes, I feel that out there... I want to do a lot of things in the future, and I would like it to be read. That I would watch with a little more interest. The problem is that when you grow up, and you are characterized by writing such and such a thing, people just want to stereotype you, right? It's like: "He writes poetry, and he's good at poetry. No, don't read the other stuff." But I'm interested in all the... I'm really interested in all genres. And I would like a little bit to have more attention to that part of the, of fiction. I know it's too much when you read an author, you read a book, it's already too much. But you want to continue writing, right? But yes, the fiction part. Yes, hopefully there will be more interest.

ELIZABETH:

Thank you.

FRANK:

No, thank you.

CLAUDIA:

Daniel, do you have a question? Go ahead.

DANIEL:

How can a person, being a writer, make a living from poetry?

How to Make a Living from Poetry?

FRANK:

Yes, no. That's the million-dollar question. Look, it's very difficult, but I think there are many side jobs that in the end compensate you. Of course, living with austerity... nobody thinks they're going to write poetry and they're going to ride around in a Rolls Royce or something like that. But I believe that yes, it becomes a living. And there is much more and more interest. There are circuits, you travel to a lot of places that pay you. You can do poetry workshops. You can teach at the university. You can work in a publishing house. You can write songs, and suddenly you hit one and you see a lot of money. But I really believe that most people who dedicate themselves to writing have a job to live, and their writing to keep themselves free. It is done in silence, it is done with, with dedication. And, nothing, and when they have a book, they launch it. But there are no such expectations that I'm going to release this book, and it's going to be a success, and I'm going to win the contests or I'm going to sell a lot of copies. I think it's always that, having a secure job, and... and of good, and of writing. But I also think that there is, there is a clearer and clearer circuit, and there are people who... who lives in his austerity. And... And he lives from that, he lives by giving workshops, he lives traveling presenting his books in other places. And it happens. It's an interesting life.

CLAUDIA:

The sensei could be a poet in that sense, right?

FRANK:

Yes.

CLAUDIA:

He had to abandon his profession there as well.

FRANK:

Yes, yes.

CLAUDIA:

More questions? Oh, sorry.

FRANK:

No, no. What I have also realized is that there are many people who, and this is very important, I believe that one should always write. There are people who stop doing it. Twenty years go by, and I resume the exercise, and when they realize that wow, 20 years have passed, I didn't write because I was looking for stability in life, I was looking for a job that works for me, and all that. They see the time that passes, and it's gone. They did not publish at the time. So, this is a work of persistence, that you may not understand what you are doing at such a time. And maybe it's not working, but as you keep insisting, things start to take shape and develop. So, if you're looking for stability and you stop writing for 20, 15 years, whatever, you're missing out on a lot of the process. So, I would say that persist, that you continue and that you do nothing, and that you look for them. In other words, you live, you live everything in life.

CLAUDIA:

Over here, Eli.

ELI:

Why did you give the poem the title poemo, instead of poema [in Spanish]?

Poemo

FRANK:

To play a little. You also know how... I wanted that poem, I wanted it a little bit dark, right? That he referred to as something dark. So, the poem sounds like light, poem sounds like dark. It gave me like that vibe. Yes... Eh, maybe. But yes, and the play with language, right? And breaking the rules, right?

There is a poet, a poem by a Spanish poet called Leopoldo María Panero, and the poem is called "Haiku," but there are about five, five verses.

CLAUDIA:

I see.

FRANK:

I mean, like, of course, breaking the rules, which is part of this, right?

CLAUDIA:

More questions guys? Here, and then there, Adriana.

STUDENT:

The character of Marilyn Monroe from Santo Domingo, where did she come from? What inspired you to write from that perspective?

FRANK:

Look, when it came out, no, no... although it is… There was a lot of talk about the issue of gender, and all that, it was not something that was touched on as much as it is now, right? That now... Eh, I don't know, the trans community is so powerful, that poem may be in the late nineties, early oughts. And it was because it was not in poetry, it was a theme that was not in poetry, it was not very recurrent in poetry. In fact, I remember, I read the poem and it was

mockery, and the reaction was: “Why do you say that? You shouldn’t say that.” And the... nothing, I saw the poem grow to the point that, nothing, many people from the same community as they have appropriated the poem, have made it their own. So, I think it’s beautiful how the, what I was writing was kind of very personal, was a little bit much about my process, and how I felt at the time transcended and meant to many people. Eh, I remember part of when I was developing the poem and all that. And... But I remember the chorus that, I’m Marilyn Monroe… It had... it was like it gave me, it gave me strength. Because it is not only the gender issue, but also the racial issue. Because the idea of the poem is that Marilyn Monroe is Black. Then it breaks like the same idea of blondeness, of the same Marilyn who was not blonde either. But a game of masks, right? Which seems very strong for poetry to me. And... And no, yes, it’s a poem that I still like. And I was very embarrassed to publish it at the time. My father said, I read that poem to my father and he put his hand on his face, and he said: "this boy, what are you going to do with him?" But the poem imposed itself little by little. So, I’ve seen it as if it's transcended, right? And... and yes. But the execution, yes, I remember. No... I don’t remember that much, do I? I know that as it comes from Whitman, right? A little, like, that was the play. And... and there are certain things that I wrote at the time, and that I understood what I meant later. Like it’s not everything, that is quite calculated, like the reference and those things. In other words, when I was doing it. I also let myself be carried away by it, by the tone, by the rhythm, and by saying certain things that I understood sometime later, right? Certain images and that.

CLAUDIA:
Oye, Frankie. I had a moment when I tried to connect Marilyn with “El gran varón,” by Willy Colón.

FRANK:
Ah, yes.

CLAUDIA:
I feel that it almost replaces that terrible epic story, right? I don’t know, I kind of saw it as competing versions.

FRANK:
Yes, exactly. But here, here it's a bit of an assumption.

CLAUDIA:
Of course, from another point of view.

FRANK:
And I think that also, exactly, like, here it serves as a metaphor, and I used it as a metaphor, as mine. Also, of the artist I aspire to be, right? But also of our nation, that perhaps you can say the same about "El gran varón," I don't know. But here it was also the metaphor of what it is to be Dominican.

CLAUDIA:
I see.

FRANK:
Of how we aspire to be something we are not, both racially, but also with the obsession of going to the United States.

CLAUDIA:
I see.

FRANK:
To go there, to go to a totally different reality. So, I think that character symbolized that. But it symbolized that part that Neruda says, "It so happens that I tire of being a man," too.
It seemed to me like that question of masculinities as well, didn't it? How you, you are going to find, I don't know, how you ask yourself that question. And we come back to the same thing: who am I, right? And here it is: "I am the Marilyn Monroe of Santo Domingo." I think it's funny, but also at the same time, it comes from that, from that search for identity. Because he is a character who is looking for himself, he is a character who is in that search. You say it's someone

else, right? That is another icon, that is another. So, I do, maybe I did frequent those drag queen places a lot, and all that kind of stuff. And there is something from that time.

CLAUDIA:
I see.

FRANK:
In other words, it has transcended the era. But I would say that a poem, already at this time on the subject of gender, would be totally different. Because drag queens, it's another era, isn't it? It is already another time in which it is approached in a different way, in a different way. But the time to which I refer was that, in which... that this was more related to gender issues.

CLAUDIA:
I see.

FRANK:
And now they are another quest. And that's normal, and in fact I think that when "El gran varón" was also others, they were other times, right? The same references he makes are sometimes a bit strong. That you think that the same narrator is against Simón, right?

CLAUDIA:
Of course. No, and it's also a song that has been reappropriated from different angles.

FRANK:
Sure, sure.

CLAUDIA:
Even the LGBT community itself has an ambiguous relationship with the song.

FRANK:
Exactly, of course.

CLAUDIA:

Which is not even absolute rejection, but you can also do different things from there.

FRANK:

Yes, I love that. This poem was taken, they have written articles, it has been read. In other words, versions have been made, everything has been done. It kind of had like, like that impact on the community. In fact, there is a trans Dominican woman, Joan Mijail, who wrote about it. That he rethought it, that he did a performance, that he did everything.

CLAUDIA:

I see.

FRANK:

It has had like that development. But again, I tell you, it was a long time ago. I remember, I can tell you that it came from Whitman. Which was like a lot of Whitman's reading, it comes. That's why there are also many references there. And yes.

CLAUDIA:

They thought that the leaves of grass were marijuana. Which is good...

FRANK:

Yes, it's a play, now. It's a play with that too. Yes, because there are many plays with that, with things that we would take for granted. That is, LA in the Dominican Republic, Los Alcarrizos, but we know what the truth is. So, there are like there are a lot of games with those references. A lot, sorry.

CLAUDIA:

Oka, maybe we have time for one, right, Victor?

VÍCTOR:

Yes.

CLAUDIA:
We give it to Adriana, Adriana is here.

ADRIANA:
Em, my question is, if there is a particular reason why your poetic style is so varied, structure-wise?

FRANK:
Oh, of course. Thank you for saying that, really. No, and thanks for all the questions you've asked, right? And thank you for being here. I talk a lot, sorry. I talk a lot.

CLAUDIA:
You have a microphone, so you can.

Depth and Diversity

FRANK:
Yes. Look, the search for structure a little bit, that diversity as Whitman mentioned, right? I'm very interested in how it gives that feeling of diversity in poetry. Because that diversity implies that you always write.... and more than the... You have the intensity too, right? Which are, they are poems as if intense. In other words, I think of poetic possibilities. There is an American poet T.S. Eliot, he spoke of two ways of poetizing. He spoke of depth, and he referred to Dante with hell, heaven and all that, which is seen in the Divine Comedy. So, he talked about depth, and he talked about Shakespeare as diversity, expansion. So, there are two possibilities. Well, I like the one with the... plus that of diversity. And that implies the... to work on different structures, to work on different ways of seeing the poem, and that's what fascinates me. It's always like, because they are ways of exploring in language... You read the poem of such a person, and you say, wow, look, look how he did it, let me see how I could do it, but in my own way. And explore from there. So, he finds another side, and I really like that, yes. Find different voices, present it in different ways. And for example, I'll tell you, of course, if I already have three poems that begin

with a forceful line, I try not to make it so, the fourth one not to be so, to be a little more subtle at the beginning. And that in the end it will be much stronger. If they are, I already have two erotic poems, I try to make the next one about another topic. That is, because of that diversification, right?, poetic. I think it's very, very important, and especially to the reader, you, or the reader, you're presenting this book, you don't want to, you want me to experience all kinds of emotions as you read page by page. My idea is like being able to write a poem in which people get excited, and in the middle, they cry, and in the end they laugh. Like going through that kind of emotions, that journey that would be like the poem, it seems to me that that would be great to be able to transmit all those sensations. Of course, and I'm very interested in transmitting. To communicate, right? Yes.

CLAUDIA:
Well, it's about time. They have to go to another class, so guys, thank you very much, a round of applause to Frank.

FRANK:
Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.