

An Unhealed Wound: Growing Up Gay in Panama

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Every time I visit my mother's house I have mixed feelings about my childhood and teenage life as a boy and teenager who never fit into society's mold. Visiting my mother's place opens an unhealed wound. I recall being bullied and verbally abused by relatives and friends. I feel like every wall and every corner of my mom's house brings sadness and hate back into my life. My worst memory of growing up was that my mother never accepted my sexual orientation, even though she had many gay and lesbian colleagues and friends who used to visit her house as long as I can remember.

My mother always ridiculed me when I played with my sister's dolls, when I used her sewing machine to make dresses for my neighbors' dolls, or when I made piñatas with my best friend, Yadira. Maybe she felt embarrassed for having a *maricón* for a son, or maybe she did not know how to handle the situation. Being a single parent raising three kids was not an easy task; however, she greatly overprotected me. I guess she did not want me to suffer in life. My older brother did not know how to handle my gayness, either, or maybe he was always jealous of me since neighbors and friends liked to compare us. They would say I was a better student or that I looked more like my mother. I always felt it was my mannerisms and girlish appearance that he could not tolerate. He called me "cueco" (faggot) many times when I used to sing like Iris Chacón, a famous Puerto Rican icon. I still recall the day when I wore my mother's dress and heels and he started using gay slurs against me. My brother and I did not get along during my teenage life. Although I have a better relationship with my older sister, I never talk to her about my sexual orientation, which is not to say that she is homophobic or has negative stereotypes about openly gay people.

I think the most painful memories of growing up as a gay boy came from my neighbors who sometimes referred to me or treated me as a girl. I remember being ridiculed while playing with some boys who used to ask me to sit on their laps every time I lost the game. I think most of my neighbors knew about my sexual orientation and preferred to make fun of me or treat me differently, while others felt sorry for me and accepted me for some other reasons. Some of my adult neighbors and teachers saw me as a short boy with pimples who looked cute or who was a

good dancer, a poet, someone who loved to organize things at school. Others like my male cousins saw me as a *cueco* who was going to end up working in a store selling fabrics or dressing up like a woman.

I attended the same neighborhood school for over nine years (elementary and middle school). Elementary school students used to attend school in the morning shift and middle school students in the afternoon shift. It was during my middle school years when I started having my first sexual encounters with other boys and men in the neighborhood. Sometimes on my way to school, I stopped by Raul's¹ house or sometimes I received a phone call from Julio asking me to come over to his house when his parents were not there. I think Julio was my first teenage crush. He and I grew up together as brothers. Our encounters started as two teenage boys' curiosity about sexuality, which turned into a weekly routine. Sometimes Julio stopped by my house when my folks were not around. Raul and Julio became my two secret lovers in the neighborhood. However, they always pretended to be very masculine in front of other boys, especially my older brother. I guess in this gender binary they thought of me as female. The last time I went home I saw Julio, his wife, and teenage son. He avoided making eye contact with me. I assumed my presence reminded him about our secret relationship or perhaps caused him to question his masculinity.

While still living at my mom's house, I experienced sex with two married men in our neighborhood. Paco was my mom's friend and Carlos lived across from one of her best friend's. Paco and Carlos sexually harassed me when I was growing up and even though we never had sexual intercourse, they touched me physically but also scared me. There were times when Carlos stood in front of my house waiting for me to go to the grocery store. His behavior really intimidated me. I think his wife knew about his homosexuality but never left him because of their children and because he supported the family.

In my last year in middle school, our social studies teacher organized an overnight beach trip, and I convinced my mother to let me go. That year, the school principal decided to have an all-boys classroom, which believed was a big mistake because this can create many discipline problems. There were many times when the boys tried to challenge each other's masculinity by playing a kind of sexual game like touching each other's butts. Well, my mother finally let me go on the trip but she talked to the teacher and asked him to take good care of me. Of course, he did not do this because he was more concerned about taking his lover, a young woman, on the trip. We all realized the teacher was cheating on his wife, so he could not have cared less about us. While still in school, I met Edwin, a very good looking, but mischievous teenage boy. He used to tease me all the time in school. I think he realized I was gay and how much I liked him. To my surprise, he was also part of this beach trip. While at the beach, Edwin and I had sex. It was the first time I felt loved by another boy. At the end, Edwin asked me not to share our encounter with anyone at school. After we came back from the trip, he avoided talking to me. I guess he felt ashamed or he did not want people to start questioning our friendship.

¹ All names used here are pseudonyms.

Once I finished middle school, I moved to a high school closer to downtown. Although I decided to focus more on my studies and started dating girls, I had a platonic love for some teenage boys in school, but I was afraid to say or do anything. I felt confused about my sexuality as I was growing up. I wanted to be accepted, to please my mother, and to challenge those who thought I was gay. In high school, Marta, a beautiful young woman, and her brother Juan were my classmates. He had blue eyes, blond hair, and was very smart. I have to admit that I fell in love with him first. We both loved singing songs in English. After finishing high school, I started dating Marta, for over three years. My mother was so happy with her because it looked like a serious relationship and most importantly, her son was dating a lady. Marta and I had sex many times. We were so lucky that we did not become parents in our early 20s. After one year of dating, I moved to the city to pursue higher education. Marta and I continued dating and sending love letters to each other. When I was about to finish undergraduate school, I came to visit and asked her if we could talk. I thought she knew I wanted to talk to her about getting married. I remember she was working at a supermarket as a cashier when she told me that it was too late. I realized Marta was dating somebody else. Years later, my mother saw her with her husband and children. Although I had sexual encounters with other girls, I still wanted to be with guys. I always felt infatuated by good-looking and athletic guys in school and on TV, but preferred to remain quiet. I felt so confused and oppressed at the same time.

After much hard work and persistence, I finished undergraduate school and I got my first job as a language arts teacher in Panama City. I tried to forget about my traumatic experiences with homosexuality living in the countryside. I tried to erase my relatives' and neighbors' assumptions about my sexuality. It was not until my last year of college when I decided to go out to gay clubs and to start dating other men. I remember seeing my friends from college at the club feeling so happy after I finally decided to join them at there.

My journey as a gay man has not been easy throughout my life. First, I left my mother's house at age seventeen to pursue higher education and escape from family and society intolerance about my sexual orientation. Second, I carefully hid my sexual orientation since I was living with relatives in Panama City during the first three years of college. Third, I had to be very careful about my sexual orientation as a public school teacher in Panama and, later, in the U.S. for over 20 years. It was not until in my early 40s, while working on my doctoral studies, that I decided to openly talk about my sexuality and my inner battles with family, society, and myself.

Being gay in Panama is not easy at all. Whenever I visit my mother's house I still experience the same feelings of pain, anger, and frustration as I did in the past. I hear my sister's homophobic slurs against openly gay men. I also witness how gay men are still ridiculed in the media, especially during carnival or any other holiday. Unfortunately, Panama does not have State policies that protect gays and lesbians, so being verbally and sometimes physically abused is often understood as normal. As a result, gays and lesbians choose to hide their sexual orientation in order to be accepted by a *machista* society and its religious beliefs. Most of my gay friends have no choice but to internalize oppression as the norm. Those who decide to express

their sexual orientation openly are victims of homophobia and social-familial isolation. Others like me decide to leave their *familias* behind and find a safe space where their sexual orientation is not questioned. In my case, I used my experience of oppression to challenge social and familial expectations about gays and lesbians. It has not been an easy journey since I was taught early in life that being gay was bad and that I was going to hell for it. I was punished, belittled, and bullied, however, through my reading on queers of color and meeting other queers like me, I have developed resiliency and strength to voice my personal experiences. I have learned to unpack my gay identity in Panama and my identity as a queer of color in the US. Through my own writings as a transnational (I'm currently working on *A Transnational Mariposa Consciousness* research paper) queer subject, I have found the space to theorize and to share my *testimonio* expecting other people, especially gay Panamanians and young queers of color, to find some commonalities and resiliency.