The LGBTQIA+ Movement in Latin America:

Its History, Its Future, and Its Legacy

Sofia Aguilar and Henry Bethell

Liberation: Contemporary Latin America

Margarita Fajardo-Hernandez

30 March 2021
"The LGBTQIA+ Movement in Latin America: Its History, Its Future, and Its Legacy" was a conference project researched, completed, and presented in collaboration between Sofia Aguilar '21 and Henry Bethell '21 as part of our studies in Margarita Fajardo-Hernández's fall 2020 course "Liberation: Contemporary Latin America." We spent the semester working together to cultivate a comprehensive history of queerness in Latin America from before Spanish colonization to the twenty-first century when revolutionary changes are taking place for queer folks across the region today. Our research paper is followed by a digital museum exhibition displaying ten objects from various Latinx countries, eras, and activists with accompanying captions to represent pivotal moments in the narrative of queerness in Latin America.
The LGBTQIA+ Movement in Latin America: Its History, Its Future, and Its Legacy

Since the conquest of Latin America by the Spanish, French, and Portuguese in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, many countries throughout the region have succumbed to the rise of Christianity in Europe. Most, if not all subsets of Christianity during this period, which included Catholicism, rejected both the concept and acts of queerness. Since then, many Latin American societies have abided by strict gender roles and accepted only heteronormative lifestyles and expressions. In the twentieth century, however, representations of queerness and queer activism began to take hold, a movement that has only strengthened and gained momentum in the twenty-first. Through a series of objects spanning pre-Spanish colonization to the modern-day—including statues of Aztec gods Xochipilli and Xochiquetzal, Alfonso Hernández’s 1927 novel “El Angel de Sodoma”, an embroidery piece entitled “Me adapto a mi enfermedad”, and a song by Arca, a transgender musician—our exhibition explores and challenges how queerness has been and continues to be defined; how it has been represented through a variety of creative works; and how the movement has been exploited or marginalized in critical historical moments and by social, political, and religious institutions. For if we are to embrace the future of queerness in Latin America, we must first understand its history.

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries marked a period of Catholic Spanish repression in response to Indigenous freedom. Interestingly, queerness thrived in harmony with the traditions and values of many Indigenous societies, particularly within the Mayan and Aztec empires before the invasion of—and subsequent conquest by—the Spanish in 1521. Before their arrival, queerness was accepted, even celebrated in Mesoamerica. However, historical records neglect much of Indigenous life before colonization; what history can offer is how queerness was
represented in the deities that the Aztec people worshipped. Xochipilli and Xochiquetzal, for example, were two of many gods whom the Aztec people believed brought balance and routine to the universe; however, they were also pivotal figures in Latin America’s narrative of queerness. In statue form, the “Flower Prince” is depicted in a flower headdress that “reflects Xochipilli’s role as the god of spring, flowers, music, and song.” Historians have concluded that he and his sister Xochiquetzal were “often called siblings, but more accurately considered two complementary halves of one gender-fluid being.” Their gender-fluidity, if indeed that is the most accurate term, explains their roles as the patrons of “gay men and male prostitutes,” as well as pleasure, leisure, sexuality, and fun. This first representation of queerness was eradicated by Spanish conquest in 1521, only to reemerge four centuries later during the most transformative political and economic event in Mexican history—the Mexican Revolution.

Waged for nearly a decade beginning in 1910, the Revolution completely changed the culture and political landscape of the country, prompting many guerilla groups to seek transformative change in land distribution from the hands of wealthy landowners to peasant and indigenous communities. By the civil war’s end, the people had destroyed the country’s previous dictatorial government to one that separated Church and state, allowed large communities to own land, and recognized the workers’ right to labor unions and strike. An unintended consequence of the revolution also included the transformation of rights for women and queer people, making space for the gender transition of Colonel Amelio Robles Ávila and setting the stage for the women’s suffrage movement in the 1930s. Yet the liberation of these two marginalized

1 Lynette Townsend, “Aztecs and diversity; there was even a god for gay men and prostitutes”, Daily Review, April 22, 2014.
3 Lynette Townsend, “Aztecs and diversity; there was even a god for gay men and prostitutes”.
communities is fraught with complexity, sparking discussions of gender identity and how it can be exploited by the agenda of a historical, but politically motivated movement.

In the name of the Revolution, both men and women were recruited to join the causes led by various guerrilla fighters, Emiliano Zapata being one of the most prominent. Female soldiers, known colloquially as soldaderas, were women who disguised themselves as men to fight alongside the others on the battlefield, “followed armies in the rear and, in the absence of professional groups, took charge of essential duties such as supplying the troops and cooking for them.” These soldaderas also often “provided the men sexual and emotional company.”

Gender roles were thus both challenged and maintained, resulting in a revolutionary combination of both tradition and progress. One military man in particular, Colonel Amelio Robles, became a symbol of this newly emerging gender dynamic. Biologically born a woman, he identified as such in childhood, though engaged in stereotypically masculine activities such as horseback riding and weapon handling. He later adopted a male persona to participate in the Mexican Revolution, became such a high-ranking military official, and lived as a man until his death in 1984. During his lifetime, The Colonel Robles School was established in 1966 and photographed in 20212 in honor of him in Xochipala, the village where he grew up. The monument is the last official acknowledgement of his male identity before his death in 1984, honoring and cementing Robles’s legacy as a queer and transgender icon.

Following it, however, both the government, as well as local political movements such as the women’s suffrage movement in the 1930s, erased his male identity to serve their political agendas. As one of the most famous historical figures in the Revolution, he became “a symbol of the nationalist woman fighter and was included as such in the local historical narrative” as a way

---

4 Cano, Women Warriors and National Heroes Global History, 186.
5 Ibid., 184.
to legitimize the fight for women’s rights.\textsuperscript{5} Doing so, however, silenced his transgender male identity and attributed to him a feminine identity from which he had long since distanced himself and could not oppose in death. The issue remains contentious today, with the school bearing his male name and a museum in his birth name situated streets apart within his village in a symbolic representation of Colonel Robles’s exploitation by an otherwise positively transformative historical moment.

In the latter half of the 20th century, queer people across the world began radical political organizing, mostly in reaction to the 1969 Stonewall Riots in the United States. Shortly after Stonewall, where LGBTQ+ people fought back against repressive police raids, a group of activists came together to form the Gay Liberation Front, a radical group that enjoyed large success as an anti-assimilationist voice in this new queer movement.\textsuperscript{7} This group set the precedent for new LGBTQ+ activist groups with similar names such as \textit{Frente Homosexual de Acción Revolucionaria} in Guadalajara, Mexico, and the \textit{Frente de Liberacion Homosexual} (FLH) in Argentina. The FLH coalition began as solely gay men and quickly evolved to incorporate lesbians as well as queer anarchists and even religious sub-groups.\textsuperscript{8} Following the example of the GLF, the coalition sought to align the gay liberation movement with the growing insurgent left. Many of the founding members of FLH learned politics and tactics as part of the Peronist union, \textit{Federación de Obreros y Empleados de Correos y Telecomunicaciones}, after the military had disposed of then-president Juan Peron and banned his Peronist party\textsuperscript{9}, thus explaining the FLH’s anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist stances. Most research on the

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 179-180.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid, 300.
organization revolves around the publications of *Somos*, a political zine published by FLH.\(^{10}\) Unfortunately, the influence of the FLH was cut short due to extreme persecution of both queer people and leftists, which begun under Isabel Peron’s government and escalated during the subsequent military junta’s reign.\(^{11}\) Under the presidency of Isabel Peron, membership in FLH dropped from over one hundred to twelve as the government used law enforcement and military campaigns to displace, threaten, arrest, and even torture LGBTQ+ activists and leftists alike.\(^{12}\) In Argentina, the so-called Dirty War—a terror campaign against anyone deemed a “subversive enemy” by the Junta—made the presence of LGBTQ+ groups unthinkable until the end of 1983 when civilian rule was restored.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, LGBTQ+ activism had taken hold in the form of HIV/AIDS advocacy. Latin American LGBTQ+ groups found their movements once again intertwined with activism in New York City, due to a large number of Latino/a immigrants in the city. ACT UP—an HIV/AIDS activist group—coordinated protests, some of which targeted powerful people like Cardinal John O’Connor, a Catholic archbishop who blocked HIV/AIDS education programs.\(^{13}\) Within ACT UP, its mostly queer membership continued the legacy of the GLF and others by coordinating impressive direct action campaigns. Per ACT UP’s limited historical archives, there existed numerous working groups or committees, including the ACT UP Americas committee and the Spanish Communications Committee; they shared a similar demographic of members and were of great importance during the AIDS crises across Latin America.\(^{14}\) ACT UP’s database lists the original mission of ACT UP Americas as follows:

---

\(^{10}\) Ibid, 298.


\(^{12}\) Ibid, 17-18.


“Promotes the creation of AIDS activist groups throughout the Americas. Future objectives are to exchange information on life-saving therapies—both traditional and alternative—and to fight for the expansion of AIDS drug trials (as well as access to them) to all of the countries of the Americas.” and the Spanish Communications Committee as follows: “Informs the public about AIDS and AIDS activism through speakers and written materials in Spanish; develops Spanish translations of English written material.”¹⁵ Both of these groups are simply referred to as ACT UP’s Latino Caucus by member and anthropologist M. Alfredo González, the only scholar in history to write thoroughly about the committee.¹⁶

Although many immigrant members only participated in caucus meetings (as opposed to general ones), these members were critical to the formation of transnational HIV/AIDS activism across the diaspora of Latinx people.¹⁷ This caucus translated numerous activism and medical documents related to HIV/AIDS, collaborated with LGBTQ+ groups across Latin America, and began new medicine recycling efforts in the region, as most HIV/AIDS medicine available in the southern hemisphere once belonged to deceased patients.¹⁸ The caucus also led a protest outside of Argentina’s New York Consulate in solidarity with Comunidad Homosexual Argentina, a community group established to advocate for gay rights and healthcare for HIV+ people, which was being legally disrupted by Argentine officials.¹⁹

However, nothing encapsulates the plight of HIV+ people in Latin America quite like the art of Argentina-based Paraguayan artist, Feliciano Centurión. Centurión himself died of HIV/AIDS in 1996.²⁰ His series Flores del mal de amor explores the reality of living with

---

¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ Ibid.
¹⁹ Ibid.
HIV/AIDS at a time when the disease was essentially a death sentence. Centurion embroidered phrases like *Mi Corazon esta tibio, mi sangre fluye* (My heart is warm, my blood flows), *Mis glóbulos rojos aumentan* (My red blood cell count increases), *La muerte es parte intermitente de mis días* (Death is an intermittent part of my days), and *Me adapto a mi enfermedad* (I Adjust to My Illness). 21 These phrases, embroidered mostly on pillowcases, form a powerful connection between him as an AIDS patient and his deathbed.

As Latin America looks toward the future, it must confront its human rights violations as well as celebrate its stepping stones toward queer liberation because of grassroots activists and organizers. The modern condition of queer people in the region is a complex and contradictory one, beginning with the fight for the legalization of gay marriage. South America, for example, is home to the country of Guyana, where sex between men is punishable with lifelong imprisonment.22 Yet Uruguay, just 2,500 miles away, ranks 5th in the Gay Happiness Index and legalized gay marriage in 2013.23 Such stark differences are present in the struggle for transgender rights as well. While many transgender people from Latin America have achieved great success in the entertainment industry—for example, Grammy Nominated Music Producer ARCA—up to 77% of transgender people in Latin America have been forced out of their homes and become homeless, a quarter dropped out of junior high due to homophobic harassment, and over half experienced discrimination in a hospital or health clinic.24 There is still much work to be done for queer people of all varieties in Latin America, as with the rest of the world.

---

21 Ibid.
Internationally, the history, representations, and understandings of queerness are far from perfect. Even today and even in Latin America, the LGBTQIA+ community struggles to encompass people of color in their spaces or acknowledge complex intersectionalities within the movement’s identity. Regardless of the past and present hardships and because of the accomplishments of prior generations, the future of queer liberation is no doubt a hopeful one. Our history, despite what it has cost, does not have to be our legacy.
1. Xochipilli and Xochiquetzal

Clay statues

Mexico, 1428-1521

Queerness thrived in harmony with the traditions and values of many Indigenous societies, particularly within the Maya and Aztec empires before the invasion of—and subsequent conquest by—the Spanish in 1521. Indeed, one must be cautious of imposing modern interpretations of queerness upon those of the past. The likelihood of Indigenous peoples defining each type of gender expression or sexuality, even heterosexuality, by separate labels—as in today’s society—in their various languages is slim. However, what we certainly learn from the Aztec people, for example, is that before the arrival of Spanish conquerors who enforced Catholicism, heteronormativity, and sexual repression through colonization, queerness was accepted, even celebrated; this manifested itself most clearly within their religion in the deities they worshipped. Xochipilli and Xochiquetzal were not only two of many gods whom the Aztec
people believed brought balance and routine to the universe, but were also pivotal figures in the narrative of queerness within Latin America.

Xochipilli and Xochiquetzal derive their names from the Nahuatl word “Xochi”, or “flower”, as this has been the dominant language of the Aztec people since the seventh century. Flowers were closely tied with femininity, even serving as a metaphor for the vagina in many Aztec ballads. As a result of the gods’ ties with agriculture, flower-growers and other farmworkers most prominently worshipped them to successfully maintain and grow their harvest. The Aztec people considered them as brother and sister, or two complementary halves of a dual deity who fluctuated between man and woman, prompting modern scholars to label the siblings as a gender-fluid being. Their gender-fluidity, if indeed that is the most accurate term, explains their roles as patrons of queer Aztec people.

In addition to being the gods of pleasure, leisure, and fun, Xochipilli, the “Flower Prince”, was the god of music, dance, arts, games, and sports; Xochiquetzal, or “Quetzal-Flower”, was a patron goddess of love, pregnancy, domestic workers, artisans, gay men, and male prostitutes. Pleasures that manifested themselves into various sexual and romantic expressions were thus welcomed, celebrated, and protected within Aztec communities through the creation and worship of these gods. Liberation was afforded to indigenous queer people before colonization, but so were the devastations and traumas enforced on them by Spanish conquest less than a century after the creation of these statues. The Spanish largely subscribed to Catholicism, a religious institution that abhorred, punished, and persecuted homosexual relations, as well as gender expressions and identities that were contrary to a

---

26 Lynette Townsend, “Aztecs and diversity; there was even a god for gay men and prostitutes”, Daily Review, April 22 2014.
27 Lynette Townsend, “Aztecs and diversity; there was even a god for gay men and prostitutes.”
person's biological sex. Yet even after colonization, many queer people, though not all, were welcomed into the fold of social structures created by the Spanish in their religious centers, armies, and other institutions. Even today, the relationship between queerness, Spanish conquest, and Catholicism remains tightly intertwined and highly complex.

These natives did not eat human flesh, nor did they know the nefarious sin as in other parts of the Indies. It is said that in the time of a Xiu lord, they had punished this sin by casting those found guilty in a burning furnace, and that today this furnace exists in the ancient city of Mayapán... where the said Tutul Xiu lived and commanded the land.

2. Document sent to the Spanish Inquisition

Quote from letter

Yucatán, México, 1774

Around the same period that the Aztec people had been colonized by the Spanish, so too were the Maya people in Yucatán, one of the thirty-two states of Mexico located in the northern region of the Yucatán Peninsula. If the Aztec people were an example of the liberation of indigenous queerness before Spanish colonization, the Maya people exemplified the struggle between queerness and sin during Spanish colonization. Interestingly, the relationship between the Spanish and the Maya people was one of constant battle, compromise, hybridity, and even similarity. In both cases, homosexuality was used as a form of domination and power over others. The Spanish, for example, asserted their cultural and religious values upon the Mayas through the concept of sin and defining homosexuality as one of such sinful acts.26 Rather than

---

rejecting this notion, the Maya people welcomed it into the folds of their own culture but continued to allow homosexuality, even celebrate it, within the context of their religion and worship of their gods. High-ranking people in Maya society, including priests, were known to “rape” male gods in order to enforce control and harness their power for the prosperity of the community. Thus to a certain extent, the Spanish and the Maya people co-existed in Yucatán in an exemplification of hybridity and mixing of traditions between the colonized and the colonizers.

Despite this, the correspondence between the Spanish in Yucatán to the Spanish crown across the sea speaks of an attempt on the former’s part to positively portray the Mayas as a people who completely followed their colonizer’s religious code of morality, especially in regards to homosexuality. Interestingly, this notion was also perpetuated by the Maya people themselves, including Antonio Gasper Chi. A Maya noble who also worked as a translator and mediator between his community and the Spaniards, Chi in this document compares cannibalism to homosexuality, or the “ nefarious sin,” crimes of which were both worthy of the death penalty. The treatment and performance of queerness during this colonial period was in constant flux, considered a sin, a crime, and a tradition simultaneously by all parties within the Maya-Spanish society in Yucatán.

---
29 Ibid., 26.
30 Ibid., 25
31 Ibid., 28.
3. The Colonel Robles School

Photograph

Xochipala, Guerrero, Mexico, 1889-2012

Waged for roughly a decade beginning in 1910, The Mexican Revolution was arguably the most transformative political and economic event in the country’s history. It was also transformative for women and transgender peoples, making space for the gender transition of Colonel Amelio Robles Ávila and setting the stage for the women’s suffrage movement in the 1930s. The ties between these two historical moments of liberation for these two marginalized communities—are fraught with complexity, sparking discussions of gender identity and how it can be exploited for the agenda of a noble cause, though nonetheless a politically motivated movement.

Assigned a biological woman at birth, Colonel Robles was known from childhood to engage in activities traditionally reserved for the men of the household, including horseback
riding and shooting.\textsuperscript{32} When the Mexican Revolution erupted, the anti-government movement sought transformative change in land distribution from wealthy landowners to poor peasants and indigenous communities, including the Nahua peoples. Both men and women were recruited to join the causes led by various guerrilla fighters, Emiliano Zapata being one of the most prominent. Female soldiers, known colloquially as soldaderas, disguised themselves as men to fight alongside the others on the battlefield, adopting traditionally male clothing and skills.\textsuperscript{33} However, they were also still expected to fulfill domestic, sexual, and emotional support to the men through cooking, sexual favors, and general female companionship. Gender roles were thus both challenged and maintained, resulting in a strange upheaval yet also unification of both tradition and progress, allowing for Colonel Robles to uniquely take part in the performance of gender through his transition. Similar to the cisgender women with whom he fought alongside, he adopted masculine clothing and habits. However, he also adopted a new name and became known from then on as Amelio, symbolizing the shift of the feminine “a” at the end of his former name to the masculine “o.” This was uncommon for the time, given that Mexican society still existed in strict cisgender binaries of man and woman.\textsuperscript{34}

Unlike other women who adopted a more masculine identity only for the sake of the war, Colonel Robles continued to live as a man until his death in 1984. During his lifetime, he was accepted and treated as such within his local community, even by those who had known him when he identified, or perhaps more accurately performed, as a girl in his youth. Even the Mexican government referred to him as Amelio Robles in official documents, identification


\textsuperscript{33} Cano, Women Warriors and National Heroes Global History, 186.

\textsuperscript{34} Amaris Castillo, “The Little-Known History of Amelio Robles, a Trans Zapatista Who Fought in Mexico’s Revolution”, Remezcla, Jan 22 2020.
papers, and photos, awards commemorating his high military honors.\textsuperscript{35} The school pictured, Colonel Robles School, was established in 1966 in honor of Colonel Robles in the village where he grew up and is one of the last official acknowledgments of his male identity before his death.\textsuperscript{36}

Following it, however, both the government, as well as local political movements such as the women’s suffrage movement in the 1930s, erased his male identity to serve their political agendas.\textsuperscript{37} As one of the most famous historical figures in the Revolution, he became the face of radical feminism and a symbol of the soldaderas as a way to legitimate the fight for women’s rights. Yet doing so silenced his transgender male identity and attributed to him a feminine identity from which he had long since distanced himself and could not oppose in death. The issue remains contentious today, with the school bearing his male name and a museum in his birth name situated streets apart within his village, symbolizing the complex legacy of the Mexican Revolution and its rejection, yet also perpetuance, of many societal institutions—most prominently gender performance, relations, and representations.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 185.
4. El Ángel de Sodoma

Book

Cuba, 1927

Alfonso Hernández-Cata’s El Ángel de Sodoma made history in 1927 as the first Spanish-language novel to depict homosexuality. Yet similar to many works of media in Latin America, literary analysis of the novel by Western critics has largely been absent, given the Eurocentric-focused nature of LGBTQIA+ literature. El Ángel de Sodoma follows the journey of protagonist José María who is left to take care of his siblings after his mother and father die and leave the family with nothing but a life insurance policy. The novel, however, only truly begins when José María undergoes his first sexual experience. To his horror, his sexuality is revealed to be one of a homosexual nature when he finds himself attracted to a male dancer on stage at the circus: “sólo una figura perduraba en su retina y en sus nervios: la del hombre... ¡La del hombre
joven y fornido nada más!” As with so many other gay literary protagonists throughout the twentieth century, he battles himself, his desires, his body, and his conceptions of gender for the rest of the novel. He fluctuates between disgust of himself—determining that he is both man and woman at once and does everything he can to eradicate his feminine side through smoking, exercise, dating a woman, and growing facial hair—and of pride and acceptance. His experience with gender dysphoria is particularly interesting, as his name, José Maria is in fact a combination of a stereotypically masculine name and a feminine one. His image on the cover of the novel as a man in make-up flexing his muscles, no doubt influenced by silent film performers, also reflects José Maria’s dichotomy between his male and female self. This inner self-hatred and love erupt at the end of the novel into the taking of his own life by falling onto a train track—the tragic end that meets so many protagonists in early modern novels about homosexuality.

What little literary analysis has been done on El Ángel de Sodoma concludes that the novel is a critique of internalized homophobia, which the novel understands is not the fault of the person experiencing it, but the society they reside in. Though a setting is never named or identified, it is theorized that the novel takes place in Spain, reflected in José Maria’s obsession with the purity of his blood both race wise and in his sexuality and gender identity. Reminiscent of early Spanish colonization and repression throughout Latin America, symbols of Catholicism appear throughout the background of the novel, such as the crucifix in José Maria’s bedroom. In fact, within the year that the novel was published, Spain was under the rule of dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera, whose administration promoted a nationalist ideology of European purity through Catholicism, old-world monarchy, and colonial values.

38 Alfonso Hernandez-Cata, El Ángel de Sodoma, Miami: Stockcero, 2011, p. 91.
40 Ibid.
concludes, only lead to the demise and destruction of people who do not fit cleanly inside this world view.

5. ACT UP! Americas Poster Against Cardinal O’Connor

Poster

1969

The poster featuring Cardinal O’Connor was created by ACT UP’s Latino caucus. During the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the late 1980s and early 1990s, most LGBTQ+ activism took hold in the form of HIV/AIDS advocacy. ACT UP’s Latino Caucus also known as ACT UP Americas created this Spanish language poster to most likely coincide with protests against Cardinal O’Connor. The poster’s text, reading Criminales de Sida (which translates to AIDS Criminals), refers to the Cardinal’s attempts to block a gay rights bill in New York City in addition to his attempts to block condom distribution and AIDS education programs.41 Despite this record,

Cardinal O'Connor was appointed by Ronald Reagan to serve on an HIV/AIDS taskforce, which prompted a demonstration of about 300 people in his church.\textsuperscript{42} The poster targets Spanish-speaking Catholics, of which there were many in New York. ACT UP Americas worked on many similar projects, disseminating Spanish-language HIV/AIDS and LGBTQ Activist information not only to American Spanish-speakers but across Latin America as well. The caucus' diasporic approach was not supported broadly by ACT UP's general membership despite their ambitious and important work.\textsuperscript{43} Unfortunately, the exact date of this poster remains unknown per the New York Public Library's database, which lists it as being produced between 1969-97. This is indicative of a lack of writing about niche LGBTQ+ historical themes such as transnational work around the HIV/AIDS crisis. Much of LGBTQ+ history requires further scholarly attention in order to prevent its total disappearance.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} M. Alfredo Gonzalez, "Latinos ACT UP: Transnational AIDS Activism in the 1990s," NACLA.
\end{flushright}
6. SOMOS 4
Zine
Argentina, 1976

SOMOS was the zine published by the Frente de Liberacion Homosexual in order to fight for gay liberation. In SOMOS 4, FLH attacks the nuclear family as a capitalistic form of repression. This issue also contains political cartoons and illustrations, a dictionary of queer terms and phrases, as well as a statement on the death of President Juan Peron. The group was founded in 1967 by activists who merged with Héctor Anabitarte’s Grupo Nuestro Mundo, a gay leftist who founded the short-lived GNM after he was kicked out of the communist party, which was extremely homophobic at the time.\footnote{Omar G. Encarnación, "Latin America's gay rights revolution," Journal of Democracy 22, no. 2 (2011): 104-118.} Shortly thereafter in 1971, members of this group combined with students and other activists to create Frente de Liberacion Homosexual (FLH). FLH was
organized horizontally, allowing members to work semi-autonomously, and they often led campaigns specific to one group within the LGBTQ+ community. The group was radically anti-capitalist and was named after the Gay Liberation Front, which was founded after the 1969 Stonewall Riots.

During Isabel Peron's presidency, the military began hunting FLH members, and membership shrank from 100 to 12 as members were arrested, killed, or fled the country. Following the military coup, LGBTQ+ activism was entirely nonexistent as LGBTQ+ existence was categorized as part of the subversive "other," antithetical to the "good" and "moral" Argentina that was being constructed. Police targeted not only Homosexuals but transgender women as well. Even towards the fall of the military dictatorship, paramilitary groups set out to murder LGBTQ+ people. From 1982-1983 at least 18 gay men fell victim to such murders while the chief of police insisted that gay men were victims of murder because of their "immoral behavior" and "superficial" relationships. It remains unknown whether many FLH activists were targeted for their identity or for their radical politics, both of which were enough to land an activist in a clandestine torture camp.

This artifact displays the struggles of LGBTQ+ activism in Argentina. Despite a precedent for radical activism in the Gay Liberation Front of New York, Argentine activists struggled due to insurmountable state violence following the military coup.

46 Ibid., 17-18.
7. Me adapto a mi enfermedad

Needlepoint on pillowcase

Argentina, 1996

*Me adapto a mi enfermedad* is a piece from the series *Flores del mal de amor* from artist Feliciano Centurión. Born in San Ignacio de las Misiones, Paraguay, Centurión moved to Buenos Aires, Argentina, in order to study Visual Arts at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes "Prilidiano Pueyrredón" and the school of fine arts "Ernesto de la Cárcova." Centurion embraced femininity in his work, typically using mediums of embroidery as in *Me adapto a mi enfermedad*, tying his work to the feminine and what he calls *el mundo doméstico*. In this way, Centurión attempted to subvert traditional gender roles as well as the line between fine art and craft. Centurión made this piece shortly before he died of AIDS in 1996. That year approximately 1700 people died of AIDS, most of them gay men, due to the nature of Argentina’s concentrated outbreak. In addition, approximately 42,000 people were living with HIV/AIDS in Argentina in 1996, a number that skyrocketed to 140,000 by 2019. As in this piece, AIDS was a central theme in Centurión’s late work. He often embroidered observational phrases such as *Mis glóbulos rojos aumentan* (my red blood cell increases).
In the 1990s, Argentine officials were often ignorant or disinterested in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, even telling activists from ACT UP’s Latino caucus “I hope you haven’t come to infect us.” This same caucus translated medical papers, collaborated with Comunidad Homosexual Argentina (CHA), and participated in medicine recycling efforts, however, they failed to spark a wave of HIV/AIDS activism such as in the US due to heavy repression. Ultimately, Centurión’s embroideries are a reflection of this climate. His flowers of lovesickness explore the pain of gay men living with HIV/AIDS, who were at the mercy of their doctors and forced to become passive creatures, waiting until the disease and subsequent apathy consume them simply for loving another man.
8. Montevideo Pride Parade 2011

Photograph

Uruguay, 2011

This photo taken by photographer Pablo Porciúncula portrays a 2011 pride parade in Montevideo, Uruguay. Pride is usually celebrated to commemorate the 1969 Stonewall riots, which are often credited with sparking contemporary LGBTQ+ movements in the United States as well as across the globe. Uruguay is known as one of the most gay-friendly countries in the world, despite Latin America’s reputation of Machismo. Uruguay ranks 5th in the world on the gay happiness index, a formula developed by German researchers that incorporates public

---

opinion, behavior, and life satisfaction of gay men.⁴⁹ Uruguay beat every other nation in North and South America (including the US and Canada). The country was also the first in Latin America to permit same-sex civil unions in 2007.⁵⁰ In the southern cone, the rhetoric of human rights was very important during and after Authoritarian governments in Chile and Argentina, in the wake of this, LGBTQ+ activists in the region have achieved success by framing LGBTQ issues as human rights issues.⁵¹ In Uruguay, LGBTQ+ activists have taken initiative during the presidency of Jose Mujica, collaborating with student and feminist leaders in pushing for and achieving reforms in a wide range of issues including Marijuana legalization and the decriminalization of abortion.⁵² "Until the 1990s, [LGBT] groups' concerns were limited to discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. But people are not only excluded for being gay, lesbian or trans, but for being an unemployed gay [person], a black lesbian or a poor trans woman," said Uruguayan LGBTQ+ activist Diego Sempol.⁵³ This shift towards intersectional understandings of queerness is perhaps a large reason for the country's reputation as a space for acceptance of queer people. While Uruguay offers an example for the rest of Latin America, other countries still struggle with homophobic violence and discrimination. Brazil is the most notorious in this arena, where someone is killed every 2 days for their sexuality and where 64% of LGBTQ+ people in the capital of Rio de Janeiro have experienced homophobic or transphobic discrimination.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Omar, G. Encarnación, "LATIN AMERICA'S GAY RIGHTS REVOLUTION."
⁵¹ Ibid.
⁵³ Ibid.
⁵⁴ Omar, G. Encarnación, "LATIN AMERICA'S GAY RIGHTS REVOLUTION."
9. Ballet Folklorico LGBT "Jalisco es Diverso"

Photograph

Jalisco, Mexico, 2018

Folklorico, an umbrella term for various types of local folk dances throughout Latin America, was first originated by Indigenous peoples in pre-colonial Mexico and slowly spread throughout other nations in Central and South America.\textsuperscript{55} Within Mexico alone, each state has its own tradition, costume, music, footwork, and blend of influences from Spanish, German, French, Asian, and African immigrants.\textsuperscript{56} Jalisco, a state off the coast of the Pacific Ocean and bordered


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 37-66.
by Guanajuato, is the birthplace not only of mariachi music and tequila but also of the jarabe tapatio, a type of folklórico that utilizes hats and is the national dance of Mexico. Historically, however, the origins and traditions of many folklórico dances throughout Mexico reflect the country’s value of machismo, the cultural responsibility of men to embrace their masculinity, manliness, and pride as the sole provider of their family. In the state of Nayarit just north of Jalisco, for example, their dance style of folklórico tells stories of courting and displays acts of machismo, such as men dancing with machetes held in their hands.\textsuperscript{57} Like many aspects of Latin America, the notion can be traced back to Spanish conquest and Catholicism through the Bible’s teachings of masculine power and feminine submission. Folklórico is also inherently heteronormative in its execution; costumes are made only for men and women, who are expected to dress according to their biological gender. Within the dance, partners are paired exclusively in male-female duos. These traditions went largely unquestioned and unchallenged until only very recently with the growing momentum of the queer movement in Mexico.

Still, machismo and similar cultural values throughout Latin America continue to be the largest sources of oppression for LGBTQIA+ people. In fact, from 2013 to 2017 alone, 381 people in Mexico were recorded to have been murdered as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression.\textsuperscript{58} Thus, given the history of the country and the state of Jalisco, as well as the cultural and religious oppression of queerness by machismo, Jalisco’s LGBT-friendly ballet folklórico company, Ballet Folklorico LGBT "Jalisco es Diverso", has broken revolutionary ground and made news headlines since its debut in 2018. The group has made its mission to center respect, inclusivity, and diversity among its dancers, who originate


from a variety of backgrounds, sexual orientations, and gender expressions and identities.\textsuperscript{59} Unlike other folklórico companies, Ballet Folklorico LGBT "Jalisco es Diverso" actively recruits transgender dancers, as well as allows children the freedom to dress and dance according to their gender identity, not solely to their biological gender.\textsuperscript{60} They have met some backlash and discrimination by a country still so closely tied to its history of homophobia, machismo, and religious oppression. Yet the dance company has continued its revolutionary and celebratory work in the name of queer liberation, identity, and expression not only in Mexico but also in all of Latin America.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.jpg}
\caption{Dancer from Ballet Folklorico LGBT "Jalisco es Diverso"}
\end{figure}

10. \textit{Mequetrefe}

Song

Venezuela, 2020


\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
*Mequetrefe* is a song on Arca’s 2020 studio album, “KiCk i.” Arca is the stage name of record producer, composer, songwriter, and vocalist Alejandra Ghersi, a Venezuela citizen who identifies as a non-binary transgender woman. Arca earned a Grammy nomination for “KiCk i,” becoming the first out non-binary person to do so.\(^1\) Her music tends to combine elements of experimental house music and reggaeton, alongside components of Venezuelan folk music. Arca has a formidable resume, having collaborated with the likes of Kanye West, Björk, and FKA Twigs. *Mequetrefe* is one of Arca’s more Reggaeton-forward tracks. The music video for the track was developed using Artificial Intelligence, yet another example of the artist’s willingness to push boundaries, which in this case amassed over 800,000 views on YouTube. Arca’s influence on electronic music is symbolic of the progress made by transgender people in Latin America, specifically with regards to visibility.

Despite this, realities are often harsh and unforgiving for transgender people in Latin America, a phenomenon not exclusive to this part of the world. Up to 77% of transgender people in Latin America have been kicked out of their homes, a quarter dropped out of junior high due to homophobic harassment, and over half experienced discrimination in a hospital or health clinic.\(^2\) In addition, the life expectancy for transgender people is way below that of the general population, dropping from 75 for the general population to between 35-41 for transgender people in the region.\(^3\) Low life expectancy for transgender people is usually an indicator of transphobic violence, inadequate healthcare, and exclusion from the legal economy (forcing transgender people into high-risk trades such as sex work).

---


\(^2\) Ivan Carillo et al. “Transgender in Latin America.”

\(^3\) Ibid.
Only Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay recognize the right of transgender people to change their gender identity.\textsuperscript{64} In Venezuela, Arca’s home country, there are no protections in place to guarantee healthcare or identity change.\textsuperscript{65} This could potentially explain why the artist moved to Spain before starting to transition.\textsuperscript{66} Arca describes her album “KiCk i” as a literal kick against “categorization,” but transgender people everywhere must hope the increasing visibility of figures like Arca can kick against the lack of legal protections and services for transgender and gender non-conforming communities.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
Bibliography


https://doi.org/10.1215/00182168-3824077.

https://davidbowles.medium.com/mexican-x-part-xii-what-did-a-xochiuhauh-possess-3784532d8023


https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/gay-liberation-front-at-alternate-u.


“Imagining Modernity: Sexuality, Policy and Social Change in Mexico - ProQuest.”

“Map of Countries That Criminalise LGBT People | Human Dignity Trust.” Accessed


https://doi.org/10.1215/00182168-81-3-4-689.


http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-3ed7-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.


“The ACT UP Historical Archive: ACT UP Committees, Caucuses, and Working Groups.”

History Compass, 2012.

Townsend, Lynette. “Aztecs and diversity; there was even a god for gay men and
https://dailyreview.com.au/aztecs-and-diversity-there-was-even-a-god-for-gay-men-and
-prostitutes/.


“Video: Feliciano Centurión – Abrazo Íntimo al Natural, Directed by Mon Ross (2016).”
https://www.as-coa.org/watchlist/video-feliciano-centurion-abrazo-intimo-al-natural-
directed-mon-ross-2016.


