

Reclaiming my history as a Queer Latina**By Anette Bautista-Gramajo**

My story is just one of many within queer history. What I first experienced as confusion was the first step in learning who I truly was in a world where being your authentic self is difficult. Through conversations with my friends and things I learned in school, I began to step away from the expectations of a heteronormative society and unlearn everything that had been embedded in my mind as a child. Reclaiming my history and my identity has been a long journey that I am still figuring out, and I would not have it any other way.

As a first-generation Latina and eldest daughter, I grew up with a traditional view of gender and sexuality. When I thought of “gender,” I imagined two categories: boys and girls. Boys were associated with “blue,” action figures, superheroes, race cars, and being tough. Girls were associated with “pink,” dolls, make-up, dresses, and being emotional. These things seemed normal, and even though I tried to challenge them, I was shut down fairly quickly. If I tried to dress as a tomboy, I’d get in trouble for not appearing “girly enough” and be told that it wasn’t “right” of me to dress as something that was not related to my gender.

This notion of gender impacted the way I viewed sexuality as well. As a little girl, you’re told that you will one day fall in love with a man, marry them, and have kids. I grew up watching many telenovelas where men were portrayed as passionate, fuerte, valiente, and macho, and they were often seen as heroes. On the other hand, the women would be portrayed as soft, cariñosa, maternal, and in need of saving. These traditional

models shape how we view ourselves and society as a whole. Even if it seems toxic or dramatic, when the man becomes jealous to see the woman with another man, or when he claims her, piensas que eso es lo que va ser el amor. You think that a man will come and you'll be happy. These gender norms are pushed on you through the media and society, as well as the family, so that it seems natural that the only romantic relationships that exist are between a man and a woman. For the longest time, I did not imagine that it could be any different.

While this is my personal experience, it reflects a reality in Latino communities, where traditional gender norms are enforced in everyday life, culture, relationships, and interactions. Heteronormativity, the belief that heterosexuality is the default and that gender is binary, is deeply ingrained in our cultures. Heteronormativity shapes not only how we interact with one another, but also how we think about ourselves; it prevents us from imagining futures for ourselves that contradict heteronormativity, creating a feeling we can't escape, one that may even cause us to feel ashamed for imagining a life that better aligns with how we feel inside.

Building on this, Mark Rifkin's notion of hegemonic straightness, which he describes as a colonial system that frames heterosexuality as not just the norm, but as something that operates through other systems such as social institutions and family structure, accurately frames my own experience. He emphasizes how hegemonic straightness functions as the dominant power in society, as everything--ranging from the media, clothing, and even the workplace--is tailored toward straightness, reinforcing it as

the standard (Rifkin, 23-24). Looking back on my childhood, I realize how deeply embedded this framework is, both in society and in my own mind. Whenever I thought about love, I imagined a man and a woman together. When I pictured my future, I imagined myself in an “appropriate” career for women, such as a caretaker, a teacher, etc. On social media, I constantly saw posts about straight relationships, celebrating anniversaries, engagement, marriage, and more. This made it difficult for me to imagine any other kind of relationship and future for myself. It limited my imagination, my creativity, and ultimately myself. The world did not just reinforce hegemonic straightness, but my mind did too, without me realizing it.

After years of thinking about what I thought love would be, I was surprised to realize that the way I was thinking about girls didn’t match exactly what I had been taught my whole upbringing. It wasn’t something that just showed up out of nowhere, but rather it crept up on me. When I questioned why I felt such strong, raw, and real feelings, I realized then and there that I didn’t follow the script I had grown up with. I found myself asking why I felt this way and if it was normal. I hadn’t grown up discussing what being LGBTQ+ was or what it meant, and when I started having those conversations, it was difficult to accept myself at first. I wondered a few things: How was I going to navigate through school and the rest of my life if I liked girls? How do I talk to others about it? What do I do? I had to find a way to build a script to follow, but how? What could I do to help me figure this out? A page from my high school notebook speaks powerfully of the tensions I experienced when I was younger: “*Standing into the*

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abyss, thoughts clouding her head, hand still on the pencil, but she can't seem to focus on that. Hearing people around her fall back, but it's been blocked out. She's just thinking. Thinking about life, the struggles, the good things, and her friends." What I found difficult to say became easy to express in writing. I have other pieces of writing tucked away in old journals and scattered through the notes app on my phone. Although I never quite finished each piece, they show how I navigated through my queerness and my identity over time. If writing had been easy, how could I show my feelings to my friends? My writing showed aspects of my soul that I had not fully accepted. The abyss that I referenced in my writing was something I felt deeply in my soul. It felt like I was stuck in the ocean, the waves bringing me further in until all I could do was watch as I sank further and further into it. I felt myself wandering this space, constantly replaying the same questions: What do I do? How do I approach this? Am I wrong for straying away from the script that was provided to me? The lack of a script meant that I had to create my own and figure out who I was without all these constraints. Writing became that outlet for me to not only survive, but to live.

When I began to have conversations with some of my friends about love, talking about the LGBTQ+ community came up, which made us dive into the topics of gender and sexuality. Having these conversations helped me realize that I was not the only one experiencing this. It also helped me accept myself. As I grew older, I navigated my way through a heteronormative world where being queer was slowly becoming more accepted. However, in the community I was raised in, it was difficult to change the

mindsets of the adults, as they maintained their traditional beliefs and so reinforced these norms. Heteronormative love continued being pushed, and to me, this was not what love was.

Queer love is not inherently romantic, but rather it is a kind of love that exists outside the box and challenges mainstream ideas. It can be platonic, it can be in the moments where we connect over our shared experiences of being queer, and it can be anywhere. These feelings and experiences were part of a longer history. In “Breaking Queer Silences, Building Queer Archives, and Claiming Queer Indigenous P’urhépecha Methodologies”, Mario Gómez Zamora argues that queer histories are unstable and nonlinear due to settler colonialism. He emphasizes how queer histories are created through various ways as they are not just written down, but they exist in the media, art, and other methods (Gómez Zamora, 2). They exist in the conversations we have with each other, even in this moment right now, and are building on these histories.

For me, writing was my way of documenting my history, of my journey as a queer Latina. My friends and I struggled to navigate these feelings at first, often describing the pain of feeling unworthy and the struggle to accept our identity. Being different from the way society wants you to be is difficult to accept, and although you may want to assimilate to “fit in,” you know you will never be like them. However, I learned over time that there are spaces for queer people to heal not just individually, but as a collective.

One of the spaces was my Queer Indigenous Histories in the Americas class taught by Dr. Mario Gómez Zamora. In this class, we held a Queer Indigenous Future Art

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Gallery where we created a piece of art that reflected a future we envisioned as queer people. My class partner for the project, Àine Mullen, and I created a map of Latin America where we highlighted statements from queer Latinos that demonstrate how we are connected through our experiences. In our project, we found that many queer Latinos struggled to accept their sexuality due to their relationship with religion, specifically, Catholicism. Many conservative Latinos cite the Bible when discussing the LGBTQ+ community, often saying it goes against God and that they need to beg God for forgiveness. These words hit hard for young queer Latinos who struggle when figuring out their sexuality.

Even now, as I am older and questioning what identity I most resonate with, I find myself disconnected from God, yet I still reach out to Him. I beg him to help me make sense of my emotions. I wish I had an answer about how to navigate this world, but the truth is, I don't. Nobody does, and the script we are given does not match the reality we live in. I am still writing my story just as you are writing yours. In this process of writing, of discovering ourselves, I am reclaiming my identity just like countless others who are queer, and together, we are creating a future for ourselves that defies everything we were taught and reflects who we are.

Works Cited

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