

Claiming Pride Against Rainbow Capitalism and Colonial Power

By Juan Carlos Cardenas

The regulation of sexuality and bodies in heteronormative societies has been a long-standing dilemma for the queer community at-large. Western governments have continuously shown a vested interest in maintaining control over sexualities, values instilled since the colonization of the Americas, with the violent erasure and domination of Indigenous societies and their values. After the European colonization of the Indigenous territories that we now call the Americas, many societies were forced to adopt the hegemonic colonial understanding of sex, labor, and race, even if these understandings did not align with their own cultural beliefs. These same colonial systems are maintained to the present day, even by queer communities themselves through settler homonationalism, resulting in the phenomena we see in recent years; rainbow capitalism and the exclusion of Indigenous populations from Pride month. Coloniality is maintained in the present day by the ruling classes. However, because of its longevity, the colonizer mentality has begun to foment itself within queer communities, causing settler homonationalism to become a cycle where white American queers join their heterosexual counterparts in imposing nationalistic standards in policing queer communities.

Rainbow capitalism, as defined in this paper, is the involvement of corporations and consumers in the appropriation, commodification, and exploitation of the LGBTQ+

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community, manufactured specifically for white queer people while alienating queer people of color in the process. Corporations tend to utilize rainbow capitalism annually during June, or Pride month, seen through them changing their logos to rainbows, posting on social media, and launching rainbow-washed products. While this widely occurs in the United States, due to its hegemonic power that has entrenched many continents, it is not restricted to this nation and has far-reaching consequences.

While, the actions of these corporations bring about world-wide recognition of the month, it remains exploitative of the movement and community as a whole, centering the focus of the month on capitalist and consumerist tendencies, while simultaneously ignoring current core issues that negatively impact the community, by attempting to pacify the crucial activist aspects of the movement from which it was founded.

Capitalism is one of the most prominent global forces that crushes queer people causing them to experience higher rates of poverty, homelessness, coercive sex work, and other injustices. What is so twisted is the fact that while queer folk are forcibly marginalized within capitalism itself through less access to education, supportive work environments, and facing higher rates of discrimination than heterosexual counterparts, rainbow capitalism does nothing to meaningfully address these issues.

An alternative for Pride would be to return to the original mission of the month, while being more diverse without the sake of profit. What rainbow capitalism has done is modernize the movement and make it more accessible with the goal of profit; however,

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we can use these same diverse practices in a genuine way, thereby increasing the relatability of Pride to diverse populations while centering the voices of the marginalized that have experienced suffering at the hands of settler homonationalism, especially Black and Indigenous voices that have faced the most systematic barriers due to this practice and have long gone ignored. Pride should return to being about community and building a queer network where we can protect and advocate for one another in times of intense hatred and attacks against queer rights that have been fought for over decades.

In June 2025, six months into President Donald Trump's second administration, rainbow capitalism has virtually disappeared in the corporate landscape, in a time when the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals are being most threatened, with the ACLU tracking over 500 bills proposed in the 2025 legislative session alone across the 50 states ("Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in 2025"). While fiscal interests were at stake, the hegemonic colonial power that these corporations adhere to was never going to be a genuine ally to the LGBTQ+ community, much less spread awareness of current issues that endanger their rights to exist. Instead, they appropriated queer symbols, such as the rainbow, every June to profit off of Pride month, claiming the Pride rainbow as something they can own and sell to fill their pockets up while the demand is high, and quickly discard when it isn't.¹ The Pride rainbow symbol should not be this easily appropriated by

¹ A widely discussed example is Target, which immediately scaled back DEI-policies once pressured by the second Trump Administration, as Modern Retail reports, "As Target pulled back some diversity, equity and inclusion practices in February, its sales dropped 3% year over year in the first quarter." (Parton para. 5)

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corporations,² but because of Pride as an institution having close relations to capitalism, it is treated with little sacredness, therefore lessening its connection to the community and causing a disconnect from a once-powerful symbol of the fight for gay rights.

Argentine feminist scholar, Maria Lugones, explains, “The cognitive needs of capitalism include ‘measurement, quantification, externalization (or objectification) of what is knowable concerning the knower so as to control the relations among people and nature and among them with respect to it, in particular the property in means of production’” (Lugones 4). This cognitive need affects the whole of capitalist society, especially those that, besides sexuality, represent the Eurocentric standards established during coloniality. Rainbow capitalism portrays these Eurocentric standards in their media showing how queer people too can capitalize off colonialism and be integrated into a system that merely tolerates their existence as long as they adhere to heteronormativity and Eurocentric standards of beauty as well as society, dictating that queer people should look and act a certain way as to not make the heterosexual populace uncomfortable.

Symbols such as the rainbow have been associated with the LGBTQ+ community and the movement as a whole since 1978, when the creator, Gilbert Baker, an openly gay man and drag queen artist, was urged by Harvey Milk, the first openly gay U.S. public

² Corporations have made it a tradition to “rainbow” their logo in June to advertise themselves as queer allies, however, notably in June 2025 examples of this in the top corporations were scarce compared to June 2024. An illustrative example can be viewed here:
https://www.reddit.com/r/decadeology/comments/112zp63/rainbow_capitalism_is_dead_an_insane_modern_shift/

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official, to create a symbol of gay Pride for the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day parade, “Baker and a team of volunteers had made them by hand, and now he wanted to mass-produce the flag for consumption by all. However, because of production issues, the pink and turquoise stripes were removed, and indigo was replaced by basic blue, which resulted in the contemporary six-striped flag” (Gonzalez, para. 3). While the contributions of Baker and Milk to the Pride movement have made a lasting impact, both in the United States and internationally, there was, nonetheless, an economic component to this activism. What I will note from the Britannica passage is its framing of Baker’s goals of mass-producing the flag for worldwide consumption, taking out the original Pride flag’s pink and turquoise stripes to streamline production. The pride flag we have now is not the original design but a modified one to fit in with production costs and concerns. This denotes a capitalist motive in Baker’s goals, with the artist believing that consumerist popularity would make or break the rainbow flag as a symbol of the LGBTQ+ movement, more so than communal standards and beliefs.

It is important to note that Baker and Milk are both white, cisgender, gay men, and this has informed much of their thinking as pioneers of the LGBTQ+ movement. This foundation does not take away from the many trans and gay BIPOC pioneers that were active around the same time, however, it does allow for us to understand how the dominant racial group can misconstrue social movements, believing working within the hegemonic system to be an effective method of creating social change. Scott

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Morgensen, interdisciplinary queer ethnographer based in Canada, discusses how Settler Homonationalism interacts with U.S. queer projects, invoking “queer as regulatory” over Native American people, “Normatively white and national queer politics will arise here by naturalizing settler colonialism, notably when appeals to the settler state fail to trouble its colonial relation to Native peoples and its enforcement of a settler society” (121).

Baker, unwittingly, participated in this naturalization of settler colonialism through his queer project of creating a Pride symbol, creating a vulnerable foundation for the movement where corporations could come in and appropriate said symbol for their capitalistic gains, thereby destabilizing the movement the moment they do not see any potential gain by retracting their disingenuous support.

While corporations do promote the LGBTQ+ movement, giving it the exposure necessary to become a global movement, it does so with colonial power in mind, promoting individualistic characteristics instead of community-oriented ones, such as buying a Pride flag or Pride products as a form of LGBTQ+ allyship, rather than supporting the community through activism, mutual aid or other forms of substantial support. Corporations will never give back to the movements or people they reap from, and LGBTQ+ movements should not be relying on their support every June to feel like they are being represented or supported, because capitalism stresses fiscal gains, portraying queer activism as a costume that can be put on in June, and put away in July, rather than an ongoing process of resisting marginalization and dehumanization.

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Consistent and authentic support for the queer community can come in many different forms, but the most effective tend to come within the community itself; those who intimately understand the struggle and can build lasting networks for queer people. Lorena Cabnal, an Indigenous Guatemalan feminist and founder of El Red de Sanadoras Ancestrales del Feminismo Comunitario, based her activism on the belief of building communal networks to defend Indigenous women and their rights against oppression and to decolonize. In her article, Cabnal states:

Los riesgos de las defensoras de la vida han aumentado debido a las denuncias que han interpuesto ante las diferentes instancias nacionales e internacionales contra diversas formas de violencia contra las mujeres y otras del capitalismo racista neoliberal, que negocia los territorios ancestrales con el Estado. Este, con el fin de promover la inversión extranjera, concede licencias de explotación de bienes naturales sin consultar con las comunitarias originarias (Cabnal 101).

The author criticizes how appealing to national and international governmental bodies has increased violence against Indigenous women, opting to side in favor of neoliberal capitalist politics. This allows for the continued theft of valuable natural resources from Indigenous communities, which in turn goes on to sustain patriarchy and racism, further emphasizing the interconnectedness of this struggle. Queer communities of color further face systemic violence and dispossession at the hands of the same settler colonial structures and corporate interests, which commodify identity while erasing radical roots

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of resistance. Both groups are engaged in parallel fights against the exploitation and erasure caused by these oppressive systems, revealing a shared struggle rooted in anti-colonial, anti-capitalist resistance. While Cabnal does exclusively talk about Indigenous feminists in her article, there is plenty to learn from these movements, especially in the context of decolonizing the LGBTQ+ movement and decentering rainbow capitalism as an essential form of allyship in a hegemonic global society. Indigenous feminist frameworks challenge the very foundations of settler colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism, structures that also marginalize and exploit queer communities of color. By engaging with these struggles, queer movements can move beyond surface-level inclusion and pride-centered consumerism toward deeper acts of solidarity rooted in land, ancestry, and collective liberation.

This kind of solidarity can be seen in other decolonial movements as well, such as the powerful reclaiming of Pride by the P'urhépecha community in Michoacán. An important example of queer Indigenous people reclaiming the Pride celebration as their own is La Marcha del Orgullo P'urhépecha LGBTIQ+ celebrated in Paracho, Michoacán, México. This Pride month celebration is realized in a form that centers the P'urhépecha community, uplifting their voices with the motto “Celebramos nuestra diversidad, honramos nuestras raíces”. This showcases respect for the Indigenous community as well as serving to claim the story of Pride month in a way that honors the values of the community. The celebration was initiated by Senator Reyna Celeste Ascencio Ortega, an

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Indigenous lesbian woman, to celebrate the original peoples of the territory and acknowledge the oppression they have faced. She commented to *Diario ABC de Michoacán*, “Mientras se siga juzgando nuestro trabajo basado en el género, en la orientación sexual, en la identidad o en la expresión; mientras que en los pueblos originarios continúe la discriminación, seguiremos saliendo a gritar, a exigir y a protestar” (*Diario ABC de Michoacán*, para. 8). Her remarks spark a sense of unity between the struggles of Indigenous communities and the LGBTQ+ communities, as they go hand-in-hand in terms of the battle for safeguarding human rights and continuing the decolonial progress.

The significance of this Pride celebration can be seen in how it emerges from the voice and vision of a local pueblo, rooted in the land, culture, and ancestral memory of the P’urépecha people, the Indigenous population of the land that has long been dispossessed and underrepresented. It stands in stark contrast to corporate-sponsored Pride events that often erase local histories and instead promote sanitized, marketable versions of queerness acceptable to settler institutions. While rainbow capitalism flattens identity into brand-friendly products, this march speaks to a deeper truth of queerness; for many Indigenous communities, the struggle of queerness is inseparable from struggles over land, sovereignty, and survival. Rather than appealing to the state or multinational corporations for validation, this event demands recognition on its terms, calling out those systems of oppression that perpetuate violence and dispossession.

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Rainbow capitalism has always been a means of controlling the LGBTQ+ movement, portraying a sanitized, consumable version of support while ignoring the real material and existential challenges LGBTQ+ people continue to endure. While American corporations have abandoned the ideals of rainbow capitalism the moment it became politically burdensome, Pride as a whole does not belong to corporations. Pride was a battle-cry of protestors and rioters who asserted their right to exist with human dignity. At a time when queer rights are being challenged by the current conservative socio-political landscape it is more important than ever to mobilize within your community. Capitalism will not save the Pride movement, but the queer community can³.

This turn away from corporate validation opens up a space for communities of color and victims of settler colonialism to reclaim Pride, not just as a celebration, but as a declaration of what we want and what we refuse. We do not want to be paraded once a year by companies that fund anti-trans and anti-gay legislation the other eleven months. We do not want our identities reduced to a marketing strategy, or our pain overlooked in favor of aesthetic products to be profited from. What we do want is to honor the radical history of our movements, to center our elders that have faced the harshest struggle and the youth that still have much to build for a more equitable and inclusive future. This discomfort with the current system is not a weakness or a sign of defeat, it's a sign of resistance and of possibility for the future.

³ On February 9, 2026, the Pride flag was quietly removed from the Stonewall Monument and replaced with an American flag following executive orders from the second Trump administration. The very same day hundreds of protestors gathered to reinstate the flag, successfully doing so the next day (Stack and Bensimon para. 5).

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Imagining a different queer future means looking beyond inclusion into oppressive systems and envisioning entirely new ways of being together, on our own terms, without the input of those whom our queerness does not concern. What would it mean to have a Pride rooted in mutual aid, land reclamation, healing circles, and abolitionist politics? What if instead of being sponsored by profit-hungry capitalists, Pride was organized by farmworkers, healers, youth collectives, and two-spirit leaders? What if Pride was not a month but a mode of living, where queerness was not something to be tolerated but something that reshapes the world itself? The kinds of queer futures that I thought I could only imagine are already being built in places like Paracho and in the work of leaders like Cabnal in Guatemala. They are imperfect, evolving, and grounded in the needs of real people. And they remind us that queerness has never just been about identity, it has always been about liberation and having Pride in the struggle that comes with it.

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