

**P'urhépecha Practices from Patamban in California and my Reflections About My Queer P'urhépecha Ancestors****By Lesly Lagunas****Introduction**

This piece is about “Queer Indigenous Inequality.” As an Indigenous woman who is part of the diasporic P'urhépecha community from Patamban, Michoacán, I want to share the stories and passions of queer people within their community, support them in some way, and join their voices in fighting against injustice and inequality. My approach is informed by my own experience, and is framed, in part, by Mark Rifkin's work *When did Indians Become Straight? Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty*. With these frames in mind, I will examine the case of two Indigenous P'urhépecha men, Simpliciano Cuyne and Pedro Quini, who in 1604 were out on trial for having sexual relations. By looking at this historical example and contrasting it with my own experiences, I hope to trace a history of silence and stigma that persists to this day. For indigenous queer people, the challenges of self-expression and acceptance is an ongoing struggle.

**Connecting queerness to my P'urhépecha identity**

I want to begin by talking about my culture; about the beautiful *P'urhépecha* traditions and how much these traditions are foundational to who I am. Growing up in the P'urhépecha community has been a wonderful experience. Even though I was a part of a low-income family, I have always celebrated my rich culture and traditions. It all

***Label Me Latina/o, Special Issue, Summer 2026 Vol.16.2*****Queer Indigenous and Latinx Histories of Migration, Love, and Meanings of Home**

started when Tía Melis had asked me “¿Quieres vestirme de Guarecita hoy?”

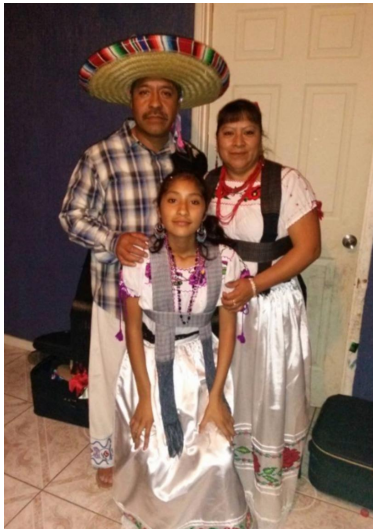
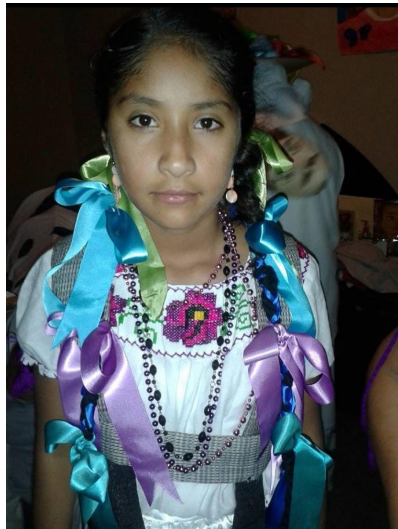
With no hesitation, I nodded my head yes, and there she began to teach me how to put on the traditional clothing for P’urhépecha women. Before I was even born my Tía Melis had always been really active in the P’urhépecha community, including the danzas, cooking, and other important community events. She would dress her family, including her three daughters, her sister, and other extended members of the family and have them perform for different occasions. She was a skilled dancer, and even participated in competitions. My Tío Manuel, Tía Melis’s husband, was also part of these events. They both are from Patamban, Michoacán, like my father Salvador Lagunas. That first day wearing the Guarecita clothing when I was a little girl, sparked my interest in my P’urhépecha heritage, an interest that was nurtured by my Tía who I loved and admired. She planted a seed in me, that has long-since taken root; I admire and love every aspect of my Indigenous culture. After so many years, I learned to love and embrace my culture more and share my personal experiences with others. It became something that is a part of my identity in California, where I reside.

I wanted to begin by acknowledging the impact that Tia Melis has on me, because she is a P’urhépecha woman who continues to advocate for our community. My Tía Melis is from Patamban, Michoacán, México, and she migrated to Long Beach, California with her husband my Tío Manuel Lagunas. Both of them have always been proud of who they are and never once denied their heritage and always spoke about

***Label Me Latina/o, Special Issue, Summer 2026 Vol.16.2*****Queer Indigenous and Latinx Histories of Migration, Love, and Meanings of Home**

beautiful memories in Patamban like having to wear their traditional clothing at schools, making Corundas, interacting with their friends who also share their experiences of being P'urhépecha. They are an important part of my life, especially after losing both of my parents years back. They took the role of being a mother and father to me. My Tía Melis is a strong and beautiful soul who always continues to give back to people without wanting to receive anything back. My Tío Manuel is also a very unique person, who is understanding with others, and who always has and continues to be the foundation of the family. He raised many children even if they aren't his own. I believe it is always important to talk about our beloved family members.

Below I share a mini gallery of my life. These are photos of my Tía, Tío and myself in wearing our P'urhépecha dress and participating in a ceremony of our community.





Photos courtesy of the author

### **Talking about queerness with my family**

As a P'urhépecha individual, I believe that one of the most important aspects of change throughout life was the problem of wanting to fit in more. I wanted to have the opportunity to wear my traditional clothing as a common attire every once in a while, but I remember I felt a bit ashamed because it was so normalized for people to make inappropriate comments of Indigenous people. In the United States, the beauty standards are different, so if people start seeing someone else who doesn't fit in, they make unnecessary comments regarding someone's appearance. I would probably have not been able to handle those comments at a younger age.

What does queer or queerness mean in my family? The word queerness can have different meanings. This is a way an individual can express themselves without having a specific label that limits their sexual preferences and gender expressions. Queer is a very beautiful way people express themselves and their identity. But it hasn't always been that way. Queer used to be a slur used against the LGBTQ+ community, and

***Label Me Latina/o, Special Issue, Summer 2026 Vol.16.2*****Queer Indigenous and Latinx Histories of Migration, Love, and Meanings of Home**

though the term has been reclaimed by younger generations of the community, for older generations, the term can still be painful. I believe it is important not to erase the older meaning because we are able to see the evolution of the term, and therefore understand the struggles that queer communities have gone through, as well as the courage it took to normalize a harsh term into something new and positive.

The use of shame and stigma to marginalize queer people is not new. During the colonial period, when the Catholic Church was aggressively and violently engaged in programs of conversion in Mexico, we find a case from August 15, 1604. During a festival for the local virgin in Valladolid (now the city of Morelia, Michoacán), Pedro Quini and Simpliciano Cuyne were caught having sex (Tortorici, 2007). The priest's nephew, who witnessed the encounter, called over two Spanish men to confirm that it indeed was two men engaging in sex. Simpliciano, realizing he has been caught, runs away from the church, leaving Pedro to face the authorities alone. Upon capture, Pedro was found facing consequences. At that time, if two people of the same sex had any type of romantic relationship, it was an unforgivable sin. The case of Pedro and Simpliciano has a lot to do with Queer Indigenous Inequality because in these circumstances both men were severely punished, ridiculed, and taunted with insulting names because they had a sexual relationship. What makes the case of Pedro and Simpliciano even more complicated was that the two P'urhépecha men didn't speak Spanish, so when they were under prosecution they were not able to fully understand the criminal trial. In this case,

***Label Me Latina/o, Special Issue, Summer 2026 Vol.16.2*****Queer Indigenous and Latinx Histories of Migration, Love, and Meanings of Home**

the power of the religious authority of the Catholic Church came together with the colonial power of Spain; the result was the subjugation of two indigenous men who were punished for both their indigeneity and their queerness. Although in present time, some parts of communities accept queer individuals, many still face homophobia and antigay violence, much like Pedro and Simpliciano, over 400 years ago.

Within the context of my family, we never really talked about “LGBTQ+” issues because the concept was not familiar to us. Throughout the years, I was able to deeply understand and engage with a community that helped me understand what LGBTQ+ meant especially with queerness. I have found in my family that we simply did not understand what it means to be queer and the meaning behind it. I did ask one of my aunts and they were a bit confused at first, but they were still interested in wanting to know more. I told her the stories of Pedro and Simpliciano and she was very upset at the idea that they weren’t allowed to be together. “Como que no, ellos no pueden andar juntos si ellos si aman,” she stated. This comes to show she didn’t care for the idea of two men being in love as a bad concept, she cared about the idea that Pedro and Simpliciano weren’t allowed to be together when they loved each other.

Most of my family, just like my Tía, deeply understand and love one another. We do not judge each for our flaws. I asked her what do you think about queer people in México or how they are represented in México especially in Michoacán. As a P’urhépecha she told me

***Label Me Latina/o, Special Issue, Summer 2026 Vol.16.2*****Queer Indigenous and Latinx Histories of Migration, Love, and Meanings of Home**

In Mexico it is not really normalized to have queer people around or to even know what queer means. There are many people in Michoacán who go by traditional values and cultures. If someone were to identify as a queer person in Patamban there would be a negative view point in which it affects cultural and traditional values within the P'urhépecha community. There is a possibility of people actually willing to understand what queer means and be educated and accepting like me. Many elders and older folks are very close-minded and only go based on their own knowledge they are normally adapted to. I feel like there can be a change into adapting and accepting not just queer communities, but the LGBTQ+ communities, the only problem would take years of process because it puts those individuals in the community in danger in México. (personal interview with my aunt)

**Final Reflections**

The main intention of my piece is to raise awareness of different cases in which Indigenous communities and queer Indigenous people have been marginalized. Also, writing this piece allowed me to bring topics to my family that we don't normally cover as an Indigenous community. A question that mobilized this work and that is connected to my Indigenous identity is why should queer Indigenous people have to be any different or seen differently than the rest of us? It is urgent for our society to allow all types of expressions and ways to love. As an Indigenous person myself, I hate to see

***Label Me Latina/o, Special Issue, Summer 2026 Vol.16.2*****Queer Indigenous and Latinx Histories of Migration, Love, and Meanings of Home**

that people like to set policies against our own people trying to be who they truly identify as. We as Indigenous people have already passed through lots of hardships like the imposition of colonial terms and the violence over our bodies. We should not allow others to discriminate and treat others unequally. We should all share the love and respect as a community. This is why I chose to be the voice of others who have not been able to speak because they are scared to be the voice of those who may not have one.

To conclude, my work about P'urhépecha practices and the knowledge of queer Indigenous communities is tied to my own personal experience of enrichment of my P'urhépecha culture and traditions and the idea behind inequality that queer Indigenous people have to face on an everyday scale as an Indigenous individual. The idea also had connections to the Indigenous population, who still struggle with being unable to express who they are for fear of being judged by others, like many members of the LGBTQ+ community. I want others to reflect on the perspective of where an Indigenous individual is coming from when talking about their culture, traditions and their self-identity. It is important to recognize our queer communities with a louder voice and understand them fully where they are coming from. Many queer Indigenous people tend to face many inequalities avoiding them to live a normal life. Let's be the bigger person and help our communities to gain confidence and support again!

***Label Me Latina/o*, Special Issue, Summer 2026 Vol.16.2**  
**Queer Indigenous and Latinx Histories of Migration, Love, and Meanings of Home**

**Works Cited**

NBC News. "10 LGBTQ Indigenous trailblazers who are making history."

<https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/nbc-out-proud/10-lgbtq-indigenous-trailblazers-are-making-history-rcna58189>

Rifkin, Mark. *When did Indians Become Straight? Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Tortorici, Zeb, "'Heran Todo Putos': Sodomitical Subcultures and Disordered Desire in Early Colonial Mexico," *Ethnohistory* 54:1, Jan. 2007, pp. 36-67.