Writing Western Nicaragua's LGBTQ+ History

Tiangues, Indigeneity, and Survivance

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Introduction

Western Nicaragua's LGBTQ+ history is rarely portrayed as Indigenous history. But I argue it is, in significant ways, a history of Indigenous ***survivance***, revealing important cultural continuities even in a context like that of Nicaragua's Pacific Coast, where a triumphant nationalist ideology of racial mixing (*mestizaje*) is so hegemonic that very few people are considered Indigenous anymore.[1] Indigenous survivance is the term coined by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor to refer to "the union of active [Indigenous] survival and resistance to cultural dominance" (2009: 24).

In this chapter, I argue that anti-Indigenous racism has made it very difficult to document western Nicaragua's history of sexual diversity.[2] And vice-versa, the erasure of western Nicaragua's LGBTQ+ history has facilitated a narrative where Indigenous peoples on the Pacific coast have been homogenized, objectified, dehumanized, compared to animals, and sometimes even declared extinct. In other words, homophobia and transphobia have made it difficult to document fully and accurately Nicaragua's Indigenous history, while racism

1 This chapter does not discuss the central or Caribbean regions of Nicaragua. The traditions I discuss are specific to the Pacific region. For a longer discussion on western Nicaragua's LGBTQ+ history, see my co-authored book with Karen Kampwirth (González-Rivera/Kampwirth 2021): Diversidad Sexual en el Pacífico y Centro de Nicaragua. 500 Años de Historia, San Diego: no press.

2 I use the terms LGBTQ+ and sexual diversity interchangeably since they are also used interchangeably in Nicaragua and by Nicaraguans in the diaspora. These umbrella terms include individuals who today identify as non-binary, gender fluid, gender nonconforming, transgender, and gender queer. Among the latter, the term most commonly used in contemporary Nicaragua is transgender (transgénero).

has made it hard to even ***see*** LGBTQ+ individuals (many of whom were Indigenous) in Nicaragua's past. When Nicaraguan history is seen through the lens of an exultant and totalizing *mestizaje*, we miss Indigenous (and Afro Nicaraguan) history, and we miss Nicaragua's LGBTQ+ history.

Partial and/or inaccurate histories became the standard version of Nicaragua's past and are still commonplace. These narratives are generally considered victimless and harmless by their authors and are part of an elaborate ecosystem that enables *mestizaje* to be continuously normalized as an inevitable *fait accompli*, and for *mestizos* to be considered superior to Nicaraguans who are not of European ancestry. In the following pages, I discuss and disrupt some of those hegemonic narratives, focusing particularly on the writings of three of Nicaragua's most well-known authors: Pablo Antonio Cuadra's essays in *The Nicaraguan (El nicaragüense)* ([1967] 1987), José Coronel Urtecho's *Reflections on the History of Nicaragua* (*Reflexiones sobre la historia de Nicaragua)* (published originally in 1962 and 1967), and Humberto Belli's overview of Nicaraguan history *Searching for the Promised Land. History of Nicaragua 1492–2019* (*Buscando la tierra prometida. Historia de Nicaragua 1492–2019)* (2019).

My discussion builds on earlier arguments I made in *Diversidad Sexual en el Pacífico y Centro de Nicaragua* (González-Rivera/Kampwirth 2021), where I established that some contemporary communities of working-class western Nicaraguan market women who today self-identify as trans have Indigenous precolonial origins. Indeed, I argue that the sale of food and other items in local precolonial Indigenous open-air markets called *tiangues* was a role taken on by cis market women ***as well as*** individuals who today might identify as trans women, given the link that was made between femininity and local commerce among the Indigenous people in the region ***even after*** the Spanish conquest in 1492 and Nicaragua's independence from Spain in 1821. Moreover, I argue that throughout the colonial period and the first century after independence, western Nicaraguan elites associated sexual diversity (a term which includes gender diversity, gender non-conformity, gender dissidence, and gender fluidity) with local Indigeneity, until that association was replaced in their imaginary by a link between sexual diversity, first wave feminism, and foreign intervention in the 1920s, during the U.S. military occupation. This history helps explain why discrimination against LGBTQ+ populations in contemporary western Nicaragua is not only homophobic and transphobic, but also profoundly racist, sexist, and classist. What has not been fully explored until now is the role that western Nicaraguan intellectuals have played

in crafting the narratives that promote (or allow for) disparaging and even zoomorphic tropes about ***all*** open-air market women (cis and trans) in elite efforts to foster and uphold a Catholic *mestizo* nationalism.

The Nicaraguan political theorist Juliet Hooker (2005) has documented how the factually incorrect belief that Nicaragua is a *mestizo* nation (a culturally and racially mixed nation of only Indigenous and European ancestry) has negatively impacted non-*mestizo* populations, particularly on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast. The U.S.-American historian Jeffrey L. Gould (1998), among other scholars, has also contributed to dismantling Nicaragua's "myth of *mestizaje*" by documenting the ongoing struggles of Indigenous peoples in western and central Nicaragua. My work builds on theirs to argue for an LGBTQ+ history of western Nicaragua that centers Indigenous survivance, particularly in relation to long-standing communities of trans market women.

The work of Pablo Antonio Cuadra (1912–2002) and José Coronel Urtecho (1906–1994) exemplified the racism of the *vanguardista* literary/ideological movement of the early 20th century and to a great extent the racism of almost their entire generation of Nicaraguan writers. It also established the economic and cultural importance of the Indigenous open-air markets before and after the Spanish conquest of Nicaragua's Pacific coast. Moreover, Cuadra's essay "The market woman" ("*La vivandera*") found in his collection of essays titled *The Nicaraguan*, and Coronel Urtecho's writing on "The tiangue economy" ("*La economía tiánguica*)", published in *Reflections*, both emphasized the crucial role of Indigenous women in the *tiangues*, a role I argue – in *Diversidad Sexual* (González-Rivera/Kampwirth 2021) – is fundamental to understanding western Nicaragua's LGBTQ+ history.

Indeed, I have argued (González-Rivera/Kampwirth 2021) that some contemporary communities of market women with members who today might identify as trans women have historical antecedents in the pre-conquest period. Moreover, since most Indigenous women before the 1520s were expected to work in the local *tiangues*, and because local men were not allowed to even enter the *tiangues*, a strong relationship between local commerce and femininity developed in that region of Nicaragua. This helps explain the vast number of women (cis and trans) engaged in local commerce in and around open-air markets today on Nicaragua's Pacific coast. It also helps explain the *relative* tolerance and acceptance expressed towards trans women by cis Nicaraguans today in those spaces. Although *tiangues* after the conquest had to incorporate men and people of all racial backgrounds, Indigenous women continued to work in the *tiangues* and these markets remained Indigenous (and working-class)

spaces in the national imaginary. I contend that this sheds light on why the discrimination against trans women ***that does exist*** in Nicaragua today is deeply sexist, classist, and anti-Indigenous, and not only homophobic and transphobic.

Mestizaje and Vanguardismo

Mestizaje is the term used in those areas of Latin America colonized by the Spanish to describe the process by which a nation or a region becomes racially "mixed". It refers to the "mixing" (whether "biological" or cultural) of Indigenous peoples and Europeans, specifically the Spanish. In the case of many Latin American countries, nation-building endeavors in the nineteenth century post-independence or "modern" period often had *mestizaje* at its core. Elites considered *mestizos* superior to all other non-Europeans due to their proximity to whiteness. The ideology of *mestizaje* however, was frequently aspirational. And it has always necessitated the disappearance of Indigenous peoples ***as such***. Moreover, the concept only works if the European enslavement of millions of peoples from Africa is ignored. In other words, *mestizaje* is not a neutral or descriptive term, it is about who holds and retains power. As Juliet Hooker has noted, "in Nicaragua official nationalisms have legitimated exclusive *mestizo* political power through the erasure of Blacks and Indians as citizens" (2005:18).

In the twentieth century, there were numerous individuals of *mestizo* backgrounds throughout the Americas who celebrated their own *mestizaje* and that of their followers to counter anti-miscegenation and racial purity ideologies. They were specifically contesting those ideologies that elevated the racial background of Protestant Europeans in the United States over those of mixed-race peoples everywhere. In the U.S., for instance, *mestizaje* became central to the development of the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Another important example is the movement led by Augusto Cesar Sandino (1895–1934) against the U.S. Marine occupation of Nicaragua in the 1920s. Sandino referred frequently to the Indo Hispanic race in opposition to U.S. Anglo-imperialism in Latin America. These celebratory versions of *mestizaje* however, were problematic because they tended to center and privilege *mestizos* at the expense of their contemporaries who were Indigenous and/or of African ancestry (cf. Hooker 2005; Gould 1998; Blandón 2003).

Juliet Hooker (2005) has documented what she notes are the three main strains of official *mestizo* nationalist ideologies in Nicaragua: "*vanguardismo*, Sandinismo[3], and […] '*mestizo* multiculturalism,' [which] emerged in the 1930s, 1960s, and 1990s respectively in Nicaragua" (ibid: 15). In this chapter I focus exclusively on the *mestizo* nationalist ideology of the *vanguardistas*, as expressed in the writings of Pablo Antonio Cuadra and José Coronel Urtecho, two of the most important members of this intellectual and ideological movement.

The importance of the *vanguardistas* cannot be overstated. They were prominent in their day and their impact on Nicaraguan politics and culture can still be felt today. What is most relevant to this discussion is that "[f]or the *vanguardistas* the colonial era was […] not a time of conquest and subjugation of the Indigenous population by their Spanish conquerors; it was an idyllic era of peace and harmonious coexistence, where everyone knew and followed their 'natural' place in the social and political order" (ibid: 25). This false representation of the past, while largely debunked by the 1979 leftist Sandinista revolution and *their* version of *mestizo* nationalism (which acknowledged Indigenous resistance against the Spanish conquest but still embraced the myth of complete and ineludible *mestizaje*), made it difficult to locate western Nicaragua's LGBTQ+ history and find any historical LGBTQ+ continuities from Nicaragua's pre-colonial period.

According to Hooker, "harmonious mestizaje, Indigenous passivity, and colonial peace […] were central elements of *vanguardismo*" (ibid: 26). Coronel Urtecho ***did*** see Indigenous peoples during the colonial period as agents, but of *mestizaje*, which led him to view the colonial *tiangue* (an Indigenous institution) as the epicenter of *mestizaje* on the Pacific coast of Nicaragua:

> It was totally at the service of the people, contributing to unify its diverse racial and cultural elements in one organic everything with deep roots in Nicaraguan soil, and due to that, had an unmistakable Nicaraguan seal […] Although of Indigenous origin, more than Spanish, the tiangue economy of the colonial city was eminently mestiza and mestizante [actively promoting mestizaje]. The same, of course, must be said regarding the life that developed around the tiangue […] That is where, it can be affirmed, the Indians of Nicaragua became Nicaraguans […] and where they themselves

3 Sandinismo is a political movement and ideology that arose in the 1960s in opposition to the U.S.-supported right-wing Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua. It built on the legacy of the anti-imperialist Augusto Cesar Sandino.

> Nicaraguanized, so to speak, criollos [Spaniards born in the Americas] and mestizos of different varieties.
> At the same time […] they [Indigenous peoples] were not completely absorbed by racial mestizaje… (Coronel Urtecho 2001:131-133).[4]

In these writings, Coronel Urtecho (2001) fetishized *mestizaje* as an active process of *becoming* (non-Indigenous) Nicaraguan. And in the process of becoming *mestizo*-Nicaraguans, Indigenous peoples stopped being Indigenous but did not necessarily become ***racial*** *mestizos*: "The *tiangue* became a communal manifestation of daily life, of the popular culture and of the colonial economy. The [cultural] *mestizaje* that came out of there or which was circulating there, was more important than the racial one, since it was nothing less than the *mestizaje* of life" (ibid: 135).

While Coronel Urtecho idealized the *tiangue* as the center of colonial economic and cultural life on Nicaragua's Pacific coast, he ignored the punitive regulations that sought to curtail Indigenous women's economic participation in the *tiangues* in the post-independence modernizing period, some of which I have documented in my earlier work (González-Rivera/Kampwirth 2021). Moreover, Coronel Urtecho failed to address the impact that colonialism had on women's livelihood in the *tiangues* after the conquest, reducing a multilayered and complex set of experiences to one that simply brought people together towards one inescapable and desirable end: *mestizaje* and "Nicaraguanization." In this vein, Coronel Urtecho wrote:

> The *tiangue* signified, in this sense, a synthesis of the countryside and the city. It was also a point of intersection between Indians, Blacks, and Spaniards (*intersección del indio, el negro y el español*). That is where the following would meet: the Indian market women, the woman with the *batea* [selling items from a wooden tray], the woman who owned a small store, the woman servant, the woman who did not work outside the home (*ama de casa*), the woman beggar, the male merchant, the businessman, the male beggar […] the soldier […] the male servant […] the male laborer, the craftsman, the male settler, the male landowner, the clergyman, and the government official" (Coronel Urtecho 2001: 135).

4 All translations from Spanish into English are my own. All the quotes from Cuadra, Coronel Urtecho, and Belli were originally in Spanish.

Not surprisingly, trans women and others who did not uphold or embrace Spanish colonial gender norms were not mentioned on this list, given the heteronormative nature of *vanguardista* texts.

Unlike Coronel Urtecho, Pablo Antonio Cuadra choose to write not about the *tiangue*, but about "the market woman":

> As far as I know no one has studied that ancestral inheritance – that thread in the fabric of our history – that comes to us from the pre-Hispanic Nahua: the market woman […] The percentage of women in small businesses is still immense […] [as is their presence] in Nicaragua's markets […] The history of women engaged in commerce (*la mujer comerciante*) has – as I have stated – yet to be written. José Coronel Urtecho, in his "Reflections on the History of Nicaraguan" surprises us by demonstrating the importance of the *tiangue* or market – with Indigenous roots – in the social, economic, and even cultural formation of our people (*de nuestro pueblo*). And the *tiangue* is a feminine product (*obra femenina*). Just as the small store in someone's home, selling[5], the market, and the popular economy also are feminine (*Como femenina es la pulpería, la venta, el mercado y la economía popular*) (Cuadra 1987 [1967]:116-118).

Cuadra (1987 [1967]) even called the Indigenous tradition of women market vendors a "strange [Indigenous] feminist legislation" and ultimately a mystery he could not decipher: "Why did this merchant people have this strange feminist legislation in their trade? It is a mystery, that custom has always been a mystery to me" (ibid: 116–117). Cuadra then went on to objectify market women in a story he told, comparing them unfavorably to *mestiza* women:

> She was a stout woman, with a powerful back, strong arms and legs and that wide and resistant neck produced by the exercise of carrying [a basket with products to sell] on the head; many times I have seen that feminine architecture in our people – a body where work has defeated her sex, a short body like the Church of Subtiava, Indian temple, a sexless body (not like the Church of Xalteva which shoots up, with her crinoline which is the *mestiza* body swaying her "turris aburnea" [ivory tower]), a businesswoman's body – (ibid: 115).

5 I have translated the word "venta" as "selling" but there are other potential translations such as "sales" and "store".

Cuadra continued to portray Indigenous market women as admirable but also frightening:

> The market woman, the businesswoman, the woman owner of a small store in her home […] that entire hidden cult of marketing – to be feared and so thorough – where the most implacable usury is often practiced – the almost cannibalistic usury of the widows and the women without husbands (ibid: 115–116).

To describe market women's lending practices as "almost cannibalistic" is to revive a colonial lens in order to make Indigenous women legible to the cultural heirs of the Spanish conquest. To assign this characteristic to women without male partners is particularly misogynistic and heteronormative. It is also disingenuous, given the impact that the conquest and colonization themselves (as well as post-independence economic and social policies) had on disrupting heterosexual Indigenous families.

Cuadra went a step further in describing his supposed encounter with an Indigenous market vendor in the *tiangue,* comparing her to an animal who transported him to Nicaragua's Indigenous past:

> I went back five or six centuries, and I felt how that market woman was there bringing in her gestures, in her commercial acumen, in her insightful countenance, a potent and ancient tradition, a relic that I was losing at the bottom of time or at the bottom of her vigilant and almost aggressive eyes like those of a bird of prey (ibid: 116).

Cuadra's descriptions of Indigenous women who were his contemporaries demonstrated the triumphant *mestizo* logic of twentieth century western Nicaragua. The words "defeated," "sexless," "cannibalistic," "bird of prey," "hidden cult," and "to be feared" used to describe Indigenous market women prevented the presumably *mestizo* reader from recognizing themselves in her. In fact, at the end of his short essay, Cuadra juxtaposed his wife (presumably with a body that "shoots up," "a mestiza body swaying her ivory tower"), with the Indigenous market woman to point out that the latter supposedly swindled him by charging him a bit more than usual for a handful of fruit (ibid: 118). While this final juxtaposition was necessary for Cuadra to make his final point – that he now understood why men were not allowed to enter pre-colonial *tiangues* – it also underscored a point that is rarely mentioned in histories

of Nicaragua: the complicity (and sometimes the full participation) of many *mestiza* women in the formation and propagation of racist elite ideologies.

Indigenous market women and their labor in *tiangues* on the Pacific coast was a central theme in the history of Nicaragua as told by José Coronel Urtecho and Pablo Antonio Cuadra in their search for the essence of what made someone "Nicaraguan"[6]. But theirs was an incomplete and distorted version of the past, and as such it could not account for the full diversity of market women.

More Recent Histories of Nicaragua

In 2019, Humberto Belli (1945-), the Catholic Minister of Education under Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, Nicaragua's first woman president (in power from 1990 to 1996), published a history of Nicaragua titled *Searching for the Promised Land. History of Nicaragua 1492–2019*. Belli's book, published before he fled from Daniel Ortega's government and went into exile in 2021, was highly influenced by the writings of José Coronel Urtecho and Pablo Antonio Cuadra. Works such as Belli's are important to analyze because they allow us to understand how racism, classism, and sexism (and not only homophobia and transphobia) have prevented a full account of Nicaragua's LGBTQ+ history from being told.

Like the *vanguardistas*, Belli deemphasized conflict in the conquest and colonization of Nicaragua. On this subject, he wrote:

> Authors like [the Sandinista] Jaime Wheelock and Francisco Barbosa Miranda have tried to emphasize the magnitude of Indigenous resistance, more due to the ideological imperative to present history as conflict between oppressors and oppressed than due to strong evidence. The instances of documented Indigenous rebellions are few (Belli 2019: 45).

Belli, a conservative, acknowledged that *vanguardistas* such as Coronel Urtecho did "exaggerate and simplify certain characteristics" and that they put forth "literary and non-scientific" descriptions. Nonetheless, Belli contended that the Nicaraguan culture that grew out of the colonial period was "morally opaque, with a propensity towards lying" (ibid: 72).

6 Hooker addresses the *vanguardista* search for "the essence of Nicaraguan-ness" in her work (2005: 21).

Specifically with regards to Indigenous peoples and *mestizaje* on the Pacific coast, Belli wrote:

> The Indian population was not only shrinking in proportion to the *mestizos*, but in its own racial identity. Their cultural inferiority complexes caused many to assimilate, without being *mestizos*, into the *mestizo* population. This was facilitated by the physical similarity between them and *mestizos*. By the beginning of the 19th century, the Pacific coast of Nicaragua was essentially Hispanicized. The still significant Indigenous remnants would rapidly lose their original language and clothing, making it difficult to differentiate between the two groups (ibid: 93).

Like the *vanguardistas*, Belli assumed his readers would identify with the colonial authorities who could not differentiate among the masses of *mestizos* and Indigenous peoples, colonizers who only saw profound deficits in Indigenous peoples and cultures. It makes sense that Belli's book is not only racist, sexist, and classist, but also heteronormative and homophobic.

Conclusion

When the history of western Nicaragua is told through the lens of colonial zoomorphism[7] (such as the comparison between Indigenous women and birds of prey) and other racist, sexist, and classist tropes, the nuanced histories of Indigenous market women are replaced by the longings and aspirations of ***ideological*** *mestizo* elites, (i.e. individuals who promote the official *mestizo* nationalisms studied by Juliet Hooker regardless of their own ethnic/racial backgrounds). The LGBTQ+ history of western Nicaragua however, by necessity, has to be one that centers the experiences of Indigenous trans market women, alongside those of other Indigenous peoples. This region's LGBTQ+ history is a profoundly Indigenous history, one which is deeply tied to femininity and local commerce, although other traditions – such as those of Afro Nicaraguans in the region – remain to be documented.

Against a backdrop of anti-Indigenous hegemonic elite writings such as the ones discussed in this chapter, I argue that the concept of "Indigenous survivance" is useful when discussing the continued/continuous presence of trans

7 For more on colonial zoomorphism in the Americas see Tumbaga (2020: 762).

and cis women vendors in the main open-air markets of western Nicaragua, markets such as the Roberto Huembes, Ivan Montenegro, *El Mayoreo*, Israel Lewites, and *El Oriental*.[8] The concept of survivance is useful because it refers to "Native survivance …[as] an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion in history; survivance is the obvious continuance of stories, not a mere reaction […] Survivance stories are renunciations of state dominance" (Vizenor 2009:138). Documenting Indigenous survivance as we slowly piece together western Nicaraguan's LGBTQ+ histories means rethinking not only what constitutes Indigenous and LGBTQ+ histories of that region, but also what constitutes the broader history of Nicaragua such that it eventually includes all of us.

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8 This is not the first time that Indigenous survivance is used in the context of western Nicaragua's Indigenous history. The Nicaraguan scholar Paul Edward Montgomery Ramírez (2021) has used it in his argument for Indigenous authorship of western Nicaragua's world-famous play, *El Güegüense*.

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