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Gender and Transgender in the Mexican Revolution: The Shifting Memory of Amelio Robles

Gabriela Cano

Today, in the village of Xochipala, in the state of Guerrero, there is a school named in honor of Coronel Amelio Robles, a prominent man and landowner, and a hero of the Mexican Revolution. In that same village in southern Mexico there is a community museum honoring the life of woman warrior Coronela Amelia Robles, displaying some of the furniture and personal effects of this former Zapatista fighter. Standing a few hundred yards apart, these two sites of memory represent a profound transformation and a paradox, for Amelio Robles and Amelia Robles were not brother and sister, father and daughter, or husband and wife, but one and the same person.

This chapter examines the conflicting perceptions of Robles's gender identity in the context of twentieth-century Mexican history. Amelio Robles was a transgender man during most of his life. His gender transition—from female to male—began after he joined the Mexican revolution as a rank-and-file fighter when he was twenty-five years old. The violence and confusion of the armed struggle were propitious for his transition. Robles's personal qualities as a guerrilla fighter were valued and accepted as expressions of his masculinity by his comrades in the army. In the post-revolutionary era, masculine identity was generally accepted and Robles was respected as a local male hero of the Mexican revolution—being honored as an official war veteran by the highest military authorities. People in his community bore no doubts of his masculine gender, and he eventually became a respected elder in his town. The local school was given his name in order to honor his contributions to education in his village and the revolutionary movement in the state of Guerrero. Robles's family, neighbors, friends, and comrades-at-arms generally accepted his masculinity.

Moreover, identification papers and photographs gave his maleness an official status. However, the social perception of Amelio Robles's identity shifted radically after his death at the age of ninety-four. Local state agents imposed a feminine gender on Robles's identity. A narrative that blatantly contradicted Robles's masculinity took over in Guerrero's memory of the Mexican Revolution, where Robles became a symbol of the nationalist woman fighter and was included as such in the local historical narrative.

Figure 9.1 Colonel Robles School, Xochipala, Guerrero in 2012. Photo credit: Gabriela Cano

Figure 9.2 Community Museum Coronela Amelia Robles in 2012. Photo credit: Gabriela Cano

The binary gender of the nationalist celebration of the Mexican revolution that paved the way for the official acceptance of Robles's masculinity would eventually deny his transition and push him back into a female identity.

The following pages tell the microhistory of Robles and the paradoxical workings of the memory of the Mexican Revolution that led to the coexistence of a school honoring the male revolutionary and a community museum celebrating the woman fighter in the same town. A short biography of Amelio Robles highlights his gender transition in the context of the Mexican revolution. However, the focus of the chapter is not the details of his life but the effects of gender and nationalism in the social memory of Robles's identity.

Amelio Robles took part in the 1910 Mexican Revolution as a combatant in Emiliano Zapata's popular agrarian movement, or Zapatismo. Zapata led a rebellion of "campesinos" (poor peasants), who took up arms to defend their communal lands against the encroachments of privately owned haciendas (estates). Zapatismo emerged in the state of Morelos, where the movement was centered, and also had followers in some parts of Guerrero, Puebla, and the State of Mexico, in the country's central southern region. Robles's home town of Xochipala, in Guerrero, joined the movement with a twofold aim: to defend its traditional boundaries from the expansion of the nearby hacienda and to resolve a long-running agrarian dispute with the neighboring town.¹

Zapatista fighters were not a professional army but rather a "people in arms"; that is, they were guerrilla groups who served a community leader skilled in combat.² War brought about the destruction of social and cultural structures and broke up

traditional social hierarchies. Social instability, evacuations, and constant danger were all part of daily life for the Zapatista guerrillas. This created a favorable atmosphere for Amelio Robles to adopt the desired masculine identity and appearance: the young rural woman became a male Zapatista guerrilla. Robles adopted the wardrobe, pose, and body movements typical of men in the early-twentieth century from his rural part of Mexico.³ The transition also entitled a name change: from the feminine Amelia, which was given to her at birth, to the masculine grammatical Amelio. (In Spanish, an “o” or “a” at the end of a word indicates grammatical gender; in proper names, the feminine or masculine grammatical gender usually corresponds to the person’s gender identity.⁴)

Unlike other women who only passed themselves off as men while participating in the armed uprising, Amelio Robles sustained his masculinity throughout his long life and even into old age. He died at the age of ninety-four, and those who knew him in his final years remember him as an elderly man respected by his family and the wider community alike. Neighbors and family members addressed him in the masculine grammatical gender as “Mr.,” “colonel,” “uncle,” or “great uncle” and treated him with the respect typically accorded to an elder property owner and household head. Robles’s standing in his community stemmed largely from his involvement in the Mexican Revolution.

The Mexican Revolution was an internal war and political process that overturned an oligarchical state and established a new government apparatus. The new state heard the voices of workers and peasants. The broad cross-section of society—middle class, peasants, workers, and landowners—entering the armed struggle made the Mexican Revolution a multi-layered and contradictory military and political process. Nationalism also came to the fore at various junctures. And to complicate matters further, the struggle not only pitted rebels against the former government and those supporting a continuation of the regime; there was also infighting among the revolutionary forces due to socio-economic, cultural, and regional differences, together of course with ideological and political reasons.

The term “Mexican Revolution” has several meanings and its polysemy is relevant to the story of Robles’s transgendering and the conflicting perceptions of his masculinity. The term refers not only to the armed struggle, but it is also used to encompass a long process of state-building and legislation. That process includes the Constitution of 1917, which mandated a major agrarian reform, the protection of workers’ rights and the imposition of restrictions on the Catholic Church. It also includes other laws such as the Law of Family Relations (1917), the Civil Code (1928), and the Federal Labor Law (1932). The Constitution of 1917 is often invoked to mark the end of the Mexican Revolution but this is a contentious issue. Some scholars argue that the Constitution of 1917 was a turning point, but not its end. Rather, they point to 1940, the final year of President’s Lázaro Cárdenas term, and a period of extensive agrarian distribution, support of workers’ demands, and nationalist economic policies as the conclusion of the revolutionary process. Furthermore, regime political actors, such as the single political party that ruled from 1929 until 2000, maintained that the ongoing, institutional process of the revolution continued until the 1970s or even later. The word “revolution” or one of its derivations has remained in the ruling party’s name over

the decades. In 1929, it was called the National Revolutionary Party, and in 1938 it took on a corporate structure and adopted the name Party of the Mexican Revolution. In 1946, its name changed to Party of the Institutional Revolution, as it continues to be known today.

There are at least three meanings of the term Mexican Revolution: first, as a war and political conflict; second, as the drafting and institutional enforcement of laws and reforms; and third, as rhetorical trope. The revolution was a symbol of nationalism, social justice, and secularization. Throughout the century, both governments and opponents invoked the Mexican Revolution as a source of their legitimacy. More importantly for our purposes, the Mexican Revolution celebrated binary gender as the epitome of national identity: the male peasant, worker, and soldier, and the sexually available young woman and mother.

Each of these meanings is relevant to the story of Amelio Robles. The process of his gender transition took place during the armed struggle and his constructed masculinity was accepted in the midst of the instability and violence of the war. The form of masculinity that Robles enacted had great value in the battlefields: he was courageous and capable of responding violently and immediately to aggression. His able handling of horses and firearms made him an outstanding warrior. His excessive indulgence in alcohol and his reputation for being a womanizer affirmed his masculine identity. The political influence his comrades exercised at the local and federal levels was crucial for the acceptance of his masculinity by state institutions. Finally, the later erasure of his masculinity and the imposition of female identity to his name and biographical narrative were also part of the discourse of the Mexican Revolution.

The Zapatista guerrillas fought to keep collective ownership of the land and to defend their traditional boundaries and autonomy in the face of the gathering forces of modernization and long-running agrarian disputes. They were notably active in demanding agrarian reforms, and although their political faction was eventually defeated, the revolutionary government dictated policies of land distribution and collective ownership and constructed poor peasants as one of the central symbols of the Mexican Revolution.⁵ The majority of Zapata's followers were poor peasants, but some small-scale landowners also joined the movement. This was the case of Robles and other Zapatistas from the state of Guerrero who joined the Mexican revolution either to support their communities in a border dispute with a neighboring town or to open political spaces for themselves in otherwise closed systems. The Robles family owned several hectares of land for crops and cattle. We can only speculate on the reasons Amelia Robles joined the Zapatistas. However, the opportunity to leave her small village and adopt a life in which appreciation for her horsemanship and use of firearms was prevalent undoubtedly counted as one of her motives.

The passing of the Constitution of 1917 gave the country a regulatory framework but did not halt the armed conflict. The restoration of peace came about only in 1920, and it was only then that a new state apparatus could be built. Robles fought with the Zapatistas for a few years, from 1913 or 1914 until 1920 when he left the revolutionary guerrillas and enlisted as a soldier in the federal army along with other Zapatista chiefs and comrades. Zapatismo was eroding, and Emiliano Zapata was assassinated in 1919.

In the army, Robles fought with the forces of Álvaro Obregón, the military leader from northern Mexico who supported agrarian reforms as part of the revolutionary coalition, and who was elected president of Mexico in 1920.⁶ Between 1923 and 1924, Robles was deployed first to the states of Tabasco and Chiapas and later to the state of Hidalgo, where he fought against the Adolfo de la Huerta rebellion, which unsuccessfully tried to oust Álvaro Obregón's government. After sustaining a bullet wound in Hidalgo, Robles was discharged from the Mexican Army and returned to Guerrero as a civilian. During his active service in the Mexican Army, Amelio Robles fought under Adrián Castrejón, a former Zapatista leader. Castrejón had a very successful political and military career, became governor of the state of Guerrero, and remained in office from 1929 to 1933. Castrejón's influence in the army and his home state's local political networks proved decisive for Robles's masculine identity to be accepted by the local organizations and institutions of the post-revolutionary government.

In the late-twentieth century, the inhabitants of Xochipala, particularly the youngest members of the community, were unaware of Robles's gender transition. They had no inkling that "El Coronel" (The Colonel in the masculine grammatical gender) had lived his childhood and adolescence as a girl and then a young woman, conforming to the gender identity assigned to him at birth and in line with the social norms of the time. Only the older generation knew his background and, on the whole, they respected him and did not confront him (at least not in his presence). His change of identity was not an issue discussed in his family, and even his nieces were oblivious to it despite living under the same roof. Robles's masculinity was taken as a matter of fact. This acceptance was confirmed by Amelio Robles's marital relationship with Ángela Torres, openly acknowledged by the local community. It was further reinforced by the fact that the authorities gave a public school established in 1966 the name Coronel Amelio Robles,⁷ in recognition of his donation of the school grounds to the community.⁸ This act of largesse reaffirmed the former Zapatista guerrilla fighter's reputation as a benefactor of the people and promoter of non-religious public education—a top priority for the revolutionary and post-revolutionary governments, as the basis for society's secularization and modernization.

The federal government also legitimized Amelio Robles's masculine identity when the Ministry of National Defense (Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, SDN) recognized him in 1974 as an official veteran of the Revolution, using the masculine grammatical gender.⁹ This recognition and the corresponding paperwork referred to his masculine identity and name, which Robles used himself when signing letters and petitions addressed to the military authorities and veteran organizations, which responded in kind.¹⁰ He received official acceptance of his masculine identity both locally and elsewhere in Mexico thanks to his bonds of friendship with his comrades-at-arms. Some of these men climbed the rungs of the military and political ladders and recognized Robles's masculinity. Such was the case of the above-mentioned Adrián Castrejón who addressed Amelio Robles in the masculine in official correspondence, although he still occasionally poked fun at Robles by calling him "La Coronela" in the feminine grammatical gender.

The Shifting Memory

Paradoxically, the Mexican Revolution undermined the officially recognized masculine status sustained by Amelio Robles for over fifty years: “La Coronela” Robles emerged as an icon of the armed movement within Guerrero’s cultural apparatus, upon which Amelio Robles had no influence. This feminization of Robles was a long process that began in the mid-twentieth century and took place in parallel with the reconfirmation of Amelio Robles’s masculine identity among his close circle of family and friends, in local organizations, veteran associations, and the SDN. The process ran in parallel but opposite directions: on the one hand, Amelio Robles’s masculine status gained legitimacy on a regular basis in his official correspondence, social and family life; on the other hand, he was assigned a feminine nationalist identity, transforming the Zapatista into an iconic revolutionary Mexican woman.

After his death in 1984, Robles’s feminization went even further. His tombstone at the local cemetery bears an inscription: “Coronela Amelia Robles,” in the feminine grammatical gender. Some years later, in 1989, a small community museum was set up in Xochipala to celebrate Coronela Robles’s female identity and her contributions to the Mexican Revolution. The objects on display include some of Robles’s personal effects and pieces of furniture belonging to his period as a Zapatista. Following the standard nationalist historical narrative that begins with the country’s pre-Hispanic past, the museum’s collection also includes objects found in the nearby archeological site of La Organera.

It is indeed a paradox that the Mexican Revolution facilitated Amelio Robles’s gender transition and the post-revolutionary authorities legitimized his masculinity while commemorations of these complex political and military processes have promoted his femininity. The volatility of war and the Zapatista movement’s popular roots enabled Robles’s masculinization; this identity had the official backing of the post-revolutionary state thanks to the influence of some former Zapatista commanders and Robles’s comrades-at-arms who went on to occupy high-ranking political and military positions. At the same time, the commemorative discourse of the Mexican Revolution celebrated the nationalist feminine images of “Adelita” and “Coronela.” Local commemorative histories of the state of Guerrero included mentions of the woman colonel or “coronela,” and Amelio Robles was powerless to oppose the feminization of his identity. As previously mentioned, the contradiction remains evident in Xochipala today where the Coronel Amelio Robles school still exists, bearing its original name, while a few blocks away, the Coronela Amelia Robles community museum receives local visitors as well as those who come from farther afield.

The most famous transgendering process in the military history of Latin America is that of the nun Catalina de Erauso or La Monja Alférez, the so-called Nun Lieutenant. In the seventeenth century, she took up a masculine identity and appearance to enlist in the service of the Spanish Empire.¹¹ Despite fighting and being treated as a man in the army, evidence suggests that she identified as a female and used a feminine narrative voice in the memoirs she wrote toward the end of her life. Unlike Robles, Alférez’s transition was not permanent, and it appears not to entail a gender transition.

The story of Enriqueta Faber, who lived in Cuba with a male identity in the nineteenth century after fighting with Napoleon's army in France, bears certain similarities with the story of Amelio Robles. Faber's masculinity was recognized in the armed forces and in identity documents. He was even able to marry a woman and became a medical doctor. Although Faber's story has been told by several authors and versions of his life vary in some aspects, his image remained unchanged as part of a larger nationalist narrative or political discourse.¹²

Amelio Robles's permanent gender transition is relevant because it illuminates the social construction and performativity of gender identities. However, the most relevant part of his story is the perceptions of his gender identity. Such conflicting perceptions are embedded in gendered discourses of the Mexican Revolution, which were very powerful in the twentieth century.

Masculinization

Many women adopted masculine identities and wardrobes as a strategy to survive the dangers of the Revolutionary War. Passing as men gave them advantages in the army: access to weapons and horses, promotions through the military ranks, and better pay. Encarnación "La Chona" Mares wore men's clothing and pretended to be a man when joining Venustiano Carranza's forces. She aimed to avoid becoming a "soldadera" (camp follower), women who 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. They also often provided the men sexual and emotional company. The services of these "camp followers" were seldom appreciated; on the contrary, the women were frequently mistreated and abused.¹³ Angelina Jiménez experienced something similar to Encarnación "La Chona" Mares, as Jiménez was given a military rank in the Constitutionalist Army, in which she fought with a masculine appearance and identity. The conclusion of the armed struggle marked the end of the masculine period for them both, and each subsequently lived traditional lives as women and mothers, forming families and taking on domestic tasks.¹⁴

The same happened in the case of Coronela María de la Luz Espinosa, who came from the Costa Chica region of Guerrero and, similar to Amelio Robles, fought for the Liberation Army of the South.¹⁵ Espinosa adopted a masculine identity and appearance when she took up arms, but later abandoned this masculinity to live a domestic life, looking after her children and husband in post-revolutionary Mexico. Some parallels exist between the lives of Robles and Espinosa: both took on masculine identities, fought as guerilla combatants, and received a military rank. However, their respective processes of masculinization contrasted significantly in other respects. Espinosa's decision was pragmatic and temporary without implying a subjective transformation. In contrast, Robles underwent an internal transformation and repositioned himself within the social gender order. His masculine identity, which outlasted his period as an active soldier, expressed a vital impulse, a desire to act, be treated, and be recognized as a man in every aspect of life.

Not all female Zapatista leaders who had men under their command and had a military rank took on a masculine identity. For example, Coronela Rosa Bobadilla,

viuda de Casas who was notoriously tough and disciplinarian with her troops, maintained her feminine identity. The same was true of other women, such as the Zapatista colonels called “La China” and Pepita Neri, both of whom had a reputation for being extremely violent.¹⁶ Their stories reveal that, because the Zapatistas lacked the traditional hierarchy and discipline of a regular army, women could take up arms and assume leadership roles without having to shed their female identities.

The specific circumstances under which Amelia Robles first took up arms are unknown due to a lack of supporting documentation. Oral accounts do exist, however. The memories of those who lived through the Mexican Revolution in Xochipala and their descendants were recorded more than fifty years after the events, and are inevitably colored by the expectations and emotions of the present. They, nonetheless, offer some clues (though subjective) about the circumstances under which Robles joined the Zapatistas and about how Amelia Robles, who was twenty-five years old at the time, still maintained the feminine identity assigned to her at birth.¹⁷

According to these accounts, joining the guerrilla forces offered Robles a way out of the dissatisfaction she felt with the isolation of her home town and a chance to escape her step-father, hence it was a decision born of personal necessity rather than ideological beliefs. The problems with her step-father had worsened since he abused her sexually. These oral histories also consistently indicate that at the time of joining the Zapatistas Robles was in a relationship with Leonor López, a young woman also from Xochipala; however, no subsequent information is available about López.

Amelio Robles's gender transition is another gap in the story, but we can reasonably suppose that it happened gradually over the years of the Zapatista struggle and that his masculinity became firmly established after he enlisted in the Mexican Army, which was out of bounds for women. In 1915, Venustiano Carranza decided to cancel the military appointments of “señoras y señoritas,” (ladies and young ladies), thus excluding female soldiers from the ranks.¹⁸ This ruling did not apply to the Zapatistas who were not part of the national armed forces. At the time of joining the Mexican Army, Amelio Robles's masculine status was already firmly entrenched and recognized by her leaders and fellow comrades-at-arms. Otherwise, she would not have been accepted as a soldier or allowed to fight.

Several official documents confirm his masculine identity. Such is case with the credentials and identity documents from the local organizations he joined: the Socialist Party of Guerrero (Partido Socialista de Guerrero) in 1934, which was affiliated with the National Revolutionary Party, was appointed a delegate in Xochipala for the League of Agrarian Communities (Liga Central de Comunidades Agrarias) in 1945, and became a member of the local Ranchers' Association (Asociación Ganadera) in 1956. These were all corporate organizations recognized and authorized by the State and subject to controls over the selection of their leaders and the formulation of their demands.¹⁹

The veteran organizations that emerged from the late 1930s also accredited his masculine status.²⁰ In 1948, Amelio Robles joined the National Confederation of Veterans of the Revolution (Confederación Nacional de Veteranos) and then the Zapatista Front (Frente Zapatista), led by Adrián Castrejón, who appointed Robles as Secretary of Military Action in 1950. The front represented campesinos who requested land, jobs, and pensions, among other benefits. Despite being a landowner,

Robles requested a military pension for his participation in Zapatismo, but he only received a one-off payment from the government during Luis Echeverría's presidency.

The weightiest official document attesting to Robles's masculine identity is perhaps the birth certificate issued by the Civil Registry Office of Zumpango del Río, which records the birth of the boy Amelio Malaquíás Robles Ávila. The particulars given—the name of the father and mother, date and place of birth—are the same as the handwritten entry in the original birth registration held by the same office.²¹ It is impossible to know whether the apocryphal document was issued in Guerrero or Mexico City, or to know the identity of the intermediaries, but its existence is evidence of the networks of power and the complicities in which Amelio Robles was involved. However, these networks were powerless to prevent the feminization of his identity that had already begun as part of the commemorative discourse of the Mexican Revolution in Guerrero.

Feminization

The Guerrero state government and the federal ministry of education (Secretaría de Educación Pública) published the *El Coyote: Corrido de la Revolución* (1951) (The Coyote: A Ballad of the Revolution) by a rural teacher called Celedonio Serrano Martínez.²² This book was produced to commemorate the centenary of the official founding of this Mexican state in 1949. Written in verse, The Coyote narrates the story of the Mexican revolution in the state of Guerrero. The literary style emulates the popular ballads penned by troubadours during the period of armed struggle. These popular songs recounted the latest news and also past events about which people were already familiar. Listening to a troubadour sing a ballad in fairs or local fiestas was a form of entertainment. The verses and the music of the popular ballads were a means of cultural expression and gave cohesion to particular social groups or regions.²³ Often the verses of the ballads were printed on colorful rice paper sheets, expanding circulation to a larger public. The broadsheets were a form of penny-press that offered entertainment and information at low cost. Engraved primitive illustrations were often printed on the flyers making them more attractive to semi-literate audiences. José Guadalupe Posada was the author of the prints that depicted scenes of life of the popular classes. In the post-revolutionary period Posada's style was celebrated as an expression of the culture of the Mexican revolution and national identity, and some artists emulated his primitive style.

The verses in The Coyote are similar in their form to the popular ballads of the revolutionary period, with the notable difference that they were not authored by popular poets but by a teacher from Veracruz, Celedonio Serrano Martínez. The format was also different, as the Coyote was a large, heavy coffee table book with more than three hundred pages of bond paper. The sheer size of the publication made reading it a difficult task if a table and chair were not available. Its large, heavy format belongs in a library or school and not a fair. Its purpose was not entertainment but educational and was not aimed at a popular audience.

The account of the Mexican Revolution presented by Serrano Martínez celebrates Zapatismo, focusing on the developments of the movement in Guerrero and naming revolutionaries who fought in this Mexican Republic state, giving Guerrero the same standing Morelos had in the history of Zapatismo. By the time the book came out in 1951, the revolutionary movement had become a dominant rhetorical trope in Mexican political discourse. Many saw the Mexican revolution as the foundation of nationalism, progress, and social justice.

The volume's illustrations include engravings and vignettes of Gabriel Fernandez Ledesma and Francisco Moreno Capdeville in a style that was used by artists of the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (*Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios*) and the Popular Graphic Work Shop (*Taller de la Gráfica Popular*). The League and the Workshop were groups of artists committed to protesting against oppression and capitalism with their art. One of their aims was to stir people into action. Their political position was not an obstacle for accepting government commissions especially after the Second World War when their anti-fascist art flourished.

El Coyote dedicates a couple of verses to "La Coronela Amelia Robles" (Colonel Amelia Robles, in the feminine grammatical gender), praising her bravery and femininity. The prints also add to her feminine identity through visible features including her plaits and long dress, as well as the depiction of her mounted side-saddle on horseback. The long skirt and hair are typical of Mexican female national identity. The "China Poblana" (the Chinese woman from Puebla) and "Adelita" (Adelita is the diminutive for the female proper name Adela) sported that style, both figures who were part of the nationalist imagery popularized during the post-revolutionary period and both of whom are depicted as young, attractive, and sexually available rural women.²⁴ They fulfill the role of being the complement of Mexican masculine identity. The "China Poblana" has oriental features and plays the role as the partner of the virile, horse-riding charro, a horseman with a typical outfit and sombrero that became a symbol of national identity. The "Adelita" accompanies the revolutionary soldier, and her feminine traits—beauty, youth, and submissiveness—are the polar opposite and complement of the brave soldier possessing the power to make women submissive.

The revolutionary "Adelita" was an idealization of the camp followers, women who traveled with armies moving across northern Mexico, cooking for them and offering sexual and emotional company as well as rudimentary first aid. The woman colonel or "Coronela" on the other hand was a reference to armed women in command of troops, idealized as figures who enjoyed a certain degree of personal autonomy and freedom, and yet, by remaining within the parameters of complementarity between masculine and feminine identities, did not threaten any upset to the established social gender order. Despite the contrasts between the two idealizations, the "Adelita" and female colonel figures, they also shared some characteristics: they were abstractions without any individualizing features since they lacked any specific geographical origin, political affiliation, or ideological position. As abstract entities, they could be adapted to suit accounts of the revolutionary movement in the country's different regions and political factions. As such, they were idealizations that rendered invisible poor women who had names and surnames and individual stories—some submissive, others violent—and, like the menfolk, also joined the uprisings with the hope of changing their situation.

The image of the female colonel was less widespread as compared to the “Adelita,” who became an icon of women’s participation in the Mexican Revolution. In spite of the differences between them, both figures can be seen as “invented traditions” establishing a feminine nationalist and revolutionary identity.²⁵ Invented traditions, according to Eric Hobsbawm, are discourses that serve the political needs of the present and give legitimacy to certain practices by assigning them a link to a past that never existed and are usually invented. The feminized figure of “Coronela Robles” (Colonel Robles, in the feminine gender) adds legitimacy to the revolutionary participation of women who had a certain control over their situation and did not question the binary nature of gender, according to which feminine and masculine identities and social spaces are immutable and clearly contrasting human expressions. At the same time, Coronel Amelia Robles, in the feminine gender, was accepted in the Guerrero region because she offered the local history of the Mexican Revolution a person of comparable status to the famous “Adelita.” The anonymous author of a popular ballad from the 1970s on this topic supports this point: in the north, there was “Adelita,” and in the south, the warrior Amelia Robles.²⁶

The “Adelita” and the image of the female colonel entered the spotlight in the 1930s as part of the heated public debate on women’s suffrage, and came to form a part of the commemorative discourse of the Mexican Revolution. Those defending women’s right to vote praised these figures to draw attention to women’s participation in the Revolution, and recognized the female combatants’ political usefulness as a way of countering the argument put forward by those opposing the women’s vote, namely that women were more Catholic and conservative than men, and that giving them citizenship rights risked jeopardizing the country’s stability and reform process.²⁷ The activists supporting women’s suffrage used various ways to refer to their commitment to the armed struggle and revolutionary causes. Refugio García, secretary of an organization supporting The Sole Front of Women’s Rights (Frente Único Pro-Derechos de las Mujeres), insisted that the smell of gunpowder remained fresh in the hair of women who had participated actively in the armed uprising; other suffragettes drew up a list of the names and details of specific women who fought in the Revolution. Amalia de Castillo Ledón, President of the Mexican Athenium of Women (Ateneo Mexicano de Mujeres), was also active in this regard, arguing that providing equal suffrage for women and opening government positions to women with suitable training was not at odds with a clear and unequivocal feminine identity, as expressed in their attire and refined manners. This was a modern form of feminism, which Castillo Ledón called “feminine feminism,” a means of including women in public affairs but without undermining the feminine and masculine characteristics that society attributed to women and men respectively. Castillo Ledón considered that the definition of such feminism needed to move away from “primitive feminism,” led by the movement’s precursors—feminist women who encountered such a hostile reaction that they were forced “to look butch and dress accordingly, ignoring their hygiene, forgetting their manners and the psychology of their gender.”²⁸ The times had changed, and it was no longer necessary to resort to such excesses.

The female colonel was a figure embodying a feminist spirit who demanded equal civil rights for women, while at the same time placating those opposed to women’s

suffrage. Objectors to the suffragette movement were concerned that women would become masculinized as a result of their involvement in public affairs; they feared that women would become so absorbed in public life that they would neglect their domestic duties and reject the typically feminine and maternal characteristics attributed by society to women, leading inexorably to their masculinization. This was not a newfound anxiety but one that had already surfaced in the early twentieth century when women began to enter the workplace; the public debate over women's suffrage simply brought the issue back into focus. Those defending women's right to vote needed to overcome people's fear on two counts: women's assumed political conservatism, and the loss or impairment of feminine identity defined by maternity and dedication to the home. These fears delayed universal women's suffrage for a further fifteen years, and it was only granted in 1953.

Furthermore, a modern dance performance called *La Coronela*, premiered in 1940 with choreography by US dancer Waldeen and musical score by Silvestre Revueltas and Blas Galindo, revived the revolutionary, nationalist, and armed feminine revolutionary figure. The iconography that provided inspiration for the choreography was José Guadalupe Posada's print of a woman wearing a rebozo (typical shawl) and holding a rifle propped up against her side. The show's choreographer and creator imagined the female colonel as a full expression of Mexican nationalism and feminine identity.²⁹

Gabriel Fernández Ledesma, whose prints were used to illustrate the aforementioned book called *El Coyote*, also worked on the set design of this dance performance. This artist, founder of the League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers (*Liga de Autores y Escritores Revolucionarios*, LEAR), conceived art as an expression of nationalism and social commitment. The *Coronela Robles* print shares at least two of the elements found in Posada's work: the rifle and the long dress, graphic components more closely linked to the conventional artistic image of the "Coronela" than to Amelio Robles's actual appearance. The female colonel was also the subject of the novel by Francisco Rojas González, *La Negra Angustias* (1944), awarded the National Literature Prize in the same year of its publication. Matilde Landete made a film of the book, in an adaptation critics have described as feminist both for its intention to show women's contributions to the revolutionary movement and for the obstacles facing them.

Gertrude Duby Blom, a journalist and photographer exiled in Mexico in the early 1940s, also produced a feminized representation of Robles. Duby visited and interviewed Robles in Xochipala as part of a feature to raise the profile of Zapatista women of the Mexican Revolution.³⁰ In this text—which remained unpublished for decades—the journalist finds that Amelio Robles's masculinity is not an expression of identity but a strategy to cope with an environment hostile to women's attempts to participate in politics. In this respect, she agrees with Amalia de Castillo Ledón's explanation of the motives for their precursors in adopting a manly aspect and identity and moving away from the "the psychology of their gender."³¹ However, both aspects of Robles overlook her gender transition and Amelio Robles's satisfaction with his masculine body image and movement, something he nurtured carefully and effectively with his choice of wardrobe, gestures, and behavior of a rural Mexican man.

The feminine image of the "Coronela" Amelio Robles was affirmed with the establishment of the community house-museum in Xochipala, which bears his name

in its feminine form, and is also supported by the National Institute of Anthropology and History (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, INAH). The Robles family backed the museum project, providing furniture and personal effects of the former Zapatista fighter and for some years provided a large room in their house to serve as a community museum (it later was moved to the premises of the former school building). Amelio Robles's gender identity began to change after his death, and his great-nephew and nieces were pleased at the attention lavished on the female Colonel Robles as an iconic historical figure. The change in attitude can be understood due to the attention received by Coronela Robles in the press and from the state government.

The initiative came from a group that supports the elderly and was backed by the Guerrero State Government's Ministry for Women, a government office established in 1987 (two years before the museum opened its doors). Its objectives included supporting gender equality, promoting women's participation in the economy, and combating violence against women. This ministry's support to the museum can be explained because honoring outstanding women from the past by publishing their names and photographs is a manner of celebrating women's contributions to society in the present.³²

A large-sized color portrait, kept by the family and now one of the main exhibits in the museum, characterizes Robles as an iconic woman of the revolution. Also on display are identity documents showing Robles in his masculine identity, effectively leaving visitors to reach their own conclusions. Perhaps many people simply do not care much about the matter and readily accept Robles's feminine identity as expressed in the museum's name.

Amelio Robles's memory found a new vocation as a symbol of sexual diversity in the twenty-first century, particularly following the centenary celebrations commemorating the 1910 Revolution.³³ Activists began to work in different parts of the country: in Monterrey, in the state of Nuevo León, one group set up the Amelio Robles prize for people, organizations, and companies that support equal rights for gays, lesbians, and transgender people; a profile in the LGTBI Obituary mentions his identity change and a transmasculine activist called Mario Sánchez sung a ballad he wrote himself, dedicated to Robles, while wearing a rainbow flag across his chest, reminiscent of the cartridge belts worn by the fighters and seen in the numerous portraits in the revolutionary period. The spirit of acceptance of sexual diversity is also found in a leaflet about his life. This text—published in Chilpancingo, the capital of the state of Guerrero—mentions his “difference” and, while remaining ambiguous, appears understanding of his gender transition.³⁴ However, both cases focus on his participation in the Zapatista uprising, overlooking the fact that this was just one period in his military career and that his active service in the Mexican Army was instrumental for him to have received official recognition of his masculinity.

Conclusion

Transgender identities are authentic and consist of the same elements as feminine and masculine identities assigned at birth: people's body language and gestures, social behavior and subjective constitutions. The history of Amelio Robles is interesting

partly because it reveals the social construction of gender and also because it allows us to explore different perspectives on this matter.

The history of Amelio Robles's permanent transgender identity is a unique case because of the existence of documents and photographs that register both his masculinity and the construction of a feminine icon that uses his name and biography. The first group of archival material accounts for his legal and subjective masculinity and his bodily performativity, while the second group of materials register those who blatantly erase or try to erase his acquired maleness. Amelio Robles's military career first as a guerilla fighter and then as a rank-and-file federal soldier was otherwise short and unremarkable: if not for his transgender identity, perhaps his life story may never have become known outside the circle of his family and local community, as his military career was not particularly outstanding and resembled that of thousands of other Zapatista combatants.

In terms of documentation, no equivalent to the story of Robles exists in the history of Mexico or Latin America. Its significance, however, is not to be found in his transgender identity but the conflictive perceptions of his masculinity. The exaltation of his often violent masculinity in the troubled and unstable days of war, shifted to the institutional oral and written recognition of his masculine identity. The local and national political connections that protected Amelio Robles in the post-revolutionary recognition could not avoid the feminization of his image and name in nationalist cultural expressions underpinned by the invented traditions of the "Adelita" and female colonel figures. These identities were bolstered by a feminism that demanded equal and universal suffrage for women from the 1930s, and their femininity provided a means of confronting people's anxiety about women's supposed masculinization resulting from their possible inclusion in public life. Therefore, the regional commemorative history of the state of Guerrero helped attribute feminine qualities to Robles by using him to give the state a certain standing in the history of the revolutionary movement.

Notes

- 1 Edith Pérez Abarca, *Amelia Robles. Revolucionaria Zapatista del Sur* (Chilpancingo, Guerrero: PACMYC 2000, CONACULTA, Unidad Regional Guerrero de Culturas Populares e Indígenas, Instituto Guerrerense de la Cultura, 2007), 15–16.
- 2 Rosa E. King, *Tempest over Mexico* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1940).
- 3 Gabriela Cano, "Unconcealable Realities of Desire: Amelio Robles (Transgender) Masculinity in the Mexican Revolution," in *Sex in Revolution. Gender, Politics and Power in Modern Mexico*, ed. Jocelyn Olcott, Mary Kay Vaughan, and Gabriela Cano (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 35–56.
- 4 I use the feminine name Amelia, and the feminine pronouns she and her when referring to Robles in early life when she lived as a girl and as a woman and reserve the masculine name, Amelio, for the longer period when he was recognized as man.
- 5 Publications on Zapatismo in the Mexican Revolution include: John Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968); Samuel Brunk, *Emiliano Zapata: Revolution and Betrayal in Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of

- New Mexico Press, 1995); Felipe Arturo Avila Espinosa, *Los orígenes del zapatismo* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2001). The meanings and representations of Zapatismo following Emiliano Zapata's death are the subject of Samuel Brunk's book, Samuel Brunk, *The Posthumous Career of Emiliano Zapata: Myth, Memory and Mexico's Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).
- 6 Robles's military career is documented by paperwork contained in two personal files: AHSDN, Cancelados, 112–119, Amelio Robles Avila, AHTE, INAH, Gro.-06.
 - 7 Pérez Abarca, *Amelia Robles*, 17.
 - 8 The date is recorded on one of the walls of the former school building where the Amelia Robles house-museum is now located.
 - 9 Gabriela Cano, "La masculinidad trans de Amelio Robles en sus documentos de archivo," in *Sociología y género: estudios en torno a performances, violencias y temporalidades*, ed. Karine Tinat and Arturo Alvarado (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Sociológicos, 2017), 27–49.
 - 10 AHSDN, Cancelados, 112–119, Amelio Robles Avila.
 - 11 Catalina de Erauso, *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Lieutenant Nun* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).
 - 12 James Pancrazio, "Reescritura, invención y plagio: Enriqueta Faber y la escritura del travestismo" in http://www.habanaelegante.com/Fall_Winter_2014/Invitation_Pancrazio.html, viewed on February 1, 2019.
 - 13 AHSDN, Cancelados, Maria Encarnación Mares, C-801 and AHTE, INAH, Gro.-06.
 - 14 Esther R. Pérez, James Kallas, and Nina Kallas, *Those Years of the Revolution, 1910–1920* (San José, California: Aztlan Today, 1974), 37–39.
 - 15 Anna Macías, *Against All Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 42–43.
 - 16 Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, 170.
 - 17 Pérez Abarca, *Amelia Robles*, 31–34.
 - 18 *El Constitucionalista*, *Diario oficial del gobierno constitucionalista de la República mexicana*, March 29, 1916, 1.
 - 19 AHTE, INAH, Gro.-06.
 - 20 A portrayal of these veteran organizations can be found in Martha Eva Rocha Islas, *Los rostros de la rebeldía. Veteranas de la Revolución Mexicana, 1910–1939* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Cultura, Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de las Revoluciones de México, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2016), 43–101.
 - 21 AHSDN, Certified copy of birth certificate, April 8, 1957.
 - 22 Celedonio Serrano Martínez, *El coyote. Corrido de la revolución* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1951).
 - 23 These notes on the *corrido* are based on the work of Guillermo Bonfil Batalla "Trovos y trovadores de la región Amecameca-Cuautla," Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, Teresa Rojas Rabiela, and Ricardo Pérez Monfort, *Corridos, trovas y bolas de la región de Amecameca-Cuautla. Colección de don Miguelito Salomón* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2018), 11–32.
 - 24 I have referred to Adriana Zavala's analysis on the "Adelita" in her study of La China Poblana in Adriana Zavala, *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition: Women, Gender and Representation in Mexican Art* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

- 25 Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–14.
- 26 JCR, "Corrido a la sin par guerrillera, Amelia Robles," Zumpango del Río, 1959.
- 27 Gabriela Cano, "The Feminist Debate in Mexico," in *The Routledge History of Latin American Culture*, ed. Carlos Manuel Salomón (New York: Routledge, 2018), 284–297.
- 28 Amalia de Castillo Ledón, "Memorial del Departamento de la Mujer," in Gabriela Cano (sel.) *Amalia de Castillo Ledón. Mujer de Letras, mujer de poder. Antología* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las Artes, 2011), 99.
- 29 César Delgado Martínez, *Waldeen. La Coronela de la danza mexicana* (Mexico City: Escenología, AC, 2000).
- 30 Gabriela Cano, "Gertrude Duby y la historia de las mujeres zapatistas de la Revolución Mexicana," *Estudios Sociológicos* 28, no. 83 (May–August 2010): 579–597.
- 31 Amalia de Castillo Ledón, "Discurso ante la Columna de la Independencia," in Gabriela Cano (sel.) *Amalia de Castillo Ledón. Mujer de Letras, mujer de poder. Antología* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las Artes, 2011), 93.
- 32 "Secretaría de la Mujer. Catorce años de lucha a favor de la mujer guerrerense, 1987–2001," *Mujeres del Sur. Bienestar, política, salud y cultura en Guerrero*, April–June 2011, 4–6.
- 33 In an article illustrated with photographs, aimed at a general readership, and subsequently in a chapter published in English in 2006 which was later translated into Spanish in 2009, I proposed that Robles should be seen as a transgender person rather than as a revolutionary woman. This work attracted media attention in 2010 during the celebrations marking the centenary of the Mexican Revolution. Gabriela Cano, "La íntima felicidad del coronel Robles," *Equis*, no. 14 (June 1999), 25–34 and Cano, "Unconcealable Realities", 35–56. In a previous publication, I wrote a short article on Robles, whom I saw as a revolutionary woman: Gabriela Cano, "El coronel Robles: una combatiente zapatista," *Fem.*, April 1988, 22–24.
- 34 Pérez Abarca, *Amelia Robles*, 22.