



“Mi mayor venganza es que un día seremos felices”: Adversity and Resilience in the Stories of Transgender Activist Kenya Cuevas

Alejandro Aguilar-Arriaga

University of Guanajuato, Guanajuato, MEXICO
Division of Social Sciences and Humanities

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Abstract

Kenya Cuevas is a transgender woman, social advocate, and human rights activist, who has garnered numerous recognitions and awards, such as the Mexico City Honors on Human Rights and in 2021 was recognized by *Forbes Magazine* as one of the most powerful women in the country. However, she has faced controversy in her battle against hegemonic structures in Mexican society. This study employs a narrative analysis framework to analyze a set of Kenya's narratives, which aims to portray the recognition of her gender identity within a Mexican context. The findings illustrate the lack of strong social recognition for transgender identity in Mexico and emphasize the need for society to raise awareness about the importance of acknowledging diverse gender expressions.

Keywords: transgender identity, Queer theory, discourse, narrative analysis, México.

1. Introduction

The extended level of violence that Mexicans have faced in the last decade has had an impact in every sector of the society (Canudas-Romo et al., 2017). Gender identity-based violence is not the exception. There has been a significant increase on hate crimes and expressive cruelty toward LGBTQIA+ individuals, specifically towards transgender woman (Valencia & Zhuravleva, 2019). Moreover, Mexico occupies the second place as one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be transgender, just next to Brazil, which has the most violent rate of the world (Spizzirri et al., 2021). The surge of this particular violence has resulted in the emergence of social fighters who have made significant efforts in defeating their cause, aiming for the recognition of their identity and for a place within society. Kenya Cuevas is one of them. She is a well-known Mexican activist and transgender rights advocate that has made significant contributions to the advancement of LGBTQIA+ rights, specifically the transgender and non-binary individuals. She has been a vocal spokesperson for the transgender community within the Mexican legal system.

To begin with this article, the objective is to analyze the key features of her gender identity portrayed through her narrative and the linguistic elements that Cuevas makes use of to portray her overview as a transgender person in a Mexican oppressive society. In order to conduct the discourse analysis, I will first provide a theoretical framework related to the key concepts of the research such as Queer theory and transgender identity. Then, the methodology and research

questions encompassed with an overview of the framework used for carrying out the narrative analysis will be presented. In addition, the procedure for conducting this analysis is provided.

- Kenya’s narratives illustrate how a significant number of transgender women are portrayed in Mexican social environments.
- The process of recognition and affirmation of one’s gender identity have a significant empowering effect on personal development within society.
- Hegemonic structures are a persistent feature when aggressive attitudes towards transgender persons are displayed.
- There is a scarcity of representation of transgender figures within Mexican society.

1.1 Background

Kenya Cytlaly Cuevas Fuentes is a Mexican transgender activist who was born in Mexico City in 1973. When she was still a baby, her mother moved to the United States leaving her with her grandmother. Her father had an alcohol addiction and another family, so he was absent the majority of the time. Due to the constant physical and psychological violence she suffered from her siblings, she decided to leave her grandmother’s house at the age of ten. At that time, she started to work as a sex worker in the streets of Mexico City.

Kenya Cuevas endured a difficult life marked by substance abuse, homelessness, and an HIV diagnosis at the age of 13. She was involved in sex work and subsequently arrested for drug trafficking, spending nearly 11 years in *Santa Martha Acatitla* prison. During her time there, she experienced sexual and physical assaults from guards, police officers, and administrators. At the same time, she cared for fellow inmates with HIV and worked to secure medical and psychological resources for them.

In a tragic turn of events, Kenya witnessed the murder of her friend Paola Buenrostro in 2016. The perpetrator, a former client, also attempted to kill Kenya. Despite the arrest, the man was released due to insufficient evidence, prompting Kenya to advocate for the rights of the transgender population. In 2021, Mexico City’s Prosecutor, Ernestina Godoy, publicly apologized to Kenya and acknowledged the discrimination she faced due to their gender identity and expression. This marked a significant moment as the term “transfeminicide” was officially recognized in Mexico City’s legal system.

As a result of such injustices, Kenya founded *Casa de las Muñecas Tiresias*,¹ the first non-governmental organization offering shelter to transgender and queer individuals in need in Mexico City. Through her organization, Kenya has established seven shelters across the country, providing housing, education, substance abuse rehabilitation, legal support, and funeral assistance for victims of hate crimes and their families. Kenya’s unwavering dedication has brought hope and support to marginalized communities in Mexico. As a trademark quote, she always recalls that “our biggest revenge is that we will be happy.”

2. Theoretical framework

This section offers an overview of research conducted about transgender identity in discourse analysis studies. In this section the key elements that structure the theoretical framework of this research will be addressed: Queer theory and transgender identity.

¹ The website for the organization and more information for making donations may be found here: <https://www.munecastiresias.org/kenyacuevas>.

2.1 Queer theory

In response to the marginalization experienced in various aspects of society, Queer theory aims to reframe these negative assertions as research goals or even sources of pride. Teresa de Lauretis (1991) introduced the term “Queer theory” to describe a flexibility in thoughts and ideas, going beyond the binary concept of gender. It incorporates elements from feminist theory, gay and lesbian studies, as well as postmodern and poststructuralist theories. As a result of the historical and social challenges diverse population has faced, Nelson (2006) reflects on the development of the Queer theory and its activism: “Queer theory transforms the sexual identity into a critique object, defying the actual conceptions society has around them, breaking boundaries among all sexualities and gender expressions” (p. 47).

Hence, Queer theory comprises principles that support the understanding of gender identities as fluid aspects, not limited to a person’s sexual orientation or gender expression. Queer theory seeks to address the marginalization experienced by minority groups, specifically the LGBTQIA+ community. Its objective is to challenge and transform the negative assumptions that society has towards the diverse community, with the ultimate goal of achieving equality and ensuring social and legal recognition for all identities and expressions of gender.

Therefore, Queer theory provides a counterpoint to the assumptions made by heteronormativity, which reinforce the idea of stable heterosexuality and a binary understanding of masculine and feminine genders. Therefore, being ‘different’ is interpreted as an analytical category which aims to give voice to all the non-conforming gender identities and sexual orientations that have been silenced throughout the time regarding homophobic, racist, classist and androcentric ideas (Fonseca-Hernández & Quintero-Soto, 2009). The purpose of this theory is to reveal and dismantle the fluidity and instability of identities, presenting an alternative viewpoint that challenges the privileges associated with a secure hegemonic model. In doing so, Queer theory prompts critical discussions and fosters a deeper understanding of the diversity within gender identities and expressions.

2.2 Transgender identity

Transgender, or “trans,” is a term commonly used to describe individuals whose gender identity, expression, or behavior does not conform to societal norms associated with their assigned sex at birth (American Psychological Association, 2011). In contrast, “cisgender” or “cis” refers to individuals whose gender identity aligns with their assigned sex (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). In Latin America, the term “transgender” is used in various ways by both scholars and the transgender community, encompassing a wide range of gender identities and expressions that are fluid, complex, and in a constant change (Martínez-Guzmán & Johnson, 2021).

Transgender identity, at its essence, involves an individual’s profound and personal understanding of their gender, which might not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. Gender identity exists on a spectrum, with transgender individuals identifying as male, female, or non-binary (Cerezo et al., 2014). It is crucial to recognize that gender identity is not determined by physical attributes, but rather by an individual’s innate sense of self. As mentioned by Haimson and Veinot (2019) “gender transition imagines an unambiguous, specific moment in which one’s gender switches.

It is a process rather than a moment; it involves transgender identity disclosures to different people in one’s life” (p. 158). Society often portrays gender transition as a single, definitive moment when an individual’s gender abruptly changes. Nevertheless, this oversimplification fails to capture the intricate and multifaceted nature of the transition process. Gender transition encompasses a journey that extends beyond a singular event, incorporating

multiple stages such as the disclosure of one’s transgender identity to different individuals in their life.

3. Methodology

By means of conducting the analysis, three transcripts belonging of an interview with Kenya Cuevas were chosen in order to examine the linguistic features of her gender identity. The transcripts were obtained from a podcast named “Mas allá del rosa” hosted by Jessica Fernández García². The rationale behind the selection of this text relies on the fact that illustrates autobiographical meaningful stages of her life as a transgender woman, such as the realization and embracement of her gender identity.

In order to analyze those narratives, Labov’s (1970) framework narrative components were selected. Therefore, the research questions that encompass this analysis are the following:

- How is transgender identity portrayed in the discourse of Kenya Cuevas?
- What elements from her discourse reflect positive and negative social assumptions society has towards a transgender person?

Hence, this research seeks to provide a rationale behind the following objectives:

- To determine the linguistic elements that can effectively portray Kenya Cuevas’ gender identity transition.
- To explore the potential empowerment derived from her gender identity recognition through active engagement in social activism.

3.1 Labov’s framework of narrative analysis

Labov’s model of narrative analysis is a framework for analyzing the structure and content of personal narratives. Developed by sociolinguist William Labov (1960), the model is based on the idea that narratives are a fundamental way in which individuals construct and convey their identities and experiences. As mentioned by Boyle (2018) “words and narratives shape the ways in which it is (not) possible to understand the issues at stake, they are legislated against, measured and resourced and the responses which are deemed most urgent and appropriate” (p. 2). This research field is considered multifaceted and multidisciplinary, employing narratives to portray human experiences and interactions (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Storytelling is widely recognized as a legitimate model of inquiry in several disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and education (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Gilbert, 1994; Nespore et al., 1995; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). By analyzing the organization, content, and complexity of narratives, this approach provides a framework for comprehending how storytellers construct their stories (Labov & Waletzky, 1997). Labov’s focus on linguistic patterns and structures helps uncover the intricate meanings embedded within narratives. The model consists of six components: Abstract, Orientation, Complicating Action, Evaluation, Resolution, and Coda.

² The complete podcast may be found at the following link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4Vb7jz_47E.

Table 1. Labov's model of natural narrative (1972)

Narrative category	Narrative question	Narrative function
Abstract	<i>What was this about?</i>	Signals that the story is about to begin and draws attention from the listener.
Orientation	<i>Who or what are involved in the story, and when and where did it take place?</i>	Helps the listener to identify the time, place, persons, activity, and situation of the story.
Complicating Action	<i>Then what happened?</i>	The core narrative category providing the 'what happened' element of the story.
Resolution	<i>What finally happened?</i>	Recapitulates the final key event of a story.
Evaluation	<i>So what?</i>	Functions to make the point of the story clear
Coda	<i>How does it all end?</i>	Signals that a story has ended and brings listener back to the point at which she/he entered the narrative.

3.2 Procedure

The analysis of the two transcripts of Kenya's interview was carried out according to the six elements of Labov's framework. Hence, each of the two texts were characterized according to the correspondent stages of the model. Following the objectives of this study, three salient themes were identified and interpreted by considering the most meaningful events on Kenya's experiences.

4. Data analysis and discussion

For the aims of conducting the analysis, two texts obtained from the podcast were manually transcribed and characterized within the six stages of Labov's model. Table 2 characterizes the first extract from Kenya Cuevas' interview within the narrative analysis components. Two salient themes were identified: Self-discovery and identity and Overcoming her fears.

Table 2. Narrative analysis: Transcript 1

Narrative category	Extract 1 from Kenya Cuevas' interview	Context of situation
Orientation	<i>Lo único que si sabía era que no quería regresar a esa casa, estaba segura de ello</i>	Kenya was heavily punished due his brother's substance abuse, so she decides to leave their home.
Complicating action	<i>Entonces me cayó la noche y a lo lejos observe que venía caminando hacia mí una silueta de una mujer, y cuando la veo, así de manera sistemática me identifiqué con ella</i>	She narrates on how was the first night she escaped from her house, when she was walking with no direction, and suddenly, in the middle of the night, she meets this exquisite figure of a woman.
Evaluation	<i>Ahí me di cuenta, yo cuando estaba chiquita pensaba que sólo eso pasaba en mi cabeza, o que la loca era yo, que sólo a mí me gustaban los hombres, y es que como todo mundo me violentaba y como no había información y yo no conocía a otras personas LGBT pensaba que eso nada más pasaba en mi cabeza</i>	She reflects on their childhood memories, recalling that she always knew she was attracted to men.
Resolution	<i>Pero eso cuando vi a esa mujer se destruyó, dije no, aquí hay más y yo quiero ser así</i>	After reflecting on past memories, she manifests to the interviewer that finally she was able to find a role model to follow, even when she did not know who that person was.

Coda	<i>¡Totalmente! Se me abrió un mundo de posibilidad y esperanza, porque dije yo quiero ser así</i>	She reaffirms on how that woman she saw during her tragic night was her first role model.
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Note: no abstract was identified in the narrative.

4.1 Self-discovery and identity

This theme highlights Kenya’s journey of self-discovery and exploration of her personal identity (Table 2). The narrative expresses her realization that her feelings and desires are valid, challenging their previous beliefs about herself. The encounter with the trans woman acts as a catalyst for self-reflection and self-recognition. She reflects on her past thoughts and beliefs, sharing that she used to think her experiences were merely a thing that was only happening to her, to her own mind or that she was getting “crazy.” This suggests a period of confusion and internal struggle, potentially due to societal norms, the time she was experiencing this, or a lack of understanding about their own identity.

However, upon seeing the trans woman and identifying with her, her perspective shifts. She embraces the realization that there is more to her identity and express a desire to embody those qualities. This theme emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance, discovering one’s identity, and the transformative power of encountering someone who embodies aspects of that identity, a role model. It highlights the significance of finding validation and connection in understanding oneself authentically.

4.2 Overcoming her fears

Kenya mentions experiencing violence from others and lacking information about their own experiences and identity. This suggests the presence of social stigma, discrimination, and a lack of support or resources for exploring her identity. Her belief that her feelings were confined to her own mind demonstrates the internalized stigma that can arise when individuals feel isolated or lack exposure to diverse experiences. She also mentions not knowing other LGBT individuals, indicating a lack of community and representation, which further contributes to her doubts about her own experiences.

However, the encounter with the trans woman acts as a turning point. It challenges Kenya’s preconceived notions and opens her eyes to a world beyond her previous understanding. This newfound perspective offers hope and possibility, indicating the potential for personal growth and breaking the binarism of how she was supposed to be. It emphasizes the transformative power of exposure to diverse identities and the importance of creating inclusive communities that support and validate individual experiences.

Table 3 characterizes the second extract from Kenya Cuevas’ interview within the narrative analysis components. From this text and due the meaningful events it addresses, a salient theme was identified: I am a trans woman.

Table 3. Narrative analysis: Transcript 2

<i>Narrative category</i>	<i>Extract from Kenya Cuevas’ interview</i>	<i>Context of situation</i>
Orientation	<i>K: A ver yo siempre me identifiqué como mujer</i>	The interviewer asks Kenya if she always felt that she was a woman and if she always felt attracted to men or was something that evolved throughout the time. Nevertheless, she acknowledges their gender identity and sexual orientation consciously from the begging.

Complicating action	<i>K: Yo siempre quise ser una niña, jugaba con muñecas, peinaba a mis sobrinas, jugaba con ellas, a pesar de que tenía sobrinos y jugaban con pelota yo nunca jugué pelota, me inclinaba más a esto, las peinaba, ¿no? Y yo decía yo quiero ser así, pero a mí siempre me travistieron, me dijeron tú eres niño, tú debes traer el pelo corto, entonces sobre esa imposición yo tuve que construir una identidad que yo no sentía, ¿no? Decía pues niño ¿no? Pelo corto, me gustan las niñas ¿no? Para no quedar mal y no me golpearan y no se burlaran de mí</i>	She narrates that she always knew she was a girl, and how she used to play with her nieces rather than her nephews, stating that she always felt as a travesty, wearing clothes that belonged to an identity she never acknowledged.
Evaluation	<i>K: Mucha incertidumbre, mucho miedo, eh... (..) o sea igual o sea me quería sentir niña, pero no lo podía expresar, entonces era algo que yo solamente tenía cuando me quedaba sola a hacer el que hacer en la casa, pues yo me ponía hacer el que hacer y me ponía una toalla en el pelo, ¿o sea cosas y actitudes que nadie me enseñó no? ¿Yo observaba los estereotipos y cómo funcionaba una mujer y un hombre no? Y sobre eso fui basando mi identidad, yo dije, yo quiero ser así, me gustan los labiales, me gusta maquillar mis pestañas, o sea yo quiero tener el pelo largo, o sea en esos años K: Y pues claro, yo no veía a nadie igual</i>	The interviewer asks Kenya if she experienced the sense of being in another body that did not fit with her own conceptions and expectations. She narrates on her childhood experiences of discovery by embracing traditional female roles when she was alone at her house due to the fear and insecurities she had.
Resolution	<i>K: Claro claro claro, y de hecho cuando veo a esta mujer pues obvio fue ese mundo de posibilidades ¿no? Entonces, pues ya cuando les pido a las chicas que me arreglen, me quedé viendo en el espejo y por primera vez, me pude identificar con esa mujer, con esa niña</i>	She recalls again on how life changing was to see that woman, asking her fellow coworkers to dress her and make up like the woman she saw on the streets
Coda	<i>K: Ay no me sentí feliz, me sentí conforme, en paz conmigo misma ¿no? Y aparte creo que logré encontrar mi identidad, no, eh, me sentía perdida en un espacio, entonces cuando llegó esta transición hijole dije, es que yo soy así, y yo tengo que ser así ¿no?</i>	She expresses freedom, liberation, being in a peaceful mental state once she recognizes herself in the mirror

Note: no abstract was identified

4.3 I am a Trans Woman

In the analysis of this extract (Table 3), a prominent theme that emerged is Kenya's realization and affirmation of her identity as a trans woman. From a young age, she deeply felt a sense of being a girl, expressing her desire to play with dolls, style her hair, and engage in activities typically associated with femininity. However, societal expectations and impositions forced her to adopt a male identity, leading her to feel confusion, fear, and a constant sense of not belonging. Kenya describes the internal struggle of trying to suppress her true identity and conform to societal norms.

She narrates on being transgressed and invalidated, with people labeling her as a boy and insisting on short hair and masculine appearances. TGNC (Transgender and Gender Nonconforming) individuals often express a sense of limitation in their narratives, feeling overshadowed by the more prominent lesbian and gay discourses. This phenomenon is commonly termed as the "silent T" (Zimman, 2009). Despite these impositions, she maintained a strong and persistent identification with being a woman, expressing that the innate nature of their gender identity was always there. At the same time, she signals her realization that her identity aligns with being a woman, despite societal expectations and norms. She emphasizes the strength and

resilience required to assert and embrace one’s gender identity, particularly in a society where transgender individuals face marginalization, discrimination, and a lack of understanding.

Kenya also highlights the significance of finding representation and role models within the transgender community. She expresses astonishment at the realization that she is not alone in this world, indicating the importance of seeing others who have undergone similar journeys and found their authentic selves, their true selves. Kenya’s experiences align with the principles of Queer theory, which challenges the binary understanding of gender and embraces the fluidity and diversity of human identities (Giesecking, 2008).

Queer theory recognizes that gender is a social construct and encourages the exploration and celebration of nonconforming gender identities. Kenya’s journey exemplifies the transformative power of embracing one’s true self and finding strength within the transgender community. This recognition opens a world of possibilities, providing hope and validation for her gender identity. Lastly, Kenya encompasses a sense of profound realization, self-acceptance, and peace towards living authentically. It underscores the importance of embracing one’s true gender identity, even in the face of societal challenges, and finding a sense of empowerment and fulfillment in being true to oneself.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to portray an overview of what it means to be a transgender woman during a difficult period of social and economic changes in Mexico. Kenya voiced through her narratives a reality that a greater number of the transgender woman population experience nationwide: discrimination, transphobia, lack of social recognition, justice, and legislation specific for transgender and nonconforming individuals and of course, absence of representative figures within social settings. Furthermore, Kenya’s narratives clearly express the challenges that a person who identifies herself/himself/themselves outside the binarism in México face.

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need to develop inclusive spaces within society that not only acknowledge the existence and rights of transgender individuals but also provide support, understanding, and legal recognition. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of representation and visibility of transgender and non-binary individuals in order to challenge societal norms and promote acceptance beyond the binary thinking.

By examining Kenya’s narratives and amplifying her voice, this paper aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and advocacy work focused on transgender rights and social inclusion. It serves as a call to action for policymakers, legislators, and society to address the systemic binary barriers and hegemonic attitudes faced by transgender persons and actively strive towards constructing a more equitable and inclusive society that embraces the diversity of gender identities.

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