

Amelio Robles, gait of the old soldier. *
(Transgender) masculinity in the Mexican Revolution¹

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1. The people's dandy

We can just imagine it: a smile of satisfaction drawn across Amelio Robles' face as he observed the studio portrait that showed him posing like a true dandy: a dark suit, a white shirt, a tie, a wide-brimmed hat, leather shoes and a white handkerchief peeking through his coat pocket. Standing with a cigarette in one hand, the other one placed on his revolver, as if to highlight the weapon he had on strapped to a holster on his hip. The formal elements of photography – the framing, the uniform lighting, the setting and, above all, the subject's contained and serene pose positioned at the centre of the scenery – fit within the conventions of a studio portrait, where the photographed person sports their best outfit and poses with decorum. The photograph was taken circa 1915, probably at Armando Salmerón's studio in Chilapa, Guerrero, a small town nestled in the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range, one of many photography cabinets that multiplied over the country's cities and towns during the century's early decades, when the simplification of technology and cheapened costs fulfilled the increasing demand for photographic portraits. (Monsiváis 2002: 178-221 and Jiménez Villela 1998: 17-147).

The studio portraits looked to establish the social identity of the photographed individual in accordance to a visual code of elegance. Posing with a lit cigarette suggests a cosmopolitan aftertaste, while exhibiting a gun, the modern substitute of the saber and the preferred weapon for early century duels, symbolised the subject's virility. The masculinity of the pose, gesture and outfit are perfectly believable. Nobody could imagine that the dandy in that picture used to be a woman.

The radical and permanent masculinisation of a young woman of rural origin occurred upon her involvement in the Mexican Revolution. For more vital than ideological reasons, Amelio Robles, who before this was called Amelia Robles, joined the rising forces in the south of the country under Emiliano Zapata's agricultural flag and, in the midst of the toughness of war, forged a social and subjective masculine identity. At the end of the armed conflict, Amelio Robles continued presenting himself as a man and sustained his masculine identity throughout his whole life, in his public activity and in the private sphere, during old age and sickness.

The pistol and the cigarette, symbols of masculinity, are not props from the photo studio but daily objects belonging to Amelio Robles, whose masculine image constitutes a subjective, sexual and social identity that prevailed in every aspect of his life. This is not a momentary pose in front of the camera as the one adopted by, for example, Frida Kahlo when she donned a masculine outfit in the family portraits taken by her father in 1926 (Herrera, Taymor et al. 2002: 33 and Stellweg 1992: 102-102). In Kahlo's case, it is a playful gesture, a bit irreverent, perhaps, following the French *a la garçon* (while at the same time covering the slimming of her left leg due to infant poliomyelitis). The painter has no desire to pass as a man, something that Amelio Robles achieves with great effectiveness.

The successful and permanent masculinisation of Amelio Robles must be distinguished from the strategic cross-dressing – the adoption of masculine outfits to pass as a man – that some women employed in periods of war to protect themselves from sexual violence that is usually more acute during armed conflict, to access military leadership positions or simply to fight as soldiers and not as *soldaderas*, that is to say, without the social gender restrictions that usually weigh on women in the military. During the nationalist wars

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¹ I use the grammatical masculine gender when referring to Amelio Robles in his adult life, where he had a masculine identity while I employ the grammatical feminine gender to address his birth, infancy and youth.

of the 19th century, and later on during the Mexican Revolution, soldaderas took care of the troop's supplies and nursing, sometimes performing courier duties and smuggling arms and rations, but only rarely did they wield weapons.

For now, although it is not possible to define the frequency of cross-dressing during the Mexican Revolution, there are instances of women like María de la Luz Barrera, Zapatista, or Petra/Pedro Jiménez, Maderista, who adopted a masculine identity during the war to later go back to wearing women's clothes and embodying socially feminine roles, like mothers and wives, which Ónever happened with Amelio Robles (Salas 1994). In his case, there could've been practical considerations, nonetheless, his radical sexual and gender identity change did not simply obey a quest to enjoy the social advantages of men, but was the fruit of a deep and vital desire. A desire, finally realised, to reject his sexual anatomy at birth and be radically masculine, in every aspect of his life.

Amelio Robles transformed from a forced feminine identity to a desired masculinity, he felt and acted like a man and his appearance was manly. We know little of his sexuality, but there is information on his romantic relationships with women and we know that at one point he courted a schoolmate whom he showered with attention; these erotic relationships were inscribed in a heterosexual logic in which Robles performed the masculine role (Gil 1927). Some people would consider Amelio as a manly lesbian, a dyke or butch, but according to current terminology, it's more precise to classify Robles as transgender, a subjective type of identification that implies the adoption of the physical appearance and social gender role assigned to the opposite sex. The lesbian sexual identity is defined as an erotic inclination towards persons of the same sex, which does not necessarily imply a desire to transition, meaning a change in gender identity, physical appearance or sexual anatomy. The term lesbianism is of course not a synonym for masculinity, but also does not exclude the possibility of adopting masculine identification. Nonetheless, identity categories are flexible, they are not hermetically sealed spaces. During his transition, Amelio Robles could be characterised as a butch lesbian and later transitioned into a transgender person with a masculine identity.

Transgender identities vary in degrees and durability, and Amelio Robles was at the end of the spectrum, he felt a deep dissatisfaction with his gender and sexual anatomy and wished to change his appearance. Today, some of these sexual characteristics can be modified through surgical procedures and hormone therapies; medical technology to change sex was available in some institutions in the US and Europe since the 20th century, when the term "transsexual" was coined to refer to people that received medical therapies that transformed their sexual anatomy. Nonetheless, the term "transsexual" is inadequate when describing Robles since his identity change did not require surgery or hormones. However, his dissatisfaction with his identity, physical appearance and feminine anatomy was maybe as intense as the one of people that submit themselves to medical treatments in order to achieve that their body resembles in some way their subjective configuration (Meyerowitz 2002: 5, 9-10).

At the beginning of the 20th century, with no hormones or surgery, Amelio Robles constructed a masculine corporal image and social identity with the cultural resources available to him in an isolated rural Mexican town. With great ability, Robles manipulated such cultural means to his favour: the pose or gender performance, a visual culture of the body inaugurated by the proliferation of studio portraits, and an industrial press avid for sensationalist news that was interested and gave legitimacy to the Zapatista revolutionary's story. Amelio Robles established his masculinity through gender performance (Butler 1999: VII-XXVI). The poses, facial gestures, and attitudes in his daily performance were crowned with carefully selected attire: it included trousers, shirts, jackets and hats common to the style of his rural context. He cautiously selected shirts with pockets that aided him in concealing his chest area. Studio photography allowed common people to project their desired image in a photograph, something that until then was only done in academic portraits, available to a selected few. Fabricated with camera intermediation, the body and the desired social identity could now be conserved forever in a photographic portrait. So, every time himself or someone else saw the portrait, the identity depicted in the photograph was confirmed. (Lalvani 1996: 68-69).

The legitimising effect was enhanced in the improbable scenario that a studio portrait was reproduced by the press, as it was the case with the photograph that appeared as an illustration of news about Robles published in *El Universal*, Mexico City's most widely circulated newspaper (Gil 1927 and Lepidus 1928:77). Even though it revealed the secret of his sexual identity - an open secret, widely known in his community - the newspaper multiplied the visual accreditation of his corporal image as an elegant man by the thousands, that without being particularly distinguished, showed a relaxed demeanour full of personal security. It

amounted to proclaiming the virility he expressed in his face, pose and attire in a public place, accentuated by his exhibition of his firearm.

Robles' masculine pose and gesture can be considered "a cultural declaration of the body and a political act" that challenges social gender assignments and heterosexual normativity (Molloy 1998: 141-160). His effective masculinisation also subverts the very ingrained notion that gender identity is an immediate and inescapable consequence of a person's anatomy and that men and women are crisply defined social groups with immutable qualities. The transgenerational process complicates (and sometimes reifies) the categories of men and women. These categories are usually considered as realities that are pre-established and immutable; overlooking their plasticity, the identity quality that is made evident in light of the radical masculinisation of Amelio Robles, one of the few processes of its kind that has been documented till now in the history of Latin America.³

The historiography of the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution has been primarily interested by ideological, political and military aspects of the struggle, but the ordinariness of the trenches, the day to day life of the troops, has been scarcely studied. The masculinisation of Amelio Robles started in the midst of the forced displacements and social disorder of war. In combat, shame and ancestral reservations were abandoned and spaces of tolerance emerged, such as the one that permitted Robles to start constructing himself as a man, and revel in the relative acceptance of his comrades-in-arms, who admired his bravery and his guerrilla capacities. On the battlegrounds, before the constant presence of death, and in the midst of the destructive impulse of war, gender ideology was also reinforced with roots in nineteenth century nationalist narratives that identify masculinity with characteristics like valour and personal bravery, as well as with patriotic attitudes and revolutionary and nationalist ideologies. With the passage of time, the stereotype of the valiant revolutionary turned into an iconic image in popular culture and in the nationalist discourse of the post-revolutionary state (O'Malley 1986:136-37).

Colonel Robles incarnates the ideal of the macho revolutionary soldier: he is valiant, brave, has the capacity to respond in immediate and violent manner to aggressions and handles weapons and horses with mastery. His relationships with women adjust to conventional models and reproduce the polarity of masculine and feminine roles. In a polaroid of Amelio Robles in 1976, decked in a worn-out outfit and a red bandana, he stands next to Guadalupe Barrón, one of the women with which he sustained a relationship and whose feminine presence accentuates by contrast the old revolutionary's virility and nonchalance as with the portraits of his youth. Both Amelio and Guadalupe pose rigidly, demonstrating the typical body language of studio photography, far from the spontaneous gestures that portable cameras aspired to register in the second half of the twentieth century.

Interest in history goes beyond a particular case, his figure might be seen as a site for culture debate around the definition and meaning of gender, masculinity and femininity, in the framework of post-revolutionary nationalist Mexican discourse. There were three distinct perceptions about Amelio Robles that opposed each other at times: 1. that of his army comrades, who admired the thorough emulation that Amelio Robles did of a masculinity, understood as a flaunting of force and an immediate and violent response to any aggression either real or imaginary, 2. the sensationalist gaze that, basking in Robles' eccentric exhibitions, also legitimises his transgression, and 3. the normalising homophobic perspective, that categorically negates transgenerational stemming from essentialist gender categories. To understand the perspective on Amelio Robles, it's necessary to depart from the masculine body image and social identity that Amelio Robles gave himself through pose, gesture and attire, as well as his effective handling of photography and media attention.

The masculine corporal image of Amelio Robles was fully endorsed by identification documents that credit his belonging to diverse social and political groups, including credentials that recognise him as an affiliate of Guerrero's Socialist Party (1934), as a delegate of the Central League for Agrarian Communities in Xochipala, Guerrero (1945), as an affiliate of the National Confederation of Veterans of the Confederation of Veterans of the Revolution(1948) and as an associate for the Livestock Association of Zumpango del Río

³ Catalina de Erauso, or "the nun of Alférez" is a very well-known figure in the history of colonial Latin America. Erauso adopted a masculine identity when she joined the army of the Spanish Empire in the eighteenth century. At the end of her life, Erauso wrote a memoir and she did so with a feminine narrative voice, this is to say, she recovered her feminine identity; something that did not occur in Robles' case, who died without giving up his masculinity (Erauso 1996).

(1956 y 1958). The credentials' identification photographs confirm the masculinity of the subject, whose name and rubric always appears as masculine.⁴

Perhaps the biggest evidence of the effectiveness of his masculine appearance would be his medical certificate, required for to be admitted to the Confederation of Veterans of the Revolution, expedited by doctor Pedro González Peña in his practice in Mexico City in 1948. The doctor confirmed good health, declared age, and six bullet wounds in different parts of his body, including one in his thigh and another one in his armpit, without alluding to the sexual anatomy of the person involved.⁵ The medical inspection demanded by the Confederation of Veterans of the Revolution surely was not a deep clinical revision but a rushed procedure, with the purpose of identifying war scars, considered undeniable proof of the valour shown in battlefields. There was no motive for the doctor to question Robles' masculinity: his reserved attitude, gesture, attire and body language – “the gait of an old soldier” – were those of a man of the country of almost sixty years, who had to conceal parts of his body to show the doctor the bullet scars he was proud to bear. On other occasions, Robles had no qualms about showing the scar on his leg, that gave realism to the narrative of his war stories.⁶

The Ministry for National Defence (Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, SDN in its Spanish acronym) legitimised Amelio Robles' masculine identity when he was decorated in 1974 as a Veteran of the Revolution and not a *female veteran*, a distinction awarded to more than three hundred women for their services to the revolutionary cause.⁷ The recognition from the country's highest military authorities must have given Amelio Robles deep satisfaction, even when the SDN did not endorse the grade of colonel he held in the Zapatista army that, as is well known, was not a professional military force but more “the people in arms”, a force compounded by groups of rebel men reunited around their chiefs where there were no systematic promotion procedures. He was not awarded a military pension either; the only thing he got was payment to overcome medical expenses for an illness he endured.⁸

Amelio Robles demanded to be recognised as a man, publicly and privately. A neighbour notes: “I never called her lady, I always called him Mr. Robles, because he'd pull out his gun if someone called him a woman or Mrs.” (Albarrán Orozco 1999). Although exaggerated, this affirmation illustrates the ways in which Robles imposed the recognition of his social identity as a man. Within his family, Amelio's masculinity was accepted; his great nieces addressed him as *uncle* or *grandfather* and knew of his particular sexual identity until adulthood, since it was something unspoken at home. Only in exceptional circumstances, when the homosocial trust between friends was reinforced by alcoholic beverages, an elder Robles did accept that some of those close to him address him as “mi coronela” (which roughly translates to “my female colonel”).⁹

Amelio Robles adopted the shape of prevalent masculinities in his rural environment, a cultural code that included the capacity for immediate and violent response to any aggression, a challenging bravery and constant flaunting of strength. In subsequent years, these characteristics led him to be at the centre of violent personal quarrels that ended with more than one person's life. Like many other men, Amelio frequently fell in alcoholic excess, was a womanizer, foul-mouthed, authoritarian and was almost never willing to be accountable to his family for his actions, even during the periods of illness that marked his old age. Amelio Robles, the most macho man of the macho men, took the stereotype of masculinity in his rural environment to its extreme. Ironically, his peculiar gender transition simultaneously subverts and reinforces normative heterosexuality and the typical masculinity it recreates.

Amelia, the girl

Amelia Robles hailed from Xochipala, a town in the state of Guerrero, where she was born in 1889, according to the relevant Civil Registry Book. The calligraphy on her birth certificate leaves no doubts, the baby brought forth by her father and mother in the presence of the commissioner of Xochipala was a girl.

⁴ AHTF, exp. GRO-06

⁵ AHTF, exp. GRO-06, medical certificate, March 4th, 1948.

⁶ AHTF, exp. GRO-06, Gil 1927.

⁷ Historical Archive of the SDN (AHSDN), Cancelados, exp. Amelio Robles and Mendieta Alatorre 1961, 112-122

⁸ AHTF, exp. GRO-06

⁹ Interviews with the author Guadalupe Robles, January 18th, 1999, and Gabriel Heredia, September 2002 in Xochipala, Guerrero

According to the Catholic Saints she was named Malaquías, although she was called her first name, Amelia, at home.¹⁰ The Robles family was a family of ranchers, the social sector of middle-class owners that were central to the Mexican Revolution in Guerrero (Jacobs 1982). Amelia's childhood spent between the house in Xochipala and the ranch, which was on the outskirts of the town. This is where Amelia learned about weapons and horses, which did not impede her from also being linked to *Hijas de María* (Daughters of Mary), a catholic congregation dedicated to deepening young women's spiritual formation. Coming from a traditional family, she dedicated herself to domestic labours (a neighbour remembers her working at a hostel that offered food to revolutionaries passing through the region), and, had she not joined the war, Amelia would have liked to study medicine, a masculine professional aspiration that she shared with her fellow countryman Juan Andreu Almazán, whom she admired greatly since she met him during the zapatismo times.¹¹

In the guerrilla, Amelia discovered, in her own words, "the sensation of being completely free"- something she did not know while living as a woman in a small town, which you could generally only leave by foot. In the village, young Amelia's abilities with weapons and horses provoked the admiration of a good show, but in the ranks these same capacities of soldier Robles were essential and highly valued.¹²

Robles' Zapatista phase spanned over five or six years, from approximately 1912 or 1913 until 1918, during which he participated in numerous armed conflicts, including the gruelling and decisive battle of Chilpancingo in 1914, that signified the defeat of huertismo in Guerrero and the military and political advancement of zapatismo in the area. Amelio Robles' bond to zapatismo was less ideological than vital, arising from his taste for guerrilla life, freer than that of life in the village and with the intensity of constant danger. When remembering revolutionary times, Robles rarely referred to agrarian issues and social radicalism, and instead delighted in anecdotes of daily life in war fields, where loyalty to your superiors, achievements and personal rivalries were the bread and butter.

Just like many other soldiers in the area, Robles recognised the government of Venustiano Carranza Government in 1918 and, in the long run, became a soldier in the Mexican army. Robles supported the Aguaprieta rebellion which gave the victory to the military of the revolution to Álvaro Obregón.¹³ As a member of the Mexican army, Amelio Robles participated in combat against the delahuertistas rebels, under the command of ex-Zapatista Adrián Castrejón, who would become governor of the state of Guerrero in 1928. Castrejón's military triumphs cemented the bonds of friendship and homosocial comradery between Robles and his chief and comrades. These bonds forged in combat greatly contributed to the official recognition of Robles' masculine identity. Aware of Robles' peculiar identity, Castrejón was the architect of the interview with Miguel Gil in *El Universal*, and, subsequently, his influence as governor favoured Robles' incorporation into Guerrero's Socialist Party and the League of Agricultural Communities, which gave him political leverage in his hometown. Amelio Robles also benefited from another comrade's political influence from his time fighting delahuertismo, Rodolfo López de Nava Valtierra, who as governor of Morelos, was willing to extend to him a certificate of revolutionary merits and to recommend his admission to the Mexican Honor League of the SDN, as was done by some of his other fellow co-religionists.¹⁴

Letters of recommendation and proof of merit were required by the SDN to be recognised as a veteran of the revolution; such proof tried to adjust to the prerequisites established by the Mexican Honor League, without necessarily establishing things that happened decades before, whose details might have already been forgotten, in an accurate fashion.¹⁵ It was usual to adjust merit and service reports of his superiors' military relations, and so it must have seemed equally reasonable to Robles to change the gender registered on his birth certificate so that now, his primary identification document will fit his appearance and inner sentiments of being a man. His personal file in the military archives includes an apocryphal Civil Registry that attests to the birth of the child Amelio Malaquías Robles Ávila. Except for the gender and name of the baby,

¹⁰ Zumpango del Río Civil Registry, Guerrero, Book of birth certificates, adoption, recognition and claims year 1890, act 160, pages 59 and 60, November 4th, 1889. November 3rd commemorates Malaquías the martyr, according to the oldest Galván Calendar 2002: 141

¹¹ AHTF, exp. GRO-06 Gil, 1927.

¹² AHTF, exp. GRO-06, Gil, 1927

¹³ APGD, Museo Na Bolom, M/1987, 1945

¹⁴ AHTF, Gro-06, Rodolfo López Nava de Baltierra, Francisco mendoza Palma, Estaban Estrada e Ignacio Naca de Catalán issued proof of merits in pro of Amelio Robles between 1956 and 1958.

¹⁵ Decree that creates the Mexican Honor League, Official paper, February 8th, 1949

every other datum coincides with the original birth certificate from the Civil Registry of Zumpango del Río's.¹⁶ Convinced of his masculinity, and basking in the political protection of a web of social relations in the area, Amelio Robles surely did not doubt the convenience of presenting an apocryphal document and having the pleasure of being declared a Veteran, and not a female veteran of the Revolution.

Unspoken realities

During the armed movement, the sexual violence that specially affected the female population, increased in a manner directly proportional to revolutionary violence. But at the same time, to some people, the revolution also opened up possibilities of self-determination that were out of reach until then. The war provoked geographical displacements and "disrupted the subsoil of respectability and decency" (Monsiváis 1984: 159-177). What ensued was what Carlos Monsiváis called "the temporal demolition of decency" that made "the realities of desire impossible to hide", at least in the exceptional spaces of tolerance such as the one that permitted Amelio Robles to enjoy relative acceptance; spaces that did not have any known urban or townie equivalents. We only know of the visibility obtained by some conspicuous homosexuals in Mexico City in the twenties, artists like Salvador Novo or Roberto Montenegro, just to mention two of those caricatured by painter Antonio Ruiz, El Corzo (Ibid and Monsiváis 1998:23).

The tolerance for marginal sexualities was not the norm in the Zapatista movement. The poblano, Manuel Palafox, one of Zapatismo's core intellectuals, was the object of reiterated downgrading because of his homosexual inclination. Maurilio Mejía, guerrilla chief and nephew to Emiliano and Eufemio Zapata outright disqualified Palafox: "a poor devil with the wrong sex like yourself cannot call himself a friend of real men like us". Palafox's homosexuality was added to the multiple political tensions that ended up with him distancing himself from Zapata, who almost ordered his execution on more than one occasion (Womack 1968: 306, 314 and Brunk 1995:328). Male homosexuality attracts extreme condemnation because it is perceived as feminisation and the rejection of masculinity (although it isn't always that). Since masculinity is identified with revolutionary conviction and displays of patriotism, this rejection is qualified as betrayal of fundamental values. Robles' transgenerational, on the other hand, revels in relative tolerance for the opposite reason since it exacerbates the masculine values that civil war praises.

Nevertheless, it should not be thought that the tolerance for Amelio Robles was easy, nor generalised. At the end of the revolutionary movement, Amelio installed in Iguala to avoid the hostility of his natal city Xochipala, where he conserved the family property, to which he returned to years later. Some testimonies say Amelio Robles was assaulted by some men that wanted to know the secrets of his body and, when he defended himself, it caused the death of two of his aggressors, this cost him to serve a sentence in the Chilpancingo jail.

The imprisonment brought him the additional humiliation of being held in the women's department (Gaitán 1978). Whether true or not, the anecdote expresses the anxiety, often translated into open or uncovered aggression, which Amelio caused by calling into question the cultural classifications of gender. His identity was a reason for jokes, more or less heavy, even by those who offered him protection as Castrejón or López de Nava. Both soldiers expressed ambiguity towards Amelio since they officially endorsed his masculinity, but in private they referred to "la coronela Amelia Robles" (the female colonel Amelia Robles) (AHTF, Gil 1927 and López de Nava Camarena 1995: 101-122).

The transgenderisation of Amelio Robles was not restricted to his military and political activities. Also, in the personal sphere, Robles was conducted as a man and he emulated the masculine behaviours of the rural society of the twentieth century. He had relationships with several women; and with Ángela Torres he got to adopt a daughter, who as an adult preferred to distance herself from her father, Amelio. Mrs. Torres came from a wealthy family from Apipilco, a town near Iguala where Robles resided in 1934, and perhaps she is "the schoolmate" to whom he provided special attentions (AHTF, Gil 1927). The masculine aspect of Amelio Robles is part of a polar opposition of masculine and feminine bodily attributes, as it is suggested by the photograph in which Amelio poses next to Lupita Barrón, with whom he also had a sentimental bond.

¹⁶ AHSDN, Cancelados, exp. Amelio Robles Ávila, birth certificate, April 8th, 1957

At the same time, the masculinity of Robles implied a sharp division of functions socially assigned to men and women in the rural world. As a typical country man, Amelio never took care of the housework he had learned in his youth, when he received the education of a small-town Catholic lady, while also becoming an expert shooter, rider and horse tamer. At an older age when the disease limited his mobility, Amelio used to receive visits from Angelita Torres. Mrs Torres used to travel from Apipilco, a town near Iguala, carrying cooking utensils and supplies, to cook for Amelio while she visited him in Xochipala. The anecdote is filled with resonances of the popular image of "La Adelita", a soldier who, with children and household goods on her back, followed her Juan and recreated a rustic home structure in the middle of the adversity of the battlefield.

Gender in dispute

The press made Robles a local celebrity and this helped to legitimise his transgenderisation. Amelio Robles interested Miguel Gil, a reporter from *El Universal* and Gertrude DUBY, a journalist from Switzerland exiled in Mexico and a militant of the European opposition to fascism. Since the beginning of the revolution, an anonymous photographer had portrayed Robles, and his image was included in the graphic history of the Mexican Revolution edited by Casasola (Casasola, s.f, 759).

In the twenties, the front page of *El Universal* was mainly focused on political information, but often also included sensational news, those stories of crimes, tragedies or extraordinary events, written in a colloquial style that sought to provoke visceral reactions of horror or extreme commiseration among potential readers as a commercial strategy of the modern press. In April, other notes with striking headlines were included: "Gertrude Ederie, the little frog woman who swam across the English Channel" or "The secret of an old woman who is one hundred and forty-three years old".¹⁷

But the prominent publication of the news about Amelio Robles is due not only to sensational elements of the news, but also to the history of Robles in the Mexican Revolution. A decade after the promulgation of the Constitution of 1917, the memories of the revolutionary process were still fresh, and the public was interested in the testimonies of participants and observers. In April and May, for example, *El Universal* included two prints by the writer Martin Luis Guzmán, who would become part of *El Aguila y La Serpiente*, a canonical novel of the Mexican Revolution that is also a great report of the war. The newspaper also published an interview of Miguel Gil with Carmen Serdan, an emblematic figure of the revolution initiated by Francisco I. Madero.

It is likely that Miguel Gil prepared the news about Amelia Robles to be published on April 10 on purpose, as it is the anniversary of the death of Emiliano Zapata. Since the beginning of the Alvaro Obregón government, who promoted the agrarian distribution and appointed several Zapatistas as members of his cabinet, the event was an occasion for local organisations and the government to promote the image of the leader of the Morelos as a symbol of the dispossessed peasants. Being a candidate for the presidency of the Republic, Plutarco Elias Calles chose April 10, 1924 precisely to manifest an agrarian position that reached the headlines of the main newspapers; nevertheless, the event lost importance in the following years as the government slowed the agricultural distribution. In tune with the Callista position of 1927, *El Universal* avoided all mention of the event, while *Excelsior* only briefly reported on the lacklustre local ceremonies held in Cuautla (O'Malley 1982: 49-54).

Miguel Gil's article offers a visual description of Amelio Robles that underlines significant details, in accordance with the recommendations for effective writing by the globally influential Joseph Pulitzer (Silvestre 1997: 34). Thus, the brief dialogue between the reporter and the interviewee about the revolutionary adventures of Amelio Robles avoids a conceptual approach on the issue of transgenderisation, but leaves an enduring impression through the following note: "when he rolled up his trousers to show the scar that a bullet left on his leg, I see that he wears socks and men's suspenders. A small detail, but detail at last!". The visual semblance wants to prove that Amelio Robles "does not have a feminine side". Nothing suggests femininity "in the air of his laughter or the look in his eyes; nor in the way he stands up, nor in the way he expresses herself, nor in the timbre of his voice". His body image, face, gestures, tone of voice and personality

¹⁷ "Gertrude Earle, la pequeña mujercita rana que cruzó a nado el canal de la mancha, *El Universal*, 3 de abril 1927, I, 8; "El secreto de una anciana que tiene ciento cuarenta y tres años de edad", *El Universal*, 27 de abril 1927, I, 3.

traits were of a man. The manly character of his body movement and the gestures are also manifested in his clothes: "the way of using the coat pocket, the trousers and the hat tilted a little to the left and laced with elegance were a sign of masculinity" (Gil 1927).

Although Miguel Gil does not use the term of sexual inversion, his vision of Amelio Robles is shaped by this broad concept with which nineteenth-century sexology named diverse homosexual and transsexual identities and which became popular in the media in Great Britain and the United States in the 1920s with some resonance in Mexico. In tune with the sexological discourse, Gil sees Robles as a male spirit trapped in a female 'body wrap': "La Coronela is a man, and yet was born as woman" (Prosser 1998: 116-151; Gil 1927: 8).

Gil's voyeuristic curiosity about Amelio's eccentricity is undeniable, but the journalist does not see Robles as a specimen of the museum of horrors, but as a "superb guy for a novel" (Gil 1927: 8). Nor is there sarcasm, moral condemnation or commiseration, attitudes that are present in an article about Robles published decades later, in the sensationalist newspaper *Alerta!* (Galtán 1978). Surely, Amelio Robles would have preferred that *El Universal* simply feature him as a brave revolutionary, without referring to him as a woman. However, he also had to be very flattered to see his photograph displayed on the front page of the capital's newspaper, so he kept the clip of *El Universal* throughout his life, along with other photographs and personal memories. Although *El Universal* reveals him as an eccentric person, Amelio Robles takes advantage of the special attention that the newspaper offers him, but he does not endorse a position of social marginality but, on the contrary, manages to lead a life well integrated into his social and family environment.

Gil tolerated the masculinisation of Robles but showed no sympathy for homosexuals. The reporter makes clear his conviction and sneers in a note about the effeminate homosexuals held in the Penitentiary of the Federal District, that for him look strikingly made-up and like transvestites (Gil 1933: 8, 9, 15). The journalist follows the common guidelines in the sensational treatment of transgressive gender identities that the press gave to the emblematic raid of the 41 homosexuals of 1901 and refers to "the neutrals" as "incongruous, incomprehensible beings [...] that are not women nor men" (Irwin, McCaughan and Nasser 2003). With their poses and gestures, prisoners parody femininity at all costs, as they also do by their nicknames that emulate show stars: Toña La Negra, Varita de Nardo, Bárbara La Mar, Eva Beltri or Delia Magaña. The mockery is directed at the effeminate that is seen as an artificial pose and a threat to gender norms. On another occasion, when writing about the Islas Marías, Gil refers to homosexuals as "half men", but qualifies the condemnatory tone by calling to reflect "on the great injustices of Nature" (Gil 1938: 187). Gil's views on homosexual prisoners clarify the scope of his tolerance for Robles, whose masculinity seems acceptable because it is an exception, that has no followers and that also enhances the values of male chauvinism. On the other hand, "the neutrals" of the prison and their peers who circulate in the streets of the city have an effeminacy that is not so exceptional and attracts the maximum condemnation of a society where the values of a supposedly unbreakable masculinity prevail.

The essentialist turn

With time, the recognition of the transgender status of Amelio Robles diminished, and who in life managed to be accepted as a man in his social and family environment and ended up being a symbol of that abstraction, even by the highest military authorities in the country, that is "the revolutionary woman". A conception was imposed that, in its understandable desire to give a necessary assessment of the achievements and rights of women, overlooked the effective masculinisation, as well as the fact of having been distinguished by the Ministry of National Defence as a veteran of the Revolution and that everyone addressed as masculine. The people's dandy that proudly carried a firearm, showed off a manly body with self-confidence and flaunted masculinity and bravery in the Zapatista war and as a soldier in the service of the Mexican army ended up giving the name of "Coronela Amelia Robles" to the Primary school of his hometown.

Amelio Robles' censorship of masculinity in social memory and in the speeches about "the woman" in the Mexican Revolution was evident in the Casa-Museo Amelia Robles [Amelia Robles House Museum], which opened its doors in Xochipala in 1989, five years after his death, under the impulse of the Women's Secretariat of the state of Guerrero, established the previous year, the Directorate of Popular Cultures, the National Institute of Anthropology and History and with the collaboration of the Robles family (Vega 1999:

35). In the museum two commemorative purposes converge: on the one hand, the one related to the historical contributions of women whose actions always occupy a secondary role in history, usually starring military heroes and, on the other hand, the one concerning local history, almost always subordinated to a centralist perspective that values the significance of regional historical processes, from the logic of the consolidation of the national state.

The invisibility of Amelio Robles' transgender identity is a consequence of an understandable and necessary eagerness to recognise what should be obvious: that women are historical subjects, capable of making significant contributions to civic life and to all aspects of history.¹⁸

However, this eagerness attributes fixed qualities to the categories of women and men and, therefore, generally cannot recognise the plasticity of gender constructions nor the marginal expressions of desire. It is a heteronormative conception that implies implicit attitudes of phobia and condemnation of homo and transsexual identities.

The paradoxes of this essentialist conceptualisation of gender identities can be seen in Gertrude Duby, exiled in Mexico from World War II, who visited Robles in his town in the early forties as part of the unfinished project of documenting the participation of Zapatista women in the Mexican Revolution. A little more than twenty years after the end of the armed conflict, the records on the revolutionary participation of women were scarce, or even non-existent as noted by Matilde Rodríguez Cabo, leader of the Single Front for Women's Rights (Rodríguez Cabo 1937:20).

Being a militant in the socialist movement and in opposition to fascism in Europe, Gertrude Duby imagined Mexico as a land of social revolution, rural traditions and ancient cultures, an idealisation involving other foreigners who travelled to Mexico attracted by the possibilities of social emancipation that they saw in the country and that seemed cancelled in the old world. Through the French ethnographer, Jacques Soustelle, Duby learned about Emiliano Zapata, "the Indian from Anenecuilco, the only revolutionary leader who has understood the situation of the peasantry in the Mexican Revolution" (Soustelle 1976: 39). Shortly after being in Mexico, Duby went further than Soustelle in her idealisation of Miliano and became convinced that the Morelean leader emulated the socialist purposes of the Russian revolution.¹⁹

The stories of the Zapatistas women about "their war against the landowners" of Morelos allowed Duby to forget, at times, about the European war. Armed with a second-hand camera, Gertrude Duby took photographs and interviewed a dozen participants in the Emiliano Zapata movement. She was touched by the stories of sacrifice and struggle of the revolutionaries, but the strongest impression was caused by Amelio Robles. Attracted by that "legendary figure", Duby travelled several times to Guerrero, took several photographs of Robles and wrote a chronicle that remains unpublished. As a collaborator of the European socialist press, Gertrude Duby was a journalist experienced in political opinion, but his texts on the Zapatistas are literary chronicles, which move away from conjunctural issues and aspire to a timeless value.

During her first visit, Gertrude Duby spent the night and part of a morning at Amelio Robles' house. She asked questions about his participation in the Mexican Revolution, and at all times she addressed the Zapatista in masculine as everyone used to do, however, both her field notes, as well as the final version of her chronicles, refer to her host in feminine: "The Coronela Amelia Robles will forgive me for treating her as a woman, she honours with her courage, intelligence and industriousness to the feminine sex" (Duby 1945).

For Gertrude Duby, the masculinity of Amelio Robles was not an expression of an authentic subjective and bodily identity, product of a powerful intimate desire, but a pragmatic resource to face the social restrictions that weighed on the female gender: "in a century in which women are relegated to second term for their gender and in which their abilities are not considered, living in a town away from the road, I understand that Coronela Amelia Robles lives, works and helps her people dressed as a man and acting as such". In Duby's eyes, Robles embodies an emancipatory ideal where men and women share public responsibilities, and women do not dedicate themselves exclusively to the home, but participate in social life, in an egalitarian utopia that inspired her militant work, at least since she was in charge of the women's section of the Swiss Social Democratic Party in the early twenties. That utopia of equity between men and women

¹⁸ The essentialist perspective on Amelia Robles that I criticise here also can be found on a brief article of my own, Cano 1988, 22-24, which marked the beginning of the recovery of Robles' figure in the commemorative discourse of women in Guerrero's history,, and others followed it with that same essentialist vision: Turok 1988: 41-44, Enriquez 198 41-43v Cardenas 2000 309-319. Separate themselves from this perspective: Eltit 1991 and Cano 1999 22-24.

¹⁹ Duby 1942: 27 y APCDB, Na Bolom, DA/1942/43

was the subject of a collaboration published in those years in the Swiss newspaper *Frauenrecht* (Pappe 1994: 27).

Seeing the photograph of Amelio Robles and Esteban Estrada it was impossible to deny the masculinity of Amelio Robles, whose pose and appearance looks as manly as that of his companion, Esteban Estrada. Given the strength of the obvious, Duby describes "the man's clothes, the short hair, the will to be treated as a man" and recognises that Estrada and Robles spoke "from man to man" on land issues. However, Gertrude Duby also finds traits that qualify as the masculine aspect of his appearance: "She has very short hair, a bit of grey already, a tall forehead, a thin nose, very bright clear eyes and a mouth of surprising energy. Her voice is strong, but melodious and not masculine; her skin is thin and very white; her movements somewhat abrupt and very determined". The story includes details of the domestic environment and hospitality offered by Amelio Robles, but Duby goes further when she discovers stereotypical and even maternal feminine features in home care and in the protective and warm attitude of "Coronela Robles" towards his visitors: "Despite the lateness of the hour, she served us an excellent dinner with a natural hospitality and later prepared me a bed with very white sheets and warm and soft blankets. I had a perfect night's rest". "The person described by Duby does not seem to be the same one in whom Miguel Gil did not see "not even a little bit feminine".²⁰ Gertrude Duby's desire was to find a local figure that would become her own ideals about the revolution in the indigenous and revolutionary Mexico, social justice and equal emancipation of women.

Like many other authors who give visibility to the participation of women in historical processes, Gertrude Duby attributes coherence and a unique sense to the activity of women in the Zapatista faction of the Mexican Revolution. She does not contemplate that the armed movement was able to have diverse meanings for its protagonists, both men and women, nor does she recognise that despite its destructive impulse, the war could also make the expression of the unseen realities of desire possible, including Amelio Robles marginal and silenced desire of being a man, who certainly would not have forgiven Gertrude Duby for "treating her as a woman".

Gertrude Duby's view is more than an external perspective, disappointed with the European war, which seeks an Eden of social revolution and feminist emancipation in indigenous Mexico. It is a homophobic perspective, and at the same time indicative of women, promoted in the thirties and seventies by Mexican feminism of the first and second waves of the twentieth century, which permeated the local commemorative discourse of the Mexican Revolution in Guerrero. Therefore, the most arduous battle that Coronela Robles fought did not take place at cross country, did not have the smell of gunpowder, nor did it require the use of the weapons of the agrarian ideology of the Mexican Revolution. It was a cultural battle, a silent and slow fight, whose great victory was to become a man, denying his female anatomy. Amelio Robles, who was formerly called Amelia Robles, sculpted the desired body and led the life of a man during seventy of the ninety-four years that his long existence lasted. Seventy years in which he acted and felt like a man and adjusted to male behaviour patterns. Dressed in a military uniform, in a coat and tie or simply in a blanket and woollen jacket, as the country style, Amelio showed off a body whose manliness many people recognised. Upon his death, there was a rumour that, in his last moments, Amelio Robles requested to be buried in women's clothing, thus denying the masculinity he sustained during his life, sometimes at gunpoint. The desire to normalise his masculine identity that the rumour expresses prevailed, and the tombstone in the cemetery of Xochipala, Guerrero - "here lies the remains of the Zapatista Coronela" - contradicts the intimate happiness of Amelio Robles feeling, showing and knowing himself as a man.

People with transgender identity such as Amelio Robles on occasion are seen as positive symbols of transgression; in other cases, their gender and physical appearance are perceived as inauthentic or even grotesque manifestations, which reinforce the conservative stereotypes of the masculinity and the femininity (Meyerowitz 2002: 11-5). However, the transgression of Amelio Robles should not be seen as a challenge or purposeful reaffirmation of a gender ideology, which can be judged positively or negatively, but as a legitimate way as any other to articulate an individual way of being and feeling, through cultural resources within reach and within the current cultural debates around masculinity and femininity, a process framed in the social

²⁰ AHTF, exp.GRO-06 y Gil 1927

conflicts, the tensions between rural and urban, the transnational circulation of cultural representations and the construction of the memory of the Mexican Revolution.

APGD

Personal Archive of Gertrudis Duby, Centro Cultural Na Bolom

AHSDN

Historic Archive of the National Defence Secretariat

AHTF

Historic Archive of Family Testimonies, National Institute of Anthropology and History

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