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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Payne, W. J. (2023). Territorial Inequality Driven by Tourism: A Queer Mapping of Urban Space in Acapulco, Mexico. *Urban Planning*, 8(2), 249-261. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v8i2.6425>

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Article

# Territorial Inequality Driven by Tourism: A Queer Mapping of Urban Space in Acapulco, Mexico

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Submitted: 1 November 2022 | Accepted: 1 March 2023 | Published: 22 May 2023

## Abstract

Drawing on the life stories of nine LGBTTTIQ-identified people who have lived in Acapulco (Guerrero, Mexico), this article provides a queer mapping of this city, peripherally situated in the Global South yet with longstanding entangled transnational connections. The frame for this analysis is the concept of “territorial inequality,” a term coined by urbanism scholar Óscar Torres Arroyo, whose seminal work examined the emergence of this southern Mexican city as an urban space formed through a process of socioeconomic segregation driven by tourism. This article also responds to the call of queer urban scholars to look beyond the metropole for spaces of the political theorized on their own terms. In Acapulco, class, race, and nationality intersect with sexuality in ways that have made it a destination for some queers while also dangerous and unpredictable for others, a segregated sociopolitical space where norms of masculinity have collided with multiversal expressions of sexuality imbued with patterns of exploitation. A key destination during the 20th-century rise of international tourism and a place now securitized as “violent,” this urban space is also the site of evolving LGBTTTIQ movements, communities, and shifting patterns of queer life and queer tourism. This article reconsiders proposals made by queer theorists such as Lionel Cantú and Jasbir Puar regarding the complicated role of tourism in shaping sexualities, urbanization patterns, and state practices structured through colonial, neoliberal, and liberational processes, to theorize queer dimensions of the development of this city.

## Keywords

LGBTTTIQ; Mexico; organized crime; queer tourism; segregation; territorial inequality; urban space; violence

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “Queer(ing) Urban Planning and Municipal Governance” edited by Alison L. Bain (Utrecht University) and Julie A. Podmore (John Abbott College / Concordia University).

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## 1. Introduction

For 500 years, Acapulco has been shaped by colonialism, globalization, and socioeconomic disparity. A significant node in the Spanish colonial empire, a key destination during the 20th-century rise of international tourism, and a place now securitized as “violent,” in recent decades this urban space is also the site of evolving LGBTTTIQ movements and shifting patterns of queer tourism. This article theorizes the place of sexual and gender minorities in this southern Mexican city, a place structured through various forms of violence, including that of tourism, and a city where urban planning processes are driven by tourism and map into the lives and bodies of queers in complicated ways. Drawing on the

life stories of nine people who identify as LGBTTTIQ and live—or have lived—in Acapulco, this article provides a queer mapping of this city of socioeconomic contrasts, peripherally situated in the Global South yet with longstanding entangled transnational connections. For consistency, I have adopted the acronym LGBTTTIQ used by Mexico’s National Centre for Human Rights (Donoso Jiménez et al, 2018, p. 23), which refers to “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, *travesti*, intersex, queer.” *Travesti* (transvestite) is a term adopted by some people who were assigned male at birth but develop a feminine or transfeminine gender identity.

The frame for this analysis is the concept of “territorial inequality,” a term coined by urbanism scholar Óscar Torres Arroyo, whose seminal work examined

the emergence of this southern Mexican city as an urban space formed through an anarchic process of haphazardly planned socioeconomic segregation driven by tourism, itself shaped by market-forces and corporate goals (Torres Arroyo, 2017, 2019). This article also reconsiders proposals made by queer theorists Lionel Cantú and Jasbir Puar regarding the complicated role of tourism in shaping sexualities, urbanization patterns, and state practices structured through colonial, neoliberal, and liberational processes, to theorize queer dimensions of the development of this city (Cantú, 2002; Puar, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c).

Once the international sun city destination of Hollywood stars and international tourists, Acapulco has transformed into a place now known for violence (see Figure 1). While a steady flow of tourists going from Mexico City for weekend jaunts is carefully protected, internationals are advised to stay clear because of the homicide rate, at least 110 per 100,000 (Statista, 2023). Between 2007 and 2021, Acapulco was consistently ranked among the top ten Mexican cities in terms of homicide rates (Calderón et al., 2021). I seek to examine the place of sexual and gender minorities within contemporary Acapulco, and its unfolding from a small port town

to one of Mexico's most popular tourist locations, even amidst high rates of homicide.

Following this introduction, Section 2 provides a re-examination of scholarly literature about queer tourism in relation to the study at hand. In Section 3, I summarize Torres Arroyo's analysis of the unfolding of Acapulco from a small port town to one of Mexico's most popular tourist locations, even amidst high rates of homicide. Section 4 provides a selection of reflections drawn from a set of interviews concerning the dynamics of sexual and gender minorities in historic and contemporary Acapulco, contemplating the high level of violence and impunity that impacts sexual and gender minorities. These complicated stories of exploitation, violation, and at times liberation combined with those of emergent dominance of organized criminality, illustrate the effect of socioeconomic segregation on the intersectional lives of members of the LGBTTTIQ community (cf. Irazábal & Huerta, 2016). These interviews, a subset of a larger set of conversations that are part of a project examining violence against queer and trans persons in the state of Guerrero, help illustrate the relationship between tourism, queerness, and the socioeconomic segregation that Torres Arroyo (2017, 2019) describes.



**Figure 1.** Scenes from the tourist zone of Acapulco in the present day.

In the analysis (Section 5), I consider how the nexus between queerness and tourism results in troubling outcomes at the interface between the interpersonal and the urban (Cantú, 2002; Puar, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). I pay attention to the sharp increase in physical violence related to the international drug trade and organized crime, exploring how the social inequality created by tourism has provided the context in which organized crime has encountered fertile soil in which to flourish, where the most marginalized members of the LGBTTTIQ community are further exposed to harm. This article exposes specific examples of these processes, grounded in material experiences and a particular place, and thus tries to provide another response to the longstanding scholarly question posed by Cantú, Puar, and others, one that also considers other transnational processes well beyond tourism: Which queers benefit from tourism?

My conclusion offers some preliminary thoughts regarding the implications of this study's results for urban planning in Acapulco and beyond.

## 2. Towards a Queer Theory of Tourism's Impact on Urban Spaces

In 2002, Jasbir Puar published the article "A Transnational Feminist Critique of Queer Tourism," in which she lamented the "celebratory tone of queer visibility politics" that ran through many of the submissions to a special issue on queer tourism that this scholar had then recently initiated (Puar, 2002a, p. 935). Puar (2002a, p. 935) was concerned that considerations of gay and lesbian tourism generally failed to recognize their neo-colonial context and that the focus on the celebration of "liberatory disruptions of heterosexual space" failed to consider simultaneous "racial, class, and gender displacements." In this foundational piece, Puar (2002a, p. 936) called on scholars to do two things: to recognize that claims of space, even "queer space," are always also processes that are "informed by histories of colonization," and to "think about queer tourism and space through some kind of theory about intersectionality."

In places formed through transnational tourism and other colonial processes, sexuality itself is a tool of power that maps differently onto the bodies of individuals who are included under a rather fictitious umbrella called LGBTTTIQ (or other variations) in ways that reinforce other exclusions such as race, class, nationality, and gender. Puar (2002b, p. 1) says that there has been a certain resistance to scholarly considerations of queer tourism because it "intrudes on many of our personal and professional desires for mobility and travel." Puar proposes that scholars need to take seriously the relationship between queer tourism and processes of neocolonialism through which sexual identities are both shaped by and in turn shape economic and cultural patterns. Puar also laments that "less has been written about the impact of such tourism on the sites visited...[and how] local homo/sexual cultures are affected by queer tourism"

(Puar, 2002c, p. 104). In this call for greater consideration of those who are "touristed upon," Puar (2002c, p. 126) also points out that in the present context of increased border vigilance for some, "gay tourism functions as an ironic marker of a cosmopolitan mobility available to a very few bodies."

Scholars have also considered the roles of sex tourism and sex work in contexts marked by same-sex sexual activity in tourist destinations, noting the fluidity between the two constructs. They have paid attention to how sex tourism is integrated into economies of the sale of sexual services, and to how sex work encompasses a range of relationships, among them ones framed as romance and friendship (at least by one party). Cantú (2002, p. 140) offers a look at the development of gay and lesbian tourism in Mexico and its effect on Mexican sexualities, observing that "dimensions of both sexual colonization and liberation are at work." Cantú proposed that tourism is itself a form of migration that shapes the political economy of sexuality in Mexico in a context in which identity and practice are often delinked. Mendoza (2013) points out that characterizations of the motivation for tourists to engage in sexual activity with locals are too often focused on the (often international) tourist and thus decenter the experiences, motivations, and identities of the non-tourist or to some extent the domestic tourist. In their consideration of Acapulco, Vargas Rojas and Alcalá Escamilla (2013) conclude that, in the context of tourism, sex work by male-identified persons has become part and parcel of the life of the gay community in that city such that it becomes an employment possibility for a range of people seeking greater income. These authors also uncover a range of forms of violence to which those who take on the role of a sex worker are often exposed, including physical violence, robbery, illness, sexually transmitted disease, and extortion by public officials. In this article, I take this one step further by exploring some of the troubling ways in which tourism is part of the processes of subalternity related to sexuality and gender diversity in Acapulco in the context of organized crime.

In an innovative consideration of the political economy of sexuality in Mexico, Cantú (2002, p. 141) argues that Mexican sexual identities should be "understood as multiply constituted and intimately linked to the structural and ideological dimensions of modernization and development," and more specifically that Mexico's so-called "homosexual subculture" has been transformed through queer tourism. Writing at the beginning of the 21st century, Cantú (2002, p. 159) observes that, "while anthropologists working in Mexico in the 1970s and 1980s asserted that 'gay' identities did not exist as they are understood in an American [i.e., US] context, this is no longer so." He argues that queer tourism has expanded the space related to commodification, leading to the creation of simultaneously liberating and exploitative sites. Cantú (2002, p. 161) links this change to the Mexican government's late 20th-century

tourism development project to redirect urban migration from its largest cities to other parts of the country “although the rise of gay and lesbian tourism in Mexico was not a planned outcome of the nation’s tourist development project, it has caused important sociopolitical reverberations.” This author argues that this action contributed to Acapulco’s popularity as a queer vacation destination in the 1980s and early 1990s, though this city was later supplanted by Puerto Vallarta.

Recent scholarly literature regarding the linkage between queerness, tourism, and territoriality provides further insight into the implications for non-tourists: so-called “locals” in Mexican tourist destinations (Bailey, 2022; Monterrubio, 2021). In a study based on field research in Acapulco, Monterrubio (2021) draws attention to the significance of gay spaces in tourism destinations for “locals,” those who call the destination “home.” This author outlines how gay tourism spaces provide locals with opportunities for escape, building identities, socializing, cruising, and learning: While the spaces often exist because of tourism, in many cases the key interactions for local queers are with other locals. In a recent study of international gay tourism in Puerto Vallarta, Bailey (2022, p. 478) also asks: “How does gay tourism affect the destination site itself?” This author pushes us to go beyond the purported acceptance and inclusion asserted by marketing campaigns and tourists and to also consider “larger systems of inequality such as class, gender, and race” (Bailey, 2022, p. 480). The study

at hand builds on this scholarship by considering additional spatial, temporal, and institutional dimensions of these questions.

### 3. The Genealogy of a Segregated City

For nearly eight decades, the principal promoter of tourism in Acapulco has been the federal government, though over time the state and local governments have also played increasingly important roles (Sackett, 2022; Torres Arroyo, 2017). Starting in the mid-twentieth century, this led to what Sackett (2022, p. 443) calls “the partition of Acapulco into tourist resort and Mexican city...[because] the public funds that poured into Acapulco promoted displacement and heightened inequality.” Torres Arroyo (2017) outlines how tourism has left its imprint on this city’s infrastructure through the creation of a service-based local economy that prioritizes tourism establishments at the expense of working-class neighborhoods and has resulted in the deterioration of the natural environment due to ill-planning. Figure 2 provides a map tailored to the data included in this article. The reader is encouraged to consult the map regularly to better conceptualize the spatial and territorial dimensions of this study.

Over time Acapulco’s population has grown rapidly, substantially through the arrival of so many impoverished people in search of work in the tourist economy. As such, Acapulco’s urbanization is intimately tied to the

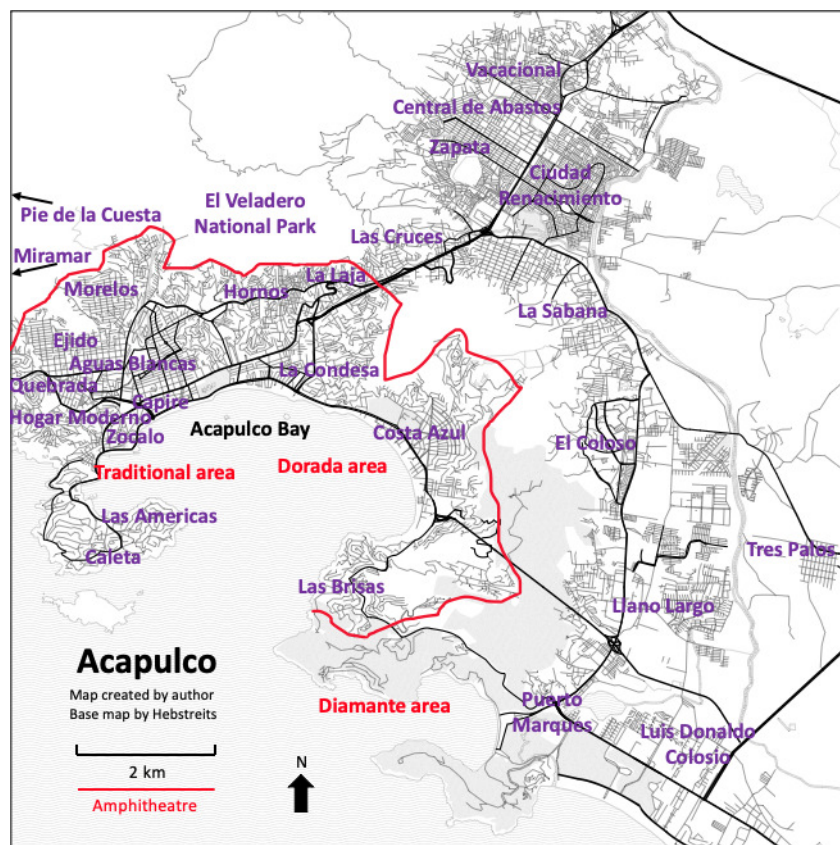


Figure 2. Places in Acapulco referenced in this study.

story of its working-class neighborhoods, many of which have been established through large-scale squatting supported by social organizations, sometimes in complicity with government officials (Sackett, 2022; Torres Arroyo, 2017). The largest and most successful “land invasion” was established in the La Laja neighborhood in 1958 (Sackett, 2022). However, processes of segregation continued to reinforce the partition of Acapulco, such that now more than half of the residents live in poverty, face a precarious labor market, and live in substandard housing in peripheral neighborhoods that lack basic infrastructure and services (Torres Arroyo, 2019).

Experiences of social exclusion are shaped through the intersection or blending of discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, and class (Irazábal & Huerta, 2016). These socially and economically disadvantaged sectors in Acapulco are made up of various social groups including women, youth, people living with HIV, people living with disabilities, the elderly, and others, who become the target of practices of systematic discrimination (Torres Arroyo, 2009). The initial disadvantaged and precarious conditions for these people are subsequently reproduced as a sort of inheritance throughout their lives (Torres Arroyo, 2009, p. 14). Thus, the study of socioeconomic segregation and discriminatory practices in the city of Acapulco is key to understanding the precarious exercise of rights of particular social groups (Bailey, 2022; Torres Arroyo, 2009, 2019).

Segregation needs to be understood not only as the unequal distribution of social groups in space but also as a temporal process (Rodríguez Vignoli, 2001). Torres Arroyo (2009, 2017, 2019) outlines that the segregation of Acapulco, itself a sociospatial manifestation of inequality, is also constantly transformed because of segmented citizen action. As such, this author sees territory as a material and symbolic resource inherent to social reproduction whose appropriation reflects existing inequalities related to resources, opportunities, and rights. Therefore, an analysis of the spatial dimensions of the life stories of members of the LGBTTTIQ community associated with Acapulco can provide further insight into how tourism matters to queers.

While Acapulco’s history goes back many centuries, as late as the 1920s it was still a small population center where less than 10,000 people lived in what is now called the “old town,” the area adjacent to the city’s main square, the “Zocalo” (Sackett, 2022; Torres Arroyo, 2019). Until then, distinct socioeconomic sectors of society lived interspersed with one another. However, as geopolitical events led to restrictions on international tourism in Europe in the 1930s, US companies started building tourist facilities in Acapulco. This set off changes led by the federal government that included a large tourism campaign, the promotion of infrastructure and service development, waves of migration from other parts of Guerrero, and the establishment of the first subdivisions, residential zones, and working-class neighborhoods (Torres Arroyo, 2019). From the beginning,

public authorities at all three levels of government set a precedent of privileging private sector development, starting with the expropriation of nearby *ejidal* (communally owned) lands for tourism development, justified based on “public interest” (Torres Arroyo, 2019). This established a pattern of private concentration of landownership and price speculation that continues to the present day.

Tourist development then shifted to coastal areas further away from the traditional port area, though the constant tension between these forces led to haphazard urban development. The 1940s were characterized by tourism dominated by international hotel chains and uncontrolled development up the slopes of the hills that surround Acapulco Bay (referred to as the amphitheater), without regard to the environmental impacts (Torres Arroyo, 2019). Already, the physical distancing of different socioeconomic sectors paralleled unequal access to public services. This city’s tourist boom took off in 1950 and continued into the early 1970s, a period characterized by “jet set” national and international tourism (Sackett, 2022). However, the rapid expansion of the city was shaped by anarchic market-led development countered by popular mobilizations rather than by any organized development plan. Many peasant and popular groups were successful in gaining practical access to land and services in this period, though often without formal recognition of tenure or guarantees.

The tourist zone expanded to encompass the entire Acapulco Bay, including the Traditional area and the Dorada (golden) area, while land invasions established many irregular neighborhoods and settlements inland from the coast. This urban expansion was marked by large-scale public and private investment in tourism, though the Mexican state played a lead role in financing and administering this expansion (Sackett, 2022; Torres Arroyo, 2019). Specifically, the state fulfilled the tourism industry’s demand for consistent utilities and services, to the detriment of the local community and the natural environment (Torres Arroyo, 2019). This pattern continued to produce greater territorial inequality, environmental contamination, and a deficit of urban infrastructure and services, issues that especially impacted those living in the squatted neighborhoods on the periphery. At the same time, the availability of employment did not keep up with the increase in demand due to new arrivals from the countryside.

Starting in 1972 and shaped by the deterioration of the natural environment, a period of stagnation set in, marked by a reduction in both national and international tourists (Torres Arroyo, 2019). The state tried to reassert control: In 1980, the national government established El Veladero National Park adjacent to Acapulco and then compelled about 120,000 people to move from their informal communities to the then newly established (and ironically named) Ciudad Renacimiento (Renaissance City), located on the leeward side of the amphitheater, far from the tourist zone. Five decades

later, this peripheral part of Acapulco, infamous for social exclusion and violence, also continues to be characterized by a paucity of services and infrastructure (Sánchez Huerta, 2018). Neoliberal relaxation of development regulation in the 1990s in the context of the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement, including the dismantling of legal protections afforded to communally held lands such as the former *ejido* of El Llano Largo, also led to the haphazard profit-motivated development of both the Diamante luxury resort area as well as low-income private sector housing further inland in areas especially vulnerable to weather events. By 1990, Acapulco's population had passed the half-million mark and informal settlements covered more than 70% of the urban area (Torres Arroyo, 2019). To facilitate the further expansion of the tourist zone, aggressive government action sought to regularize landownership by continuing to move those living on squatted lands to more peripheral areas.

According to Mexico's National Commission for Human Rights, nearly 70% of Acapulco's residents now live in poverty in a city that is among the most dangerous in the world, thus producing an unprecedented level of vulnerability to both structural violence (poverty and inequality) and physical violence (Donoso Jiménez et al., 2018). This government body accuses the state of creating a divide between first-class and second-class citizens in what is otherwise a very wealthy city. Lower-income residents are trapped in tiny, poor-quality housing isolated from the rest of the city and with poor access to urban infrastructure and services. Poor public transit and deterioration of roads have added to the isolation of lower-income residents who have no other option than to live far from the city center in neighborhoods lacking cultural and recreational facilities and with significant limits to access to public education and health-care. In contrast, Acapulco's municipal government has created many regulations related to urban planning that prioritize municipal services for exclusive zones catering to national and international tourists to the detriment of working-class and middle-class areas. Since 2007, this segregated landscape has been further compromised by the infiltration of organized crime at all levels of society, a circumstance that creates unacceptable levels of vulnerability for most people outside of the tourist zone, and in particular ways for sexual and gender minorities.

#### 4. Queers in Space: Ethnographic Data as Points on a Map

This section relies on the grounded analysis gained through interviews with nine individuals with knowledge of the dynamics of the LGBTTTIQ sector in Acapulco (six identified as gay men, two identified as trans women, and one identified as lesbian), as well as participant observation in Acapulco during six research trips that ranged from two days to two weeks in length. These interviews form part of a larger project that looks at violence

experienced by sexual and gender minorities across the state of Guerrero. When taken together, the story these selected interviews tell is not a singular narrative of gay liberation but is rather a demonstration of the layered ways in which many of those whose sexuality and gender marks them as marginal to mainstream society are also formed by other dynamics including class, race, and citizenship. These ethnographic sketches are meant to provide points on the queer map of a segregated Acapulco. Continue to use the map provided to locate the places in these stories (see Figure 2). To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the informants who agreed to participate in this study, names and other identifying markers that could be linked to them have been changed.

Scholars have documented public homoerotic activity in Acapulco as far back as the colonial period when the port was the site of encounters among military men, sailors, and prisoners from across the globe (Vargas Rojas & Alcalá Escamilla, 2013). However, while Acapulco has been a globally renowned tourist destination since the early 20th century and even had an internationally known gay scene before Mexico City, the territorialization of space by queers has always been weak. Following Cantú (2002), contemporary Acapulco can be understood as the nexus of a range of migration patterns, including Mexican and international tourists who come for a few days or months at a time and stay in a vast array of hotels and vacation homes targeted to a spectrum of budgets, as well as tens of thousands of Mexicans who have emigrated from other parts of the state or of the country in search of employment. Of course, sexual and gender minorities are found amidst all these groups and thus are fully part of the social and geographic diversity that marks the city of Acapulco. For example, while there is a recognized "gay zone" in the coastal neighborhood of Condesa where a few gay bars are located (several kilometers east of the "old town" historical center), these venues and this neighborhood do not constitute the only or even the primary geography relevant to sexual and gender minorities. One informant estimated there are at least fifty establishments across the city where men connect with other men to arrange sexual encounters, though most of these venues are not explicitly gay.

I met with Arturo in his spartan fifth-floor walk-up apartment, near the city's Zocalo. Our interview took place on his balcony, with its expansive view of Acapulco Bay. Arturo was a charming Mexican middle-class proudly gay man in his late seventies who, after five decades living and working elsewhere in the country and the US, retired to the historic district of Acapulco. Neighbors called him "grandpa." When he was five years old, his father was appointed chief of Acapulco's customs office, and the family moved from Mexico City to this same neighborhood. He recalled that at the time—the 1940s—the coastal highway was a dirt path, and the beach came right up to the Zocalo of what was then little more than a fishing village. Arturo has known he was gay since his first sexual experience with a male cousin as a

nine-year-old, something he said was later confirmed by a love affair with another student in his teen years. After attending university in the US, he returned to Mexico City where he had a career as a bureaucrat before retirement.

As a young man in the 1950s, Arturo developed a strong platonic friendship with an older man who allowed him the use of part of his home in an affluent area of Acapulco called Costa Azul as a *pied-à-terre* when Arturo could get away from work. Arturo fondly remembered the Acapulco of those days as “a city of the big American movie stars, the place where the Kennedys honeymooned and where jet setters and politicians rubbed shoulders.” He said that there was little violence: “There was no organized crime in that time period, those sorts of things didn’t happen here, and you could bring whoever you wanted to your house [for a sexual encounter].” Arturo also recalled that there were regular drag shows at a venue just outside the historic center in the Aguas Blancas neighborhood, attended by international and national tourists alike. By 2021, this corner of Acapulco once known for its bordellos and cabarets had become a ghost town and a no-go zone due to upwards of 30 homicides per month in what is roughly a ten-block area (Castro, 2021).

Svend was a US citizen in his early seventies from California who first lived in Acapulco in the late 1960s and was revisiting old haunts in Acapulco at the time of this research project. When he first came, many of the big hotels that now line the coast were not yet built, and the coastal highway was a single-lane road alongside an open beach. He commented that Acapulco has had a long tradition of young men becoming sexually involved with foreigners at least as far back as the 1930s, a phenomenon he said coexisted with a high level of machismo and homophobia. He recalled bringing his “first ‘boy’ ”

(his terminology) back to his hotel in the historic center (near the Zocalo) for a sexual encounter during his first visit to the city in 1969. Several other informants also told me that until a few years ago, La Placita restaurant (see Figure 3) on the main plaza had been a key hangout for teenage sex workers, including minors.

At the time, Svend said the historic center “wasn’t so rough” but in the mid-eighties it started to deteriorate, a phenomenon he linked to the increasing numbers of Mexican national tourists: “We had villas and we had servants. It sounds very colonial but it’s true.” His blatant celebration of inequality is noteworthy. Svend said that he began living full-time in Acapulco in the early eighties because his sexuality had made his life “unmanageable” in the US. He described a high-risk lifestyle that he found invigorating, including constant brushes with danger at a time when a public gay life oriented towards international tourists existed in the interstices of the law: “There were always raids and police pay-offs with all the bars. I mean constantly.” Svend said that soon after first visiting Acapulco he bought a home near the historic center of town in the upscale Quebrada neighborhood, and later lived in the high-end Las Brisas neighborhood on the east side of Acapulco Bay. He lived there for many years before moving to Southeast Asia in 2000 (certainly, to escape the increased policing of the sexual exploitation of minors in Acapulco at the time).

In her fifties, Pati identified as both trans and gay, though added that she used to identify as a woman but no longer wanted to bother with the effort involved in dressing the part. At the time of our interview, Pati managed a brothel in the nearby state capital Chilpancingo, though had lived in Acapulco for several years in her youth. Originally from a small town north of Acapulco, at age 15 she fled to Mexico City to escape her “macho”



**Figure 3.** Decrepit sign above La Placita restaurant adjacent to Acapulco’s Zocalo.



father. While working as a dishwasher in a restaurant there she met a young man who offered to take her to Acapulco by airplane. Jumping at the opportunity, she quickly abandoned her patron and soon moved in with her older gay brother who had moved to Acapulco many years earlier. Her brother worked as a quartermaster in the Acapulco port area (east of the Zocalo), and she lived with him for several years, on and off.

During her brief stay in Mexico City, Pati began a career as a *travesti* sex worker, something that she continued in Acapulco and Chilpancingo: “I worked the street for about ten years.” She recalled finding clients in the bathrooms of the Rios cinema and other movie houses in the downtown Capire neighborhood of Acapulco where she and her brother also lived. She recalled that *travesti* sex workers warned each other about dangerous clients: “They call them faggot-killers [*mataputos*]” She remembered the same police raids as Svend, which also led to her decision to leave Acapulco. At one point in the interview Pati mixed up the terms “raid” and “operation,” the latter a reference to violence committed by organized criminal elements in the present day, though then noted that the distinction is largely insignificant since so many of those now involved in organized crime previously worked as police officers. Pati also recalled that drag shows were a much more elaborate experience in the 1980s in Acapulco and other tourist destinations, so she joined up with a group of other *travestis* to create a drag show that they took on the road for several years.

Bobby was a Canadian in his sixties, whose connection to Acapulco began in the 1970s, and who permanently relocated to this city in the late 2000s. He lived in the Americas neighborhood until his death—he was murdered two months after being interviewed for this project (Payne, 2019). While Bobby had only lived in Acapulco permanently for a few years, he said that he had been visiting Acapulco regularly since the early 1990s. He lived in what he described as a villa in a wealthy-class enclave at the end of the Playas peninsula that extends south from the historic center. Bobby characterized the young men involved in sex work as “obviously gay,” disregarding the impact of dynamics of socioeconomic class. He said that until the mid-2000s, older foreign gay men came to Acapulco in pursuit of sexual activity with adolescents as young as fifteen years of age: “It used to be in the Zocalo at night there would be dozens and dozens of guys trying to get you to go with them for money.” Bobby said these youth, many of them minors, came from elsewhere in Mexico, in search of these connections. Bobby dismissed arguments he had heard that the foreigners were compelling naive young men into a way of life that was not of their choosing: “These guys...at fifteen...are wiser sexually than a Canadian at twenty-one,” thus buying into an age-old colonial trope. Bobby said that this pattern of street-based sex work involving Mexican adolescents and older tourists ended after a series of high-profile arrests of foreign tourists, accused

of exploiting minors. This brief look into Bobby’s segregated life illustrates the colonial dynamics of queer tourism in this city.

In his mid-thirties, Ignacio owned a small stand on Condesa Beach where he sold clothing and refreshments, though he lived in Las Cruces, a more affordable neighborhood located about an hour from the tourist section of the city. He was born and raised in another peripheral neighborhood far from the tourist zone. For several years, Ignacio moved back and forth between Acapulco and California, staying in the US for a year or more each time, though because he did not have a visa it cost him as much as \$3000 United States dollars to cross the border using the services of a “coyote” (smuggler). Ignacio discussed the street-based sex trade that had operated in the Zocalo area a few years earlier. He said that at its height about fifty Mexican male youths from across the country had worked in that neighborhood, paying \$200 pesos per week (about \$15 United States dollars at the time) to the organized crime group that controlled that area, though this number had dwindled to two or three youth.

Ignacio told me about his deceased lover Brandon, a 17-year-old who had been involved in drug trafficking and had been killed a year and a half earlier, by the organized crime group that he had worked for, because of a bad debt. Ignacio said that Brandon’s short life had been marked by deprivation. As a small child, Brandon had also lived in the Las Cruces area with his parents, though they separated, his mother moved to another city, and for a while, Brandon lived with his grandmother in the La Sabana area, known for flooding, poor infrastructure, and homicides. After that, he was in the care of the government agency responsible for child welfare in the Renacimiento neighborhood and then in a privately run youth shelter located near Acapulco’s Zocalo.

While Brandon lived with Ignacio in Las Cruces, Ignacio encouraged him to enter a residential addiction treatment program located near Ejido, a process that initially seemed to show some signs of success. But Brandon felt unable to resist the draw of the traditional area of Acapulco. Ignacio said that Brandon’s lifeless body was found in a hilly area above the Miramar neighborhood. With help from friends, Ignacio organized a funeral service and burial for Brandon, though none of Brandon’s family members were present. Ignacio also commented that at least four other young men Brandon knew from his time in the group home had died under similar violent circumstances.

Eva, a transgender woman in her late thirties, worked as a male stripper and sex worker in her youth in Acapulco before living in several cities elsewhere in Mexico and the US for many years. She described herself as a restless and hyperactive person who does not like to stay in the same place for too long: “I have lived in many different places, Mexico City, Zihuatanejo, Ciudad Obregon, Puerto Vallarta, the US, and of course Acapulco where I am from.” For financial reasons she has not yet

gone through gender-affirming surgery but said that if she had the money she would do so.

Eva grew up in Hogar Moderno (“modern household” in English), a working-class neighborhood in central Acapulco not far from the historic zone. “When I was fifteen, I told my parents that I was gay,” she said. She talked about being bullied in school and about violence at home: “When I came out to my parents...my father hit me a lot.” A short time later, she left school (she had completed grade 10) and found employment working in several poorly paid service positions: “When I was 18 years old, I worked as a [male] stripper in a bar, dancing. That was where I first got to know the gay world.” Eva said that her clients were tourists, mostly Mexican though there were some American clients as well. She said she started dating a man who worked in the same bar: “He was the love of my life, my first boyfriend, he loved me, and he also made me suffer....I was very young and innocent, and I didn’t know anything about life yet.”

At age 21, Eva moved out of her parent’s home and into a guesthouse in Condesa that catered to foreign gay men, exchanging her labor for tips and housing. She accepted an invitation from an older gay couple to join them in the US and stayed in California for about four years, where she worked doing drag shows. She returned to Mexico because her parents were both ill and because things had worsened for undocumented immigrants in the US after 9/11. For about a year, she worked as the head waiter of a restaurant in Acapulco’s tourist zone. Then she moved to Puerto Vallarta for several years, doing drag shows and occasional sex work. At the time of our interview, she had again returned to Acapulco to be closer to her recently widowed mother.

At the time of the interview, Eva worked as an assistant in a hair salon and performed in drag shows. She did

weekly performances in a pozoleria-style family restaurant in the Zapata neighborhood, far from the tourist zone (see Figure 4 of a similar performance by another artist in the Renacimiento neighborhood). Pozolerias, named for the famous Mexican soup that they usually (but not always) serve, commonly employ drag performers on Thursdays to draw customers. Eva said that she still traveled by public transit due to the cost of taxis, “even though people say that it is dangerous.” At the same time, she noted that she drinks very little and has become a homebody apart from the shows, evidence of her prioritization of personal safety. Eva is HIV positive and thinks she was likely infected by an American client as an adolescent when she was first involved in sex work, at the aforementioned Condesa guesthouse.

Nanci was a psychologist who grew up in Morelos, a working-class neighborhood adjacent to the traditional area of the city. While she held several professional positions, she also encountered significant employment discrimination based on sexual orientation. As a university student, she came out as lesbian and initially experienced familial rejection, though she noted that this reaction was soon dampened because she has taken on the role of economic provider for her divorced mother.

She recalled being cautioned as a child by her father to avoid the Zocalo area because of child exploitation by “gringo and Canadian tourists.” Nanci identified two places where trans and male sex workers now operate, including in the Condesa neighborhood around the bars, as well as along the coastal road that runs alongside the downtown beaches (including Condesa beach). She referred to the trans sex workers using the derogatory term *vestida*, using the term interchangeably with *travesti*. Nanci also distinguished between *chichifos* and *mayates*. She explained that both are



**Figure 4.** Drag performance in a pozoleria-style restaurant in the Renacimiento area of Acapulco.

straight-identified males but that *chichifos* (often minors) usually restrict their services to receiving oral sex, while *mayates* enter long-term economic relationships with trans women who have some degree of economic stability through steady employment such as hairdressing. While the clients of the three categories of sex workers she described are largely local Mexican men, she explained that these subjectivities are a product of the societal inequality produced in the context of tourism and that these identities would likely not persist in a society marked by greater equality and opportunities for these people.

While in university, Nanci became close with another woman. After a rocky relationship, they eventually went their separate ways. Sadly, this friend's own economic and familial circumstances were especially unstable, something that led her to drug addiction and to being forced into prostitution by an intimate partner who pimped her to whoever was willing to pay. A few months after they had drifted apart, Nanci learned that her friend had been brutally murdered in a hotel room, a crime that has not been solved. Nanci insisted that her friend died because of her vulnerability as a woman, as a lesbian, and as someone without economic resources. She also explained that organized crime impacts the LGBTTTIQ community precisely because of the elevated levels of vulnerability that members of this community experience in Acapulco. Nanci is working with others to establish a community organization that will provide support to sexual and gender minorities who find themselves in difficult straits.

At age 15, Juan's father reacted violently to the news that Juan identified as gay, and so this young person left home. The place he fled was a working-class neighborhood in Pie de la Cuesta, several kilometers west of Acapulco, a town where his grandparents and extended family also lived. He counts himself fortunate to have had a friend in nearby Acapulco who was able to take him in. Prior to leaving home, Juan had already started performing as a drag artist, and so was soon able to rent a room for himself. After about a year, the relationship with his parents significantly improved because they reconsidered their attitudes towards Juan's sexual identity, and so he returned to the family home. These experiences led Juan to engage with LGBTTTIQ activism and he has been involved with local and state campaigns against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. He has also worked as a housekeeper in several different tourist hotels including the Twin Towers in the Condesa neighborhood. He completed junior high school as an adult.

Juan lamented the many cases he knows about in which gay men and *travestis* have been subjected to extreme violence, sometimes fatal. He outlined three emblematic examples that illustrate the sort of violence that sexual and gender minorities in Acapulco need to worry about. One case involved a 40-year-old gay man brutally beaten to death in the El Coloso neighbor-

hood. Another involved the murder of a *travesti* found dead in the La Laja neighborhood. She was involved in street-level drug trafficking and so the assumption is that she was killed concerning that connection. The third involved the disappearance of a gay man in Luis Donaldo Colosio's neighborhood, someone who was known to sell cocaine and marijuana in the area. Neighbors saw armed subjects enter his home and take him away. Juan explained that people who identify as *travesti*, transgender, transsexual, or lesbian in Acapulco have reduced employment opportunities, even more restricted than gay men, and that the result is that they are more likely to become embroiled in organized crime as petty actors, a circumstance that too often leads to danger, violence, and death. He lamented that LGBTTTIQ activists are especially wary of becoming involved with cases that involve organized crime precisely because of the added risk and uncertainty. Juan identified Zapata, Renacimiento, Vacacional, and Central de Abastos—all located in the northern part of the city far away from the tourist zone and widely known to be captured territory of organized crime—as the most dangerous for the LGBTTTIQ community.

Gustavo, a gay man from a middle-class Acapulco family, also found himself involved in LGBTTTIQ activism from a young age. He explained that in the late 1990s, a group of 10 government workers began to meet because they were concerned with the municipal government's regular arrests of *travesti*, transsexual, and transgender persons. They sought out meetings with various municipal leaders, including the Secretary of Public Security as well as the city's mayor. Gustavo recounted how this led to the development of LGBTTTIQ activist spaces that contributed to the establishment of annual pride marches and other political and educational campaigns against discrimination (see Figure 5). In 2014, in face of discriminatory action against the public display of the Pride flag by students in the Faculty of Tourism of the Autonomous University of Guerrero, located in Acapulco's Hornos neighborhood, activists were able to provide organized support for the students.

## 5. Analysis of a Contradiction

According to research conducted by Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, 2021), 7.4% of Guerrerans identify as LGBTTTIQ, a higher percentage than all but three of Mexico's 31 states, much higher than the national capital, and well above the national average of 5.1%. This is a striking result that does not obviously correspond with other socioeconomic markers that are usually associated with these identities and thus suggests the need for further research. This relatively high level of LGBTTTIQ identity in Guerrero is likely related to a combination of longstanding cultural patterns of toleration of so-called non-normative expressions of gender and sexual identities in this state, coupled with the migratory and identity-related processes related to tourism.



**Figure 5.** Acapulco’s annual Pride march.

At the same time, Guerrero is cited as having more killings of sexual and gender minorities than any other political entity in Mexico except Veracruz and Mexico City, which both have populations nearly triple the size. The complicated stories told by the research subjects of this study and indicated by other experiences suggest three frames that together help us understand the set of dynamics that matter for members of the LGBTTTIQ community in Guerrero: liberation, exploitation, and violation.

Queer tourism has led to liberation experiences for many LGBTTTIQ-identified persons, such as Svend and Bobby who sought to escape the constraints of social exclusion in the US and Canada. This seeking of liberation through opportunities for identity formation has contributed to the constant flow of international tourists to destinations such as Puerto Vallarta and Acapulco (Bailey, 2022). At the same time, tourism has also led to experiences of liberation for many queer Mexicans through the mechanisms identified by Monterrubio (2021). The range of spaces and businesses that provide LGBTTTIQ persons with places where minority identities are welcomed has been augmented by over seven decades of tourism in Acapulco attracting millions of visitors from other parts of Mexico and beyond. The Mexican informants who contributed to this study showed that their identities have been built through the possibilities afforded to them by a city created by tourism. Locals have opportunities to socialize and seek sexual encounters that would likely be less available elsewhere, and this context certainly contributes to the notable level of LGBTTTIQ activism in Acapulco and in the state of Guerrero (Payne, 2020). Monterrubio (2021, p. 50) concluded that LGBTTTIQ tourism spaces are key to

providing locals with opportunities to “be gay at home,” and this study reinforces this assertion. As well, some LGBTTTIQ individuals, including Nanci and Juan among so many others, have advanced in educational attainment and employment in ways that are tied to the tourist economy.

Bailey (2022, p. 489) underlines that queer tourism contributes to the availability of acceptance and inclusion, but that this is restricted to those who can afford it, and that the related forms of consumption “create stratification within the LGBTQ+ community.” In Acapulco, tourism has long been and continues to be the occasion of a range of experiences of exploitation that impacts people in different ways, something made evident through the experiences of those interviewed for this study. The extreme economic inequality produced through this often unplanned urban space marked by segregation and exclusion allowed many tourists and locals opportunities to sexually exploit young people who lack adequate economic resources or social support. The circumstances of spatial segregation have contributed to the vulnerability of many LGBTTTIQ-identified persons, including Eva, Ignacio, and so many others.

However, what stands out in this examination of the experiences of LGBTTTIQ persons in Acapulco is that the rapid expansion of the power and territory of organized crime here and across the state of Guerrero has aggravated and accentuated pre-existing conditions that already led to adverse outcomes for some sexual and gender minorities due to segregation and the related production of vulnerability. It is important to recognize that the shift of organized crime towards Acapulco has been part of a continental realignment of drug trafficking provoked by transnational shifts such as 9/11, the 2007 financial crisis, the “war on drugs,” the opioid crisis, and border dynamics. So many of the informants told sad but very common stories of lethal outcomes. While the successive waves of organized violence have certainly impacted all sectors of Acapulco’s population, LGBTTTIQ-identified persons are more likely to be exposed to the violence fomented by organized criminal entities that seek to maintain their expansive economic and political power. The mapping of the stories included in this article shows us that queerness is not in itself a corrective for other forms of marginalization. Instead, we are left to notice the multiple ways in which the nexus between queerness and tourism results in troubling outcomes at the interface between the interpersonal and the urban, including the sexual exploitation of minors, the amplification of the harming of international borders, and at least in the case of Acapulco, links between a tourist economy and violent death.

## 6. Conclusion

Which queers benefit from tourism? In different ways, this is the central question that both Puar (2002c) and

Cantú (2002) ask us to consider. Puar (2002c, p. 113) observed that “the specter of the native, the other, the ‘third world’...encourages a continuity of colonial constructions of tourism as a travel adventure into unchartered territory laden with the possibility of taboo sexual encounters, illicit seductions, and dangerous liaisons,” something sadly reflected in the lives of the people interviewed for this project. Cantú (2002, p. 147) showed that Mexico has been marketed as a place that is both “just like home” and at the same time “exotic,” that tourists have been sold a sort of homoeroticism that is in equal measures a raw or pure form of sexuality but also dangerous. The stories included here demonstrate that this view has been purchased, and that tourism tends to reproduce and amplify existing inequalities between queers. Torres Arroyo (2019, p. 317) insists that poverty and social exclusion are the manifestations of a century of tourist policy and related urban planning in Acapulco and that the territorial inequality produced inhibits the full exercise of the social rights of those impacted in spatially evident ways. The infiltration of an already distorted social fabric by organized crime has further aggravated the harm experienced by some sexual and gender minorities.

What are the implications of this study for urban planning? To start, there is no evidence that planning and tourist development decisions have taken into serious consideration queerness or its related subjectivities in Acapulco. Unlike in Puerto Vallarta, there has been no significant promotion of LGBTTTTIQ tourism, something that several informants identified as a missed opportunity given the cultural patrimony of this city as a place that represents sexual liberation. It is interesting to note that Acapulco was the site of the International Lesbian and Gay Association’s 1991 Annual Conference (Brito, 1991), though none of the informants of this study indicated knowledge of that event. In 2022, the municipal tourism office did sponsor a Pride fest, though it seems to have been designed as a decidedly apolitical cultural event that competed with the annual Pride march organized by activists the following week.

Elsewhere, scholars and activists have called on planners to “consider an intersectional analysis of oppressed populations with multiple markers of alterity to increase its understanding and recognition” of marginalized members of the LGBTTTTIQ community “to be better positioned to plan spaces and services with and for them” (Irazábal & Huerta, 2016). Nowhere is this more important than in Acapulco, where a queering of the urban planning of this city built on tourism and corrupted by cartel violence could take into consideration how the city’s planning and development to date have facilitated the violation of so many sexual and gender minorities.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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