

“La casa de las flores: a case study of Queer Mexican representation in millennial telenovelas”

by

Eric Phann

Honors Program Director: Dr. Allison Stedman

Advisor: Dr. David Dalton

Honors in Spanish

Abstract

Telenovelas are a TV genre unique to Latin America and are often colloquially referred to as "Spanish soap operas" since, like US soap operas, they feature a storyline that evolves from episode to episode and airs every weekday. A key difference, however, is that telenovelas highlight Latin American characters and culture and are shorter in episode count, resulting in tighter storyline pacing, which facilitates stronger melodrama and a captivated audience. Originating in Brazil in 1951, the telenovela still constitutes one of the most dominant and influential genres of Latin American television and is popular all over the world. In recent years, the telenovela has evolved into a new TV subgenre called the "millennial telenovela," in which traditional love plots and themes have been reconstructed to appeal to the millennial demographic. LGBTQ+ characters and issues have only recently taken the spotlight in these millennial telenovelas, however. As a result, there is a lack of research on how such characters have been represented as the telenovela has transitioned from its traditional to its millennial incarnation. This study seeks to examine how LGBTQ+ characters and their storylines have evolved in millennial telenovelas in order to assess how the existence of these characters both reflects and influences contemporary Latin American culture. In reviewing pre-existing literature surrounding telenovelas and in conducting a case study on one of the pioneers of the millennial telenovela, *La casa de las flores* (English: The House of Flowers) by Manolo Caro, this study will reveal how the millennial telenovela both appropriates and innovates upon the traditional telenovela format to promote LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion in Mexican society and culture, where the topic is still exoticized and polarizing.

“To my family, friends, and lovers—past, present, and future.”

Acknowledgements

Dr. Stedman — Thank you so much for all the wisdom on research and writing. You have not only streamlined this entire process for me but enhanced it: you have made writing this thesis a very enjoyable and enriching experience.

Dr. Dalton — Thank you for all the brainstorming and guidance on what my thesis should be. I remember early sophomore year when I expressed interest in the Spanish Honors Program and you were completely on board to take me under your wing.

Dr. Pitts — Thank you for encouraging me to take your class. I have never taken anything like it before and learned so much about Queer and Trans Latinx studies. Much of the analysis in this thesis has been influenced by your class queer-ing up my thinking.

Thank you to the entire UNC Charlotte Honors College and The Martins for endlessly supporting me and my undergraduate career, both financially and academically.

Thank you to all the foreign language educators out there. Mrs. Karina Vazquez, I remember us bonding and chatting over *La casa de las flores* in high school Spanish class. Thank you for believing in me and pushing me to further pursue my Spanish studies in higher education.

Special thanks to Ryan Gibson for our late night peer review sessions — we've learned a lot about the queer experience and each other since we have met.

Thank you to my mom, dad, grandma, and younger sisters. I love you all so much!

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	4
Table of Contents.....	5
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	6
Chapter 1.1: History of the Telenovela.....	6
Chapter 1.2: Queer Mexican Representation in Traditional Telenovelas.....	8
Chapter 1.3: Birth of the Millennial Telenovela.....	9
Chapter 1.4: La casa de las flores.....	11
Chapter 2: Julián de la Mora & Diego Olvera.....	12
Chapter 2.1: Coming Out as Bisexual.....	12
Chapter 2.2: Conversion Therapy.....	16
Chapter 2.3: Elena de la Mora & Surrogacy.....	18
Chapter 3: María José Riquelme & Paulina de la Mora.....	19
Chapter 3.1: Migrations and Exile.....	19
Chapter 3.2: Transwomen Expectations.....	21
Chapter 3.3: Embracing the Queer.....	22
Chapter 4: Virginia de la Mora & Ernesto de la Mora.....	23
Chapter 4.1: Bridging the Past and Present.....	24
Chapter 4.2: Journey to Allyship.....	27
Chapter 5: Analysis and Critiques.....	28
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	31
Bibliography.....	33

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis seeks to investigate how Queer Mexican¹ characters have been represented in the millennial telenovela as it departs from the traditional telenovela by using pre-existing literature to conceptualize the traditional telenovela and *La casa de las flores* (English: The House of Flowers) by Manolo Caro as a case study for the millennial telenovela. As my close readings of the show will reveal, *La casa* is representative of how the millennial telenovela draws from and subverts the traditional telenovela genre to give a voice to the LGBTQ+ community through unapologetic, contemporary storylines and representation.

Chapter 1.1: History of the Telenovela

Telenovelas are televised melodramas (Herrera Guerra 168). As such, they incorporate the four key characteristics of literary melodramas: tears, laughter, fear, and enthusiasm (180). They may also be colloquially referred to as “Spanish soap operas” as they air nearly every day and feature a captivating storyline filled with twists and turns, which rewards their audience for their continuous viewership and engagement, as the plot builds up cumulatively chapter after chapter (175). One important difference between the soap opera and the telenovela, however, is that telenovelas often have a self-contained story and are finite, in terms of plot evolution, whereas the soap opera may be infinite in length. Because of the constraints necessitated by structure and length, telenovelas are often snappier in pacing, resulting in a tighter, more concise form of melodrama that provokes intense emotions from viewers.

¹ For the scope of this thesis, *Queer* is used to include and represent the spectrum of identities and sexualities that are counter to the mainstream, often hetero-cis-normative society (see: “Queer Theory Revisited” by Michael Hames-García).

The first telenovela ever produced was *Sua Vida Me Pertence* by Wálter Forster in Brazil in 1951. Since then, telenovelas have soared in popularity throughout Latin America as a dominating and influential genre of television and are also enjoyed around the world. As a testament to its domestic popularity, "estimates of telenovela audiences in Mexico range from sixty to eighty per cent of the television viewing public" (Huska 684). Further, Colombian telenovela *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (1999) has been adapted for release in 17 countries within and outside of Latin America, including the United States, India, Mexico, Greece, Vietnam, and China, representing an international presence beyond the telenovela's origin country ("The Power of the Telenovela"). Nevertheless, telenovelas often incorporate cultural characteristics and values from their country of origin, capitalizing on viewer affinities for shows that reflect their national identities and traditions in an effort to build a larger and more loyal audience (181). As a result of this, some scholars have argued that telenovelas can be seen as a method of communicating modernity meaning, that in reflecting the changes and nuances of a particular society, they simultaneously have the ability to influence the evolution of the culture they reflect (Estill, "Telenovela").

The degree to which this is possible, however, is restricted due to dominant Mexican production companies such as TV Azteca and Televisa being more likely to stick to the status quo—conservative values and messages—in order to maintain positive ratings and viewership from their majority middle-class audience, specifically stay-at-home moms (Herrera Guerra 183). This may facilitate propagation and reinforcement of preexisting conservative themes and beliefs as opposed to changed or modern ones. This bidirectional relationship between a country's society and culture and the telenovela is key to understanding the long-standing vitality and importance of telenovelas throughout Latin America.

It is important to note still that telenovelas are works of fiction. As such, they are meant to entertain. They do this by representing a perceived reality and highlighting relatable social issues, e.g., machismo, racism, and classism, in order to evoke feelings and emotions from viewers that resonate with those of the characters on screen. Rosalind C. Pearson describes this concept of telenovela as, with respect to Mexican telenovelas in particular, “a microcosm of Mexican life and culture, with the drama of daily life translating into the melodrama of telenovela life” (404). Since the cultures and societies depicted in telenovelas bear such a close resemblance to worlds they represent, the lines between narrative and reality are frequently blurred, giving telenovelas the opportunity not only to show the world as it *is*, but also as it *could be*. However, it is worth noting that, because performances in telenovelas can also be seen as exaggerations, whether or not the viewer chooses to believe in such a world is its own argument.

Chapter 1.2: Queer Mexican Representation in Traditional Telenovelas

Extending this idea to queer representation, traditional telenovelas rarely featured or spotlighted Queer Mexican characters. When such characters did appear on screen, they were often caricaturesque in nature, in that blatant stereotypes associated with this population were exploited as a comedic device that perpetuated the public’s image of them while failing to capture the true diversity and individuality among the community (Tate, “Laughing,” 55-6). For example, gay men were universally portrayed as strictly effeminate and one-dimensional. They were never given screentime showing their sexuality or depth of character. Instead, they were reduced to a stereotype whose sole purpose was comedic relief. As a result, traditional telenovelas, rather than acting as agents of social change, reinforced the deep-seated cultural paradigms whereby male homosexuality is tied with femininity and male heterosexuality is tied

with masculinity—a binary that has deep roots in Mexican culture (Tate, “Redefining Mexican Masculinity,” 539).

These representations were problematic and hurtful to the LGBTQ+ community. It may be tempting to argue that any representation at all can be positive, but visibility can hurt a community more than it helps it, especially when such visibility is created by and for the benefit of those not part of it, i.e., a cisheteronormative society. A more positive representation of diverse Queer Mexican characters would only evolve through a new, modern reimagining of the genre itself.

Chapter 1.3: Birth of the Millennial Telenovela

As previously mentioned, traditional telenovelas and their writers have long been restricted by their production companies, leading to rigid, formulaic approaches to writing and structure. Furthermore, these production companies sought to push conservative ideas and thinking into the storyline and script, as they consider such writing to be easily digestible and appealing to their middle-class audience. This is all in an attempt to maintain viewership and ratings, but this also assumes that their audience is rigid and stagnant, which Herrera Guerra argues is not the case. She notes that the general audience is much more fluid in viewpoints and ideologies than believed to be by production companies and producers (Herrera Guerra 187). Audiences just expect something to be easily consumable, not necessarily conservative. Additionally, although the target population was originally middle-class stay-at-home women, telenovelas have become “a staple of television broadcasting that cut across lines of gender, class, and age” (Huska 864).

As such, it was only a matter of time before audiences grew tired of the lack of innovation in telenovelas. Casa Perez describes this gradual yet profound shift from traditional to modern telenovelas in Mexico and the impact it can have on Mexican society, saying that “telenovelas are changing, as are the people who watch them and the way they deal with whatever beliefs and values telenovelas reproduce” (Casas Perez 408). This comes from the aforementioned desire for innovation. As the world develops into what we know now—societies changing, fashions shifting, freedom of expression increasing—it is inevitable that viewers will want to see that development and change reflected on their screens (Casas Perez 409-10). They want to see modern plotlines about topics that are contemporary, yet still relatable and understandable within the confines and restrictions of a potentially conservative society.

This led to the advent of the millennial telenovela, a relatively new phrase used to describe, and sometimes used synonymously with, modern telenovelas. The term originated in 2016 when BuzzFeed and Telemundo were promoting their millennial telenovela “Much Ado About Nada” (Spangler, “Telemundo and BuzzFeed”)². They cited how their use of data and insights about millennial viewers would be used to create storylines for a “full-on telenovela for millennials.” These millennial telenovelas promise to present a more modern storyline, with contemporary topics such as LGBTQ+ rights and representation, male sexuality, and female empowerment. Eventually, the name would be attributed and associated with other shows that derive from the telenovela genre, including *La casa de las flores*.

² As of writing, there is no footage readily available about the show, suggesting that the show never released or was scrubbed from the Internet.

Chapter 1.4: La casa de las flores

La casa de las flores is a Netflix original series created by Manolo Caro and produced by Noc Noc Cinema. It has been characterized as a dark-comedy millennial telenovela. A total of 34 episodes over three seasons were released from August 10th, 2018 to April 23, 2020.

Additionally, a special episode was released on November 1st, 2019 to bridge the events of season one and two, *La casa de las flores: El funeral* (English: The House of Flowers: The Funeral). Since then, Netflix has created a full-length movie, *La casa de las flores: la película* (The House of Flowers: The Movie), released on June 23rd, 2021 which serves as a sequel to the events of the aforementioned episodes. Due to the shift away from an episodic format, we will not analyze the movie. Instead, we will focus on the original episodes released between 2018 and 2020.

La casa is centered around the de la Mora family, an upper-class and dysfunctional Mexican family. It follows the family members' lives as they navigate personal affairs and try to keep their flower shop and cabaret afloat—both of which share the same name as the show: *La casa de las flores*. The flower shop is framed as a more posh and formal setting while the cabaret is more casual and queer, with on-site drag queens and strippers. The family consists of matriarch Virginia, father Ernesto, eldest child Paulina, middle child Elena, and youngest child Julián. Eventually, the main cast expands to include María José Riquelme, who is Paulina's ex-spouse, and Diego Olvera, who is Julián's partner.

In the analysis that follows, I will divide the series by character-relationships in order to explore how their sexuality and gender identities are represented throughout the show with respect to the telenovela genre as well as to the characters' relative existence to Mexican culture

and society in general. The analysis will conclude with an examination of the show's impact on the telenovela genre by studying the public reception of the show as well as any observations or critiques of its Queer Mexican storylines. My analysis of the overall representation of these characters in *La casa* will identify areas of excellence and avenues for potential improvement for millennial telenovelas moving forward. In order to achieve this, I will draw upon pre-existing literature and theories to critique and to affirm *La casa* in its appropriation of the traditional telenovela format and in its restructuring of this format to reflect Mexican culture and society while influencing its future directions.

Chapter 2: Julián de la Mora & Diego Olvera

Julián de la Mora is the youngest child of the de la Moras. He is often characterized as indecisive and hypersexual. Impactful moments in his storyline include his bisexuality and intimate relationship with the family's financial adviser, Diego Olvera, and to a lesser extent Lucía, his ex-girlfriend.

Chapter 2.1: Coming Out as Bisexual

Since the very first episode of the show, Julián is revealed to be queer: he is shown having sex with Lucía in one scene and Diego in another. To give context to his dynamic with these characters at this point, Lucía is his girlfriend and Diego is a lover that he tries to hide from her and everyone else. Later in the season, it is revealed that Julián and Diego have been meeting up for about five years in secret. This affair trope is nothing new to the telenovela genre and there is even precedent for a man cheating on his wife with his male lover, but the way *La casa* handles this trope is unique in that we are able to see Julián come to terms with his bisexuality,

and his relationship with Diego develops past being an affair. Much of this is done within episode three, where the show builds up multiple plot points around acceptance and coming out of the closet, leading to an iconic and memorable drag lip-sync at the end of the episode where Julián comes out as bisexual to his family.

Caro starts the juxtaposition of Julián and Diego here. When Julián brings up the idea of coming out of the closet to his family, Diego reveals that his family has not talked to him in 15 years, ever since he came out to them as gay, but that he also does not regret coming out. This represents many people's experiences and fears when coming out.

The same episode has Julián refusing the label bisexual, assuring himself and others that he is gay—he then has sex *again* with Lucía before admitting to himself that he is indeed bisexual. Ironically, a running joke throughout the series has characters calling Julián gay in a way many people use it today, as an umbrella term, with Julián making a conscious effort to correct them by reidentifying himself as bisexual, not wanting to be pigeon-holed into the umbrella term.

An important part of this storyline is how his parents come to terms with their son's queerness. His mother, Virginia has a conversation with Elena discussing this. Elena has no issue whatsoever with it, but throws out the word “therapy,” to which Virginia immediately agrees, thinking she is referring to electroshock conversion therapy. Elena has to clarify that she was referring to Virginia: since Virginia is the one having problems with the possibility of Julián being gay, she should consider therapy to get to a place of acceptance. This is one of many instances where Caro plays with the audience's expectations and ultimately subverts them for a comedic and dramatic payoff while pushing his messaging of acceptance and inclusion.

Virginia decides to schedule an appointment with their family therapist Dr. Salomón Cohen and viewers are able to understand a bit more about her perspective and why she is worried that Julián might be gay. Dr. Cohen and Virginia chat a bit about her life before bringing up her concerns with her son being gay. Dr. Cohen, who often uses a sock puppet named Chuy as a secondary object for his patients to talk to, sees Julián being gay as a non-issue and not problematic in the slightest. Dr. Cohen, talking through Chuy, notes that Julián has brought up his queer identity in their therapy sessions when he was younger, to Virginia's surprise. Chuy even claims that he himself is gay and that it is okay to be gay. But, Virginia counters with the following: "But you're a sock. A sock can't get hurt...nobody will speak bad of you or give you electroshock therapy. No one will make you move to another country out of shame. You won't get fired. [...] You're just a sock. No one will talk about you."³

This is pivotal in understanding Virginia's perspective on the matter; she is not simply conservative or old-fashioned in her thinking, nor does she think that her son being gay is inherently bad or evil. Rather, she is worried for her son's safety as such a label would mark her child as an outsider and make him seem different from everyone else. Further, as the matriarch, she is worried that the reputation of the family would be jeopardized. The conversation continues with Chuy asking Virginia what is more important to her: "her son's happiness or what people may say about him?" Virginia argues that the two are tied together: that what people say about us affects our happiness. The scene ends with Chuy saying confidently "no—absolutely not."

Julián continues unsure about coming out to his family and goes to the cabaret to ask one of the drag queens for advice. She replies that truths are never easy to tell, but that you should always tell them from the heart. These words of wisdom go over Julián's head until she sings

³ All referenced *La casa* quotes were translated from Spanish, its original language, to English by Netflix.

some Gloria Trevi and suggests he comes out with a song. Julián takes this advice to heart and decides to come out to his family in song.

His coming out scene is regarded as one of the most memorable and impactful moments of the season. The scene starts off with him singing quietly before crescendoing into a full-on semi-fictitious musical performance juxtaposed with a Gloria Trevi drag performer-impersonator from the cabaret, with dramatic lighting in the colors of the bisexual flag. They both lip sync to “¿A quién le importa?” (English, idiomatically: Who cares?) by Alaska y Dinarama. The song, regarded as a gay anthem by the queer Spanish language-speaking community, discusses not caring about what people say in regards to what one does or says and to keep going and never change who you are (Montalvo Lucar, “How I Made It”). This is a direct call-back to the previous scene and Virginia’s concerns over Julián’s coming out potentially impacting the family reputation.

Upon coming back to reality, the family claps out of courtesy but ultimately the dinner devolves into a shouting cacophony of arguments. Some people are surprised and confused about Julián coming out as bisexual instead of gay, his partner Diego included, and Virginia quips with “whatever you are... bisexual, trisexual, gay, drag or whatever it is [...] nobody has to know.” His moment of pride and expression is met with disbelief and downplayed as confusion or pigeon-holed with gay. Finally, the episode ends with Ernesto getting arrested, but not before he has the chance to tell his son that he accepts him as he is.

Such a storyline would never have appeared in such a deep and grandiose form if this were a traditional telenovela: it explicitly addresses and attacks the conservative belief of suppressing one’s identity to assimilate to a heteronormative society. Further, it establishes his

bisexuality as a core part of who he is early on in the series, rather than making it peripheral to his character.

Chapter 2.2: Conversion Therapy

One of the hurdles of Julián and Diego's relationship is the topic of children. Julián has been strongly against having kids, claiming that he is too young and not ready for such a big responsibility or commitment. Diego is on the other side of the spectrum, feeling as if it is time for him to become a father, perhaps even to multiple children. The idea of adoption and children get thrown around between Julian and Diego throughout the show since season one, but the storyline is not fully realized and fleshed out until season three. This storyline involves Diego reconnecting with his violently homophobic family—his mother, father, and cousin Fercito—as Julián is still against the idea of children. This chapter, 2.2, is intertwined with the following chapter, 2.3, as the idea of parenthood becomes conflated with that of a heteronormative nuclear family. Thus, as Diego grapples with running out of time to start a family, he voluntarily turns to conversion therapy as a “solution.”

Diego's conversion therapy arc starts with him attempting to reconnect with his homophobic parents by announcing that he is expecting a child. This child is the result of artificial insemination and surrogacy with Elena, which will be discussed in the following chapter. This delights his parents extremely—until they ask if he is still gay, to which Diego replies affirmatively. Despite how much Diego misses them, they remain firm in shutting out Diego until he “cures” himself of homosexuality. To this end, they recommend conversion therapy, something his cousin Fercito went to and seemingly cured his own homosexuality

through. The pamphlet they give him notes that participants will be “50% less gay after one month.”

Diego humors the idea and attends a conversion therapy lecture, in which the speaker frames homosexuality as a choice, something that can be purged so that it may not consume or ruin one’s life with evil “sodomite behavior.” His rhetoric attempts to empathize and connect with everyone in the hall, noting that he too was homosexual before deciding to give it up for a better life. The lecture plays out much like a sermon, religious and almost cult-like, so much so that he has the crowd saying “amen” by the end of it. Shortly after, Diego is approached by his cousin Fercito who presents the idea of attending an exclusive conversion therapy camp on a farm. By this point, Diego is still hesitant and resistant to the idea of committing to conversion therapy, but agrees to meet with Fercito again to discuss the idea further.

This subsequent meeting with Fercito gives viewers insight into what a traditional nuclear family is like. Despite being something that many people strive for, it is revealed that it can still be extremely problematic and dangerous, even if seemingly normative and perfect. This is seen through how Fercito interacts with his children and how he views women. In one breath he chastises his son for wanting to eat sausages because that would be too gay and suspect, and in another he minimizes and objectifies women for the sake of hypermasculine, chauvinist values. This, again, is one of the many ways that Caro presents the “expectations vs. reality” dynamic in *La casa*.

Diego eventually takes up Fercito’s offer and enlists in the conversion therapy camp, as he feels he has no other option. Through this, we are able to see an example of the many hidden or disguised ways that violent homophobia is present in Mexico. The other inmates of the camp

have been brainwashed into thinking homosexuality is a sin and will only cause harm if not cured. Diego is initially resistant to this idea and thus is subjected to the camp leader's electroshock therapy as a means to cure his homosexuality and prevent further disruption to the camp. Eventually, Julián and Elena are able to heroically rescue Diego from his stint at the conversion therapy camp and they are able to decide what their next steps are regarding their surrogate child.

Chapter 2.3: Elena de la Mora & Surrogacy

Elena is pregnant, but the biological father of the child is initially unknown to the family. Eventually, Diego reveals that he and Elena decided to undergo surrogacy together by artificial insemination in the hopes of starting a family with Julián.

It is worth noting that the child Elena bears would be the next heir to the flower shop, which is why it has been so important to figure out who the father is. However, now that the biological father is found, there is still a question of who the legal father is. Given that Elena is now in a relationship with Pablo, it becomes difficult to assess who the father is or should be, and by extension who will be parenting the child. This presents itself as two options to the viewer: Elena and Pablo or Diego and Julián.

By the last episode of the series, the four characters have decided to parent the son together, Diego and Julián as well as Elena and her partner Pablo. While Elena is not necessarily a queer-identifying character, the relationship she is now in can be analyzed as such. Other than the inherent queerness of Diego and Julián, having four parents destabilizes the traditional family unit by normalizing something unconventional. Rather than assimilate to a heteronormative and

traditional family unit or even anti-assimilate by solely letting Diego and Julián parent the child, Caro paves a third option of having all four co-parent the child together.

This can be viewed as a form of disidentification from queer theory (Muñoz 30). Rather than align with the binary options, he subverts expectations and writes all four in as parents, creating an arguably even more unconventional household through a new generation of the de la Moras. This is a testament to the idea that even the queerest relationships, both a heterosexual couple and homosexual couple, can come together, coexist, and co-parent if they so choose to, defying traditional parenthood and norms for the family unit.

Chapter 3: María José Riquelme & Paulina de la Mora

Whereas Julián and Diego represent a queer relationship between two men, Paulina and María José represent a queer relationship among two women. It is also important to note that María José is a transwoman and was known as José María before transitioning. Their relationship is seen to have many ups and downs in the show as they engage with new, potential lovers and chaotic family issues that disrupt their lives. Important plotlines regarding their relationship include María José moving back to Mexico after being exiled by the de la Moras for transitioning as well as Paulina coming to terms with her queerness after María José had returned.

Chapter 3.1: Migrations and Exile

The first mention of the character María José is, with some hindsight knowledge, in episode four where she is dead-named, referred to as her pre-transitioning name, José María. As

Spanish is also a gendered language, she is referred to using masculine pronouns and parts of speech as opposed to feminine ones. This is presumably done for dramatic effect from a writing standpoint so as to not give too much away about the character early on, possibly reserving their trans identity for shock factor. Additionally, it could also represent how the family still somewhat rejects her transition, intentionally misgendering her as José María.

She is called back to Mexico by Paulina who is desperate to bail out Ernesto from prison. Much to everyone's surprise, José María had fully transitioned to María José, going through gender-affirming top surgery, and had been equipped with a new wardrobe and hair. This is just as much of a sucker punch to the family now as it had been when she was first excommunicated from the family. Nevertheless, the family, desperate for her skills and expertise as a lawyer, make an effort to understand her and to behave respectfully in her presence. Slowly, but surely, they are able to use the correct feminine pronouns and avoid dead-naming her, something that they had struggled with initially.

One of the implied differences in society between Spain, where María José is from and still resides, and Mexico, where she used to live with Paulina and the rest of her family, is the acceptance of transgender individuals. An example of this in the show is when María José, who has not updated her government ID since transitioning, asks for a female guard to pat her down to get into the prison to see Ernesto. The male guard seems happy to refuse her request, saying that it says José María on the passport and begins patting her down. This is blatant transphobia and an intentional, violent act of misgendering the individual against their wishes, all in an attempt to make her uncomfortable and feel without power. After the ordeal, Paulina asks María José if she is okay, to which she sarcastically answers with how much she missed the way she had been treated in Mexico: "the dirty looks, the whispering, the catcalling." María José, much

like the millennial viewer, longs for a more progressive future for the country, one where her gender identity is never contested or trivialized.

Chapter 3.2: Transwomen Expectations

Traditionally, trans women in telenovelas have not been not represented in serious or respected ways, neither in their mannerisms nor their occupation. They are instead conflated with gay men or drag queens and shown to be highly promiscuous and sexual, often in jobs which would align with this perception. This stereotype is subverted by Caro in writing María José as a put together, educated, and successful lawyer. While Virginia banishes María José due to her transgender identity and transitioning, presumably to protect the family image, they inevitably call upon María José because of her legal prowess in the courtroom—something that should be highly respected and undeniable regardless of her gender identity.

Nevertheless, her capabilities for her profession are still put into question due to her trans identity. Ernesto essentially refuses help from María José, claiming that “no judge would listen to her dressed in that costume” and that María José should dress up as a man. This is indicative of misogyny on the one hand, and transphobia on the other. He implies that she, as a woman, would not be listened to by a judge, and that her trans identity is merely a costume, something that can be taken on and off at will. Eventually, Ernesto comes around and is thankful that María José takes his case, calling her beautiful. This is significant because he uses the word *guapa*, ending the adjective with the feminine “-a” instead of the masculine “-o”, affirming his perception of her gender identity as a woman rather than as a man.

María José is very aware of the target put on her back as a queer trans woman, noting that “not being normal in this country and most of the world is a label that can’t be removed.” Further, despite others perceiving her as someone crazy, an attribute often attributed to trans individuals, she is arguably the most mentally stable of the family and functions as their respite within all of the chaos, helping them in their time of need. Much more than any other character in the show, María José is highly rational and level-headed. Caro, in writing María José as a character, seemingly intended to push the notion that one is more than the stereotypes and expectations pushed onto them by a society that does not care for them.

Chapter 3.3: Embracing the Queer

As previously mentioned, Paulina was with María José while she was transitioning. They also were both parenting Bruno at the time. Once they reunite for the first time, one of the jokes she makes is that “without realizing it, [they] had become lesbians,” which María José laughs in response to. Through humor, this light-heartedly presents the viewer with the complexities of sexual identity in trans circles, bringing a relatively niche, queer theory topic to a broader audience.

It is worth noting that Bruno still endearingly refers to María José as father, despite transitioning. This pushes the notion that despite the gender change, María José is the father and spouse that they have always known, and she repeatedly reaffirms this throughout the show herself. It normalizes transitioning and the trans experience within the traditional family unit and functions as an act of resistance against conservative societal values. Again, Caro demonstrates an explicit separation between parenthood and sexual identity or gender roles.

Paulina undergoes a journey of acceptance of María José and their relationship, as well as a journey of embracing her own newfound queerness. These moments range from small things, such as feminine terms of endearment, to larger things such as asking to touch María José's new breasts. Early on, María José says to her "it's one thing that we had a divorce... but I still care about you. I had a change of sex, not a change of heart," sharing a moment of tenderness and vulnerability ending with an unexpected kiss. Paulina from this point forward is much more light-hearted in their relationship and serious in respecting María José's identity. In one case, she makes a joke asking Bruno which one of his mothers is the cutest, using the feminine word, *guapa*, to refer to the both of them, showing how she has started to embrace the queer.

Throughout their storyline, their relationship faces hurdles as they deal with the chaos around their family, even choosing to see new people when taking a break from their relationship. The trials and tribulations bring them closer in the end, and their storyline ultimately culminates in a wedding which caps off the final episode of the series. This bookends the series with a celebration of queer love and representation.

Chapter 4: Virginia de la Mora & Ernesto de la Mora

Virginia de la Mora and Ernesto de la Mora are the parents of the aforementioned de la Mora children. While not explicitly queer identifying characters, this chapter will focus on their roles as allies to their queer friends and family members. It is through these characters and their experiences that viewers gain insight into generational development in Mexican culture and society, as their existence and presence represents a metaphorical bridge across time. Throughout the entirety of the series, they are often seen challenged by—but ultimately accepting of—their friends and family's queerness, e.g. Julián's bisexuality and María José's trans identity.

Notably, Virginia is written off and is pronounced dead upon the start of the second season due to the departure of the actress. However, Caro is able to revisit the character for the show's third season, where the narrative jumps between the present and the past, shedding light upon a younger Virginia and her friends as she navigates Mexico in the late 1970s.

Chapter 4.1: Bridging the Past and Present

The third and final season of *La casa* is interesting in that it highlights queer ideas and storylines much more than any season prior, as well as the characters' acceptance of queerness over broad stretches of time. Further, it is unique in structure in that it includes and maintains parallel narratives throughout time, the current timeline from the present and a timeline from 1979, restructuring the show as both narratives unfold and characters are developed in the present or past. Most of the adult characters in the present timeline are represented in the past, namely, Virginia, Ernesto, family therapist Dr. Salomón Cohen, and neighborhood gossip Carmelita. New additional characters are developed throughout this narrative as well, such as Pato, their gay best friend, Agustín, Pato's closeted and chauvinist lover, as well as Victoria, Virginia's mom. This allows Caro to not only give a farewell to Virginia, but also to bring storylines full circle and showcase how past actions affect present lives as the series draws to a close.

These parallel narratives throughout time are used to parody and highlight the evolution of the traditional telenovela, both in cinematography and in plotline. In this way, Caro is able to pay homage to the genre he is innovating, from outfit design and set pieces to camera filters, all representative of the traditional telenovelas. The scenes set in the past are noticeably more

conservative and formatted in a more traditional manner, providing insight into the Mexico of the past and, more importantly to this paper, society and queer culture for that time period.

One of the main parallels drawn between past and present is the presence of machismo and internalized homophobia. For the past narrative, this usually involves Pato and how he is often abused by machismo and homophobia, whether by his intimate partners or society in general. The first example of this is when Pato brings a man with a wife and kids to mess around with on the friend group's trip to Acapulco. This presumably closeted, married man is clearly uncomfortable being gay in a public space, shown to be recoiling from Pato's advances and pushing him away physically. They are about to have sex before the man storms out, shoves Pato against a wall, and calls Pato homophobic slurs such as *maricón*, *puto* and *joto*—all essentially meaning “fag” or “faggot” in English.

This is a somewhat stark contrast to the present timeline where such verbal and physical abuse driven by homophobia is not portrayed in such a violent and frequent manner. Caro is able to show how normalized such overt language and treatment of queer people were at the time. Even some of the characters, such as Ernesto, are shown using *maricón* to refer to queer people, something that he would not do in the present, even if there were no ill-intent behind his usage of the word. This is further solidified as many of the younger characters will critique such language of the older generation. This helps contextualize the past vs. present Mexico—what was once acceptable is no longer.

Another example of this machismo and homophobia involves Pato and Agustín, his closeted lover. Similar to Pato's previous fling, Agustín does not want to be affectionate or gay with Pato in public due to pressure from Mexican society. He associates queerness with

weakness, despite himself being queer and telling Pato that he loves him behind closed doors. Ultimately, Pato's advances and desires for a public, gay romance with Agustín lead to a deadly conclusion, in which Agustín and his friends gay bash Pato, leaving him to die on the streets.

On the other end of the spectrum are also moments of pride and celebration of queer bodies shown in the past narrative. One of the flashbacks shows the 1979 group preparing for and talking about Mexico's first gay pride. This comes off the momentum of gay pride movements and riots across the world, namely the Stonewall Riots in New York in 1969. During this time, Young Ernesto, Salomón, and Pato go through drag transformations during a party. This is an act of destabilizing gender norms in a society where machismo is deeply rooted: two heterosexual, masculine, cis males, Ernesto and Salomón, getting into drag and having a good time.

These storylines juxtapose past queer history with present-day queer stories, solidifying the idea that queer people have always existed and that they are nothing new. Caro is thus able to go back and reveal stories once hidden from the mainstream telenovela narrative in a very meta way by revisiting these historical queer stories through the lens of a traditional telenovela but still within the structure and rules of his own millennial telenovela. It gives insight into what has changed and what has stayed the same, allowing viewers to compare the past with the present, and to long for a better future.

It also represents how some, but not all, of the older characters are able to function as bridges from generation to generation, having borne witness to moments of pure hatred, as well as love. In this way, they choose to heal the wounds of the past and to foster a supportive and

understanding generation and culture for their children, rather than continuing the generational trauma and conservative ideologies passed down from their own parents.

Chapter 4.2: Journey to Allyship

It is important to note how allyship and solidarity has developed throughout the years in the telenovela, a genre so influential to Latin American culture and society. What was once the goal, is but a bare minimum now—no longer is tolerance sufficient. The queer community demands acceptance. This very evolution is reflected through the development of multiple characters, especially those from earlier generations who have the most work to do in deconstructing deeply rooted biases and stigmas instilled since childhood.

In the first season, while Virginia is still alive, she is seen having trouble adjusting to all the new-found chaos and queerness involving her family. First, Julián coming out as bisexual, and then a post-transitioned María José returning to Mexico. She represents the family member who is a bit slower to adapt to changing times, and she acknowledges this often by saying that she is almost at the point of suffering a heart attack when anything queer and unexpected happens.

Eventually, Virginia and Ernesto come to be supportive parents, not only for Julián and Diego, but also for Paulina and María José. They fight fiercely and do what they can in their position to support their unconventional family at all costs. What once was preserving the traditional family unit has become accepting a new definition of what a family can look like, celebrating it, and fighting for it.

A moment of vindication, both for Virginia and Julián, was an interview regarding a public response to Julián's sex tape being leaked by his ex-girlfriend Lucía. After Julián publicly announces that he is marrying the love of his life, Diego, the interviewer asks Virginia how she feels about it and whether she cares what people will think about it. Virginia responds by saying “we don't care about being perfect. I don't want my kids to be perfect. I want my family together. I want my children to be happy, and if he's happy with his partner, my home is open to them, okay?”

Throughout the first season, the most unaccepting and conservative family member has become the most accepting—she has transcended to becoming a queer icon. Caro solidifies this by having a fan walk up to Virginia and take a picture with the whole family, wishing that their mom was more accepting like Virginia. By the end of the season, before the character is written off, Virginia tells all of her children to not let the love of their lives escape and to not care what people say or do in regards to who they are. In this moment, she chooses her family over societal expectations—she stands up and protects her family, despite how unconventional and queer it may be.

This allyship is an important facet of representation, showing how characters within the work perceive and interact with queer characters, which is especially impactful for viewers who do not identify as queer. This subset of the audience can at the very least identify with these straight-cis characters. Even individuals who grew up in societies or families with staunchly conservative backgrounds can grow to become more accepting of queer identities and pave their own journeys towards allyship.

Chapter 5: Analysis and Critiques

As shown throughout the previous chapters in this thesis, *La casa de las flores* is a show that unapologetically highlights Queer Mexican characters and their storylines, rather than continuing the tradition of minimizing their importance or excluding them altogether. Caro, in an interview, has also addressed this, noting that *La casa* has given viewers characters which they can feel represented by and identify with, in a space where they have not primarily existed in such a capacity (Garrán, “La Casa de Las Flores”).

Although *La casa* is revolutionary in highlighting multiple Queer Mexican characters in main roles for the millennial telenovela, it is not considered to be the first Mexican telenovela to do so. Articles published in 2019 claim that *Juntos, El Corazón Nunca se Equivoca* (Together, the Heart is Never Wrong), produced and televised by Televisa, was “set to make television history as [Mexico’s] first telenovela to feature a gay couple as the leading characters” (Lopez, “With gay couple”). With the understanding that *La casa* was based primarily in Mexico, this implies that it was not the first to feature a gay couple as the leading characters, despite significant evidence to the contrary. Perhaps this is because *La casa*, although being considered a millennial telenovela, has subverted the original genre to the point of almost branching off into an entirely distinct genre. Another possibility is that *La casa* does not qualify for the telenovela title simply because it aired on Netflix, instead of on a Spanish-speaking television channel.

This brings into question the logistical context surrounding *La casa de las flores* and the role that this plays with respect to its legitimacy as a telenovela and its overall impact on the genre and fanbase. Netflix, as an entertainment distributor, is much less censored than their television counterparts, e.g., Televisa and Univision. This means that *La casa* had more freedom

to innovate upon the telenovela genre as opposed to if it were put through the Televisa pipeline. It is also worth noting that the show is transmitted through a contemporary medium, streaming rather than live television, which is a key component of its identity as a millennial telenovela. Naturally, streaming is a more convenient medium for many viewers from a time management standpoint because it “diverg[es] from the telenovelas’ traditional broadcast schedule of hour-long episodes during the work week” (Haynes, “The House of Flowers”). Viewers are able to binge watch the show in its entirety upon release as opposed to waiting for new episodes and having to tune in on a fixed schedule in front of the TV. Further, international viewers may not have ready access to Mexican television as they do Netflix, which also provides subtitles for its foreign language content in many languages. Thus, the ability to stream makes it accessible to a wider demographic, specifically those with 9 to 5 jobs, those outside of Mexico and Latin America, or those that cannot understand Spanish. This itself is an act of inclusivity, which is in line with the show’s overarching philosophy.⁴

While revolutionary in representation, *La casa* is not flawless. Scholars and fans have critiqued the show for still falling into some questionable stereotypes regarding some characters. In regards to Julián and his bisexuality, he is undoubtedly characterized throughout the show as someone indecisive and very sexual, producing a sex tape, desiring an open relationship, and even becoming an escort (Sierra, “The Problem”). Others have critiqued the show’s casting of Paco, a cisgender man, to portray a transgender woman, María José. Paco León and Manolo Caro have both addressed these critiques, with Caro noting that giving trans roles and opportunities to trans individuals is very important and more work needs to be done on this front (Reina, “La Casa de Las Flores”). Nevertheless, he encourages audiences to give Paco a chance

⁴ However, it can still be difficult to quantify *La casa*’s reach because Netflix does not publish their shows’ viewership data.

as a prominent actor and LGBTQ+ rights activist in the Spanish-speaking film industry. Paco has since decided not to take any more roles away from trans actors (García, ¿Por Qué?)⁵. Finally, Paul Smith argues that *La casa* is not as revolutionary as it makes itself out to be, noting that “supposedly transgressive elements of Netflix’s *La casa de las flores*, so widely feted by contemporary viewers and reviewers, had in fact already been treated (indeed, more radically) by the ‘new telenovelas’ of Argos” (Smith, “Screenings”).

It is also important to mention that part of the millennial telenovela’s departure from the traditional telenovela means portraying characters with shades of gray and complexities. This means that characters are less prone to being part of the black and white, good and bad binary. This is important to note as many characters have somewhat questionable moments throughout the show for the sake of drama and comedy, such as the main characters dead-naming María José. However, given that telenovelas have a tendency to represent the country’s culture and society at the time, this is not too far off from conservative Mexico, where trans identities and pronouns have been slow to gain traction. *La casa* uses moments like this to connect with and relate to the audience in a manner that aligns with their reality in order to build rapport and depth for the characters, a key facet of telenovelas. These characters can sometimes be complicated or misunderstood, and understandably so, as this closely mirrors the authenticity and complexities of the real world. As such, Caro is able to build and shape these characters to tell stories that are in line with his vision of love and acceptance, showing queer possibilities in relatable storylines with a dazzling touch of telenovela magic.

⁵ On the other hand, the show has been lauded for casting Verónica Castro as Virginia de la Mora as she is known for her work in traditional telenovelas, being hailed as “Mexican telenovela royalty” (Betancourt, “If Almodóvar”).

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The plot points of *La casa* are far more complicated and involved than could possibly be addressed in this thesis. As such, *La casa* still has a wealth of areas that researchers could dive into and analyze. A few of these include the juxtaposition of the cabaret and the flower shop in regards to how they celebrate or shame queer people and Purificación, a ciswoman, dressing up as her sister María José, a transwoman. Another area that this paper does not cover is the impact of the characters' race, gender, and class, and how that intersects with their queer identities, creating a unique, multifaceted perspective for analysis.

La casa de las flores puts at the forefront of the show emphatically Queer Mexican main characters and centers queer issues and storylines. This is a stark contrast from previous telenovelas where such characters served merely as subplots or minor characters and were peripheral to the main characters and their issues. This helps to give Queer Mexican characters greater depth and screen-time, allowing viewers ample time to get to know them beyond a brief episode stint, where their character might be reduced to their sexual or gender identity, and limited to the stereotypes that come with it. In doing so, it has made a name for itself as the pioneer of the millennial telenovela. Although the series may not be perfect, it has nonetheless brought representation to a community that has long lacked it in Latin America's most prominent television genre.

Bibliography

Primary Source:

Caro, Manolo, creator. *La casa de las flores*. Noc Noc Cinema, 2018. *Netflix*,
<https://www.netflix.com/title/80160935>.

Secondary Sources:

Almeida Rodrigues Lima, Cecilia & Karla Cavalcanti, Gesa. “‘Homophobia is so last century’: activism of telenovela fans in defense of fictional lesbians couples.” *Comunicación y sociedad*, vol. 17, 2021, pp. 1-28. *SciELO*, <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2020.7312>.

Betancourt, Manuel. “If Almodóvar Wrote a Mexican Telenovela, It Would Be Netflix's New 'La Casa De Las Flores'.” *Remezcla*, 13 Aug. 2018,
<https://remezcla.com/film/trailer-la-casa-de-las-flores-netflix/>.

Casas Perez, Maria de la Luz. “Cultural Identity: Between Reality and Fiction: A Transformation of Genre and Roles in Mexican Telenovelas.” *Television & New Media*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2005, pp. 407–14. *Sage Journals*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476405279956>.

Chassen-López, Francie R. “Distorting the Picture: Gender, Ethnicity, and Desire in a Mexican Telenovela (El Vuelo Del Águila).” *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2008, pp. 106–29. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.0.0003>.

Estill, Adriana. “Telenovelas and Melodrama in Latin America,” *Latin American Studies. Oxford Bibliographies*,

<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766581/obo-9780199766581-0206.xml>.

García, Alberto Pascual. “¿Por Qué Triunfa ‘La Casa De Las Flores’ Es La Telenovela Millennial (Del Mo-Men-to).” *Quo*, 4 Sept. 2018, <https://quo.eldiario.es/ser-humano/a74204/por-que-triunfa-la-casa-de-las-flores-es-la-telenovela-millennial-del-mo-men-to/>.

Garrán, Daniel. “‘La Casa De Las Flores’: Las Claves De La Telenovela Millennial.” *Cadena SER*, PRISA, 16 Oct. 2019, https://cadenaser.com/programa/2019/10/16/el_cine_en_la_ser/1571229583_635883.htm.

Haynes, Suyin. “The House of Flowers and the ‘Millennial Telenovela’.” *Time*, Time, 23 June 2021, <https://time.com/6075019/the-house-of-flowers-telenovela/>.

Herrera Guerra, Susana. “Origins, development and update of the Mexican telenovela.” *Telos (Maracaibo, Venezuela)*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2019, pp. 163–91. *Gale Academic OneFile*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A583486551/AONE?u=char69915&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=16a43fa8>.

Huska, Melanie. “Illegitimacy and Redemption in Independence and Neoliberal-era Mexico: Representations of Family in a Mexican Historical Telenovela.” *Gender & History*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2018, pp. 682–95. *Wiley Online Library*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12397>.

Lopez, Oscar. “With Gay Couple as Stars, Mexican Telenovela Set to Make History.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 21 June 2019,

www.reuters.com/article/mexico-entertainment-telenovela-idUKL8N23S43E.

Montalvo Lucar, Jeanne. “How I Made It: Alaska, on an LGBTQ Anthem En Español.” *Latino USA*, 29 May 2018, www.latinousa.org/2018/05/29/alaskalgbtqanthemenespanol/.

Muñoz José Esteban. “Performing Disidentifications.” *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, pp. 1–34.

Pearson, Rosalind C. “Fact or Fiction?: Narrative and Reality in the Mexican Telenovela.” *Television & New Media*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2005, pp. 400–06. *Sage Journals*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476405279863>.

Reina, Elena. “La Casa De Las Flores' Reinventa La Telenovela 'Millennial' Para Netflix.” *El País*, 10 Aug. 2018, https://elpais.com/cultura/2018/08/09/television/1533777015_190159.html.

Sierra, Sylvia. “The Problem with Bisexuality in Netflix’s House of Flowers (La Casa De Las Flores).” *Sylvia Sierra PhD*, 14 May 2021, <http://www.sylviasierra.com/2021/05/06/the-problem-with-bisexuality-in-netflixs-house-of-flowers-la-casa-de-las-flores/>

Smith, Paul J. “Screenings: Netflix's The House of Flowers and the New Telenovela.” *Film Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2019, pp. 59-61. *University of California Press*, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2019.72.3.59>.

Spangler, Todd. "Telemundo and BuzzFeed Want to Reinvent the Telenovela Using Audience Data (Exclusive)." *Variety*, Variety, 11 May 2016, variety.com/2016/digital/news/telemundo-buzzfeed-telenovela-1201771358

Tate, Julee. "Laughing All the Way to Tolerance? Mexican Comedic Telenovelas as Vehicles for Lessons Against Homophobia." *The Latin Americanist*, vol. 58, 2014, pp. 51-65. *Wiley Online Library*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tla.12036>.

Tate, Julee. "Redefining Mexican Masculinity in Twenty-First Century Telenovelas." *Hispanic Research Journal*, vol. 14, no. 6, 2013, pp. 538–52, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1468273713Z.000000000068>.

"The Power of the Telenovela." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 25 Jan. 2012, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/the-power-of-the-telenovela>.