

**The Imperial-Royal Casa de Tijuana: Culture, Identity and Gay-*Travesti*  
Activism in Mexico's Northwestern Border****La Casa Real-Imperial de Tijuana: cultura, identidad y activismo  
gay-travesti en la frontera noroeste de México**Martín H. González Romero<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article proposes to analyze the history of the Imperial-Royal Casa de Tijuana since its foundation in 1982. It explores the position of this group in the history of LGBTIQ+ mobilization in this region and proposes the analysis of a particular circuit of *travesti* and drag shows, through its study as a gay-*travesti* organization that supported LGBTIQ+ community projects. Based on research from the GLBT Historical Society Archives of San Francisco, this work studies the formation of spaces of sociability, solidarity, and mutual aid through the complex parody—of gender and royalty—carried out by the empresses and emperors of The Casa de Tijuana. This framework shows cross-border communication bridges and provides reflections about the spaces of freedom, as well as the colonial traits embedded in gay-*travesti* subculture.

*Keywords:* 1. crossdressing, 2. LGBTIQ, 3. drag, 4. Tijuana, 5. San Diego.

## RESUMEN

En el presente artículo se documenta y analiza la historia de La Casa Real-Imperial de Tijuana desde su fundación en 1982 hasta nuestros días. Se explora la posición de esta agrupación en la historia de la movilización LGBTIQ+ en la región y se propone el análisis de un circuito particular de espectáculos travesti o *drag* mediante su estudio como organización gay-travesti que apoyaba proyectos comunitarios LGBTIQ+. Con base en la investigación de los Archivos de la Sociedad Histórica GLBT de la ciudad de San Francisco, se problematiza la conformación de espacios de sociabilidad, solidaridad y ayuda mutua mediante la compleja parodia —de género y de la realeza— que realizaban emperatrices y emperadores de La Casa de Tijuana. En este marco, se evidencian puentes de comunicación transfronteriza poco documentados y se aportan reflexiones sobre los espacios de libertad y, a la vez, los rasgos de colonialidad de la subcultura gay-travesti.

*Palabras clave:* 1. travestismo, 2. LGBTIQ, 3. *drag*, 4. Tijuana, 5. San Diego.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the GLBT Historical Society Archives of San Francisco, California, one can discover a fascinating document that opens the door to a complex world of courtly intrigues. This document, a flyer, although not particularly old, grandly invites participation in a coronation ceremony, evoking the aura of a long-lost empire or a reality foreign to the American continent. The details are even more captivating. The flyer prominently announces in English: “First Imperial-Royal Election Coronation” (Figure 1). At the top, a coat of arms is divided into four sections, featuring the emblems of the Second Mexican Empire, the state of Baja California, the state of Baja California Sur, and the city of Tijuana. These are unified at the center by the national Mexican coat of arms, crowned at the top and surrounded by laurels, forming the escutcheon of The Imperial-Royal Casa de Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. The event was scheduled for September 17, 1983, and, according to the flyer, it would include a dance, a show, and the celebration of courts. The theme of the gala was “Liberation is Independence,” and admission was priced at 500 Mexican pesos or 5 US dollars (José Sarria Papers, 1983a).

Figure 1. Invitation Flyer for the Coronation Ceremony



Source: José Sarria Papers (1983a).

The apparent grandeur of this event's invitation reflects the tradition of parody and exaggeration within the gay-drag subculture. Its celebration in Tijuana highlights a previously undocumented cross-border communication. The Imperial-Royal Casa de Tijuana, a charitable organization, was part of a complex international network of imperial courts originating in the United States. This network's altruistic work connected it with early homosexual or lesbian-gay liberation organizations (now LGBTIQ+) on both sides of the border.<sup>2</sup> This particular circuit of drag or *travesti* shows,<sup>3</sup> predominantly featuring drag queens and gay men, included a variety of individuals whose sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression contravened social norms, placing them at the margins of their communities. Beyond their social and festive nature, the imperial courts have been dedicated to fundraising.

Documenting the history of this organization offers insight into the recent history of sexual diversity, the identity categories within it, and the intricate political, social, and cultural dynamics of the northwestern border of Mexico. The close geographical proximity between San Diego and Tijuana facilitated the exchange of ideas, people, and resources to address the challenges facing the LGBTIQ+ communities of the region, particularly during a period in which its vocabulary was changing. The Imperial-Royal Casa de Tijuana played a pivotal role in this exchange, bridging the practices of the gay-drag subculture with LGBTIQ+ activism. Since the 1980s, this activism has gradually shifted away from the liberationist rhetoric that characterized the early stages of homosexual or lesbian-gay mobilization. Instead, through mutual aid, it has confronted neoliberal policies aimed at reducing social spending, articulating its demands within the framework of human rights discourse.

The early years of LGBTIQ+ mobilization in Mexico, formerly known as homosexual liberation, were characterized by a liberationist language, documented in works such as that of Argüello Pazmiño (2014). While the Argentine case remains one of the most studied in Latin America (Simonetto, 2017; Ben & Insausti, 2017), there is a notable lack of studies describing how these mobilizations transformed in the final years of the 20th century. This gap persists despite the contributions of Connell and Dados (2014), who explored the impacts of neoliberalism in the contexts of the global south and how communities adapted to economic crises. Their work challenges the narrative that neoliberalism was simply imposed from the North.<sup>4</sup> In the northwestern border of Mexico, the relationship between LGBTIQ+ activism and the gay-drag

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<sup>2</sup> Few studies focus on the history of LGBTIQ+ mobilization in the city of Tijuana. One notable exception is the doctoral thesis by Anguiano (2019).

<sup>3</sup> While *travesti* performances and drag shows originate from different traditions and are not equivalent, they often become conflated in the context of the northwestern Mexican border. This conflation is partly due to translation difficulties and the fluid, sometimes interchangeable use of English and Spanish.

<sup>4</sup> In Mexico, several histories of neoliberalism have been documented, including works by Escalante (2015), which provide a broad overview, and Lemus (2021), which focus specifically on the Mexican context. However, there remains a gap in understanding how neoliberalism impacted sexual politics movements and organizations, warranting further study.

network of imperial courts illustrates the enduring solidarity within social circuits and the resilience of a subculture that remained present through various stages of mobilization.

While The Imperial-Royal Casa de Tijuana no longer exists in its original form, its legacy persists today under different names, thanks to the community efforts of those who continue its traditions of dances, coronations, and charitable activities in Mexico. The survival of this cultural circuit, along with its commitment to preserving its historical memory, underscores the need to reconsider the relationship between archival research and other methodologies. Despite the ongoing work and diverse legacies of this organization, its history remains largely unwritten. The following pages offer a glimpse into an ongoing project and present a preliminary attempt to document the history of The Imperial-Royal Casa de Tijuana. This endeavor proposes a research trajectory that begins with archival investigation to address the gaps in a living history that has yet to receive significant attention from academia.

The text explores several key elements. The first section delves into the origins of The Casa de Tijuana within an international network of drag originating from the gay subculture of San Francisco, California, in the 1960s. Central to this circuit is the parody of courtly manners and royal symbolism, often infused with a serious undertone. The second section discusses how The Casa de Tijuana emerged within this network and how its symbols were adapted to reflect nationalist and regional sensibilities, particularly those of Mexico and Baja California. Sections three and four detail a diplomatic conflict that arose between the neighboring courts of Tijuana and San Diego in 1988, highlighting the racist and xenophobic aspects of the dispute. Evidence suggests that within the parody of empires, genuine exercises of exclusion occurred, denying the possibility of autonomy for a Mexican court.

Similarly, the fifth section provides insights into the history of The Casa de Tijuana following that episode. These years were characterized by the crisis precipitated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which, despite reducing participation, spurred expressions of solidarity and community support. While the circuits of The Casa de Tijuana experienced friction during this period, they also served as spaces for the exploration of identities. The complexity of these identities challenges the stability of compartmentalized constructs developed to articulate a language about sexual diversity. Finally, in the sixth section, the disintegration of The Imperial-Royal Casa de Tijuana is examined, alongside the formation of a new network of gay-drag activism. This parallel network not only acknowledges its historical origins but also addresses the exclusionary practices that marred the turbulent diplomatic relations of the border empires. Celebrating its ethnic and cultural diversity, as well as the myriad sexual and gender identities converging in its imperial courts, this new network seeks to forge a more inclusive path forward.

This narrative offers a window into various facets of culture, identity, and gay-drag activism in the northwestern border of Mexico. Specifically, it sheds light on the role of travesti circuits in fostering spaces of sociability, solidarity, and mutual aid in Tijuana. This perspective diverges from academic discourse primarily focused on their involvement in the sex work market (Castillo, 2006a, 2006b), as well as the predominant emphasis on gender transition processes within the

transgender population (Domínguez Cornejo, 2014). Moreover, this work seeks to contribute regional insights into trans sociabilities, complementing existing research from the central region of the country (Prieur, 2014; Gutiérrez Martínez, 2022). Additionally, it adds to the transnational history of LGBTIQ+ activism by spotlighting the border space as a locus of exchange and continuous communication. Rather than emphasizing exchanges between organizations or activists through travel or correspondence, as explored by Macías-González (2014), Simonetto (2020), and Grinnell (2016), this narrative underscores the border region's significance as a dynamic site of interaction.

### THE EMPRESS JOSÉ I OF SAN FRANCISCO

The invitation to the inaugural coronation of The Imperial-Royal Casa de Tijuana is part of the personal collection of José Sarria, a historically significant archive of substantial proportions. This collection spans 130 boxes, encompassing nearly 20 linear meters of documentation. Its vast extent presents both a challenge and an opportunity to chronicle the evolution of a subculture into an international charitable organization. Of Colombian-Spanish heritage, Sarria was born in the 1920s in San Francisco, where he spent the majority of his life. He is revered as one of the trailblazers of the LGBTIQ+ movement in the United States (Gorman, 1998).

José Sarria is celebrated as a pivotal figure in the history of sexual diversity for his groundbreaking performances of drag shows at the Black Cat bar. Situated as one of the earliest bastions of resistance for gay men, drag queens, and transgender women, the Black Cat provided a sanctuary against police persecution during the 1950s and 1960s. Sarria's performances featured modified opera arias, cleverly parodying the oppressive climate surrounding sexual diversity in San Francisco. In a stroke of ingenuity, Sarria introduced a distinctive badge in the shape of a cat, a playful nod to the bar's name. Emblazoned with the phrase "I am a man," this badge served as a practical tool for drag queens to confront police officers who cited laws against cross-dressing in public. In 1961, Sarria transcended the stage to enter the political arena, becoming the first openly gay man to run for public office in the United States. Although his bid for a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors was unsuccessful—a milestone later achieved by Harvey Milk—Sarria's candidacy significantly elevated the visibility of the burgeoning Homophile Movement. His campaign laid essential groundwork for the subsequent rise of the Gay Liberation Movement, catalyzed by the watershed events of the Stonewall riots (D'Emilio, 1983).

In 1964, José Sarria made history once more by declaring himself Her Royal Majesty, Empress José I of San Francisco, Widow of Norton. This title paid homage to Joshua Norton, a renowned figure in San Francisco's history who, in the mid-19th century, famously proclaimed himself emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico. Sarria's satirical proclamation, which also celebrated the regal essence of drag queens, established a complex tradition within the realm of drag shows (Gorman, 1998). Since then, Empress José I has been revered as the founding mother of the International Imperial Courts System (IICS). Today, the IICS stands as the second largest LGBTIQ+ charitable organization globally, second only to the Metropolitan Community Church

(Sistema Internacional de Cortes Imperiales [SICI], 2023).<sup>5</sup> The mission of the IICS revolves around hosting shows and social fundraising events for various causes, primarily aimed at supporting LGBTIQ+ communities. The annual coronations of each Casa or court, during which the emperor and empress are elected, serve as central events within the System. Thus, the IICS encompasses a vast network of groups whose activities embody a rich tradition of gay subcultures.

Undertaking an analytical and critical examination of the IICS presents an enriching endeavor for understanding the recent history of sexual diversity. However, comprehensively elucidating its growth and consolidation from the 1960s to the present would necessitate a more extensive scholarly effort. Despite being well-known in the United States due to the efforts of journalists, various LGBTIQ+ organizations, and the IICS itself, the organization has garnered limited attention in academic discussions within gender studies, with only a few notable exceptions (Retzloff, 2007; Drushel, 2016). Exploring the imperial courts could contribute significantly to understanding what Melissa M. Wilcox (2018) terms “serious parody,” as evidenced in her study of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a kindred organization emerging from San Francisco’s gay-drag subculture. Just as the Sisters engage in a nuanced parody of the Catholic Church and monastic life, the imperial courts employ satire to mock the grandeur, formality, and protocols of royalty.

This parody extends beyond the realm of mere amusement, exerting cultural, social, political, and economic ramifications. Within the imperial courts, the satirical depiction of royalty serves as a catalyst for community organization, facilitating the establishment of a sophisticated network of drag circuits dedicated to charitable fundraising. Notably, as will be explored later, the observance of protocol within this parody is treated with utmost seriousness. Moreover, the gender parody evident in the parades orchestrated by the imperial courts evokes parallels with other LGBTIQ+ subcultures, such as the traditional debutante balls. These balls hold significance in the historical narrative of sexual diversity, particularly in the United States during the first half of the 20th century (Chauncey, 1994).

In this sense, constructing a history of the IICS holds the potential to challenge deeply entrenched notions in historiography regarding the evolution of gay subculture before and after liberation movements.<sup>6</sup> It also prompts an examination of the rigid dichotomies between

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<sup>5</sup> This statement has been issued on several occasions by the leadership of the System itself. This information accompanies the general description on the website of the International Imperial Courts System (SICI, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> The notion that liberation movements rejected gay subculture in favor of a discourse centered on rights is explored by Halperin (2012). Conversely, Chauncey’s research (1994) on gay subculture in New York from 1890 to 1940 argues that liberation movements propagated the myth of the closet, effectively negating the existence of spaces of freedom for homosexual individuals prior to their liberation. This concept has been echoed in numerous studies examining sexual diversity subcultures in various contexts preceding liberation movements (Rodríguez Sánchez, 2020; Huard, 2014).

homophile organizations and liberationist movements that emerged in the 20th century (Huard, 2014; Katz, 1992; D’Emilio, 1983). Furthermore, the extensive documentation detailing the activities of the IICS offers fertile ground for evaluating the tenets of queer theory. Since the 1990s, queer theory has emphasized the subversion of gender norms and the transformative potential of parody and exaggeration within sexual diversity circuits (Meyer, 1994). Considering the complex dynamics that facilitated the IICS’s introduction to Mexico, it would be valuable to explore the incorporation of the term *cuir* (queer) as a means of probing the limits of this theoretical framework within non-English-speaking contexts (Torres Cruz & Moreno Esparza, 2021).

The emergence of a Royal-Imperial Court of Tijuana as a recognized imperial court within the International System remains a little-known and poorly documented chapter of history. To shed light on this, the history of the intricate network of imperial courts, dating back to its inception in 1965 in San Francisco, should be considered. This undertaking would involve critically re-examining the extensive documentation preserved in José Sarria’s personal archive, which includes communications between the founding mother and courts in various cities across California. Thus far, however, no scholarly work has focused on these sources to document the evolution of the network across the border. An initial exploration has been facilitated by a concise file simply labeled “Mexico,” containing various documents that reveal a tense relationship between the LGBTQ+ community of Tijuana—including gay men, travestis, drag queens, and trans women—and the courts of California, United States. Subsequent research efforts will need to delve further into Sarria’s documentary collection to develop a comprehensive narrative situating The Casa de Tijuana within the broader context of transnational and transborder LGBTQ+ history.

#### LIBERATION IS INDEPENDENCE

According to the flyer accompanying this text, The Imperial-Royal Casa de Tijuana made its debut in 1983, with the inaugural coronation scheduled for September 17 of that year (José Sarria Papers, 1983a). However, the documentation accompanying this invitation suggests that The Casa de Tijuana’s affiliation with various imperial courts across the border was not a recent development. Evidence indicates that Napoleon VII, slated to be crowned as the first emperor of The Casa de Tijuana, requested the presence of Empress José I herself to partake in the ceremony: “By your performance of crowning, a historical international bond of solidarity will be established: the first Monarch of the United States and the first Monarch of Mexico” (José Sarria Papers, 1983c, n.p.). Additionally, according to a brochure directed at those journeying south to stay at the Palacio Azteca Hotel and attend the ceremony at Marko Disco,<sup>7</sup> The Casa de Tijuana was founded on October 20, 1982, and recognized as sovereign and independent on June 4, 1983, through a treaty between the imperial court of San Diego and that of Tijuana (José Sarria Papers, 1983d).

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<sup>7</sup> Both establishments are still located in the Dávila neighborhood of Tijuana.

Until that point, it appears that the imperial court of San Diego had regarded Tijuana as part of its sphere of influence, likely engaging in activities within the city's nightlife hubs. This is evidenced by the coronation ceremony's theme, "Liberation is Independence," which cleverly intertwined allusions to both gay liberation and The Casa de Tijuana's newfound autonomy. It likely also nodded to the celebration of National Independence, which coincided with the weekend of the ceremony in Mexico.

As observed, despite being a parody of nobility, courtiers approached protocol matters with a notable level of seriousness. In fact, it is this meticulous attention to protocol that forms the basis of the archive allowing for the documentation of this history. The letters, invitations, programs, and other documents comprising José Sarria's archive on the imperial courts serve as a portal to LGBTQ+ realities seldom captured by traditional historical archives. Nonetheless, the reproduction of imperial and monarchical codes of conduct prompts reflection on their deep colonial baggage. This burden may seem evident, as these circuits—marginalized within dominant culture—recreate colonial languages and dynamics, a theme particularly relevant in light of insights from postcolonial criticism and the decolonial turn.<sup>8</sup> However, through their participation in this parody, gay men, drag queens, trans women, and others contribute to the cultural reappropriation of these codes, reclaiming for themselves a sense of splendor from the societal margins often denied to them.

Moreover, the border dynamics within this gay subculture dynamic brought forth nationalist sentiments that were evident even during the inaugural coronation ceremony. According to Napoleon VII, the Imperial-Royal duality of The Casa de Tijuana symbolized Mexico's relationship with the wider Imperial Courts System. In Tijuana, the coronation would designate the king and queen of Tijuana, who concurrently held the titles of emperor and empress of Mexico. Consequently, within the Empire of Mexico, various Casas or courts could emerge, but their sovereign would always reside in Tijuana (José Sarria Papers, 1990c). Additionally, the first emperor-king of The Casa de Tijuana elucidated that it was established as an extension of the Aztec Empire, acknowledging its rulers from Tenoch in 1325 to Cuauhtémoc in 1521 (José Sarria Papers, 1990c).

In its activities, The Casa de Tijuana consistently underscored its exceptionalism in comparison to other courts, accentuating its distinctly Mexican character. In this context, the relationship between Mexico and the United States in this history seems fraught from its inception. For instance, in the invitation extended to its northern neighbors for the inaugural coronation in 1983, The Casa de Tijuana preemptively addresses potential tensions and issues behavioral guidelines:

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<sup>8</sup> The aim here is not to offer a comprehensive survey of the literature on coloniality. However, it is crucial to consider Rufer's assertion (2023) that "analyzing contemporaneity requires acknowledging colonialism as a fundamental element of our historical continuum" (p. 22).



If you can't do it in your own hometown, on Main St. USA, don't do it in Tijuana. There is a cultural difference, & if you realize & understand this, are considerate, courteous & generous, you will invite [*sic*] many requests for your return visit (José Sarria Papers, 1983d, n.p.).

In the subsequent years, tensions between these neighboring empires would escalate into genuine diplomatic conflicts.

The documentation preserved by José Sarria offers numerous insights into the history of The Imperial-Royal Casa de Tijuana in the years following its establishment. The annual coronations, held at various bars throughout the city, served as the highlight of the calendar. During these events, the emperor and empress, who would reign for at least one year, were elected, with evidence indicating occasional re-elections. To select the new rulers, members of the court and other guests at the coronation would cast their votes using a stub detached from their entrance ticket (José Sarria Papers, 1983b). However, coronations were not the only activities organized. The invitation to the 1986 coronation, set to take place on a moonlit night in Rosarito, Baja California, also outlined a list of the year's events, including a party for Mexico's Independence, Halloween festivities, Thanksgiving Day, and a Christmas celebration (José Sarria Papers, 1986a). The program for the moonlit night in Rosarito featured dance music, a court performance, dinner, the coronation ceremony, the investiture of nobles, and the presentation of international courts, among other highlights (José Sarria Papers, 1986b).

Over the years, the successive emperors and empresses of The Casa de Tijuana played a pivotal role in its evolution by introducing new references and symbols to their empire. For instance, in 1986, The Casa de Tijuana adopted the title *Casa Imperial-Real de los Dioses Aztecas Dorados y Leones Plateados de Tijuana* (Imperial-Royal Casa of the Golden Aztec Gods and Silver Lions of Tijuana) (José Sarria Papers, 1986b, n.p.). The following year, in 1987, the gay cultural magazine of San Diego, *The Scene*, dedicated an extensive article to promote the coronation of Fernando I, scheduled to take place in Tijuana: "Currently reigning as Empress is Pedro Zamora Santana, 28 and known as Empress Dubarry I, who will serve with Emperor Fernando I" (José Sarria Papers, 1987, n.p.). The cover of the magazine featured Fernando I's portrait, while inside, Empress Dubarry (Pedro Zamora) was depicted in two photographs: one alongside the outgoing Emperor Rodolfo, dressed in empress attire, and the other showing her as a young man in casual attire, leaning on the shoulder of the incoming Emperor Fernando I.

The article features an interview with the new emperor, who elaborates on the coat of arms selected for his empire and outlines the activities planned to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Tijuana (José Sarria Papers, 1987). In 1988, Emperor Fernando and Empress Dubarry extended invitations to the coronation of "The Casa and Court of the Empire of Calafia" (José Sarria Papers, 1988d, n.p.). This name harkened back to the mythical island of Calafia, featured in the chivalric romances of Amadís de Gaula. The popularity of these tales among early Spanish explorers of California led to the region's name. Consequently, the new symbols introduced another nod to regional pride within The Casa de Tijuana. The parodic endeavor, central to the grandeur of the Imperial Court System, served as a means to bolster national and regional identity within the gay-

travesti subculture in Tijuana. It was not merely a whimsical pursuit. As will be elucidated, entrenched prejudices at the border often dismissed the possibility of such grandeur within Mexican territory.

#### DIPLOMATIC CONSULTATION

The 1988 coronation held special significance, as it was expected to be graced by the esteemed presence of Empress José I. According to evidence from the archive, José Sarria was unable to attend the inaugural coronation in 1983, but five years later, preparations were underway for the official visit of the founding monarch, scheduled for May 27th at La Sierra Hall.<sup>9</sup> An invitation announced the event would feature “a very special international show with male striptease and guest artists” (José Sarria Papers, 1988d, n.p.). Sarria’s impending visit sparked considerable anticipation due to its symbolic importance, solidifying The Casa de Tijuana’s position within the court system established in 1965. In a letter penned by Leo E. Laurence, a courtier from Tijuana who also served as a firefighter on both sides of the border, the sentiment was expressed as follows: “Your Majesty [...]: We are ready for you. Are you ready for Mexicans [*sic*]?” (José Sarria Papers, 1988a, n.p.).

Laurence also held the role of ambassador for The Casa de Calafia, representing Emperors Fernando and Dubarry. He had recently visited the imperial court of San Diego to secure attendance from members of that Casa at the official visit of the founding monarch. Laurence informed Emperor Bill Williams and Empress Jesse of San Diego that their presence in Tijuana on May 27 was mandatory, given the significance of the official visit. It appears that Sarria’s visit to Tijuana stirred envy or, at the very least, prompted some resistance to acknowledging the autonomy of The Casa de Tijuana. In a document titled “Diplomatic Inquiry,” addressed to the emperors of San Diego, The Casa de Calafia sought to dissuade them from what appeared to be a form of boycott against them. This purportedly orchestrated action was attributed to Nicole Ramirez Murray, who had previously served as empress of San Diego:

After consultations with HRH José I de San Francisco, who ranks senior (as founder) to Nicole in the Court System, our Royal Ambassador learned that the Imperial Court of Tijuana would be diplomatically correct to decline the invitation form the San Diego Court to attend its Coronation if San Diego’s monarchs do not attend our May 27th event in Tijuana (José Sarria Papers, 1988, n.p.).

The document also cautioned them that the participation of His Majesty José I in San Diego was also in jeopardy if they persisted in rejecting the invitation to Tijuana.

The efforts proved futile. On May 28, 1988, the day after the coronation in Tijuana, Nicole Ramírez Murray was declared *persona non grata* in the Empire of Calafia by royal decree of its Emperor Fernando I. Additionally, the attendance of their royal representatives at the coronation

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<sup>9</sup> The La Sierra Hall was located on what was then the road to Ensenada, at kilometer 1.5, at the entrance to the La Sierra subdivision.

in San Diego was suspended (José Sarria Papers, 1988e). With diplomatic relations severed, hastily issued official statements attempted to address the situation. The newly crowned emperors of San Diego, Amazon XVII and Dennehy XVII, expressed intentions of reconciliation and sought to mend relations with Tijuana: “Communication has always been a problem among gay people, as with all people. We intend to strive toward correcting this problem and settling misunderstandings” (José Sarria Papers, 1988f, n.p.). The prevailing notion of strained or contentious relationships within the gay community is evident in these statements.

Another document, signed by the Royal Council of the Imperial Court of San Diego, nullified the 1983 treaty through which Tijuana had gained its sovereignty and independence, asserting instead that Tijuana was now under their jurisdiction (José Sarria Papers, 1988g). In response, Sarria came to the defense of the people of Tijuana: “Tijuana is under my protection. They don’t have to worry. If San Diego and Nicole want to play games with Mexico, they have to contend with me. [...] Tijuana will not be bullied”. Furthermore, he cautioned that if San Diego intended to annex Tijuana, they should begin by providing financial assistance and support for the activities of its court, particularly for the shelter serving the population affected by HIV/AIDS in the city (José Sarria Papers, 1988h, s. p.).<sup>10</sup>

#### CAMP CORONATION

While the precise motive behind the conflict remains unclear, various indicators suggest that not all courtiers from San Diego treated their counterparts on the Mexican side of the border as equals, likely driven by racist, classist, and xenophobic prejudices. Among these indicators are a collection of pamphlets and flyers found in Sarria’s Mexican folder, initially appearing cryptic in their connection to the Royal-Imperial Casa de Tijuana. One such item, for example, features a photograph reminiscent of a police mugshot, portraying Champagne, Empress of Portland, labeled: “Wanted. Armed & Dangerous. Champagne Rose Empress XXV for Empress IV de Rio Tijuana” (José Sarria Papers, 1984, n.p.). Another, more extensive flyer depicts Judy Jive, Empress of Vancouver, dressed in *zarapes* and covered with a mask: “The Thirteenth Empress de Rio Tijuana. It’s time to find... The Burrito Bandito. Who is this masked Woman? She is Judy Jive, the girl behind the glam” (José Sarria Papers, 1993, n.p.). The flyer also shows Judy holding a police arrest card and details a series of fictitious charges: “Taco Taking. Burrito Busting. Enchilada Excavation” (José Sarria Papers, 1993, n.p.). Additionally, the flyer lists thirteen compelling reasons to elect her as Empress of RioTijuana.

It appears that, parallel to the existence of an independent and autonomous Royal-Imperial Casa de Tijuana, the Imperial Court of San Diego promoted an annual excursion to Tijuana. This excursion took place on the same weekend as their own coronation ceremony and included a camp-style coronation celebration, during which an emperor and empress from one of the visiting Casas

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<sup>10</sup> The creation and the coordinates of this shelter are still a mystery that must be solved through research beyond the historical archive, to contribute to the history of the fight against HIV/AIDS in the region.

and courts were elected as emperor and empress of Rio Tijuana. This event allowed for the selection of someone responsible for raising funds to send to Mexico that year, but it also served as a popularity contest for those participating in the excursion. Simultaneously, the coronation caricatured Mexican identity by reproducing stereotypes that portrayed Tijuana as a city of sin.<sup>11</sup>

A brochure outlining the coronation of Rio Tijuana in 1985 makes it very clear that the festive nature of their excursion was fueled by humor at the expense of their Mexican neighbors: “Campaigning for this illustrious (?)<sup>12</sup> position may officially begin by April 1 (bribery, extortion, murder, and cheating are permitted in Mexican elections)” (Jose Sarria Papers, 1985, n.p.). The persistent jesting about crime in Mexico is accompanied by descriptions that transcend mere caricature, shedding light on the tangible disparities between the neighboring empires. Notably, the coronation scheduled for that same year, set to take place during an excursion to Ensenada, Baja California, was promoted as a “fully escorted trip” (Jose Sarria Papers, 1985, n.p.). This detail also underscores the underlying apprehensions among the visitors regarding their visit to Mexico.

In this context, and despite the colonial undertones inherent in replicating extravagant royal codes, it is important to recognize the contrast in the dynamics between the Imperial Casas across the border. While the Royal-Imperial Casa de Tijuana aimed to uphold the tradition of serious parody, through which various Casas embellished societal margins with allure and refinement—infused with a hint of Mexican nationalism—their counterparts in San Diego appeared to regard Tijuana as merely a playground, thus denying Mexicans the chance to engage in their process of reinterpreting colonial norms.

The history of The Royal-Imperial Casa de Tijuana offers a keen perspective on the International Imperial Courts System. On one hand, it unveils insights into the liberating potential of queer/*cuir* parody, enabling individuals to navigate their sexuality, gender expression, and identity beyond the confines of mainstream societal norms. On the other hand, it also serves as a testament to the persistence of inequality and exclusion dynamics, even within spaces ostensibly dedicated to LGBTQ+ community solidarity.

#### OUR EMPIRE IS POOR

Piecing together the history of the Royal-Imperial Casa de Tijuana following the diplomatic rift that unfolded in 1988 presents a formidable task. However, scattered evidence of the Casa’s endeavors in the years that followed suggests a rekindling of its ties with the IICS. This evidence not only sheds

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<sup>11</sup> A chapter in a philosophy thesis from the University of Berkeley, focusing on drag culture, delves into the examination of colonial practices within the imaginary realm of the International Court System of Imperial Courts. This chapter illuminates distinctions between the Royal-Imperial Casa de Tijuana and the Empire of Rio Tijuana (Horowitz, 2012). For further insights into the cultural dynamics of Tijuana, refer to Félix Berumen’s work from 2003.

<sup>12</sup> The question marks are from the original version. It is a humorous and ironic detail that questions the illustrious character of the titles of emperor and empress of Río Tijuana.

light on the nature of this circuit but also offers valuable insights into its place within the intricate web of relationships constituting LGBTQ+ activism along the northwest border of Mexico.

As per the records preserved by José Sarria, The Casa de Calafia continued operating in the following years, maintaining connections with other Casas and courts in California. However, its relationship with San Diego remained stagnant for an extended period. In 1990, The Casa de Calafia orchestrated a coronation to be held in Santa Monica, where Emperor Fernando I was set to be re-elected. The invitation details outlined a ceremony featuring a performance symbolizing the emperor's birth from the union of two rival warriors from the island of Calafia (José Sarria Papers, 1990a). Nonetheless, a letter from Emperor Napoleon VII to José Sarria expressed his vexation at The Casa de Calafia's liberal manipulation of its symbolism, seemingly devoid of any grounding (José Sarria Papers, 1990b).

Furthermore, the first emperor of the Royal-Imperial Casa de Tijuana seemed concerned about the future of the courts in Tijuana. According to the comprehensive report sent to the founder José I, The Casa de Tijuana had veered off course since 1986, following a generational transition triggered by the severe illness of some of its founders, including Napoleon VII himself. The profound impact of the HIV-AIDS pandemic on the Casa's dynamics became glaringly apparent thereafter. Subsequently, a downward spiral ensued, with the new leadership adamantly disregarding the counsel of their predecessors. One particular aspect of the 1990 coronation that bothered Napoleon VII was the assertion that the Casa de Tijuana had traditionally been characterized by a dominant emperor, with the empress playing a subordinate role devoid of genuine leadership. Napoleon VII expressed frustration at the elevated status attained by Fernando I through this narrative, who had been in power since 1988:

It is discriminatory & undemocratic. The Casa was founded on the principle of the recognition of all persons being of equal status in diversity. Anything other than that is pure fascism, racism, sexism, chauvinism & is repressive & suppressive of other persons gender, sex & human rights. The Empress-*Reina* is a co-equal ruling monarch (José Sarria Papers, 1990b, n.p.).

Presenting the disregard for Empress leadership as a gender discrimination issue prompts various inquiries about identity classifications and their experiences within this sphere of socialization and solidarity. The identification of empresses as women in their own right, despite them being predominantly portrayed as gay men engaging in drag, prompts us to acknowledge an avenue through which some individuals explored their own transgender identities, facilitated by performance and nightlife in the drag culture of the Imperial Court System. It also encourages us to reconsider the recent history of sexual diversity with less rigid delineations concerning LGBTQ+ identity categories, recognizing the intertwined nature of gay, transgender, and travesti identities, which have traditionally been interchangeably labeled as supposed sexual inversions within normative discourse (Guerrero McManus, 2014).

In the letter addressed to José Sarria, Napoleon VII underscores other critical issues facing the Royal-Imperial Casa. The founding emperor of Tijuana expresses notable irritation at what he perceives as desperate appeals from Mexican visitors to Santa Monica. The invitation from The Casa and Court of Calafia specifically solicited economic contributions from their counterparts in the United States, citing the Empire's financial struggles and need for sustenance. Napoleon VII deemed these pleas counterproductive and detrimental:

It is the most scandalous, disgraceful & dishonorable act that any person could perform for the Casa & the Mexican Community! Such a begging act places Our Empire in the poorest appearance by the so many racist mentality [*sic*] of Americans. We know how they think (José Sarria Papers, 1990b, n.p.).

Napoleon VII's concern regarding Mexico's portrayal to its North American counterparts underscores the profound impact of economic disparities along the border on intergroup relations. Spaces of solidarity and mutual assistance within the recent history of sexual diversity were not immune to internal conflicts, necessitating management alongside endeavors to defend their rights against normative society.

The events of 1990 shed light on other delicate matters in the history of the Royal-Imperial Casa de Tijuana. Napoleon VII lamented that one of his foremost concerns that year was the dwindling participation and decreased number of court members, aggravated further by a schism between two adversarial Casas: The Casa de Calafia and The Casa de Paz y Cultura. Additionally, the latter had recently opted to formally classify itself as a private club, thereby declining to engage in community service, contrary to the ethos of the IICS (José Sarria Papers, 1990c).

Despite this questionable decision, mentions of the activities of The Casa de Paz y Cultura are abundant in the pages of the *¿Y qué?* bulletin of the Baja California lesbian-gay movement. There, it is evident that, since the 1980s, a significant portion of the attention of lesbian-gay organizations has been devoted to combating the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The bulletin also extensively promotes nightclubs such as Mi Kasa, Los Equipales, and Mike's Disco, where the Casa's coronations and numerous other drag shows were organized (José Sarria Papers, 1991). Documentation preserved by José Sarria documents his close relationship with José Navarro, coordinator of the *¿Y qué?* group, who at one point invited him to serve as marshal of the Tijuana Pride Parade (José Sarria Papers, 1997a; José Sarria Papers, 1997b; José Sarria Papers, 1997c).<sup>13</sup> Additionally, various sources also indicate Emilio Velásquez—founder of the Frente Internacional por las Garantías Humanas en Tijuana (FIGHT) (International Front for Human Guarantees in Tijuana) and editor

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<sup>13</sup> José Sarria served as honorary marshal of the Tijuana Pride Parade in 1997, alongside Patria Jiménez, but was unable to attend due to health issues. Some of the invitations were also signed by Alejandro García, founder of the *¿Y qué?* group of the Tijuana AIDS Project and the ACOSIDA clinic.

of its *Frontera Gay* gazette—as the president of the Royal-Imperial Casa de Tijuana, holding the same rank as Napoleon VII.<sup>14</sup>

In this context, the history of the Casa offers a valuable perspective for understanding the relationships between the gay and travesti subculture and the lesbian-gay movement in northwestern Mexico. The drag network appears to play a central role in recent LGBTIQ+ activism in the region, warranting a detailed cartographic mapping through successive research efforts. This also underscores the need for a more nuanced social characterization of its participants, who included gay activists with considerable economic, social, and cultural capital, as well as likely travestis and trans women from working-class backgrounds. Ultimately, this would illustrate the connections between the so-called “scene” and LGBT+ activism, which are sometimes portrayed as incompatible.<sup>15</sup>

### BORBÓN Y VIZCAYA DE MÉXICO

The history of the Royal-Imperial Casa de Tijuana extends significantly into the present day. Nicole Ramírez Murray, who was once Empress of San Diego and reportedly promoted the boycott of the Tijuana Casa’s coronation in 1988, now holds the highest rank within the IICS. After being declared the first heir of José Sarria, her leadership was officially consecrated in a coronation ceremony in 2007, and she has since proclaimed herself Nicole the Great, Mother of the Americas (SICI, n.d.). Ramírez Murray has a distinguished career as a human rights defender and LGBTIQ+ activist, though some criticisms of her work within the IICS cast a shadow over her accomplishments (Horowitz, 2012). Her role in the diplomatic conflict that led to the breakdown of relations between Tijuana and San Diego remains unclear, as do her motivations for rejecting the official visit of Empress José I—the founder of the IICS—to the city of Tijuana.

Today, the IICS website prominently displays the flags of Mexico, Canada, and the United States in its logo, along with a list of affiliated Casas in these countries (SICI, 2023). However, there is a noticeable absence of detailed information regarding The Casa de Tijuana, which stands as the sole registered Casa within its Mexican chapter. Moreover, the link to the individual website of The Casa de Tijuana, as featured on the official IICS page, appears to be disabled. Delving into social media platforms reveals the existence of a network of imperial Casas and courts that operate independently of the IICS, rejecting its leadership from the southern region. The Facebook page

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<sup>14</sup> Emilio Velásquez is listed as president of the Imperial Royal Casa de Tijuana in the invitation to the 1986 coronation (José Sarria Papers, 1986b). He is also mentioned by Napoleon VII as one of the individuals who devised the court’s symbols and their connection to the Aztec emperors (José Sarria Papers, 1990b).

<sup>15</sup> In the early years of the Homosexual Liberation Movement in Mexico, its initial activists resisted endorsing the gay scene and nightlife. They believed that such spaces perpetuated the societal stereotypes enforced by repression and diverged from their liberationist goals aimed at dismantling the necessity for a ghetto. This topic is examined in the author’s doctoral thesis, which centers on the case of Mexico City (González Romero, 2021).

La Corte Imperial de Borbón y Vizcaya de Tijuana B. C., Mexico (2018), clarifies that their organization no longer aligns with the IICS Casa de Tijuana. This is because in 2018, the latter formally severed ties with the International Court System and opted to become a chapter of Borbón y Vizcaya instead.

According to the broader Facebook page of the organization, La Corte Imperial de la Corona de Borbón y Vizcaya de México (2018) is a civil association with a presence across various regions of the country, as well as in the United States, El Salvador, Ecuador, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic. While this system does not directly oppose the IICS and acknowledges itself as part of José Sarria's legacy, it operates independently and aims to address the perceived lack of representation for Mexico and Latin America by Nicole Ramírez Murray. Their platform, which is also focused on community engagement, advocates for the interests of Afro-Latin, indigenous, trans, and non-binary populations. These ongoing tensions underscore the unequal dynamics that have historically characterized relationships among imperial courts in the northwest border of Mexico. Such tensions continue to shape lives and drive the political and solidarity efforts of communities asserting their sexual and gender dissidence.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Upon delving into the archives, the history of The Royal-Imperial Casa de Tijuana is proposed as a case study for transnational history originating from the northwest border of Mexico. This approach requires the documentation of an institutional history that not only recounts the emergence, development, and legacy of the Casa but also opens up analytical pathways exploring coloniality, drag, and queer/*cuir* parody across its various stages. Moreover, it situates the Casa within the broader context of the history of sexual diversity, examining its sociability spaces and the diverse political organizations within the LGBTIQ+ movement in both Mexico and the United States. As observed, this case study has the potential to blur the analytical boundaries between activism and subcultures within sexual diversity. Ultimately, documenting the history of this organization facilitates the establishment of connections with larger historical narratives concerning the northwest border of Mexico and the relationship between Mexico and the United States.

To accomplish the aforementioned goals, collaboration with individuals still affiliated with the imperial courts is essential. This includes those associated with The Casa de Borbón y Vizcaya de Mexico or Nicole Ramírez Murray's International System, whose insights into past events are crucial for research purposes. Such collaboration not only enhances the accurate understanding of historical events and the appreciation of the institution's extensive history but also sheds light on the mechanisms at play within the imperial courts, which continuously strive to perpetuate their legacy. Academic research, therefore, plays a vital role in organizing and disseminating a collective memory that the communities of gay men, travestis, drag queens, and trans women themselves have preserved and passed down for over half a century, since the establishment of the IICS in 1965 by José Sarria.



Similarly, the history of The Royal-Imperial Casa de Tijuana contributes to discussions surrounding sexual diversity by challenging the rigid approach often taken towards categories of sexual and gender identity. The border context of The Casa de Tijuana, along with its ongoing dialogue and interaction with counterparts across the border, calls into question certain interpretations that, while grounded in the principle of cultural autonomy, overlook the continual exchange of ideas and the liminality inherent in border regions. In the latest edition of “Transgender History,” for instance, Susan Stryker highlights the importance of recognizing the travesti identity as distinct to Latin America, separate from and not to be assimilated into the transgender category (Stryker, 2017).

In this research, such assertions are contextualized by recognizing that dialogues between the north and the south influence how individuals perceive their sexual and gender identity, leading to the transformation of social conventions in this regard. In this context, the research also delves into perspectives that highlight a culturally traditional approach to experiencing and representing male homosexuality in Mexico, which emphasizes gender transgressions over the object of sexual desire.<sup>16</sup> The history of The Royal-Imperial Casa de Tijuana is noteworthy as it encompasses both these traditional conceptions and those of modern gay identity. It serves as a site of subjective experimentation, where one can observe the exchanges, tensions, and agreements that shape contemporary norms surrounding identity. Nonetheless, it represents merely a small facet within the intricate history of sexual diversity.

Translation: Erika Morales.

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<sup>16</sup> Reference is made to a conception of homosexual identity described by Guillermo Núñez Noriega (2001, 2007) as the *prevailing model for understanding homoeroticism among men in Mexico*. This model is characterized by the opposition of binaries such as penetrator-penetrated, active-passive, man-queer, and dominant-submissive. It contrasts with a *Western-bourgeois* model that, above all else, emphasizes the choice of sexual object. Núñez Noriega’s research specifically highlights the existence of realities that diverge from these two models.

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