

# Learn with the Queers: ‘*Historical Resilience*’, Lesson 01

## What can the AIDS pandemic teach us for Covid-19?

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**Resilience**, “*the ability to be happy again after something difficult or bad has happened.*”<sup>1</sup>

Inspired by an amazing testimony written by Indianare Siqueira<sup>2</sup> in which she discusses quarantine, queer bodies and solidarity, I realised that the LGBTI+ community has a very strong characteristic: a ‘*historical resilience*’. That is to say, while the whole world endured Spanish Flu in the early 1920s, and COVID-19 these days, queer history shows us that beyond these pandemics, queers have also faced the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s, as well as a long-lasting “relationship” with prejudice, discrimination and invisibility. Due to this, the LGBTI+ population had to learn how to exist while resisting, how to live while dying, how to laugh while crying: in other words, how to be resilient 100% of the time.

In the beginning of her testimony<sup>3</sup>, she illustrates what has changed for her after 45 days of social isolation due to coronavirus. And her answer? Nothing. Yeah, that’s it... Nothing! *Well, except for the fact that she hasn’t been drinking alcohol during quarantine.* As she argues, the isolation we face today has always been part of many people’s lives. The LGBTI+ population has always been forbidden to go to most places and, as a consequence of that, have had to create their own ‘ghettos’. ‘Ghettos’ where sexist behaviour of cis gay men led lesbians, bisexuals and transgender women to create their own ‘ghettos’. ‘Ghettos’ which were more open towards trans bodies but transphobia still prevailed, leading trans bodies to create their own ‘ghettos’.

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge Dictionary.

<sup>2</sup> A Brazilian trans activist and founder of Casa Nem, an LGBTI+ shelter in Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>3</sup> Indianare Siqueira’s Facebook Page, accessed April 28, 2020, [www.facebook.com/indi.siqueira](http://www.facebook.com/indi.siqueira).

And do you want to know when this scenario changed? In the early '80s.

As Indianare says, “it took an [AIDS] pandemic to make a whole community come together again because they were abandoned and were being hunted down as the culprits and spreaders of the HIV virus that caused AIDS”<sup>4</sup>. Thus, there was no way out other than regrouping as a community to fight for survival, to be treated humanely and to oppose oppression. The world had to finally stop and look after these individuals that, for many centuries, had been neglected. A worse catastrophe had to be avoided. Does it sound familiar to you? Haven't people been voting for 'walls'? For closing their borders? For 'blind nationalism' that allows us to be destructive with 'the other'? This 'other' that is made of flesh and bone, just like you, just like me. Aren't we accustomed to living side by side with many social ills? Didn't we know that we needed to change but we preferred to go along with it as it didn't affect us or our loved ones directly? The signs are pretty clear, folks! We have been bad, but really, really bad... to the world, to the 'other', and to ourselves. What the LGBTI+ community went through during the AIDS pandemic, such as the fear of the unknown, the loss of loved ones, quarantine (imposed on them through attacks and discrimination in the streets), lack of proper treatment and a cure, is repeating itself in our own worldwide struggle against COVID-19, regardless of whether you're rich or poor, black or white, straight or gay, cis or trans.

Luckily, it is also in times like this that the 'sense of community' flourishes and we see people taking action in favour of the most vulnerable in our society. Due to queer resilience through organisations, collectives, and protests in a burdensome battle, the LGBTI+ community has, in the late 20th century, been able to overcome the AIDS pandemic step by

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<sup>4</sup> Siqueira, 'Facebook'.

step, (but not the virus); become more resilient, and thrive for better days. Casa Nem<sup>5</sup>, for instance, hosts primarily transgender people in situations of extreme vulnerability in Rio. As a non-profit organisation based in an occupied building that relies on donated funds and their own residents' income for their existence and survival. Needless to say, the coronavirus pandemic has hit them really hard. The building's lack of infrastructure and potable water, coupled with residents not being able to go out and work - as the level of transmission is very high due to their living situation - made them go into lockdown before everybody else for their own safety. Due to this, a very active online campaign has been their only way out of this situation and make it through this hard time. Fortunately, the shelter has been getting a lot of help and, at the same time, helping others as surplus donations are given to other people in need in the city. Furthermore, the residents have been producing face coverings as part of an initiative with another social project that professionalises transgender women in fashion. The face coverings are donated to other queers in need, sexual workers and homeless people.

All in all, take note! 'Queering' the Cambridge Dictionary would allow us to reframe resilience as 'the *queerability*' to be happy while something difficult or bad constantly happens to you'.

#MakeSpaceForHomelessQueers<sup>6</sup>

## References

1. Indianare Siqueira's Facebook Page, accessed April 28, 2020, [www.facebook.com/indi.siqueira](http://www.facebook.com/indi.siqueira)
2. Casa Nem's Facebook Page, accessed April 28, 2020, [www.facebook.com/casanemcasaviva](http://www.facebook.com/casanemcasaviva).

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<sup>5</sup> Casa Nem's Facebook Page, accessed April 28, 2020, [www.facebook.com/casanemcasaviva](http://www.facebook.com/casanemcasaviva).

<sup>6</sup> This hashtag has been used in an online protest led by The Outside Project (LGBTIQ+ shelter in London) and Voices4 London.