

Reclaiming *mariola's* wings

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There was once a child who was called names. The laughs pained them, and they struggled to make friends. This child spent most of the time in their head, thinking about the insults. There was nobody on their side. Everybody thought they should never show any sign of pride.

Have you ever been called the name of an insect? *Mariola* is a vernacular name given to the stingless bee *Tetragonisca angustula*. It is probably due to its phonetic proximity to the Spanish word *marica*, which means *fag*, why people use it to refer to us, male homosexuals. All over Latin America and Spain, there are other insect names used to insult us, such as *mariquita* (ladybug) and *mariposa* (butterfly). All these insects have wings and can fly, very similar to *fairies* in the English language¹. I suppose that people thought both queers and insects were fragile and could not defend ourselves, they were wrong.

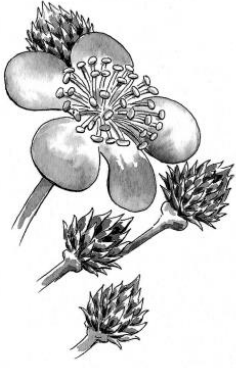
It took me several years to accept my wings. As gender activists did with the word *queer*, I responded to hateful comments by metamorphosing the slur into a language of resistance². As an adult I got a *mariola* tattooed on my leg to reclaim the name. Why to be proud of it? It is kind of poetic, and we need to start with the etymology of *Tetragonisca angustula*. Although this scientific name refers to the elongated and quadrangular form of the insect's abdomen³, the Italian word *tetragono* is an adjective to describe a person who does not allow changes in their attitude, regardless of adversity⁴. The behaviour of stingless bees is interesting too. They cannot sting but defend themselves and their colonies by biting⁵. Now, calling myself *mariola* makes me feel I can resist adversity and defend myself using strategies that might sound weird to others.

Learning how other cultures see the world helped me ease the pain of homophobic slurs. Mayans considered stingless bees sacred animals, and a few codices show the ceremonies where people offered food and incense to gods, so they provide abundance of flowers for honey production⁶. Before the Spanish conquest, in Meso-American civilizations it was also common to have same-sex relationships⁷. There was a time when stingless bees were sacred animals for a civilization where homosexuality was normal.



My memories of *mariolas* aren't all bad. When growing up, I maintained colonies of these bees in the family garden. From time to time, we extracted small amounts of honey from the colonies and it was truly a nice and sweet treat. Before being called *mariola*, this was to me the name of a useful insect. Honey from stingless bees has been traditionally used for its medicinal properties since pre-Columbian times⁸ and my mother treats wounds with it. My father used *mariolas* as pollinators in our small plantation, during the time he produced papayas. Being called this name no longer sounds so bad, right? I am also proud that I was able to conduct scientific research on *mariolas*. For my undergrad thesis I focused on their interaction with bacteria that show an antibiotic effect on human pathogens⁹. With the publication of the manuscript, I felt that I was conquering the name that was once imposed on me by bullies.

Perhaps calling myself *mariola* is not normal but calling insect names to offend others should not be either. Reclaiming the name took me a long cognitive process. Children that suffer from bullying are not born prepared to "bite" back their antagonists, and more violence is not the answer. Being bullied is associated with severe mental health problems,

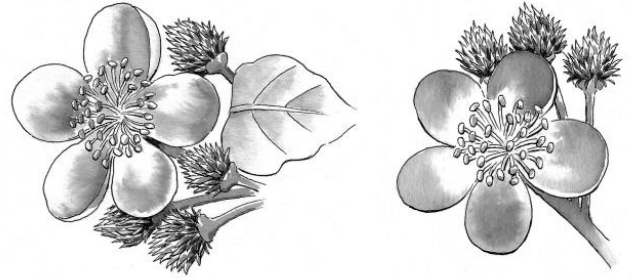


including self-harm, violent behaviour, and psychotic symptoms¹⁰. To be a victim of bullying and to be called an insect common name had a strong impact on my personality, to the point it was difficult to trust or become friends with heterosexual people.

The name *mariola* is now an important and positive part of my personality, but it is very frustrating that it all started with a bunch of kids making fun of me. I have not known of my bullies for nearly two decades, and here I am writing about them. This was very impactful and influenced how much I thought about insects. It sounds a little sad, but during that time, I was watching documentaries instead of making friends. I wish that I could have talked about my problems with my parents, but those problems could not be discussed at that moment. Now, I am proud of my wings and the name *mariola*.

*Please could you stop the noise?
I'm tryna get some rest
From all the unborn chicken
Voices in my head.*

-Radiohead, "Paranoid Android" (OK Computer, 1997)



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