

# Hombres Mujeres: An Indigenous Third Gender

Men and Masculinities

1-27

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## Abstract

This article interrogates West and Zimmerman's Doing Gender paradigm by examining the Muxes of Juchitán, a little known third gender in El Istmo de Tehuantepec, Oaxaca México. After presenting preliminary findings based on personal interviews with forty-two muxes and forty-eight community members, distinguishing between muxes and gays and describing the wide variation in the muxe lifestyle, the essay concludes that muxes are a third sex/gender category that is actively redoing the prevailing Western gender binary as well as traditional Mexican conceptions of gender and sexuality. They are an indigenous third sex/gender category, which is less about Western conceptions of sexuality, sexual identity, or doing transgender and more about retaining the language, cultural categories, practices, and worldviews of indigenous communities.

## Keywords

muxe, Zapotec, two-spirit, third gender

This essay presents findings from an ethnographic study of the Muxes of Juchitán to extend the debate engendered by West and Zimmerman's (1987, 2009) *Doing Gender*, which attempted to explain how gender is created and reproduced in society. The muxes (pronounced "Moo-shey"), an understudied indigenous group in *El Istmo de Tehuantepec*, Oaxaca México, have been described as a third sex/gender

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category (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997, 283) analogous to the institutionalized third gender found among some Native American groups (Whitehead 1981; Williams 1986), the *hijras* of India and South Asia (Reddy 2005), and *Moana* values and worldviews expressed by certain Pacific Islander groups, including the Tongan *Leiti*, the Samoan *Fa'afaine*, and the *Mahu* in Tahiti and French Polynesia; biological males who manifest feminine identities in a number of ways (Halapua 2006, 26).

Muxes are biological males who also manifest feminine identities in their dress and attire, but they are not transsexual nor are they seeking to become women. They both self-identify and are generally recognized and accepted as a third gender, rather than as men or women, adopting characteristics of each gender. While lacking the religious significance associated with Two-Spirit indigenous persons, hijras, and the aforementioned Pacific Islander groups, muxes may have had such significance in pre-Colombian times (Chiñas 2002, 109; Lacey 2008; Williams 1986, 135).

Nearly three decades after West and Zimmerman's article first appeared, doing gender theory has been so widely accepted that it may have reached a canonical or law-like status (Jurik and Simen 2009). In fact, some argue that it "has become the hegemonic theoretical framework for understanding gender" (C. Connell 2010, 31) and the "point of reference for Anglophone gender analysis" (R. Connell 2009, 105).

This essay seeks both to expound and expand on the doing gender debate by proposing that, like Two-Spirit native people, muxes are a unique group of indigenous men who upend conventional conceptions of sex category, gender, sexuality, and the gender binary by openly dressing in female Zapotec attire and assuming traditional feminine roles while being accepted and well integrated into the larger Zapotec community. Muxes also take us beyond the conventional gay/straight, object choice Western binary in that their sexual partners are not other muxes or gay men but *hom-bres*. I also seek to place these findings in a global indigenous context and suggest that muxes are a third sex/gender category that cannot be understood by traditional conceptions of gender and sexuality like those articulated by West and Zimmerman (1987), Butler (1990, 2004), Lorber (2005, 2006), and other doing gender scholars or within the rapidly emerging field of transgender studies (see Stryker 2008, 2013; Valentine 2007).

After presenting a brief overview of the doing gender in the workplace literature, the essay begins by discussing the increased recognition of Two-Spirit persons among indigenous communities in North America, and attempts to link the literature on the muxes to this movement. After discussing the methods and sample employed in the study, I then present the major findings, focusing on the primary muxe organization, *Las Auténticas Intrépidas Buscadoras del Peligro* (Las Intrépidas) and the great Intrépida Vela (community festival and dance). I conclude by discussing how sexuality and gender are defined and manifested in Juchitán and profile a wide range and variation in the muxe lifestyle and experience.

The essay concludes by placing these preliminary findings in a global indigenous context that challenges West and Zimmerman's (2009) assertion that it is impossible to "undo gender" and suggesting that muxes are a third sex/gender category that is actively redoing the prevailing Western gender binary as well as traditional Mexican conceptions of gender and sexuality. In the end, I argue that muxes are an indigenous third sex/gender category, which is less about sexuality, sexual identity, or doing transgender and more about retaining the language, cultural categories, practices, and worldviews of indigenous communities.

## Doing Gender, Work, and the Muxes

### *Doing Gender in the Workplace: A Brief Overview of the Literature*

West and Zimmerman first challenged the prevailing role theory model of gender differences in 1987 by drawing on Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodological case study of Agnes, a preoperative transsexual raised as a boy who adopted a female identity as a teenager. They proposed a distinct sociological understanding of gender "as a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment" and rather than viewing gender as an internal property, they saw it as emergent from social situations and external to the individual (West and Zimmerman 1987, 31).

In elaborating their theory, West and Zimmerman (1987, 2009) were careful to distinguish among *sex*, *sex category*, and *gender*. Sex refers to socially constructed biological criteria used in classifying individuals as female or male, such as genital differences at birth or chromosomal differences. Persons are then placed in a sex category through the application of these socially constructed indicators, but in everyday life such classification is created and maintained "by socially required identification displays that proclaim one's membership in one or the other category" (West and Zimmerman 1987, 127). Although sex category presupposes one's sex and often serves as a proxy for sex, the two can and do vary independently, so that like Agnes who had to preserve the secret of her penis and present herself to society as a woman, one can declare membership in a sex category even when the socially constructed sex criteria are absent (West and Zimmerman 1987, 2009).<sup>1</sup> Gender, on the other hand, entails the process of managing behavior according to normative conceptions of appropriate attitudes and actions that are deemed to correspond to one's sex category. Such membership activities in turn develop from and reinforce one's sex category.

Critical works have started to focus not only on doing gender but on how one goes about "undoing" and "redoing" gender by questioning the prevailing gender binary and promoting social change (Butler 1990, 2004; Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009; Lorber 2005, 2006). Lorber (2005), for example, uses the metaphor of "breaking the bowls" and calls for a deliberate degendering of society in order to promote equality and social change (2006).

Although the debate has been mostly theoretical (C. Connell 2010), an emerging body of empirical work has looked at how transgender persons have attempted to undo the heteronormative binary model. Not surprisingly, some of this research has examined the workplace experiences of transgender-identified individuals<sup>2</sup> (C. Connell 2010). Transgender persons are not only able to transcend conventional notions about how one goes about doing gender in their daily interactions (Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009) but also to alter and expand norms associated with gender (C. Connell 2010).

Drawing on an empirical analysis of nineteen in-depth interviews with transgender persons, Catherine Connell, for example, reports how they negotiate and manage gender interactions in the workplace in order to critique West and Zimmerman's notion of doing gender. Five of the nineteen transgender persons in C. Connell's study were described as doing gender in the same sense that others do gender on a daily basis. Rather than coming out and challenging the gender binary by publicly declaring their transgender status, they were quietly performing "stealth" in the workplace, and coworkers did not identify them as transgender (C. Connell 2010).<sup>3</sup>

The remaining fourteen participants, on the other hand, were said to be undoing or redoing gender or doing transgender because they were "out" and their coworkers, friends, and family knew they were transgender. While these persons blended masculine and feminine gender performances, they "often felt they were gender disciplined and/or reinterpreted according to conventional gender norms" (C. Connell 2010, 40).<sup>4</sup> While many transgender persons believe that they are radically altering the gender binary, most are in fact directly and indirectly supporting or reifying the very system they are seeking to change (Gagné, Tewksbury, and McGaughey 1997),<sup>5</sup> supporting West and Zimmerman's (2009) assertion that it is impossible to undo gender and that attempts to change and subvert the gender binary only work to reinforce it.

### *Work, Sexuality, and Gender in Juchitán*

Despite the obvious theoretical and practical significance of the emergent research on doing and redoing gender in the workplace, it is not without limitations (C. Connell 2010; Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009; Schilt 2006; Gagné, Tewksbury, and McGaughey 1997; Rosenfeld 2009). One limitation, as noted, is that in attempting to reconfigure sex and gender roles in the workplace, transgender persons may inadvertently reinforce the gender binary and heteronormative system that they are seeking to challenge. A second, related limitation is that such research is based on the sex/gender binary, which tends to conflate sex, sex category, and gender. In Juchitán, on the other hand, sex, sex category, and gender are separate and somewhat independent entities. Muxes identify with *lo femenino* or what is feminine and many dress in traditional female attire, but they are not generally seeking to be transgender, or to be accepted as women.

Regardless of their dress or appearance, they are recognized as muxe by the community and by gay identified men. Biinizia informed me that a number of muxe have eschewed professions and occupations that would require them to adhere to modern and rigid masculine and feminine forms of attire. Interestingly, muxe do not seek to go stealth by dressing in Western female attire because as *Intrépidas*, they in fact aspire to maintain their Zapotec dress, language, and customs. It should also be noted that there is no traditional male Zapotec way of dressing. Men at the *velas*, religiously inspired four-day festivals, are expected to wear black pants and a white *guayabera* (a loose fitting tropical shirt), but this form of dress is found throughout Mexico, although muxe often adorn these shirts with brightly colored flowers and embroidery.

I argue that in Juchitán, sex, sex category, and gender are upended and do not necessarily correspond. Ironically, acceptance of muxe as a third sex/gender category may be facilitated, not only by a sharp division of sex roles but also by the prevalence of gender equity in Isthmus Zapotec society (Chiñas 2002; Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997). Juchitán is not a matriarchal society,<sup>6</sup> but a matrifocal family system which persists in the face of patriarchy, where both men and women have important cultural and ritual roles and where women exercise a great deal of power and autonomy economically, socially, and in the kinship system (Chiñas 2002; Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997). Because women assume the role of merchants and traders in the market they also control family resources and are recognized as economic heads of households.

*El Mercado* (the market) has been described as “The Heart of Juchitán” (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997, 67) and is controlled by women. Juchitecas (Tecas) have a reputation for being hard workers and interestingly, when a man works hard, he is praised because “he knows how to work like a woman” (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997, 281). A man who works hard is treated like a muxe and accepted in the market not because he is a woman but because he works like one.

The idea of going stealth in the workplace is antithetical to muxe identity since their workplace, or better yet, their work ethic, defines their identity. Like the women of Juchitán, muxe are praised for being very hardworking. Even those who do not dress in feminine attire are openly recognized as a third sex category and take on the characteristics of each gender. They are seen as neither women nor as men but like the Zuni Man/Woman or *Hombres/Mujeres*, as combining and incorporating dimensions of each gender. When asked whether they identify as men or women, muxe invariably responded that they are neither; they are muxe; a third gender that combines male and female traits that belie the prevailing Western gender binary. Muxe are therefore continuously not only doing but also redoing gender.

In an interesting reversal in Juchitán, lighter work associated with music, poetry, and art is typically defined as men’s domain, whereas heavy work like working in the market and preparing for *velas* is defined as women’s domain. Intermediate activities like making decorations for the *velas* and fiestas do not readily fit into one of these categories and are considered an appropriate realm

of work for muxes. They design, embroider, and make traditional feminine Zapotec attire. Several of the persons interviewed like Mayté and Darina designed decorations, *huipiles* (traditional dresses), and/or high fashion dresses, work that is valued and in high demand.

## Literature Review: Two-spirit Peoples and the Muxes of Juchitán

In the 1980s, the so-called Anthropology of the Berdache was criticized by Native peoples in North America as gay, lesbian, and transgender indigenous anthropologists sought to “displace colonial knowledge by making Native knowledge the methodological ground of research by and for Native peoples” (Morgensen 2011, 139; Lang 1998, 7). The emergence of Two-Spirit Identity represented a critique of the Anthropology of the Berdache (Whitehead 1981) and of Western notions of gender and sexuality (Driskill et al. 2011a). Will Roscoe’s book (1991), *The Zuni Man-Woman*, for example, argued that the Zuni Lhamana represented a third gender status which combined the work and traits of both men and women. The Lhamana was “less about sexual identity and more about the cultural categories of indigenous communities” (Driskill et al. 2011a, 12). The newer Two-Spirit or “Two-Spirited” term confronts the Anthropology of the Berdache and refers to gender constructions and roles that occur in many native or indigenous communities outside the Western gender binary as well as to Native people who are now reclaiming and redefining these roles within their respective communities (Driskill et al. 2011b).

The muxes are also indigenous persons who speak Zapotec, lead very public lives 24/7, live within a society and culture which, like the Zuni man-woman, recognizes the existence of an indigenous third sex/gender category that is neither male nor female but muxe. While most muxes cross-dress and are called *vestidas*, some only dress for the fiestas, yet there is no necessary relationship between being muxe and cross-dressing.

While there is an extensive body of research on Juchitán and surrounding Isthmus communities, most of this research has focused either on its rich history and legacy of political resistance in the region (Campbell et al. 1993) or on the women of Juchitán and the so-called Isthmus matriarchy (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997). Juchitán is perhaps best known as the home of, *Coalición Obrera Campesina Estudiantil del Istmo (COCEI)* a radical leftist Worker–Peasant–Student indigenous coalition that has dominated politics in the region for the last thirty years (Campbell, Bindford, Bartolomé, and Barabas 1993, xviii).

The literature on the muxes is limited and has been conducted primarily by outsiders. Beverly Newbold Chiñas (2002), for example, an American anthropologist, studied *The Isthmus Zapotecs* and devoted a scant four pages near the end of her slim book to the muxes. In the Preface to *The Isthmus Zapotecs*, Chiñas acknowledges that she entered the field not only “uninvited, unannounced, and unexpected,” but

ultimately unwelcomed and a number of women in the market refused to answer her questions (Newbold Chiñas 2002, xii).

A team of German anthropologists headed by Bennholdt-Thomsen (1997) similarly focused mostly on women and the matriarchal nature of Zapotec society but only the last chapter of their excellent book, *Juchitán, la ciudad de las mujeres*, is devoted to the muxes. To date, the definitive work on the muxes was carried out by the now deceased Italian anthropologist, Marinella Miano Borruso. Her out-of-print Spanish language book, *Hombre, mujer y muxe': en el Istmo de Tehuantepec* (Miano Borruso 2002) presents the life history of a Zapotec woman from birth to death. Another account is a short pamphlet, *Las Otras Hijas de San Vicente* published in Oaxaca by a Juchiteco, Elí Valentín Bartolo Marcial in 2010.

## Method and Sample

Preliminary field research in Juchitán was conducted on four separate occasions in 2009, 2011, 2013, and 2014 through participant observation, attendance at muxe velas (festivals), and conducting open-ended interviews with a purposive sample of muxes and a select group of community members. Many of the muxes interviewed were directly or indirectly associated with a local muxe organization, *Las Auténticas Intrépidas Buscadoras del Peligro* (The Authentic, Fearless Seekers of Danger) which has been in existence for almost forty years. The longevity of the Intrépida organization speaks to its public acceptance by the business community, political leaders, and even the Catholic Church. Leaders of the organization proudly proclaimed that members and associates of Las Intrépidas come from all walks of life, including accountants, lawyers, teachers, politicians, and merchants.

The name Intrépidas is significant because it connotes that the group's members represent muxes who are authentic and fearless seekers of danger. Members are in fact committed to taking on unpopular or controversial issues, including sex education, safe sex, AIDS awareness, and the eradication of domestic violence. The name Intrépida (fearless) also suggests that one is not going stealth or in the closet.

Although a Mexican national, bilingual and bicultural, and a heterosexual male, I was an outsider who was neither Zapoteco nor muxe, and expected that it would be difficult to gain access to members of the organization. I found muxes to be surprisingly warm, inviting, eager to talk about, and share their experiences. My initial contacts in Juchitán were made through social notables, a term employed by Wayne Cornelius (1982) and by Cecilia Menjívar (2000). A critical social notable was Felina, the owner of a salon that bears her name and who is past president of Las Intrépidas. *Felina's Estética* is both a salon and a place where muxes congregate daily. It became a place I frequented often, where I made contacts, and conducted interviews with Intrépidas and community members. It was also a communication center where people left messages or met with me for interviews. I also obtained referrals from other persons I came into contact with like the staff at the hotel where I stayed. David, a young trainer at a local gym where I worked out, provided a great

deal of information on Juchitán and community views on various issues, referred me to one of the gay men whom I interviewed. Roque, a hair stylist, and Gabriel, a person who sells computer networks, were other persons I befriended who also served as social notables and greatly facilitated the research. I also attended a number of local community events and activities hosted by Las Intrépidas, which yielded more contacts and served as occasions for participant observation.

The study used a wide range of qualitative research methods, including archival research, ethnographic field research, participant observation, and in-depth personal interviews. Through these contacts, I was able to observe, engage in informal conversations, and conduct forty-two open-ended interviews with muxes at Felina's Hair Salon, the velas, restaurants, Intrépida basketball games, and other locales. An additional forty-eight interviews were carried out with community members in order to assess their views of muxes. These included ordinary citizens in Juchitán and the surrounding communities as well as other social notables like two priests at the San Vicente Ferrer Parish, the Assistant to the Municipal President, the Assistant Director of the local Colegio Nacional de Educación Profesional Técnica (CONALEP), (National School for Professional Technical Education), a government supported vocational/trade high school, and a staff worker at *Ama la vida (Gunaxhíl Guendanabani)* an organization devoted to the prevention of HIV, which has been in existence for twenty years. Finally, I conducted interviews with five self-described gay men who were not muxes.

The interview schedule was open-ended, lasted approximately forty-five minutes, and covered a broad range of topics, including where the person was born and grew up, what their parents did for a living, when the person first realized he was muxe, how their families responded to their sexual orientation and lifestyle, whether they were teased, harassed, or bullied as children and adolescents, how muxes were distinct from gay men, whether they were, or had been, in a stable relationship with a man, as well as the accomplishments and challenges faced by Las Intrépidas as an organization and their societal acceptance in the community at large. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, audio-recorded, translated into English, and transcribed by the author.

Because many muxes have adopted feminized or artistic names, I generally use the feminine pronoun when referring to persons like Biiniza or Felina who are vestidas and clearly assume a feminized identity and persona and the masculine pronoun and pseudonyms for those who have not adopted a feminine persona. Some muxes alternate between the masculine and feminine pronoun. Kike, a well-known *travesti*,<sup>7</sup> and performance artist, for example, uses Kike in his daily life as a hair stylist and Kika when he transforms into a woman. He even refers to himself in the third person as *La Kika*. Muxes appear to use the pronoun "he" when referring to a person's total persona, including childhood, and "she" when referring to the current person as a muxe, but they are not particularly concerned with whether one uses the masculine or feminine pronoun to describe them. One muxe, Roque, commented to me that the pronoun reference really didn't matter because he or she was still the same person.

## Findings

### Community Acceptance: *La Gran Intrépida Vela* (Festival)

The *Intrépida Vela* is a three-day marathon celebration held on the third weekend in November and the culmination of the group's activities for the year. It represents the most important and visible illustration of how muxes are accepted by their community. About 10,000 people attend the *vela* annually, including family, friends, and people from other parts of México and abroad. Friday begins with the *Tirada de Fruta*, a carnivalesque parade with colorful floats where the *Intrépidas* throw candy, cookies, and a variety of household items like utensils and Tupperware to the crowd. On the second day, the muxe mass, the great dance and crowning of the *Intrépida Queen* are held, while the third, *La Lavada de Ollas*, which literally means the washing of the dishes or pans, is a more informal and laid back day with a dance and party that takes place on Sunday afternoon and where muxes are more likely to dress in regional native attire in brightly colored, flowered *huipiles* (blouses), and *nahuas* (skirts).

The first year I attended the *vela*, Felina told me that people would be going to the outdoor amphitheater where it was being held to set up the night before the event. I decided to help set up as this provided me with an opportunity to hang out with muxes and see them relate to one another in an informal setting while they worked, joked, and drank. Each *Intrépida* staked out an area for a *puesto* (booth) for invited guests and set up wooden chairs and plastic tables in the center in a rectangular, horseshoe shape. I befriended a muxe named Mandis, and helped him set up by opening and arranging wooden chairs. It took about three hours.

Mandis appeared to be about seventy with thinning hair, a founding member of *Las Intrépidas*, and one of the muxes who do not cross-dress or wear traditional female Zapotec clothing, although he does wear some makeup.<sup>8</sup> When I asked Mandis about this, he explained that he could not cross-dress because he works for the government in the Office of Tourism. After we finished setting up, someone brought out liter size bottles of beer and people started to drink and socialize.

By the next day, the venue was magically transformed for the *vela*. It was hard to believe that this was the same dusty field we set up the previous day. White canopies had been placed around each area with lighting. Three stages were colorfully decorated and well lit; two stages were for the bands and the other for the celebration and crowning of the new Queen. The *Intrépida* event was held by invitation only and interestingly, the entrance "fee" was a case of beer purchased at the door. This is consistent with the spirit of reciprocity engendered in the community. I bought my case of beer, put it on my shoulder, walked in, went directly to Mandis' *puesto*, and handed it to him. He greeted me, embraced me, and graciously accepted it.

I walked around and visited with Ángel who introduced me to another muxe who, along with Mandis, was one of the founders of the *Las Intrépidas* organization some thirty-five years earlier. Ángel was very engaging, had a shaved head, and like Mandis, did not dress in feminine attire, but wore dark lipstick and some makeup. He was

dressed in a white outfit with a vest, a large necklace, silver top hat, gray cape, and carried a black cane, an outfit one might see at *Carnaval* or *Mardi Gras*. He told me that he makes his own outfit every year. He also said that the prior year, Mandis and some of the other Intrépidas had him go home and change because his outfit was too outrageous and embarrassing.

Like the venue itself, entertainment at the vela was impressive. There were two masters of ceremony. Three bands played, with the most famous of them, *La Sonora Dinamita*, an iconic Colombian band that was reputedly paid \$12,000 (US dollars) to perform. The event was a gala affair with a red carpet and lots of paparazzi pushing, fighting, and shoving each other to get a good view of the contestants. It was very difficult to see the contestants as they came down the red carpet. A special guest was a tall, statuesque black supermodel from Guatemala named Karen Davis.

Prior to the coronation, fifty muxes were introduced, including former Muxe Queens like Felina, muxes who lived in cities throughout Oaxaca, and those from other regions. The ceremony had all of the trappings of a traditional beauty pageant.<sup>9</sup> The culmination of the evening was the introduction of Queen Darina I, and her court, which consisted of eight male dancers of about the same age. Darina is a young muxe I later interviewed who is a seamstress and also worked at a bar.

On Saturday morning, a mass was held for the muxes. Two muxe groups attended and each had *mayordomos* or sponsors for the vela and carried a banner or standard. The Intrépidas standard read, *Las Auténticas Intrépidas Buscadoras del Peligro*. Most of the muxes were dressed in traditional *Juchiteca* (*Teca*), attire with flowers and ribbons in their hair and wore a lot of gold jewelry. The priest, Father Pancho, talked about the muxes in his sermon and formally welcomed their organization into the Church, much like he might welcome the Knights of Columbus or other groups. He formally recognized their new *mayordomos* who went up to the altar in a procession that honored their sponsorship of the vela. The priest engaged in a traditional ceremony that signaled the changing of the guard through the exchange of ceremonial candles between the old and new *mayordomos*.

In reflecting on the mass, I was surprised not only that the local Catholic Church was so welcoming of the muxes but that they dedicated a mass to them. Like the Leiti, Fa'fafine, and Mahu in Polynesia, muxes are widely accepted in the community (Halapua 2006, 35). When I interviewed Father Pancho on my second visit to Juchitán, he told me that the muxes were a part of the community and accepted like everyone else.

The crowds that gathered for *La Regada de Frutas* also reflected the acceptance of muxes in the community. It was interesting to sit outside of Felina's *Estética* and see families and children lining the street along the parade route, just like people in the United States would line up for a Fourth of July Parade. At a subsequent *Tirada*, I met a thirty-something mother, Brenda, who was also waiting patiently with her two young children. She defined muxes as a Zapotec word that means someone who is biologically male but has the social characteristics of a woman and said muxes were accepted because "They are now part of our culture; not something separate and apart." This was a typical response from a number of citizens I interviewed.

### *“A Blessing from God?”*

The prevailing view in the community propagated by a number of books (Chiñas 2002; Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997) and documentaries (Hernández 2003) on the muxes of Juchitán is that being muxe is not a voluntary choice. Zapotec parents, especially mothers and women in general, readily defend them and their right to “be themselves” and often say that “God made them that way” (Chiñas 2002, 1009). When I asked the father of a muxe named César how he felt about having a muxe child, he responded, “Así nació” (That’s how he was born). “Of course, I accept him, what else could I do.” The words were spoken without reproach and in a matter-of-fact way, as if being muxe was a part of nature and he didn’t try to understand or question something that was natural.

Since being muxe is seen as an immutable characteristic, perhaps it is not surprising that people readily distinguish between genuine muxes and those who simply cross-dress or mimic the muxe lifestyle. Biiniza, for example, noted that there were only a handful of muxes among the hundreds of transvestite men who were in attendance at a recent Muxe Vela in the city of Oaxaca.

Some Zapotec parents responded that they are not embarrassed or burdened by having a son who is muxe. On the contrary, to have a muxe son is sometimes viewed a blessing from God because they generally do not leave home and stay through adulthood to help their parents, unlike other men who get married and leave. A team of German anthropologists have argued in fact that societal acceptance of the muxes is such that it would be misleading and condescending to say they are tolerated, since this implies token or reluctant acceptance (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997, 280).

At the same time that muxes are generally accepted in the community and some Zapotec parents may see them as a blessing from God, there is an inherent contradiction between this public perception and the lived experiences of many of the muxes who were interviewed in this study. Perhaps it was Father Luis who best described this contradiction when he observed that Zapotec culture is very familistic and that while most families ultimately accept muxe children, such children are accepted not so much because they are muxe but because they are part of the family. It is one thing to say that muxes are generally accepted in Juchitán, and certainly more accepted than they are in other parts of Mexico, and quite another to suggest that there is total and universal acceptance of the muxe lifestyle. The findings of this study challenge the commonly held assumption that having a muxe child is generally seen as a blessing from God. While some Zapotec families like Carmelo’s (Lacey 2008), César’s, and Roque’s readily accepted muxe children, a majority of the muxes I interviewed, including Anilú, Kike/a, Estrellita, Coni, Gabriel, Biiniza, Felina, and Huicho reported having difficult and traumatic childhood experiences and not being readily accepted by their parents, especially their fathers, although most did ultimately accept them. The muxes employed in traditional professions such as teaching,

accounting, politics, and government service (e.g., Mandis, Felixa, and Enrique) also noted that it would not be acceptable for them to wear feminine attire in the workplace. Finally, a number of persons reported that *mayates*, heterosexual men who have sex with muxe, were not viewed favorably in the community.

### *Sexuality, Hybridity, and the Latino Sexual/Gender System*

One thing that distinguishes muxe from gays is that they do not date or have sex with one another and that their sexual partners are *hombres*, or straight men. Gay bars or muxe clubs also do not exist in Juchitán because muxe are integrated into the entire community. Almost all of the muxe I interviewed also said they assumed the *pasivo* (passive/insertee) rather than the *activo* (active/inserter) role in both oral and anal sex, and they all indicated that they preferred *hombres* as sexual partners.

Roque, for example, has not assumed a feminine persona but identified as muxe and was affiliated with the *Intrépidas*. He noted that his first sexual experience occurred when he was in Prepa (high school). It was consensual and the other boy “era un hombre.” He has had a number of *novios* (boyfriends) but has never lived with them. He always assumes the *pasivo* role during sex and acted as if that was the only natural thing for him; otherwise he would be un *hombre*. He has been in long-term relationships, one lasting eight years, and sometimes goes out in public with his partner. Others want to keep it on the “down low” but Roque is open about his relationships. He just ended a relationship and started to say that they had *unos problemas* (some problems), then corrected himself, and added, “Well it wasn’t problems. It was that I learned that he was married and I don’t want anything to do with that.” It was evident that he didn’t want to incur any problems or retributions from his partner’s family. He mentioned that there were some men who only had sex with muxe and yet identified as *hombres*. *Hombres* who regularly have sex with muxe are known as *mayates*, a term that literally refers to a dung beetle, and are generally disdained by the community. People also distinguished between a *mayate* who has sex for money or gifts (*comprado*) and *el marido del muxe* (a muxe’s husband).

Muxe sexuality should also be examined within the context of the larger Mexican and Latino/Latina sexual system. Sociologist Tomás Almaguer (2001) and a number of anthropologists (Carrier 1976; Lancaster 1987; Parker 1986; Taylor 1986) have pointed to the inapplicability of Western categories of sexual meaning for understanding sexuality in México and Latino América. According to this line of research, in the contemporary United States, sexual categories and personages are determined by sexual preference or object choice. Same sex is viewed as gay and its opposite as nongay, whereas those who have sex with both sexes are categorized as bisexual (Almaguer 2001). This categorization has resulted in a general prohibition of all same-sex behavior in the United States.

In México and Latino América, on the other hand, sexuality is divided into two basic categories—*pasivos* and *activos* (Taylor 1986). *Pasivos* (passives) are those who are insertees or have the penis of another man inserted into one of their orifices,

usually the anus, whereas activos (actives) are inserters. According to this view, some Mexican and Latino men can and do engage in sex with other men without impugning their masculinity, as long as they retain the dominant activo or inserter position in the sexual act. Within this sexual system, gay and straight status are thus determined not by object choice, but by the respective power of the participants. A person is considered a *maricón* (gay), a *joto* (queer), or a *puto* (fag), only if he assumes the passive, insertee role in the sexual act (Almaguer 2001). Not only is the active partner not stigmatized, but he may be recognized as *muy macho*. Muxes simply described their partners as hombres because they assume the dominant activo inserter position. My research did not reveal any derogatory references to muxes in their role as pasivos.

The fact that muxes do not have sexual relations with each other is also consistent with the observation that the third sex/gender status is defined not so much by same-sex behavior as it is by the prohibition against sex with members of the same-sex/gender status (Callender and Kochems 1986). One may have sex either with men or women, but not with other muxes.

A number of recent studies focusing on sexuality and gay and transvestite men in México are relevant to this discussion. One of the most important of these works is Annick Prieur's (1998) ethnographic study, *Mema's House, Mexico City: On Transvestites, Queens, and Machos* carried out in Nezahualcóyotl, a poor and crowded urban area on the outskirts of Mexico City. The house provides a place where a group of young homosexual men live or meet to do what they could not do openly at home. Although there are no quantitative studies on the subject, Prieur claims that "It is not at all unusual for Mexican men from the working class to have sexual experiences with men, at least during certain periods of their lives" (1998, 180).

In his study of sexuality in Guadalajara, Héctor Carrillo (2002) similarly argues that in the Mexicano/Latino sexual model, it is not necessary to know the sex or object choice of one's sexual partner in order to determine "normality." The model assumes that masculine men are attracted to women and that feminine women are attracted to men (Carrillo 2002, 39). But it also contends that men assume a more dominant role in sexuality as the active inserter partner, while women assume the more passive receptor role. The second assumption "validates the notion often associated with machismo, that the realm of the masculine dominates over the feminine (and by extension that men are superior to women)" (2002, 39).

While muxes distinguish themselves from gays, it would be wrong to conclude that muxes are impervious to the larger Mexican gay universe. Carrillo, for example, points to the existence of sexual hybridity and the coexistence of older gender-based conceptions of sexuality and emergent object choice interpretations of sexuality, resulting in the proliferation of seemingly contradictory interpretations based on competing logics, which are not seeing as contradictory or incompatible. While it would be problematic to see muxes simply as gay men, neither are they altogether dissimilar from some Mexican gay men, and in this sense they may occupy a hybrid location within the larger universe of Mexican sexualities and homosexualities.

On the surface at least, muxe sexuality, for example, appears similar to that of Mexican gay-identified men, like the Jota's in Prieur's book. Like muxes, there are gay men throughout Mexico who maintain gender-based interpretations of sexuality and gendered sexual roles, becoming *vestidas*, adopting a feminine persona, or consistently playing the *pasivo* role during anal sexual intercourse. Also, like the muxes, these gendered gay men seek partners who are masculine men, *hombres*, or even "hombres hombres," a term which designates that they are real heterosexual men and not gay men posing as *hombres*.

Carrillo has similarly pointed to the coexistence of two different and seemingly contradictory perceptions of sexuality in Mexico. The first, or Western object choice view is that all men who have sex with each other are homosexual, while the second, or traditional Mexican gender-based approach holds that to be a homosexual one must assume the *pasivo* role of a woman, which ironically "brings one of the homosexual partners into the realm of heterosexuality" (Carrillo 2002, 81). One of Carrillo's heterosexual respondents, Gerardo, assumed that the inserter partner could potentially also have sex with a woman "but if this partner was not interested in women, in effect we would have the paradoxical case of a heterosexual man who is not attracted to women" (2002, 81).

The findings of this study suggest not only that muxes are able to maintain a sexual/gender hybridity that enables them to adopt seemingly contradictory perceptions of sexuality that extend beyond the sex/gender hybridity identified by Carrillo for Mexican gay men. While most muxes are *pasivos*, seek *hombres* as sexual partners, and are not attracted or sexually involved with other muxes or with women, some like Armando, Enrique, and Huicho engage in bisexual behaviors and a number of muxes are married to women and have children and a few like Kika also do not assume the *pasivo* role in anal intercourse. In addition, the gender roles assumed by muxes are varied and range from those who are *vestidas* and dress in traditional feminine Zapotec attire, to *pintadas* who wear some makeup or might simply have long hair or wear their hair a ponytail, to those who simply wear brightly colored *guayaberas* or a gold rings and gold necklaces.

### *Gays, Muxes, and Zapotec Culture*

From the preceding, it is clear that while muxes are similar to Mexican *locas* who assume the *pasivo* role in sexual relations, it would be erroneous to see them as gay men. Muxes, in fact, are generally careful to distinguish themselves from gays, and gays are even more emphatic in distancing themselves from muxes. Coni, one of the *Intrépidas*, noted that gays are more masculine and less visible publicly because most remain in the closet. In contrast, muxes are out, very visible, and many dress in traditional feminine native attire. It was interesting that she linked being muxe not only to being out but with maintaining Zapotec culture, traditions, and retaining the language. She added that most *Intrépidas* were indigenous, spoke Zapotec, and estimated that some "60 percent of families in Juchitán had one or more family

members who were muxe” and that muxes were generally more accepted in the poorer, largely indigenous sections of the city. Mayté similarly expressed the view that all muxes were Intrépidas at heart because they had the courage to come out and be open about their sexuality, even if they were not members of the organization. Kike(a) added that gays are more reserved in their dress. Muxes “son más abiertos” (are more open, public, and out of the closet). “We can dress in a manly way or as women. We are like a third sex,” he said.

Biiniza, an Intrépida who always dresses in regional feminine attire was perhaps most eloquent, when she expressed that “being muxe is not something you put on and then take off like a dress. It’s a way of being that includes not only dressing like a traditional Teca but also maintaining, incorporating, and respecting Zapotec language, customs, and traditions.” One of the pressing concerns faced by the Intrépidas is being able to recruit more members who will represent the organization and maintain their local indigenous language and traditions. Biiniza indicated that many muxes have opted not to pursue professional careers, even though they are very capable, because this would require conforming to traditional dress codes and wearing modern, professional male apparel. A point of contention with smaller, rival muxe organizations that espouse a departure from traditional Zapotec attire at velas is also resisted by the Intrépidas, as they are equally resistant and unwilling to dress in modern, professional female apparel.

Muxes also see Juchitán as a Queer Paradise where muxes are widely accepted (Hernandez, 2003). Some muxes argue that Juchitán is a more progressive place, sexually speaking, than Mexico City or other cities and maintain that they feel fully integrated into the life of Juchitán and not rejected by the local society, while gays and lesbians in Mexico City and other parts of Mexico are often harassed and always have to constantly fight for their rights.

The gay men I interviewed were even more emphatic and quick to differentiate themselves from muxes. Mario, an articulate twenty-four-year-old gay man, for example, said that

For me a muxe is a man who identifies as a woman and likes to dress like a woman. I am not muxe. I am gay because I have never wanted to dress like a woman or to be one. They work in female trades. I know I am a man.

## Diversity in the Muxe Experience

The experience at the vela and my interaction with Mandis, Roque, Ángel, and others made me realize that all muxes were not the same and that there was a broad range and variety in the muxe experience, from those who dressed in elaborate and traditional feminine Zapotec costumes, or *vestidas*, to *pintadas* who on the surface looked like ordinary men, except that they wore gold necklaces, jewelry, or light makeup.

## Vestidas

Since the prototypical muxe is a vestida, the section below presents two successful, popular, and visible Intrépidas, Felina and Biiniza who openly dress as women and assume a feminine name and identity.

*Felina, the hairstylist.* Felina was born and raised in Juchitán, although she left for five years to study to be a hairstylist in Mexico City. She attended school through *Preparatoria*, comes from a family of four brothers and three sisters, and was in the middle of the birth order. Her father was a *campesino* or farmworker and her mother, a housewife. Although women in El Istmo tend to control the money in the family, her parents each had power and authority in their respective domains.

Felina could not remember when she first realized that she was muxe, but it was very early on. “Fathers always resist” [accepting muxes], but her father eventually accepted her the way she was. Boys in school made fun of muxes, but she didn’t have a lot of problems. Surprisingly, there were six muxes in her grade, three in one classroom and three in another, and she hung around with other muxes as well as with girls. Her mother is deceased and she has a good relationship with her father and lives with him. When asked about the acceptance of muxes she suggested that “It comes from women because they control the money in the household.” Consequently, when they have a muxe son they see him as “one more pair of hands” because “muxes are very good workers.”

Felina’s first sexual relationship was when she was thirteen or fourteen and she has been involved in a number of long-term relationships, one lasting eight years. Many of the men muxes have relations with also have novias (girlfriends), but it doesn’t bother her because she is not jealous of them. Muxes do not typically live with their men. They would agree on a place to meet or to go out. As to where they would have sex, it varies. It might be in a motel or someone’s house that was available. Like most muxes, she always assumes the pasivo role in sex.

Felina linked the popularity and acceptance of muxes to the importance of virginity in Juchitán, which means that men do not generally have a sexual outlet. Things are changing, but muxes continue to play an important role in providing a sexual outlet for young men. Men simply see sex with muxes as a way to satisfy their sexual needs and nothing more. Los hombres do not see themselves as gay because they separate the sex act from their sexual orientation and because they assume the active role in sex. Many men are therefore able to have sex with muxes and also be in relationships with women, but they generally do not want people to find out about it. At the time of the interview, Felina worked as an AIDS Information Advisor. Her formal title was Director of Sexual Diversity for the Municipio of Juchitán, which is part of her political involvement as an Intrépida, but she makes her living as a hairstylist.

Felina pointed out that the Intrépida organization<sup>10</sup> has a good relationship with the Church and a number of political entities. That’s because the Intrépidas have to demonstrate to the community that they are responsible citizens and involved in

civic affairs. Members get invited by schools and other agencies to make presentations on Safe Sex and AIDS Prevention. The group has been supported financially by the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) (The Institutional Revolutionary Party), the dominant political party. The Church accepts them because they participate in the Church relative to the celebration of various Saints Days, *cuaresma* (Lent), and other activities.

Despite the general acceptance of muxes, she said there are always exceptions. There are muxes who are drunks, who are obnoxious, who are aggressive and even violent, and they get a corresponding response. As far as sex workers are concerned, that is not something that is generally appealing to people from El Istmo. People who do this kind of work in Juchitán are from other areas.<sup>11</sup> According to Felina, the primary challenge currently facing the muxes is recruiting more young members who will be able to maintain the strong values and traditions of the Zapotec community.

*Biiniza, the impetuous breeze.* Dressed in traditional Juchiteca attire when I met her for dinner, Biiniza explained that her name reflected what she's like. In Zapoteco it means "viento y agua" (wind and water) or like an impetuous breeze or mist. She is one of the muxes who most dresses and acts like a woman 24/7 and is almost always dressed in traditional Zapotec attire.

Biiniza was born in Niltepec, a town within the municipal district of Juchitán, and therefore feels that she was raised between the two communities. Her father was an engineer from the north and her mother a teacher and politician who became the municipal president of her community. The parents divorced and her father moved back to the north, so he wasn't around for much of her childhood and adolescence. She gets along well with him and her mother is now deceased.

Biiniza grew up with her grandmother and great-grandmother. They would play games, listen to music, dress up, and dance. She felt that grandmothers always have a sixth sense. They would bathe her, play with her, and were around her so much that they sensed that she had an inclination toward the feminine. Interestingly, her great-grandmother was most open to her sexual orientation and much more accepting of it than her mother. She also suggested that in an all-male family, they may have wanted a girl and this may have affected her upbringing. Biiniza has identified as a girl for as long as she can remember.

Her first year in school or Kinder was very traumatic because it shattered the world constructed by her grandmother and great-grandmother. For the first time, she began to experience contact with boys who were somewhat homophobic. She also discovered a boy to whom she was attracted and thought was gorgeous. Biiniza still knows his family and tells his mother that her son has always been "beautiful."

At about age thirteen she fell in love for the first time at the *Preparatoria* with a boy who was fifteen. For her, this boy was *lo máximo* (the greatest) and their courtship "Era muy bonito" (was lovely); she really fell in love. At that time, there was a lot of talk about AIDS, so she went to the pharmacy to purchase a condom. Her aunt worked there and asked why she needed one and she told her that they were talking

about them at school and wanted a sample. At that time, girls also talked about boys and maintaining their virginity but “she” had sex for the first time with this boy. The relationship lasted eight months and she described it a “horrible pregnancy.” Predictably, the boy had a girlfriend and he ended up being with her.

Biiniza has not been involved in a long-term relationship since then. Her first sexual encounter was beautiful, but an important lesson she learned is never to let anyone take advantage of her or exploit her. I asked where muxes have sex and she said that is in places just like other people. “You have sex in hotels, someone’s apartment, or wherever you can.” She and her first sexual partner got together in a house that was under construction; only they had access to it. I asked whether they kissed and did other things and she said, “Oh, yes, just like anyone else.”

Biiniza went to Oaxaca City to study. She took courses and studied for a short career in *turismo*, which was popular at the time. She also trained as a health expert and now works in the MESXXFA, a hospital outside of Juchitán, and also owns a consulting agency that provides services to various governmental agencies.

One of the issues that has arisen for Las Intrépidas, according to Biiniza, and the reason some muxes have broken away from the organization and formed splinter groups is that they want to be more modern and dress in contemporary attire. These muxes dressed in modern attire at the vela and more traditionally at the Lavada. The Intrépidas want to protect Zapotec traditions. Although things are changing, a number of professions require that you dress in traditional gendered clothing, so you cannot dress like a Teca. She mentioned a college professor, an anthropologist in another state, and a politician who now openly cross-dress. One of the more prominent Intrépida Vestidas is Amaranta Gómez, an HIV/AIDS activist who lost an arm in a bus crash and ran unsuccessfully for the Mexican Congress, as the first transgender Mexican to run for public office (Associated Press, July 4, 2003; Hernández 2003).

### *Pintadas*

*Enrique: A conflicted, bisexual politician.* One of the reasons that some muxes do not dress as women is because they are employed in traditional public occupations. Enrique, a twenty-four-year-old self-described muxe and elected public official in a nearby municipality, does not dress in regional female Zapotec attire. He is a heavy-set person of average height but built like an American football player. At the Intrépida Vela, he was wearing black pants and a white guayabera and the only distinguishing muxe trait, other than the light makeup, was that he wore a large gold medallion necklace, gold rings, and a gold bracelet.

He has short hair, does his eyes, but if you didn’t look very carefully and did not notice the makeup, he would be indistinguishable from other men. Enrique said that life was difficult and his eyes got glassy as he told his story. He is not like most muxes because he is bisexual and has known that he was bisexual since he was about ten years old. At an early age, he knew that he had a thing for boys through

elementary school and high school and liked to play and dress up with his sisters. Although attracted to boys, Enrique was also attracted to girls. Enrique said that his mother knows about his sexuality and that his very traditional working-class father suspects, but doesn't ask because he is afraid to find out and really does not want to know. Enrique lives at home and his family is aware that he takes time in the bathroom fixing himself up and don't say anything. He admitted that dressing up as a woman was *una fantasía* (a fantasy) but he can't do it because of his work. Elections were coming up shortly and he had to be very careful about his appearance because any kind of negative publicity would be used against him politically. Enrique paused briefly and speculated on what might happen if a picture of him dressed like a woman was made public and concluded it would be political suicide.

The day after one of the *velas*, Enrique invited me to a local Fair in his hometown outside of Juchitán. It was a traditional Mexican fiesta with *charros* (cowboys), a rodeo, games, rides, and a lot of food and drinking. As we walked across the town square and entered the fairgrounds, I was impressed with the number of people who knew him. We were warmly greeted and he introduced me to various people. Town residents clearly recognized and respected him.

Enrique told me he was previously married and has a two-year-old son but is now divorced. He was candid with his ex-wife about his bisexuality but the marriage didn't work out. He seemed very sad, on the verge of tears, and kept saying how difficult life was for someone who is bisexual. "Es muy, muy difícil" ("It's very, very difficult").

*Felix(a): A dedicated teacher.* Felix(a) is a forty-something muxe who teaches third grade at a nearby town, also dresses in regular male attire, and is alternately called Felix or Felix(a), depending on the setting and circumstance. Felix(a) was clean-cut and impeccably dressed with a light green guayabera, dark green slacks, spiked, moussed hair, and looked neat and well groomed. Felix(a) has been involved with Las Intrépidas for about twenty years but is not currently a member. Like Enrique, because of his profession, he cannot dress like a muxe. Despite Felix(a)'s dress, his students know that he is muxe and they accept and respect him.

Felix(a) has been aware of being attracted to boys since the age of ten. He liked to play with his sisters, was always attracted to boys, and believes he was born that way. Felix(a) has always been accepted by his family and, like many muxes, lived with his parents until they died, and continues to live in the same house where he grew up. Felix(a)'s first sexual experience was at the age of seventeen with a neighbor boy who was straight; a relationship initiated by the boy. He had *novios* (boyfriends) in high school and in college but they were always *hombres*.

Felix(a) likes being in a stable relationship and was in one until about a year ago. They were together for about five years. I asked whether one person or another was dominant and Felix(a) said "no" but commented that some muxes have problems because they want to control their men but he lets his partner go out with women. This is consistent with the flexibility of sex roles in Juchitán and suggests that even

though muxes are involved in sexual liaisons with hombres, most do not insist on being in monogamous relationships and allow their partners to go out with women, but not with other muxes.

Like Enrique, Felixa doesn't dress like a muxe because he is a teacher and at the vela he told me that he didn't like seeing muxes dressed in provocative or outlandish ways. One muxe, for example, was wearing a white mesh, see-through dress with a black thong underneath. Another wore a Brazilian carnival-style outfit with wings and short-shorts. A couple of other muxes also wore very short skirts and came by Mística's puesto where I was sitting with Felixa. He repeated that he didn't like their attire because the way they dressed was outlandish and *vulgar*.

*Óscar: El Padrino Muxe (The Muxe Godfather).* I went to interview Óscar, one of the founders of Las Intrépidas, at his home, a large house not far from downtown Juchitán. He had a number of guests staying at the house during the vela including an older guest, a woman who was called *tía* (aunt). I had a chance to speak with her briefly and she told me she was indeed Óscar's aunt. When I asked what she thought of the muxe lifestyle, she said, "Es que es natural. Así nacieron" ("It's natural. That's how they were born"). She seemed just like any other aunt and was totally accepting of Óscar, his friends, and their lifestyle.

Óscar was clearly a very busy and important man and we were interrupted several times during the interview. Óscar is a short, stout man around sixty with curly graying hair and small eyes. He was wearing a very large gold necklace with a ruby stone and lots of gold rings and bracelets. He looked comfortable, was barefoot, wore shorts, and acted like a powerful Don in a way reminiscent of Don Vito Corleone in "The Godfather." We sat and chatted in a reception area at the entrance to his house where a large portrait of his mother was hung.

Óscar sat in a glossy wooden armchair, is very gregarious and charismatic, and has an eye for business. His family has always been in commerce and he started early on as an entrepreneur and was quickly outselling others at the Mercado. He is a successful businessman who owns a hotel which caters to muxes, invited me to stay at his hotel, and also has several stores where he sells clothing. He used to sell gold jewelry, but it is too expensive now and he was robbed a couple of times. Now he only sells *la fantasía*, which is fake or gold plated jewelry rather than real gold.

Óscar grew up in Juchitán. Like all of my respondents, he has known he was muxe for as long as he can remember and doesn't believe that you can make a person muxe through abuse or anything like that. He believes that "muxes are born, not made," "nacén, no se hacen." He has two sisters. His mother was accepting of his sexual orientation, but his father was disappointed since Óscar was the only male in the family. Óscar's first sexual experience was in Mexico City when he met a man on the *Metro* (subway) who took him home and had sex with him. He lived with the man for about three years.

Óscar is not shy about taking credit for establishing Las Intrépidas in Comitancillo. The muxes from this small town were the original Auténticas Intrépidas Buscadoras del Peligro, not those from Juchitán. There was a group of about six in the 1970s who were first known as *Las Panteras Negras* or Black Panthers. The others, including Óscar, started meeting with them in Comitancillo and they eventually came to Juchitán.

## Conclusion

While this preliminary study of muxes in Juchitán can be used to illustrate and expand on West and Zimmerman's doing gender paradigm, in interpreting the findings, it is important to resist the temptation to see the muxes simply as another manifestation of a global quest for a gay/transgender identity and in the process impose a Western sexual interpretation on what are clearly a series of social rather than sexual constructs (Quiroga 2000, 191).<sup>12</sup> I argue, in other words, that being muxe is more of a social and gender category than a sexual classification, and one firmly anchored in indigenous Zapotec conceptions of gender and sexuality.

The idea that some men who dress and act like muxes are seen as imposters or inauthentic, while others are authentic is consistent with the view that one is born muxe and that muxes constitute a distinct sex/gender category. Although not all muxes cross-dress, neither do they go stealth since being muxe is seen as a 24/7 proposition that cuts across all aspects of one's life and can take various forms. In addition to dressing in female Juchiteca attire, it may entail wearing gold jewelry, gold rings, makeup, wearing one's hair in a ponytail, or like Felixa and Oscar, simply wearing a bright, flowered guayabera. Ultimately, being muxe transcends external superficial trappings like dress or appearance. Muxes are neither men nor women but a third gender. Muxes identify with *lo femenino* (the feminine) and, like Mexican locas, their sexual partners are hombres rather than other muxes, but they identify as a third gender rather than as hombres or mujeres, and distinguish themselves from gays.

The fact that muxes have sex with hombres, rather than with one another, is also consistent with Puig's contention that the purveyor of a patriarchal ideology is not a woman but a hegemonic conception of femininity itself, produced not by woman as subject but by the Spanish neuter of *lo femenino*. The conceptualization of the superior macho, according to Puig, is the product of the "homosocial," a relation or liaison between men, rather than between men and women (Sifuentes-Jáuregui 2002, 159).

The findings suggest that being muxe is clearly more of a social than a sexual practice and that the muxe experience cries out for a more global or transnational explanation of sexuality and gender. Just as the emergence of Two-Spirit Identity represented a critique of anthropology and of Western conceptions of gender and sexuality, so is it imperative to recognize muxes as a self-identified third sex/gender

category, which is less about sexual identity and more about retaining the language, cultural categories, practices, and worldviews of indigenous communities.

The brief presentation of several case studies illustrates the range and variety of the muxe experience from vestidas like Felina and Biiniza to pintadas like Enrique and Felix(a) who, except for wearing gold necklaces, rings, or light makeup are generally indistinguishable from other men, to those who may appear on the surface like ordinary men except for wearing brightly colored guayaberas. While muxes generally seek to maintain Zapotec dress, traditions, and language, and most are quick to distinguish themselves from gay men, the world of the muxes has been impacted by an emerging gay culture in El Istmo de Tehuantepec and other parts of Mexico. A number of Intrépidas have left Juchitán for periods of time to study and live in Mexico City, Oaxaca City, and other metropolitan areas, which brought them into contact with larger societal influences and the emergent mestizo gay lifestyle. A point of contention between Intrépidas and rival splinter groups has also been whether to retain the traditional female Zapotec attire or adopt a more modern form of dress at the velas.

Some of the more nuanced recent literature on Mexican sexuality has also challenged the traditional pasivo/activo paradigm as the only point of reference for interpreting male same-sex desires within Mexico and suggested a hybrid model which is able to reconcile seemingly contradictory sexual and gender conceptions of homosexuality (Carrillo 2002; Laguarda 2010; Nuñez Noriega 2014; Parrini 2007; Quiroga 2000; Sifuentes-Jáuregui 2002). In a recent ethnographic study, Guillermo Nuñez Noriega (2014), for example, demonstrates how masculinities in the Sonoran mountain region are constructed in such a way that men are able to maintain adherence to traditional patriarchal masculinity while simultaneously enjoying male-to-male intimacy and affection. Others, like Carrillo, have pointed to the existence of a hybrid sexuality, which is able to reconcile the emergent Western object choice and the traditional gender-based Mexican pasivo/activo gender conception of sexuality, which maintains that to be homosexual one must assume the pasivo role of the woman in anal sexual intercourse.

The findings of this study suggest that muxes are able to maintain a sexual/gender hybridity that enables them to adopt seemingly contradictory perceptions of sexuality that extend beyond the sex/gender hybridity identified by Carrillo for Mexican gay men. Muxes are an indigenous third sex and gender category analogous to the Native American Man/Woman, the hijras of India,<sup>13</sup> as well as several Oceanic indigenous groups.

While much can be learned about doing and redoing gender from the muxe experience, we must actively resist the temptation to colonize them by imposing the gender binary and Western conceptions of gender and sexuality on an indigenous group. But we must at the same time, as Mitchell Rolls (2000) notes, be equally careful not to romanticize precolonial indigenous cultures and imprison such communities in a false past that robs them of contemporary agency.

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## Notes

1. Raewyn Connell maintains that Agnes' problem was not so much living up to standards of femininity as it was maintaining her categorization as female. Drawing on West and Zimmerman, she calls for the reconceptualization of men and women as "distinct social groups," who are "historically constituted in specific (and changing) social relationships" (R. Connell 2009, 108).
2. Researchers have examined the lives and experiences of transgender persons in a variety of contexts, but space limitations preclude an extensive discussion of this literature. See, for example, Beemyn and Rankin (2011); Irwin (2002); Meadow (2010); Stryker (2008); and Valentine (2007).
3. Mark, for example, a sixty-four-year-old transman had been living and working as a man for twenty-five years and was able to work stealth by changing his name and pertinent background information and assimilating appropriate masculinity.
4. Kristen Schilt examined the reproduction of gender inequality in the workplace through in-depth interviews with female-to-male transsexuals who were actively involved in undoing and redoing gender when they openly enter the workplace as women and then have to make the transition to becoming men (K. Schilt 2006).
5. Dana Rosenfeld similarly found that heteronormativity and homonormativity shaped the identities of lesbian and gay elders who adopted an assimilationist politics, which encouraged them to assume a heterosexual veneer which justified "passing" in order to survive in a heteronormative world (Rosenfeld 2009, 617).
6. Full discussion of the so-called Isthmus matriarchy is beyond the scope of this essay. (see, Chiñas 2002; Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1997).
7. While the term "transvestite" is offensive to some, people in Juchitán and the muxes readily use it.
8. I should mention that Mandis died recently and that he was honored at the last vela I attended.
9. I subsequently learned that the criterion for the selection of the Queen was not beauty or popularity but whether the person could raise the money to pay for the headlining band at the vela.
10. There are approximately thirty-six active member of the Intrépidas who have a puesto (booth) at the vela and serve on the *Mesa Directiva* (Board of Directors).

11. I found it interesting that although Mayté had worked as a sex worker in Mexico City, she was not employed as a sex worker in Juchitán. This supported Felina's view of sex workers as being outsiders.
12. The Chair of the Zambian Lesbian, Gay, and Transgendered Persons Association, for example, denied the existence of Western influences within his group, noting that they were not White, but "indigenous Zambians," fighting for their rights (Quiroga 2000, 192).
13. In an excellent ethnographic study, Reddy (2005, 2) generally rejects the view of hijras as the quintessential third sex and suggests that this view "ultimately might be a disservice to the complexity of their lives and their embeddedness within the social fabric of India" (Reddy 2005, 4).

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