

Joshua Truett  
PhD Candidate  
Theatre Department

“*Muxes, Velas*, and the Performance of Zapotec Style:  
Festival Economies and Indigenous Queer Labor”

**Introduction: A Queer Journey of Unlearning, Perspectives on Terminology**

I begin with a brief discussion about terminology, while simultaneously placing myself within this work. I first encountered the *muxes* on a *Viceland* television food program. This segment of the *Munchies* about Oaxaca (2014) was set in the market of Juchitán de Zaragoza. The program’s host Daniel Hernandez was guided through the market by Palo, a local Zapotec chef. As the episode progressed, the alarm bells of my trans/queer radar were triggered. At the end of the segment, the host revealed that while Palo dressed in the local *traje* (costume) of Zapotec women, in a *huipil* (blouse) and *enagua* (skirt), the host was not born a biological female. The guide was introduced as an example of a *muxe*, a native third-gender identity that was part of a Mesoamerican indigenous culture that displays an unusually high acceptance of trans, queer, and third-gender people. I was fascinated by this indigenous form of queerness.

Looking back, I realize this was my first mistranslation of the term *muxe* based on my own Western cultural assumptions. At first, I categorized the *muxe* as a variant of queerness because of my own queer, cis-gender identity. I followed past mistranslations of *muxes* as gay men, which ignored the large number of *muxes* who live their lives as females and other *muxes* whose identity is constructed by the female-identified labor they perform, rather than their sexual practices. Recently, the rhetoric about *muxes* has shifted to focus almost exclusively on trans and cross-dressing *muxes*, creating the impression

that all *muxes* are transgender. Neither translation of *muxe* is correct. These scenarios carry assumptions and epistemologies that do not account for the complexities of *muxe* identity, what is called *muxeidad* in Spanish. This is not to suggest that *muxes* are ignorant of contemporary gay, trans, and queer discourses—quite the opposite. The *muxes* I have met, as well as those portrayed in the films, are keenly aware of Western models of trans/queer culture and discourse, as many individual *muxes* may identify and *disidentify* with external cultural influences to various degrees (Muñoz 1999). Imposing my own Western identity categories on the *muxes* perpetuates the erasure of indigenous cultural logics and identities (Morgensen 2016:195-6). Thus, I began a search for a more accurate term to use about the *muxes*, something that might reflect their roots in Mesoamerican indigenous culture.

The *berdache* term used in much of the previous literature about American indigenous third-gender identities has a problematic history (Mirandé 2017: 165-174; Morgensen 2011: 56-67). The term originates in Arabic and is linked to male prostitution (Mirandé: 167). It is tied to colonial legacies of violent suppression and deadly genocidal eradication (Miranda 2010). The alternative term offered by Native activists and scholars in the 1990s is *Two-Spirit*. This term disrupts Western epistemologies about indigenous systems of gender and sexuality (Driskill et al 2011: 10-18). The Two-Spirit term is a response to the problematics of *berdache* and the placing of native gender/sexuality into the Western binary system. In *Spaces Between Us*, Scott L. Morgensen (2011) argues that “Two-Spirit presents an Indigenous epistemology—rooted in Native traditions, articulating Native modernities—that challenges colonial knowledges, alters power

relations with non-Natives, and incites new registers through which Native people can join and hold non-natives accountable to work for Indigenous decolonization” (65).

My second mistranslation occurred when I began to refer to *muxes* as Two-Spirit people. After conducting fieldwork in Juchitán, I realized that few *muxes* or other Zapotec people use the Two-Spirit term, which is rooted in the legacies of English settler-colonialism in Canada and the United States, while *muxes* are part of Spanish and Latin American settler-colonialist legacies. The Isthmus Zapotec have developed a system of gender that is similar to Two-Spirit, but it is based in its own unique cultural and social logics (Mirandé 2017:165). I finally settled on the third-gender terminology because I believe it provides the least amount of colonial residue. However, term *third gender* also has its drawbacks. For example, it has been criticized for its tendency to Other, creating a scenario where third gender is seen as primitive and set apart from modernity (Towel and Morgan, 2002). However, I suggest third gender terminology accomplishes two important discursive moves. First, it calls into question the gender binary that is entrenched in the Western medical and social imaginary, offering a discursive space that at complicates that binary.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the terms function of Othering may have some benefits. The act of mistranslating can be an act of linguistic violence that continues consumption of “native resources” to both materially and discursively support the settler-colonial project. It is the responsibility of scholars writing about third-gender identities to counter the negative connotations that relegate third-gender identities into a primitive past by presenting third-gender subjects in their modern contexts. Finally, and most importantly, many *muxes* identify and use the third-gender (*tercer genero*) concept as a self-identifier. In the opening of the highly-stylized short documentary film *Muxes* by

Ivan Olita (2016), a respected and influential *muxe* known as Felina explains in a voice-over that the *muxe* are understood as a third gender (*tercer genero*) in Juchitán, where there are “women, men, and *muxe*.”

### **Velas and Festival Economies**

Current political movements—facilitated by social media—increasingly utilize the tactics of public assembly to assert their voices into the public sphere. From white supremacist rallies to civil rights marches to gay pride parades, public protests and celebrations are spaces where cultures negotiate ideologies about race, gender, and sexuality. My presentation examines the festivals of the Isthmus Zapotec of Mexico, elucidating how a third-gender group in this indigenous culture utilizes these traditional festivals to publicly perform their complex identity, building acceptance for their marginalized subculture. I argue that the unique political economy that supports the reproduction of the *velas* in the Isthmus, which occur throughout the year, creates a space where the queer labor of the *muxe* is respected, and thus, rewarded with economic advancement, social acceptance and slowly increasing political influence.

Zapotec historian and poet Víctor de la Cruz dates the beginning of the *vela* celebrations to approximately 150 years ago. The *vela* festivals are multi-day events comprised of parties, processions and parades, as well as ceremonial dances. The *velas* build upon Zapotec ritual performance, melding them with the Catholic religious and ritual structures. They take place throughout the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, but they reach their height of extravagance in the city of Juchitán de Zaragoza, where there are thirty or more *velas* held each year. Traditionally, *velas* are

held to honor Catholic saints and to celebrate religious holidays. There are also secular velas created and hosted by groups, such as prominent families, to increase their status and political stature through the exchange of social debts.

### **Muxe Velas and Queer Labor**

A growing number of secular velas are created and hosted by groups of muxes, a queer identity within the Isthmus Zapotec culture. Taking on the performance structure of the vela, the muxes adapt the festivals to suit their own social ends, increasing the tolerance and social acceptance of “queer” identities in the region. These muxe velas are public stages for the performance of their complex identity, which mixes indigenous ethnic traditions with influences from Western queer culture. However, as previously mentioned, it must be stressed that muxes are not merely gay, transgender, or queer as the terms are constructed in the West, instead they should be considered a *third gender*.

Third and fourth genders are found in many non-Western societies. A muxe is born male but later in life takes on feminine identity and behaviors in appearance, economic and ritual labor, and most participate in sexual practices with other men. As ethnic studies scholar Alfredo Mirandé argues: the “muxe Zapotec sexual/gender system is not solely the result of war, conquest, and subordination, but one endemic to many indigenous societies and cultures” (2017: 199). In many of these indigenous societies, third-gender individuals are considered to have unique religious/cultural powers because of their liminal status between or beyond the two “primary” genders. I believe the liminal labor and social position of the muxes is exploited by the structures that reproduce the annual velas. The vela performances and the festival economy that is required for the

staging of them—the floats, food and costumes that are often created by the muxe labor— increases the acceptance of muxes in Juchitán. I argue that this the muxes inclusion in the festival economy created by the velas, offers an opportunity for the muxes to participate in “respectable labor,” allowing the local community to view them beyond the sex worker stereotype that is conflated with many “queer” identities, especially trans women. The conflation between queer identities is found across historical epochs and global cultures. This phenomenon is explained in “Staging the Trans Sex Worker:”

Trans identity remains—at least in a labor and material sense—overdetermined given the economically precarious position many trans people find themselves in and the discrimination to which they are subject. Trans individuals are frequently pathologized as hypersexual if not as potential sex workers despite living in different socioeconomic locations that affect rates of participation in sex work.

(Rev and Geist 2017: 117)

The political economy fostered by the vela festival system disrupts this stereotypical conflation of the third gender individuals in the Isthmus with sex work, allowing an opportunity for muxes to work in alternate, more culturally respectable work, although there are many muxes who still do sex work as part of their queer labor

The limited degree of tolerance toward the muxe and this queer labor has garnered Juchitán the (inaccurate) moniker of “Queer Paradise,” but discrimination and violence are still regularly perpetuated against muxes, trans, gay and lesbian people. A similar misreading of local culture has led to the popular misnomer for the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as an “Indigenous Matriarchy.” Scholars agree that the theory of a local

matriarchal social system is myth that arises from the fact that Zapotec women run the local markets and often control family finances. Women also play a central role in the planning, execution and maintenance of the vela system; some have argued this a reason there is more economic opportunity offered to the muxes who are also engaged in female-identified labor practices.

### **Performing Zapotec Style**

Clad in beautiful local fashions, women outnumber men as the main participants in the vela parades and dances. Women (and muxes) of the Isthmus are famous for the vibrant local *traje*, or costume: black velvet blouses and skirts embroidered with colorful designs and lined with delicate white lace, extravagant gold-coin jewelry compliments long black hair braided and adorned with ribbons and flowers. Similar to the ways the carnival and civic parades elsewhere function as a form of embodied public speech, the velas are stages for the public performance of political and cultural identities, both dominant and emergent. The velas, the processions, and the parties give various groups in the society an opportunity to claim their voice within the discourse of the public sphere, by giving them an opportunity to perform what Anya Peterson-Royce (1982) calls “Zapotec Style.” By performing Zapotec Style muxes and other Isthmus Zapotecs prove their allegiance to a vigorous ethnic pride that creates cross-class solidarity and political cohesion, especially in Juchitán, with its history of indigenous socialist political resistance movements.

Isthmus Zapotecs use the velas to perform and publicly proclaim their indigeneity, questioning the mixed-raced or *mestizo* ideology that defines Mexican national racial

identity. The Zapotec vela asserts the native female body as its central public figure. It recasts the protagonist of the colonial narrative, shifting the focus away from the European male conqueror and instead celebrating the figure of the indigenous woman. The muxes then utilize this festival performance for their own means. By placing the third-gender body of the muxe—dressed in Zapotec Style—in the lead role of their velas, the muxes use them to perform a dissident narrative that questions homophobic and transphobic discourses. Through the lens of the muxe vela, we can examine how festival performances are used as rituals of resistance that disrupt dominant hegemonic and heteronormative discourses.

The visual culture, gastronomic heritage, and native language celebrated in the velas are all elements of Zapotec Style. Peterson-Royce argues the ongoing (re)creation of culture can be understood through the way ethnic style is performed in society, using the performative structures of the velas as an example. Rather than the more static and conservative concept of “tradition,” her concept of style allows for a flexible and dynamic accounting of ethnic identity formation, which she argues is not fixed or conservative process. Instead, it is a dynamic and productive process, as postcolonial cultures continue to combine disparate cultural influences in a process of negotiation and creation. By instilling pride in local ethnicity, which cuts across all class lines through ethnic and cultural performance, Zapotec Style has allowed the Isthmus Zapotec to survive centuries of the foreign invasions of outside societies from the Aztecs to the French. Through the performance of Zapotec Style, the velas play a central role in the formation of local *counterpublics*.



## **Velas and Dissident Counterpublics**

In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner argues that any public sphere creates an environment in which counterpublics can emerge, coalescing around identities that are not recognized within the dominant public, such as gays and lesbians—or the muxes. Warner posits that a counterpublic, “enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power; its extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like” (2002: 56). The concept of emerging and conflicting counterpublics illustrates the ways that the velas can mean and *do* different things for different groups; they can be used to both contest and construct the boundaries of local identity.

The labor, capital, and communal/family effort that goes into planning of these events is as important, *if not more*, than the vela events themselves. I believe we misread the events if we focus solely on the parties and parades. Warner explains that counterpublics don’t just *reflect* existing group identification; instead the counterpublic is created in the *doing* of the alternate identities, like the *doing* of a performative gender or ethnic identity. He explains “a subaltern counterpublic, this sub-ordinate status does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members' identities are formed” (Warner 2002: 56). I believe we can consider the performative scenario of the velas constitutive of overlapping counterpublics.

The Isthmus Zapotecs use the velas as a performance of indigenous logics that questions the Mexican ideology of mixed-raced or *mestizo* national identity. Through the

vela performance structure, the Zapotec counterpublic asserts the *native female body* as the central figure in its narrative, the “queens” who are the public figureheads of the velas. This narrative recast the protagonist of the *Malinche* story, which is part of the national mythology of Mexico, shifting the focus away from the European conquistador (Cortez) and instead putting the female native body in the most important role, ceremonially uplifting and celebrating the indigenous women within the vela performance. The performative scenario of the vela can then be utilized by contrasting counterpublics such as the muxes, who use the local ritual to perform their dissident identity, challenging the heteronormative and transphobic logics of oppressive Catholic and machismo discourses. More recently the *Intrépidas*, the longest-running group of muxes in Juchitán has witnessed smaller muxe groups break off in order to host their own velas. Breaking away, in part, because of questions over what is appropriate fashions or style for muxes to wear, with newer muxe velas being more tolerant of non-Zapotec fashions. This conflict over style illustrates that the velas are vital public stages where identity is performed and contested, negotiating what is “authentic” local style and creating opportunities for the practice of “respectable” queer labor.

## **Conclusion**

This presentation examined the mechanisms that counterpublics use in festival performances, which serve as a counter-hegemonic dramaturgy of resistance to heteronormative and hegemonic oppressions. By examining the festival productions, the Zapotecs and muxes, and the political economies they produce, I offer an addition to the growing body of performance studies scholarship elucidating the intersections of

queerness and ethnic/racial identity, revealing how they are performed through ritual and festival. I have argued that the *velas*—the festival economies and queer labor that support them—play a crucial role in the political and social struggles in the Isthmus, particularly in the city of Juchitán de Zaragoza.

My research here is intended to take part in the important effort to find a common space for Western queer activists and scholars to work with the *muxes*, and other transnational subaltern groups, in a manner that respects their unique cultural logics and histories, while still allowing for the expansion of transnational discourses about the imbrication of ethnicity, sexuality, and gender can offer in the ongoing effort to end oppression of subaltern and indigenous communities. The stakes could not be higher, as native scholar Qwo-Li Driskill argues:

The most substantive issue Two-Spirit and Indigenous trans folks face is the ongoing settler colonialism that we have experienced for generations. Our lands and bodies are still under settler control. Indigenous children are still being taken away from their families and funneled into adoption and foster care. We are still struggling to awaken and/or continue our languages and lifeways after concerted efforts by settler states to destroy them” (“Trans\* Political Economy Deconstructed,” Irving 2015: 19).

I hope that my research can contribute to this “resurgence” of indigenous third gender, two-spirit and other indigenous “queer” identities, practices, and politics

---

<sup>1</sup> Towle and Morgan argue: “The existence of the ‘third’ category might imply—  
wrongly, in our view—that ‘first’ and ‘second’ categories are inviolable and  
unproblematic, at least for the purposes of exploring gender variability” (2002: 484-5).

## References

- Brandes, Stanley H. 1998. *Power and Persuasion: Fiestas and Social Control in Rural Mexico*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Boellstorff, Tom et al. 2014. "Decolonizing Transgender: A Roundtable Discussion." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3: 419-439.
- Cruz-Malave, Arnaldo and Martin Manalansan. 2002. "Introduction" *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Driskill, Qwo-Li, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen. 2011. *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Dutta, Aniruddha and Raina Roy. 2014. "Decolonizing Transgender in India: Some Reflections." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3: 320-37.
- Hernandez, Daniel. "Munchies Guide to Oaxaca, Part 4." *Vice*. Accessed January 19, 2018. [www.munchies.vice.com/en\\_us/article/pgxjqv/munchies-guide-to-oaxaca-part-4](http://www.munchies.vice.com/en_us/article/pgxjqv/munchies-guide-to-oaxaca-part-4)
- Irving, Dan et al. 2017. "Trans\* Political Economy Deconstructed: A Roundtable Discussion." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 1: 16-27.
- Miano Borruso, Marinella. 2001. "Género y Homosexualidad entre los Zapotecas del Istmo de Tehuantepec. El caso de los muxes." Accessed January 05, 2018. [www.academica.org/iv.congreso.chileno.de.antropologia/101.pdf](http://www.academica.org/iv.congreso.chileno.de.antropologia/101.pdf)
- , 2002. *Hombre, mujer y muxé en el Istmo de Tehuantepec*. Mexico, DF: Plaza y Valdés.
- Miranda, Deborah A. 2010. "Extermination of the *Joyas*: Gendercide in Spanish California." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1-2: 253-284.
- Morgensen, Scott Lauria. 2016. "Conditions of Critique: Responding to Indigenous Resurgence within Gender Studies." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1-2: 192-201.
- , 2011. *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Colonization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 1999. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Olita, Ivan dir. *Muxes*. 2016. *Nowness*, accessed Jan 19, 2018. [www.nowness.com/series/define-gender/mexico-muxes-ivan-olita](http://www.nowness.com/series/define-gender/mexico-muxes-ivan-olita)
- Peterson-Royce, Ana. 1982. *Ethnic Identity*. Bloomington: Indiana University
- Rev, Nihils and Fiona Maeve Geist. 2017. "Staging the Trans Sex Worker." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 1: 112-27.

- Stephen, Lynn. 2002. "Sexualities and Gender in Zapotec Oaxaca." *Latin American Perspectives* 29, no. 2: 41-59.
- Taylor, Analisa. 2006. "Malinche and Matriarchal Utopia: Gendered Visions of Indigeneity in Mexico" *Signs* 31, no. 3: 815-840.
- Tlostanova, Madina V. and Mignolo, Walter D. 2012. *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press. Accessed January 22, 2018. [muse.jhu.edu/](http://muse.jhu.edu/)
- Towle, Evan, and Lynn Morgan. 2002. "Romancing the Transgender Native: Rethinking the Use of the 'Third Gender' Concept." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, no. 4: 469-97.
- Warner, Michael. 2002. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books.