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Muxe, Two-Spirits, and the myth of Indigenous transgender acceptance

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Abstract

This theoretical essay critically examines and problematises the notion of Indigenous transgender acceptance among the muxe of Mexico and Native American Two-Spirits that is commonly represented in Western social science activist research. Relying on a close reading of works by social scientists within the field of Indigenous studies, I argue that an overemphasis on the historical acceptance of transgender people in Indigenous communities in the literature distracts from the contemporary discrimination that they face within their own communities. Furthermore, I contend that such a congratulatory stance towards certain Indigenous communities without gender binaries ignores how the acceptance of transgender women can be rooted in sexism.

Keywords

discrimination, Indigenous, Mexico, transgender, United States

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What does it mean to be “Two-Spirit”?
Walking in the land of our ancestors,
Walking with our hearts open,
Walking close to Creator,
Walking with passion,
yet hiding who we are.

Jaynie Lara, “Being Two-Spirit”

Introduction

We are living in a transformative time for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) rights, in which the issues of visibility and acceptance for people with sexual and gender differences are more in the forefront of popular consciousness. The gains that queer movements around the world have achieved are largely thanks to efforts from activists and academics who have sought to deconstruct cis-gendered and heteronormativity through direct action and activist research. One way in which activist academics have challenged gender and sexuality norms is by seeking alternatives to patriarchal homophobia in non-Western societies.

Perhaps the most widely used example of institutionalised queer practices is that of the Two-Spirits of the United States (Towle & Morgan 2002, 483). Also known by the now antiquated term *berdache* during the colonial era and in the writings of pioneering anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead (Gilley 2006, 8; Morgensen 2011, 139), Two-Spirits are differently gendered people renowned for holding special status within their respective tribes before the arrival of Europeans. The academic transition from “berdache” to “Two-Spirit” signalled more than merely a semantic shift; it heralded the rupture of anthropological authority in writing and representing Indigenous cultural history (Driskill et al. 2011, 10). Literature on Two-Spirit acceptance, which has historically come from anthropology and related disciplines as well as from outside of academia, from “sexual/gender-nonconforming activists” (Driskill et al. 2011, 10), tends to emphasise historical acceptance while blaming a loss of Indigenous cultures and sovereignty for modern-day repudiation of Two-Spirits in their communities (Burns 1988; Kenny 1988; Williams 1992).

Perhaps less well represented in English-language academic literature is the case of the Zapotec muxe from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mexico. In Latin America, academics similarly use the muxe as an idyllic example of modern Indigenous queer acceptance within a larger patriarchal and machismo Mexican society. For example, sociologist Alfredo Mirandé tells us that “much could be learned from the treatment and acceptance of the Muxes in a place like Juchtán and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec” (2011, 539), while anthropologist Beverly Chiñas concludes, “From their simple lifestyle and low level of formal education, some might consider the Isthmus Zapotecs an unsophisticated people, yet we could all learn from their open-minded and accepting attitudes about sex/gender variations” (1995, 301). Despite providing complex accounts of muxe showing that they are variously accepted, merely tolerated, and sometimes ill-treated, Mirandé and Chiñas choose to conclude their studies by praising what they purport ultimately amounts to the general acceptance of muxe in Zapotec culture.

Coming from a feminist anthropological perspective, Gómez alleges that the muxe are “parte natural y normal de la composición genérica de la sociedad, y son valorados por su papel económico y cultural [are a normal and natural part of the composition of society and are valued for their cultural and economic roles]” (2008, 189). And although she discusses

the difficulties of Muxe life and the patriarchal nature of Zaoptec society despite the queering of gender, Gómez concludes that researching muxe and other gender non-binary peoples ultimately challenges the universality of Western gender and sexual norms:

> El debate sobre la validez de ciertas categorías y postulados teóricos que se han considerado universales, se ha enriquecido a través del análisis de realidades contemporáneas ajenas a la sociedad europea occidental moderna. [The debate over the validation of certain categories and theoretical postulates that have been considered universal has been enriched through the analysis of contemporary realities that are foreign to modern Western European society.] (2008, 191)

By contrast, Brazil-based gender theorist Botton offers a criticism of this blanket extolment of muxe acceptance, doubting the extent to which muxe actually "queer" the gender binary in Mexico. However, she does praise muxe dances called *velas*, which she describes as being "heterotópico [heterotopian]" spaces of resistance (2017, 32).[1]

By adding the case of the muxe to the already fruitful discussion being had about the myth of Two-Spirit acceptance within cultural studies, I attempt to both compare how this myth operates outside of a U.S. context and to encourage academics in anthropology and other social sciences to further critique the myth of Indigenous transgender acceptance in modern times. In this article, I argue that this celebration of what has been positioned as historical and modern-day transgendered acceptance within Indigenous groups of North America is somewhat misguided.[2] The urge to produce academic work that esteems Indigenous transgender acceptance perhaps originates from a desire to challenge the normalcy of transgender discrimination and queer discrimination in general within so-called Western societies (that of Europe and non-Indigenous North America). These researchers appear to want to offer an alternative view of gender and sexual norms by alerting a mostly non-queer audience about the existence of trans-friendly societies and framing queerness as autochthonous to the Americas and not as a contemporary foreign import. Another possible related goal that especially pertains to Two-Spirits is to help these individuals mitigate the pain associated with being transgendered and being demonised and ostracised within their own communities because of their differences, despite cultural histories of being valued within their own ethnic groups.

An additional question that begs consideration is whether the glorification of muxe and Two-Spirit acceptance is based on reality or on romantic and stereotypical ideas about sexual liberation in Indigenous societies. I maintain that celebrating transgender and queer acceptance among Indigenous North Americans may be unwarranted since contemporary Two-Spirits face incredible amounts of discrimination, and even the muxe of Juchitán, Mexico—known as "the Queer Paradise" by English-speaking tourists—face violence in their own communities (Islas 2005). On the other hand, some muxe (in an effort to obtain more privilege) discriminate against cis-women and see themselves as being an improvement upon the female gender. Therefore, the exaltation of Indigenous transgender acceptance could obscure latent sexism within these communities, which could be seen as trading one form of discrimination for another.

Zapotec muxe and Two-Spirits: Background and terminology

Muxe are a group of Mexican Indigenous male-bodied, differently gendered people who are somewhat famous among queer theorists and anthropologists for the apparent acceptance they enjoy from their Zapotec communities. Two-Spirits are likewise commonly referenced as examples of transgender acceptance in non-Western and Indigenous communities. Western conceptions of transgenderism define it as anyone who does not

identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, who inhabit a gendered space between man and woman, or who see themselves as being both genders. Woman, man, and transgender refer to gendered identities, which, as will be shown later, do not necessary correlate with the sex of a person (Boellstorff 2007, 26-7). Cultural norms tend to influence attitudes towards and associated behaviors of specific genders in a particular society, and gender is an identity that is both ascribed and avowed (Butler 1990, 8; Martin & Nakayama 2007).

Therefore, those who self-identify as a particular gender and are seen by the larger society as that same gender are deemed "cis-gendered". The term "third gender", coined in 1975 by the anthropologists M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhis to describe cultures that have more than two conceptualisations of gender, is another way to describe differently gendered people like the muxe and Two-Spirits (Towle & Morgan 2002, 472). I use the term "queer" in place of "gay" or "homosexual" to broadly refer to all those who have sex, sexuality and gender differences, because it is ideally a more inclusive term than "gay" and has more political currency in the West. There are many terms to describe gender/sex variant people and the meanings or terms themselves change depending on the context and the culture. Moreover, these terms are constantly contested as people discover more useful ways to describe themselves and their perspectives.

Queerness as a sociocultural construct takes on various meanings depending on time, place, and space. In his book *Latin American Homosexualities*, anthropologist and sociologist Stephen O. Murray sagely points out that although homosexuality likely exists in every society, labelling these people as socially different is not universal (1995, 3). For example, in Mexico, a gay person is usually someone (typically male) who is not only attracted to people of the same sex, but is also public about this desire. He sees himself as part of a minority group and therefore views his sexuality as a political identity (Miano Borusso 1999, 209). The term "homosexual" takes a different meaning than "gay", and the terms are not necessarily synonymous. In Mexico, the Spanish word for "homosexual" describes someone who is sexually attracted to the same sex and has romantic feelings for the same sex as well (Miano Borusso 1999, 208).

The term *travesti* in Mexico describes a person who dresses and/or behaves in a manner at odds with the societal norms associated with an assigned gender at birth. These people are not interested in modifying their sex organs through surgery, like transsexuals, although some travestis will take hormones in order to feminise their bodies. While travestis will wear men's clothing when it suits them, transgender individuals known as *vestidas* live their lives in women's clothing. A *pintada* is a cis-gendered man who wears makeup, or what we would call a "cross-dresser" in English (Miano Borusso 1999, 209). Writers generally describe Zapotec muxe as travesti, although all of these terms could apply to the diversity of muxe experiences and ways of being. In the United States, "Two-Spirit" has the connotation of embodying what is traditionally thought of as the male gender and the female gender simultaneously. In this sense, Two-Spirits are "women-men", or bi-gendered (Gilley 2006, 8).

Driskill clarifies that being Two-Spirit is generally about gender roles and expression, not who you "fall in love with or are sexually involved with", drawing a distinction from sexual preference (2011, 102). However, some members of the broader Indigenous LGBTQ community also choose to identify as Two-Spirit (Driskill et al. 2011, 3). Two-Spirits have their own varying subjectivities and ways of self-identifying. For example, in Cherokee, the term for Two-Spirit is ᎠᏎᎩ ᎤᏓᏅᏙ (*asegi udanto*), which means "a different way of thinking, feeling, and being that is outside of men's and women's traditional roles" (Driskill 2011,

98). For some Cherokee *asegi udanto*, they see their gender queerness much in keeping with the queerness of being Cherokee, in comparison with other Native American groups (Driskill 2011, 106).

"Two-Spirits" is a blanket term for transgender Native Americans from the United States. They lived in all parts of the present-day continental United States in pre-Columbian and colonial times (although they seem to have had the greatest presence among Western tribes such as the Sioux and the Cheyenne) and have various names within specific tribes (Kenny 1988, 17). In academia, scholars sometimes denote them as berdache. The term *berdache* is potentially problematic because it is a colonial word used by French explorers to describe both transgender behaviour and same-sex desire (Burns 1988, 1). Therefore, the term *Two-Spirit* is oftentimes preferred as a way for transgender Native Americans to identify themselves that more closely relates to their own cultures. Ideally, as with Native Americans tribes in general, it is best to use the term that exists in the language of a particular tribe whenever possible.

Since Two-Spirits represent at least 133 different Native American tribes, it is difficult to generalise about the origins of transgender acceptance in Native American groups. However, there does seem to be a recurring theme of valuing difference among tribes that have historically accepted gender variance. For example, former anthropologist Walter Williams states that:

> The holiness of the berdache has to do with Indian views that everything that exists is a reflection of the spiritual. If a person is different from the average individual, this means that the spirits must have taken particular care in creating this person. If the spirits take such care, by this reasoning, such an individual must be especially close to the spirits. Thus, among the Lakotas a winkte is described as wakan, a term that means very sacred or holy and is incorporated in the name for the Greatest Holiness, Wakan Tanka. (1992, 32)

This difference afforded special privileges to Two-Spirits, who were oftentimes in positions of power within their communities. Moreover, Two-Spirits were sometimes included as figures in creation stories, as is the case with the Navajo, and were thus woven into the metaphorical fabric of the tribe itself (Kenny 1988, 22). Unfortunately, the historic extolment of gender difference has largely been forgotten, with some Native Americans crediting European colonialism with the supposed introduction of gayness into Native communities (Gilley 2006, 61).

Queer acceptance in Juchitán and other Zapotec towns in the region could have originated during the pre-Columbian era, since Aztec priests cross-dressed for religious ceremonies, and Mayans worshipped gods who were simultaneously men and women (Mirandé 2011, 536). Another theory is that because Zapotecs were uninterested in conquering other ethnic groups, they never developed a culture of delegitimising conquered people by emasculating them, unlike the Aztecs. The fact that they were never conquered by the hyper-masculine Aztecs could also explain the perseverance of queer acceptance among Isthmus Zapotecs (Reding 2000, 18), although it does not explain the lack of acceptance among other Zapotec groups. Whatever the original impetus may be, muxe enjoy a unique social status in Zapotec society.

The term *muxe* originates from an archaic spelling of *mujer*, which is Spanish for "woman" (Islas 2005; Mirandé 2011, 509) and is particular to Zapotec male-bodied people (Reding 2000, 18). Female-bodied transgendered Zapotecs are known as *marimachas* in Spanish and *ngulu* in Zapotec, who are generally less visible than muxe and face more stigma than

their male-bodied counterparts (Chiñas 1995, 297; Miano Borusso 1999, 202). It is probable, then, that the respect accorded to muxe may at least partially originate from their male (sex) privilege.

Muxe are highly visible in Zapotec communities in the Isthmus, but there appears to be some unease with the identifier itself. For instance, it is impolite to refer to someone directly as "muxe" and it is reserved as a term solely in the third person (Chiñas 1995, 294). When describing the origins of the muxe organisation Auténticas, Intrépidas y Buscadores de Peligro [Authentic, Intrepid Seekers of Danger] in the eponymous documentary by Alejandras Islas, one muxe explains that the organisation was named that way because "most muxes feel intrepid so that's how they identify themselves" (Islas, 2005). The decision to use "muxe" in the first person likely depends on the individual and on the context, but it betrays a certain amount of discomfort with the word and undermines any "intrepidness" a muxe may feel in the face of a homophobic and misogynistic Mexican society.

Ambivalence about terminology extends to other parts of muxe identity. Although both anthropologist Beverly Chiñas and sociologist Alfredo Mirandé assert that muxe see themselves as belonging to a "third gender" by the nature of having qualities traditionally associated with both men and women (Chiñas 1995, 294; Mirandé 2011, 510-511), Mirandé also states that some muxe view themselves exclusively as women. This enables men who have relationships with muxe to still identify as heterosexual (2011, 526), in addition to the Latin American tendency to not view the penetrative person as homosexual (Murray 1995, 11). It is clear, then, that muxe subjectivities are as multitudinous and varied as queer and other subjectivities in general.

Given the complexity of not only queer terminology in Mexico but queer social organisation around the world, Murray borrows from the work of sociologist and LGBT rights advocate Barry Adam to create a "fourfold typology" of queer social systems (Murray 1995, 5). Of the categories, gender-defined and profession-defined are the most relevant to this essay.[3] These different conceptualisations of homosexuality are not mutually exclusive but usually only one predominates (Murray 1995, 5). A gender-defined sense of homosexuality assumes that the passive, or "receptive", partner in the relationship also behaves according to women's gender norms (Murray 1995, 11). Murray notes that several Indigenous tribes in North America (no doubt having Two-Spirits and possibly muxe in mind) have this social organisation (1995, 5-6). Interestingly, in these societies and in Latin America, there is stigma associated with being viewed as the passive, effeminate partner. As we will see in the case of the muxe, passive biological males are not devoid of all privileges. Murray notes that in some societies, male-bodied people who perform tasks usually associated with women are said to perform these tasks better than female-bodied women (1995, 12).

Another type of organisation is the profession-defined, in which vocations within a specific society are reserved for queer people. Examples of this, which I will elaborate upon later in the essay, include Two-Spirits as spiritual leaders. Murray asserts that although on the surface profession-defined organisation seems progressive, in practice among Indigenous people of the Americas, gender queer people were restricted in careers that were available to them outside of spiritual roles (1995, 15).

Muxe social roles: A paradox of privilege and prejudice

The gender-defined system of queer socialisation predominates in Isthmus Zapotec society and begins in infancy. Adults in these communities will look for instances of young boys imitating their mothers, amusing themselves with toys originally intended for girls, preference for playing with other little girls, and dressing in girl's clothing (Chiñas 1995, 294). It is not always clear from an early age if a child will become muxe, since some masculine boys will discover that they are muxe and vice versa (Chiñas 1995, 294-295). However, if a child identifies as muxe as an adult, then they can look forward to a somewhat privileged place in their community.

Although muxe do not have religious significance in Zapotec culture (unlike the Two-Spirits of the United States), they do other important work inside and outside of their communities (Chiñas 1995, 296). Some muxe engage in what is traditionally considered women's work in Zapotec communities, such as embroidering costumes, sewing women's clothes, decorating home altars, and designing patterns for embroidery. Other muxe, due to the dual nature of their gender, participate in men's work, which is typically making gold and silver jewelry. Regardless of the work they do, muxe products are seen as having more aesthetic and artistic value than Indigenous cis-women's work. Muxe are considered extremely gifted and intelligent, and so they will generally receive the most education in their families, who usually cannot afford education for all of their children beyond a certain level. Because of this, muxe also tend to work in banks, government, business and politics (Chiñas 1995, 295).

The preference for muxe artisanal products and a belief in the superiority of muxe intelligence is certainly positive for the muxe but could also be indicative of prejudice against female-bodied women in Isthmus Zapotec communities. Although ethnologist and sociologist Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen denies that men's work garners higher pay than cis-women's work in Juchitán (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997; Mirandé 2011, 519), Mirandé, referencing Bennholdt-Thomsen (1997), states that "Lighter things like music, poetry, and art are the concern of men, whereas women's work is always linked to subsistence as lighter work is not honorable for women. Women have to do heavy, hard work" (Mirandé 2011, 522). The difference in value may not lie in salary, but the case could be made that men's work is privileged over women's work in other ways. For instance, due to the ease with which they can navigate through men's and women's social groups, muxe have access to important subsistence work but also highly valued, less strenuous creative work—access that female-bodied women do not have.

Despite any direct or indirect role that muxe may have in the perpetuation of what seems like female devaluation in Isthmus Zapotec society, some muxe face difficulties because of the prejudices against them from within and outside of their communities. For example, Chiñas mentions that non-Indigenous outsiders will sometimes harass young muxe but that parents (usually the mother) will often come to the aid of young muxe and defend them (1995, 295). However, although a large part of being *Juchiteco*, or from Juchitán, is being accepting of muxe (Mirandé 2011, 522), muxe sometimes endure abuse from their families. In "The Muxes of Juchitán", Mirandé discusses Cristal, who is muxe and is one of his informants. Cristal's mother "beat [her] regularly" and her parents would often humiliate her in public (2011, 525). Mirandé goes on to describe a ritual of violence for young muxe as a:

> "coming out" or initiation ritual in which authoritarian parents use corporal punishment as a test to determine whether their sons were really muxes. If the child persisted in his effeminate behavior in the face of habitual corporal punishment, it affirmed the child's

> natural predisposition to be a muxe and led to his acceptance by the community. (2011, 525)

Muxe who undergo this violent ritual feel more validated as muxe because it proves that they are truly muxe (Mirandé 2011, 525). In other families, the father and brothers of a muxe try to suppress her transgender identity by ignoring its existence or by ostracising her (Miano Borusso 1999, 219). These attempts to deny or control muxe personhood negate claims that muxe are wholly accepted by their communities and that perhaps a more critical viewpoint is needed in analysing queer rights in Isthmus Zapotec communities.

Two-Spirits and the struggle for reacceptance

Violence and ostracism are common experiences for Two-Spirits in the United States, although gender variance used to be accepted among numerous Native American tribes. Some Two-Spirits, notably Navajo *nádleeh* and Mojave *alyha*, sought to mimic female procreation by symbolically giving birth to stones (Kenny 1988, 17). Perhaps the most famous Two-Spirit, We'wha from the Zuni tribe of the Southwestern region of the United States, was considered the most intelligent person in her tribe (Williams 1992, 32). Like the muxe, Two-Spirits were considered special members of their communities. They were thought to have "double vision" that allowed them to view the world from a man's perspective as well as from a woman's perspective (Williams 1992, 41).

Some tribes thought that this ability to navigate seamlessly through the worlds of women and men translated to a similar ability to traverse between the spiritual and the mundane (Williams 1992, 41). Reminiscent of profession-defined queer social systems, Native American tribes who believed that Two-Spirits were gifted because of their uniqueness would sometimes appoint them as spiritual leaders. In fact, the Mojave of the Southwest, the Klamath of the Columbia Plateau in the Northwest, the Yurok of California, and other California tribes thought that Two-Spirit shamans were more powerful than cis-gendered ones (Williams 1992, 32). Two-Spirits may have also been a logical choice for this work since high priests were oftentimes not allowed to marry or start families (Kenny 1988, 20).

Two-Spirits held important positions as healers and artists among the Navajo and as artisans in Great Plains tribes. In certain California tribes, they also performed profane and yet still important work like burying the dead, given that it was considered a dangerous undertaking for cis-gendered and therefore less spiritually powerful people (Burns 1988, 2). Others gave counsel to shamans and religious leaders and consecrated special objects for the tribe, such as the pole used in the sacred Sun Dance ceremony. Two-Spirits gave special protection to the warriors and young boys of the tribe. For the Potawatomi, Two-Spirits beautified the hair of warriors headed to battle. Among Lakota communities, parents sought the special protection of *winkte* (Lakota for a transgendered male-bodied person) for their young sons. If they agreed, winktes bestowed a secret, embarrassingly intimate yet powerful nickname upon the boy that would protect him throughout his life and bind him to the winkte forever (Kenny 1988, 20; Williams 1992, 36-8).

Unfortunately, Two-Spirits face a "double oppression" in modern times because of racism in U.S. society and from homophobia both within their communities among other Native people and from non-Native Americans (Burns 1988, 3). It is important to bear in mind that not all Native American tribes accepted gender variance and that some tribes may have simply tolerated transgenderism as opposed to embracing it. Well-known tribes that did not value gender diversity outside of the gender binary include the Iroquois, Apache, Pima and the Comanche (Williams 1992, 39). Moreover, all of the previously mentioned tribes with

traditions of appreciating Two-Spirits also have histories of denigrating them as well. Williams blames the imposition of Christianity by European colonisers and a hegemonic Anglo-American culture for introducing homophobia in previously open-minded Native communities (Williams 1992, 39).

Conversely and perhaps ironically, some Native Americans believe that queerness has never been a part of Native life and view it as a product of White American cultural contamination in their native cultures (Williams 1992, 39; Gilley 2006, 61). For instance, one tribal chairman felt strongly against Two-Spirits and transgenderism, complaining that "It is totally opposite to our traditional teaching and religion, which is based on a strong family life. I don't want these two [gay and native] put together. It is a disgrace to put them in the same category" (Gilley 2006, 62). Although Gilley does not mention the tribal membership of this chairman, his sentiments reflect a general antipathy towards Two-Spirits that exists in tribes with and without legacies of transgender acceptance. Even in tribes that do have this legacy, there have been strong efforts to deny it. Some traditionalists who try to resurrect ways of life that were lost during colonisation will ignore traditions involving Two-Spirit people (Gilley 2006, 57).

This cultural erasure is a violent experience that causes Two-Spirits to have to hide who they are when they are on the reservation. There is immense pressure to downplay their femininity, since Native and non-Native people alike take stock in the stereotype of the stoic, macho Native warrior (Gilley 2006, 77). On the reservation, Two-Spirits monitor each other's behaviour to appear less effeminate and thereby avoid violence (Gilley 2006, 69-79). Many Two-Spirits who feel ostracised by the predominately White queer community but also by their own Native communities will deemphasise their Two-Spirit identities in favour of their Native American ones (Gilley 2006, 183). Native American Two-Spirits who separate the Two-Spirit part of themselves from the Native American part and deny the former are engaging in a form of strategic essentialism.

Two-Spirits and strategic essentialism

Strategic essentialism, a concept developed by postcolonial and feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak, is the tactic employed by activists in cultural and political movements in which a marginalised culture or group of people presents itself to the dominant culture as a unitary and singular unit and ignores the diversity of the people within the group (Spivak 1990). This method is employed as a way to strengthen group identification with the whole so that they may have more collective power in demanding rights. The negative aspect of strategic essentialism is that it denies and obscures difference, effectively silencing those who would speak from a different perspective.

Anthropologist and feminist theorist Aura Cumes in "'Esencialismos estragéticos' y discursos de decolonización" discusses strategic essentialist tactics used by the Mayan movement in Guatemala who, due to a desire to maintain so-called cultural purity, seek to redefine what it means to be Indigenous and Guatemalan. For these activists, Indigenous Guatemalans are essentially Maya, which necessarily ignores Indigenous Guatemalans who do not identify as Maya (Cumes 2009, 7). Discussing the essentialising nature of the negritude movement in Latin America, Afro-Dominican anthropologist Ochy Curiel maintains that strategic essentialism is an essential tactic in the fight for equality and human rights for marginalised peoples, but that it also has the danger of perpetuating stereotypes and making movements exclusionary. Exclusivity in social movements based on fighting for rights of discriminated-against groups can make group members become

too focused on defining and regulating the behaviour of the in-group while at the same time losing sight of the larger goal of ending racial discrimination (Curiel 2002, 98).

Curiel warns that if we remain uncritical of strategic essentialism and become transfixed by identity politics, then we risk obfuscating our histories and will forget about the longstanding insidiousness of racism:

> Entender que si nos quedamos atrapadas en las identidades supondrá un reduccionismo que perderá de vista nuestra historia y sus procesos y la forma en que el racismo se va expresando en nuestras sociedades a través del tiempo. [Understanding that if we remain trapped in identities, it will lead to a type of reductionism that will make us lose sight of our histories, its processes, and how racism has expressed itself in our societies throughout time.] (2002, 111)

Curiel envisions a feminist movement in which all self-identifying women, regardless of their race, class or sexual orientation, may participate. She calls for everyone who is interested in the realisation of true equality to cease "reproduciendo privilegios en nuestras relaciones interpersonales [reproducing privileges in our interpersonal relations]" by checking our own racist, classicist, sexist, and homophobic thoughts and behaviors (2002, 111). Similarly, anti-Two-Spirit Native Americans who ignore or deny the historic contributions of Two-Spirit people by blaming European colonialism for the advent of queerness in North America are allowing homophobia to distract them from the larger goals of self-determination and cultural revitalisation that could uplift all Native people (Gilley 2006, 188).

Unintended consequences of the myth of transgender acceptance

For Indigenous Americans across the continent, the European colonial age was a violent time of extreme cultural loss (Garroutte 2003, 79-80). Perhaps as a way to atone for the sins of the founders of the discipline, itself a "child of Western imperialism" (Gough 1968, 12), U.S. anthropologists have tried to use research to help tribes remember their histories and restore their traditions. Potentially inspired by the cultural sensitivity inherent to modern anthropological research, queer and transgender theory is more conscious of the issues of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) and is therefore hesitant to reproduce the same privileged or colonial discourse that pervaded anthropology in the past.

Moreover, queer theorists within anthropology have challenged the longstanding tendency of anthropologists to locate queer acceptance in "primitive" societies, which would constitute a form of discursive colonialism and cultural appropriation. Moreover, as Two-Spirit poet M. Carmen Lane points out, in discussing this imagined queer acceptance, "misogynist academics always focus on the men who are women"—particularly with the aforementioned research on nádleeh and winkte— and in so doing, systematically ignore those with what Lane calls a "man heart" (2011, 194).

For Morgensen, the misrepresentation of Native Americans as being progressive in their acceptance of non-binary gender identities speaks to the privileges that non-Native anthropologists enjoy as a result of settler colonialism: "Appreciation works here as appropriation not just by taking Native culture out of context, but by failing to note that settler colonialism is what makes inspiration by Native culture possible, and desirable for non-Natives in inheriting life on stolen land" (2011, 138). Morgensen condemns the myth of transgender acceptance in Indigenous communities and calls for non-Native anthropologists to more seriously examine how the legacy of settler colonialism informs their oftentimes romantic views of Indigenous peoples.

Tom Boellstorff maintains that queer theory, through an anthropological lens, has “little patience for nostalgic approaches that dismiss lesbian women and gay men outside the West as contaminated by the foreign, to seek instead ritualized forms of transgender or homosexual practices that supposedly reveal regions of idyllic precolonial tolerance” (2007, 22). He goes on to assert that “anthropology could play an important role in ethnographically unmasking—rather than theoretically solving—the question of the relationship between sexuality and gender, by showing their constitution in historically and culturally specific life worlds” (Boellstorff 2007, 26). However, anthropologists and queer theorists unwittingly may still be reproducing this colonial discourse when speaking about Two-Spirits, muxe and transgender acceptance.

Despite the wish of many intellectuals and activists to establish widespread queer acceptance in Indigenous communities, it does not exist in Isthmus Zapotec communities, nor in Native American tribes. To argue otherwise would be to promote a grave epistemic fallacy that silences the painful experiences of transgender Indigenous people (Dotson 2011, 236).

Furthermore, despite their best intentions, academics who promote the myth of indigenous transgender acceptance are guilty of romanticising Indigenous queer realities in ways that are uncomfortably similar to discursive colonialism and cultural appropriation. For instance, although Chiñas, Goméz Suárez and Mirandé give clear examples of how muxe continue to face discrimination, they insist on tempering their own findings that the Isthmus Zapotecs are not entirely accepting of gender variation, instead choosing to frame Zapotec culture as not *so* transphobic as Western cultures tend to be. Regardless of whether this comparison is accurate, it certainly obscures continued discrimination against these groups.

Downplaying the realities of transphobia in Indigenous cultures in an effort to subvert the idea of a progressive West prevents Indigenous transgender people from articulating the complex and interwoven ways of being transgender and Indigenous in societies where both groups still occupy subaltern spaces.

Conclusion

The muxe of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and Two-Spirits of the United States are common symbols of supposed transgender acceptance among Indigenous societies. Muxe do enjoy some privileges within their communities, mostly because they are male-bodied, and it appears that these social benefits are predicated on the same patriarchal systems that continue to oppress and denigrate female-bodied women. Two-Spirits, on the other hand, are struggling to assert themselves as valuable members of their tribes—tribes that have forgotten how they once valued difference. Strategic essentialism has led to a further denial of Two Sprits, who due to a presumed mutual exclusivity between queerness and “Indian-ness” must often choose between their gender identity and their Native identity.

The observation that muxe maintain privileges over female-bodied women might be unintentionally provocative to some readers who might take offence at my implying that muxe are involved in the oppression of Zapotec women. I do not make this argument glibly and am sensitive to the current heated debates between radical feminists and feminists with a more postmodern take on identity about the degree to which trans women should be accepted within the feminist movement. I do not intend to argue that muxe, Two-Spirits, or

transgender people in the West are antithetical to feminist causes. However, I do want to suggest that oppressed groups can still be involved in the oppression of others—even if passively by merely accepting the status quo as some muxe seem to have done. Elucidating these privileges, however, does and should not detract from the everyday experiences of discrimination and abuse that muxe and Two-Spirits face from their families and from outside their communities.

The urge of many activists, anthropologists, and queer theorists to laud these communities as progressive is understandable, given the intensity of anti-LGBTQ sentiment in Western societies. However, it would not serve anyone to write hyperbolically about Indigenous queer acceptance when muxe, Two-Spirits, and other third-gendered people continue to endure discrimination. This well-intentioned desire to portray certain Indigenous groups as more open-minded about gender difference than in the West has a potential unintended consequence of suppressing any Two-Spirit or muxe voices wishing to raise awareness about or to speak out against the violence facing them.

It is important to discuss contemporary discrimination against Two-Spirits and not only focus on their history because Two-Spirits, like other transgendered people in places where they are not accepted, are fighting for their rights and for full acceptance in their communities. Some Two-Spirits hope that a reclamation of their cultural history will help them be accepted once again. The muxe, who seem to enjoy more privileges than Two-Spirits, may enjoy these privileges at the expense of female-bodied women, which is cause for alarm as well as further research. The status of Two-Spirit and muxe and the communities from which they come should be of concern to people who are care about Indigenous, transgender, queer and women’s rights. It should also matter to activists and academics who are aware of the considerable amount of work that still needs to be done before transgender and other queer people can live as equal members in their societies.

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[1] For more examples of literature on muxe acceptance, see Gómez Suárez & Miano Borusso 2008 and Gómez 2010. For studies that critique the claim in depth, see Urbiola Solís et al. 2017 and Flores Martos 2010.

[2] I note that transgender and cis-gender are Western concepts that arguably have been imposed onto Indigenous and otherwise non-Western understandings of sex and gender. However, I believe it makes sense to talk about “transgender” in Indigenous and non-Western contexts since this cognitive link has already been made in interdisciplinary queer theory and praxis (see Adam 1986 for an example)

[3] The four categories are age-structured, gender-defined, profession-defined, and egalitarian/gay relations (Murray 1995, 5)