
The *muxes* of Juchitán: Representations of Non-binary Gender Identities in Contemporary Photography from Mexico

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Abstract

Nicola Ókin Frioli's series of portraits entitled 'We are Princesses in a Land of Machos' (2004) represents the *muxes* of Juchitán, who occupy the non-binary gender position identifying as neither men nor women. Through analysing these images, this paper explains how still photography represents and contains alternative understandings and expressions of gender. Ókin Frioli's photographs are a visual marker of how the *muxe* phenomenon relates to notions of femininity, in a context where local Zapotec cultural legacies allow for different expressions of gender than elsewhere in Mexico. Informed by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, such a viewpoint allows for framing representations of non-binary gender identities as a challenge to identitarian perspectives, and for examining gender as a mechanism of oppression.

Resumen

La serie de retratos titulada 'We are Princesses in a Land of Machos' de Nicola Ókin Frioli representa los *muxes* de Juchitán, que ocupan una posición no binaria de género y no se identifican como hombres ni como mujeres. El presente artículo explica el proceso de representar diferentes expresiones de género mediante un análisis de las imágenes de Frioli. Sus fotografías relacionan la posición de los *muxes* con nociones de feminidad, en un contexto en el que las tradiciones zapotecas permiten manifestaciones de género diferentes de las existentes en cualquier otro lugar de México. Así se formula el marco teórico instruido por la teoría sobre la performatividad de género de Judith Butler, que conceptualiza estas representaciones como un desafío a las perspectivas identitarias y examina género como un mecanismo de opresión.

Nicola Ókin Frioli's photography series entitled 'We are Princesses in a Land of Machos' (2004) is a portraiture project representing the *muxes* living in Juchitán de Zaragoza in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca.¹ The series captures the

1 I would like to thank Nicola Ókin Frioli for kindly agreeing to the reproduction of his photographs in this paper and for his time, generosity and kindness in allowing me the

muxes of Juchitán in everyday surroundings in their finest clothes, offering a glimpse into the lives of people assigned male gender at birth who defy heteronormative standards of behaviour in today's Mexico. The photographs reveal part of the Juchitán community occupying a gendered position that is neither male nor female, but *muxe*. Approaching the visual appeal of this series in a scholarly manner is complicated by the fluidity of the term *muxe*, which encompasses a wide range of appearances and behaviours (Gutmann 2007: Location 1117). Through a visual analysis of Ókin Frioli's photographs, I examine the representational role of photographic portraiture in documenting, consolidating and questioning gender norms. Theoretically, I probe the explicit resistance to applying Judith Butler's theories of gender in recent scholarship concerning *muxes* (see Subero 2013; Mirandé 2015) by arguing that her work can help to analyse gender itself as an oppressive mechanism.

Before analysing the photographs or introducing 'muxenity' as a phenomenon, it is necessary to acknowledge the larger framework of coloniality (see Stryker and Currah 2014: 303), which necessarily informs this academic mediation of Nicola Ókin Frioli's work. In pinpointing my own position as a Pole educated and working within the British university system, and the photographer's Italian roots and education, I make explicit our respective places within the colonizing framework. In doing so, I work against the presumed transparency of academic and photographic work, and acknowledge their role in producing and sustaining normativity. To admit this privilege and power of mediation is not to position the mediators at the centre of the enquiry. Rather, my intention here is to mark a point of departure for analysing whether photographic representation and its academic analysis can remain critical of its own enquiry.

Nicola Ókin Frioli was born in 1977 in Rimini, Italy. Inspired by his father's love of photography, he completed a photojournalism course after finishing school and then accepted a scholarship for a two-year experimental certificate programme at the Università dell'Immagine run by Fondazione Industria Onlus Milan, in Milan. In 2000, even before finishing his formal education, Ókin Frioli first travelled to Mexico, where he reports having found a sense of belonging coupled with an attraction that brought him back every year until 2007, when he decided to move to Mexico City.² In doing so, he followed a trail blazed by Tina Modotti, an Italian photographer described by Roberto Tejada as one of the first to break with the picturesque convention in Mexican photography and establish it as a medium in its own right (Tejada 2009: Location 1193). This positions him within the long line of foreign photographers for whom Mexico was a source of inspiration and the location of some of their best work, such as Edward Weston,

opportunity to interview him (see n.2 below). I am also indebted to the editors and to the anonymous reviewers for their detailed, rigorous and timely feedback throughout the revision process. While gratefully acknowledging their helpful input, I would like to claim any omissions and errors as my own. For making the practicalities of writing easier for me through sharing domestic responsibilities, I would like to thank my mother,, Maria Cyrankowska and my partner Ted Gasiorowski.

2 Skype interview conducted by the author with Nicola Ókin Frioli, March 2017.

Paul Strand, Henri Cartier-Bresson and others. Such was their influence that the importance of foreign gaze has to be understood as a significant part of the history of Mexican photography. In that sense, the medium itself is implicated in the complex colonial and neo-colonial processes of making meanings of Mexico and in Mexico through foreign lenses.

Since arriving in the country, Ókin Frioli has built up a wide-ranging portfolio of work, encompassing three types of photography: commercial, journalistic and documentary. His commercial clients include global brands such as Adidas and Gatorade, aiming to appeal to the Mexican market.³ This type of work allows him the economic independence to be free in his choice of subjects for documentary work, as well as the time he needs and wants to spend with the people he photographs (Ókin Frioli interview, see n.2). Moreover, he admits that the different types of photography influence one another in his practice, because the exacting aesthetic and the economy of communication demanded in commercial and journalistic photography influence his style as a documentary photographer. Although many of his projects are politically charged, such as his work on Latin American migration to the US in 'Al "otro lado" del sueño' (2014), his documentary interests are marked by his desire to get to know others and their way of life. In claiming to be uninterested in politics, he underlines that he wants to follow his interests and his emotions in seeking subjects to photograph, as opposed to fulfilling a specific political agenda (Ókin Frioli interview, see n.2).

He began his documentary work with the *muxes* in 2002, having stumbled upon a story about the *muxe* community in the local press.

I remember members of the LGBT community being ridiculed in my home town of Rimini, even as attitudes towards homosexuality and transgender people were slowly transforming, particularly in a liberal seaside resort. What struck me about the *muxes* was how much respect they were afforded within their communities. I wanted to capture that respect in my photographs and publish them in Europe to challenge assumptions about gender stereotypes in Mexico. (Ókin Frioli interview, see n.2; author's translation)

Initially, he simply turned up at the market in Juchitán and asked locals to put him in touch with the *muxes*. Soon, he was introduced to Mística (Figure 1), at the time the leader of the local *muxe* organization Las Auténticas Intrépidas Buscadoras del Peligro.

Mística then put him in touch with other *muxes* and the project snowballed organically from one house in Juchitán to the next, with *muxes* inviting the photographer into their homes and posing for him there. Ókin Frioli kept taking photographs for the series until 2010. When discussing the process of photographing and negotiating how he wanted to portray the *muxes* and what they wanted to reveal of themselves, Ókin Frioli pointed out that this was a portraiture project where his vision to a large extent coincided with that of his subjects (Ókin Frioli interview, see n.2). He had in mind a series of formal portraits, but it was the *muxes* who chose their outfits, hairstyles, makeup and poses with

3 See <<http://okinreport.net>> [accessed 8 July 2018].



Figure 1. Mística, *muxe* leader in Juchitán, Mexico

minimal direction from the photographer (see n.2). Because most *muxes* chose to pose in their traditional Oaxacan dress, the series gives a relatively uniform image of what is, in fact, a very varied phenomenon. While conflating Ókin Frioli's vision of the *muxes* with their own would be a mistake, it is important to acknowledge the artistic collaboration between the photographer and his subjects in producing the portraits.

Going back and forth to Juchitán for nearly a decade, Ókin Frioli had a chance not only to build good relationships with the *muxes* but also share with them many of his prints and even show them some of the international magazines that published his photographs, which reportedly delighted the *muxes* (see n.2). Since then, the series has been published in many magazines and newspapers such as the *Huffington Post* and the *Daily Mail*, and won several awards, including the first prize in the Pride Photo Award competition. To date, this is one of Ókin Frioli's most successful and most widely disseminated portraiture projects.

'We are Princesses in a Land of Machos' is part of the growing visibility of the *muxe* community, both within Mexico and abroad. The recent decades also saw several film documentaries made about the *muxes*, such as Patricio Henriquez's 2003 documentary entitled *Juchitán: Queer Paradise*, and *Muxes: auténticas, intrépidas, buscadoras de peligro* released in 2005 by Alejandra Islas (Vrana 2007), followed by several others. Mexican photographers such as Nelson Morales, and foreign photographers working in Mexico, for example Erin Lee or Shaul

Schwarz, all photographed *muxes*. The *muxes* themselves run several public social media accounts where they post images of themselves, disseminate articles about themselves, and advertise events within their communities.⁴ Signalling this proliferation of different visual representations of the same community, often capturing the same people, helps to situate Ókin Frioli's work within its contemporary context as an example of an artistic and documentary zeitgeist.

This visual interest in the culture of Oaxaca, particularly its local manifestations of femininity, has a long history. The women of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec have been exoticized for their beauty, imposing presence, and attractive dress since the middle of the nineteenth century by foreign travellers and Mexicans alike, but it was during the post-revolutionary search for a cohesive national identity that the image of Tehuana gained a new importance (Chassen-López 2014: 281, 311). It became a signifier for indigenous Mexico in the national search for an 'inclusive racialized and ethnicized aesthetic' (2014: 311). In the process, it became sanitized and reappropriated, perhaps most famously in Frida Kahlo's 1943 painting *Autorretrato como tehuana*, where, as the name suggests, the artist has painted herself into a traditional Tehuana dress, complete with a *huipil de tapar*. Kahlo reappropriated indigenous femininity in her self-portrait and visually disrupted the ontological certainties of racial and class divisions (Redcliff 2003: 496). This disruption was not unproblematic, designating the indigenous as feminized, passive, close to nature; an eroticized 'object of pleasure for the male gaze' (Chassen-López 2014: 311–12). Nonetheless, Chassen-López argues that despite these issues, the iconicity of the Tehuana 'marked the emergence of a ... more inclusive culture' (2014: 313). Within this more inclusive legacy, Graciela Iturbide's album *Juchitán de las mujeres* (1989; see Iturbide 2010) is noteworthy because it produced another iconic image of Tehuana femininity in the photograph entitled *Nuestra señora de las iguanas*. The album was received with some grassroots resistance, which contested its portrayal of Juchitán as matriarchal (Saynes-Vázquez 1996: 189), but in doing so it clearly offered an opportunity for local defiance against a romanticized vision of femininity in Juchitán.

There is a productive parallel to be drawn between the iconicity of Tehuana and the emergent body of work visually representing muxenity. Images of Tehuanas have been co-opted into the collective visual imaginary of what it means to be Mexican by making ideas of national identity more inclusive. Similarly, images of the *muxes* are making understandings of gender and sexuality more inclusive, even if such processes are necessarily fraught with misrecognitions and appropriations. Visual representation provides crucial material for analysis and scrutiny, be it at a local or transnational level and, importantly, guards against invisibility in a hyper-visual world.

4 See <<https://www.facebook.com/AutenticasIntrepidasBuscadorasDelPeligro/?fref=ts>> [accessed 8 July 2018].

Understanding 'muxenity'

In order to understand Ókin Frioli's involvement in representing the *muxe* community, it is impossible to avoid the question of their gender identity, which is his very reason for photographing them in the first place. This question of identity is fraught with misrecognition for many reasons, not least because here it is asked from within Western academia and directed towards a community, which has a radically different understanding of what gender means. Heather Vrana reasons that the 'Zapotec conflation of gender and sexuality, and Western minds' inability to conceive of such a conflation, is a source of confusion as non-indigenous scholars, journalists, and documentarians attempt to address the *muxe*' (Vrana 2007). Her critically productive solution to this dilemma is to position gender identity not just as a product of systemic oppression but as 'itself a mechanism of oppression' (2007). Similarly, Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah in *Decolonizing the Transgender Imaginary* grapple with the challenge of acknowledging the oppressive and exclusionary nature of current gendering systems and their simultaneous epistemological indispensability (2014: 303). Nonetheless, as Judith Butler claims in *Bodies that Matter*, to be implicated and circumscribed by the discourse of power does not mean one is determined by it (1993: 123). This statement, while still located firmly at the centre of Western feminism, at least offers 'awareness of our own intellectual practices' (Vrana 2007: 00) and allows for an examination of representations of *muxenity* that remains vigilant to its own misrecognitions. Photographs of the *muxes* are in this context a visual challenge, which probe the unsettled relationship between what is seen and what is known.

The term *muxe* is most widely used to describe people who are assigned male gender at birth but live their lives through recognizably feminine modes and roles. The anthropological work of Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen (2008) positions them as a third gender, not merely tolerated but appreciated for their difference within their communities. From a sociological perspective, Alfredo Mirandé in his article 'Hombres Mujeres: An Indigenous Third Gender' (2015: 2) situates Juchitán's *muxes* alongside other third gender communities, such as other Native American groups, the hijras of India and South Asia and certain Pacific Islander groups. It is useful to position the *muxes* among other communities who recognize a third gender, making visible that binary understanding of gender is not universal, but instead a product of a colonizing and neo-colonizing historical process.

Within this context, Ókin Frioli's portraits of the *muxes* are positioned as specific local instances of challenging the hegemonic gender binary. My critical approach to his representations of *muxenity* draws on Judith Butler's work on gender and performativity (1990; 1993; 2004), while simultaneously addressing the way in which her theory has been deployed in recent studies of this phenomenon (Subero 2013; Mirandé 2015). In this way, studying the photographs becomes a point of departure for analysing representations of a gendered phenomenon rooted in Zapotec traditions, but also a visual anchor for examining Butler's theory as a tool for understanding gender as an oppressive apparatus.

The area in which the photographs were taken, Juchitán de Zaragoza in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, features in the national and international imaginary as a predominantly indigenous town famed for its unorthodox approach to gender roles, not least because of the rich iconography mentioned above. Indeed, it is essential to connect the status and the lifestyles of the *muxes* with the distinct understanding of femininity in Juchitán. As Águeda Gómez Suárez and Marinella Miano Borusso argue in their article 'Dimensiones discursivas del sistema de sexo y género entre los indígenas zapotecas del Istmo de Tehuantepec (México)', Juchitán is a place where women play a crucial role in the social, economic and cultural life of their community (2008: 169). Their prominent place in the marketplace, which allows them a degree of economic autonomy, and the domestic control they exercise, led scholars to describe their society as 'matriarchal' (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997: 67) or 'matrifocal' (Chiñas 2002). As Miano points out, such labels are problematic, since they ignore other aspects of women's subordination (Gómez Suárez and Miano Borusso 2008: 171), which exist despite their significant domestic and economic influence.

Therefore, ways in which muxenity merges feminine and masculine qualities in Juchitán is dependent on specific Zapotec understandings of femininity, which extend beyond the domestic sphere and into the economically crucial marketplace (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997: 67). Alfredo Mirandé outlines a sociological classification of muxenity as a gendered and sexual phenomenon. Based on his research, in terms of gender he distinguishes between *muxes vestidas*, who wear traditional Zapotec clothing; *muxes pintadas*, who use make-up and wear Western feminine clothing; and others who wear masculine clothing and are, at least in terms of external appearance, indistinguishable from heterosexual men (Mirandé 2015: 14). In addition to maintaining the hybridity described above, *muxes* also engage in a wide range of sexual behaviours, some marrying women and having children, but most preferring to maintain relationships with men, although never with other *muxes* (2015: 14). Apart from the gendered and sexual behaviours described, another crucial aspect of muxenity is its inextricable link with the indigenous heritage of the Zapotec Isthmus and their language (Mirandé 2015: 15; Subero 2013: 17; see also *Muxes: auténticas, intrépidas, buscadoras de peligro* 2005). It is also this link between muxenity and Zapotec traditions which is at the forefront of Frioli's visual representations of the *muxes*, since all but one of his portraits capture them wearing traditional Oaxacan clothing, namely a *huipil* (blouse) and a skirt, often wearing flowers in their hair or a even a *huipil de tapar*, which is a traditional white head covering. The *muxes* are a respected and well-integrated part of the community (Bennholdt-Thomsen 2008). Although their acceptance and integration is not unproblematic (Mirandé 2015: 11–12), their socio-cultural visibility and level of community involvement through organizations such as Las Auténticas Intrépidas Buscadoras del Peligro are evidence that they do not encounter the same levels of ostracism, rejection and violence customarily aimed at non-heteronormative people in the rest of Mexico (Rodríguez Ortiz 2010: Location 2217).

Since gender normativity in Juchitán clearly allows for muxenity to be a discrete category from femininity and masculinity, Mirandé claims that, from a sociological perspective, the *muxes* cannot be understood 'by traditional conceptions of gender and sexuality like those articulated by [...] gender scholars or within the rapidly emerging field of transgender studies' (Mirandé 2015: 2). Nonetheless, Mirandé later concedes that 'much can be learned about doing and redoing gender from the muxe experience' (2015: 22). In visual culture studies, Gustavo Subero in his analysis of Alejandra Islas' 2005 documentary about the *muxes* entitled *Muxes: auténticas, intrépidas, buscadoras de peligro* also questions the applicability of Butler's theory to analysing muxenity (Subero 2013: 181). In his view, Butler sees the body as an empty vessel, which acquires meaning only through performance (2013: 181). That, in turn, makes her theory on gender inapplicable in the context of muxenity, since ethnographic research clearly demonstrates that being *muxe* is seen as an intrinsic and immutable trait. As they say in Juchitán, '*muxes se nacen y no se hacen*' (Mirandé 2015: 20).

That is a familiar refrain from *muxes* themselves, but also from their families and communities (Flores Ezeta 2014: 1; Mirandé 2015: 20). Firstly, it is a strong form of resistance to the reductive gender binary prevalent within the dominant Mexican culture. Additionally, it also signals a sense of belonging within the traditional Zapotec framework, even inside a globalizing world of growing trans-awareness and trans-activism. Epistemologically linking the legitimization of the *muxe* identity to Zapotec ethnicity and culture allows for validating identities on terms that have no need to refer to larger neo-colonizing frameworks. Therefore, scholarly reluctance to utilize Butler's theory in analysing the representation of *muxes* at first glance may appear justified, which is why it demands closer examination and merits a challenge.

Butler's idea of performance as a means to legitimize identities has been positively revolutionary in its influence across arts, humanities and social sciences. Her theory of gender is often reduced to the idea that individual performativity is the only way of validating identities. It is often understood as an act that likens choosing one's gendered performance to choosing one's clothes in the morning, with the physical sexed body being dominated and determined by such choices (Subero 2013: 181). However, performing gender has little to do with choice in the neoliberal sense as an unconstrained exercise of individual agency. Indeed, Butler claims that there is no such thing as an unconstrained choice, since 'nobody enters discourse on their own terms' as we are all introduced into life by being called a name (1993: 123). She underlines that each and every one of us is bound by identitarian discourses, whose power depends on their ability to recognize and segregate discrete identities (2004: Location 81). However, she also claims that to be bound by discourse and depend on it for self-expression is not the same as to be reduced only to its existing forms (Butler 1993: 123). Hence any gendered performance can be characterized as an embodiment of a battle between resistance and compliance with the gender system that makes socio-cultural intelligibility possible. Therefore, rather than conceptual-

izing the body as an empty vessel, Butler positions it as a site of constant negotiation between individuality and normativity, 'as part of a dynamic map of power in which identities are constituted and/or erased, deployed and/or paralysed' (1993: 117). This is why the apparent contrast between understanding identity as immutable or as performative cannot be sustained. Just as the binary between male and female is exposed as a false dichotomy by muxenity, so is the irreconcilable difference between the concepts of gender and sexuality understood as either intrinsic or performative.

Moreover, a closer analysis of the belief in Juchitán that '*muxes se nacen y no se hacen*' (Flores Ezeta 2014: 1; Mirandé 2015: 20) proves that Butler's theory of gender performativity is a useful theoretical tool in examining Frioli's photographs of the *muxes*. The affirmative part of the sentence asserts that *muxes* are born into a particular community, which recognizes their liminal gender position between male and female as part of its social make-up. Bearing in mind Butler's contention that 'it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as a socially viable being' (2015: Location 71), the Zapotec systemic recognition of muxenity constructs a socio-cultural condition of its viability. The *muxes*' enactment of muxenity, both in front of the camera and in everyday life, happens within a specific socio-cultural context, which recognizes and allows for such an expression of gender. To label the *muxe* identity as performative is not to declare it unauthentic, but rather to acknowledge the importance of socio-cultural recognition of a particular gendered performance for its viability and visibility (Butler 2015: Location 71). After all, Butler argues that it is precisely through 'creative constraints' derived from one's own spatio-temporal context that an individual can begin to form a sense of self, based on the ongoing interpolation of available norms and identities and one's own limited choices (Butler 1993: 123). Performativity, then, is an important tool for expressing a particular identity and making it visible and viable within its socio-cultural context. To declare Juchitán a queer paradise would mean ignoring several ways in which *muxes* and gay and non-binary people still face discrimination there (Mirandé 2015: 11–12), but its system of gendered identities and their roles within a community clearly offers different choices to the hegemonic Western gender binary. Nikola Ókin Frioli's photographic intervention becomes part of the *muxes*' gendered performance, claiming a space for them not just within Juchitán's culture, but also within the global horizon of vision.

The following visual analysis of two of Ókin Frioli's photographs from the series shows how Butler's theory can be successfully applied in the context of muxenity, and examines how photography captures the dynamic nature of gendered performances in its ability to freeze them in an instant. In this context, the photographer's images are cultural tools, which concurrently fix representations in their singular mode, time and place and liberate them from such constraints.

The portraits of the *muxes*

Nicola Ókin Frioli's series of portraits of the *muxes* mostly follows a traditional portraiture convention. This is an important representational strategy, which, as Richard Brilliant argues in his book *Portraiture* (2013), 'make[s] value judgments not just about the specific individuals portrayed but the general worth of individuals as a category' (2013: Location 206). Although, as a genre, portraits are explicitly focused on the person they represent, Brilliant also argues that their context is that of 'natural human tendency' to think of oneself and others in relational terms (2013: Location 206). Therefore, Ókin Frioli's photographs can be framed as visual evidence of socio-cultural reciprocal recognition, which evidences and constitutes the local viability (Butler 2015: Location 71). of muxenity. The *muxes* are photographically fixed inside houses or local businesses and most of them are dressed in traditional clothing, underlining their Zapotec



Figure 2. *Muxes vestidas*: A teenage muxe

heritage. While clearly rooted in the local context of Juchitán, the series is also a cultural invitation for expanding the Isthmeño recognition of muxenitry onto the global online art community and market. The photographs' resonance in the media, both in Mexico and abroad (Nichols 2013; Pow 2013), signal a shift in Western attitudes to non-binary gender identities. In that sense, these portraits are an expression of current fashions and a contribution to the shifting definition of 'the worth assigned to human life itself' (Brilliant 2013: Location 206).

The series is published online on Ókin Frioli's website and contains 20 portraits of the *muxes*, 19 of them dressed in traditional *huípiles*. In addition to the uniformity of dress, the photographs depict the subjects in similar, highly saturated colours. Although muxenitry as a phenomenon is a radical challenge for the binary understanding of gender, Frioli's framing of it in his art is highly conventional. He stages their gendered difference by using a well-established aesthetic framework, producing a contrast between the portraits' form and their content, particularly for his Western viewers. The *muxes* seem solemn and formal, clearly staged in order to appear dignified, 'reflecting the constraints imposed by the conventions that govern one's appearance in public and before strangers' (Brilliant 2013: Location 143). Through using conventional visual means to represent unconventional gender identities, Ókin Frioli lends visibility to a marginal phenomenon and actively challenges the hegemonic gender binary, showing how being bound by conventions does not mean '[being] reduced only to their existing forms' (Butler 1993: 123). The images are surrounded by a darker vignette, in a clear reference to visual effects born of technical constraints evident in historical portraits, of which Mexico has a rich tradition (Monsiváis 2006: 35). Through using these visual cues, Ókin Frioli aesthetically aligns the marginal gender phenomenon of muxenitry within the Mexican tradition of portraiture and claims a socio-cultural space for it, which extends beyond its native Juchitán through the photographer's online platform.

Among the portraits of *muxes* vestidas there is a striking photograph of a teenage *muxe* (Figure 2). *Xe*⁵ is straddling two sofas framed against an ochre wall; *xer* surroundings appear to be part of a hairdressing or beauty salon. On the wall behind the *muxe* there are several posters displaying a variety of men's and boys' haircuts. The representational role of this backdrop is significant since it points to the socio-economic status of the *muxes*, who are often expected to work in the services industry (Subero 2013: 178). Significantly, it also links the Zapotec expectations of the *muxes* to Western stereotypes surrounding non-heteronormative identities and their place in society. At least historically, openly homosexual male hairdressers were more in evidence than openly homosexual male politicians (Mirandé 2015: 19) or footballers, even in countries which have been moving steadily towards removing stigmatization and discrimination through legislation which offers same-sex couples civil partnerships or marriage rights.

5 There is no evidence of uniformity in Juchitán in referring to *muxes* by using either masculine or feminine pronouns, since both are used. My choice to use the pronouns *xe* and *xer* linguistically marks muxenitry as a separate gender category.

The colourful background therefore places the young *muxe* at the local and global nexus of expectations stemming from how others perceive *xer* gender identity and how that perception limits *xer* life choices, visualizing gender as a constraining mechanism.

The *muxe*'s location within the composition is significant for its obvious liminality. The teenager straddles two sofas, sitting on the two armrests with *xer* right hand resting on one piece of furniture and *xer* leg left leg draped over the other. It visually hints at muxenity being the in-between identity, combining male and female characteristics but not vying for recognition as either male or female. The *muxe* is wearing a pair of tight denim shorts and a fitted t-shirt with a gold foil print spelling 'Rock & Roll' in big letters across *xer* chest. *Xer* legs and arms are smooth and hairless. The pose itself displays a mixture of seductiveness, through the subject's arched back and long, exposed legs splayed on either side of the armrest, and teenage attitude evident in the *muxe*'s defiant gaze and *xer* pout. It is precisely this combination of marked self-awareness in terms of muxenity and the *muxe*'s evident youth that make this image a disconcerting representation of embodied gendered experience, for which there are no set cut-off points, such as age of consent.

This image clearly represents someone in the process of growing into *xer* adult gender identity. The palpable liminality captured within the portrait in compositional and gendered terms is also intimately connected to the age of the subject, frozen in time during *xer* adolescence, a liminal period between childhood and adulthood. This compels viewers to consider the temporal frame of *xer* gender identity, necessarily reframing it, not as an ontological given and an existential certainty (Mirandé 2015: 12), but as a dynamic process of becoming (Butler 1993: 117; Redclift 2003: 491). At this theoretical juncture, it is particularly useful to refer to Brilliant's arguments that portraits are relational in their tendency to capture what the artist and the subject would like others to see (2013: Location 206), and always position the self in relation to the wider community. The teenager's visibility and the viability of *xer* choices, gendered or otherwise, are dependent upon the norms which govern *xer* life. These norms, nonetheless, do not foreclose the possibility of exercising one's agency, even if they have the power to determine any such agency. As Butler argues, individual agency is 'riven with paradox' because it is opened up by the fact that individuals are constituted by a social world they do not choose (2015: Location 96). The compelling nature of this photograph lies precisely in its ability to momentarily capture both the constraints and the freedoms of growing up as a *muxe* in an instance of singular teenage vulnerability spread between two old sofas.

This portrait is a testament to socio-cultural conditions in Juchitán, which recognize being *muxe* as a valid and liveable identity. However, while acknowledging specific circumstances, which make muxenity possible, it is important not to romanticize Juchitán as a place where prejudice and discrimination are absent. Although the belief that *muxes* are born to be *muxes* permeates Juchitán's culture, that is not to claim that their acceptance within familial and social

structures is unconditional, or that their gender difference is necessarily always welcome (Mirandé 2015: 12; also *Muxes: auténticas, intrépidas, buscadoras de peligro* 2005). Mirandé points out that the tolerant attitude to the *muxes* within Zapotec culture, although more welcoming than elsewhere in Mexico, is linked to their position within the family and their relationships with others, and not to their exceptional gender status. As shown by Alejandra Islas in her documentary, *muxes* are expected to continue living with their parents and provide care for them, significantly limiting their options to form long-term relationships (see *Muxes: auténticas, intrépidas, buscadoras de peligro* 2005: 16:20–16:40). This important sociological observation demystifies Juchitán's status as a queer paradise (Flores Martos 2012: 322), instead showing that the recognition of the *muxe* identity and lifestyle is an ongoing negotiation between intrinsic desires and social demands, underpinned by strong family bonds and concrete gendered expectations placed on the *muxes*.

Within that context, the photograph of the young *muxe* offers a contrast between *xer* position and the photographs hanging on the wall behind *xer*. The posters, each showing several smaller pictures of boys' and young men's haircuts can be read as a visual blueprint for a heteronormative identity. Inside a hairdressing salon, they serve a specific purpose of showcasing available cuts. Within the confines of Frioli's composition and this analysis thereof, they function as a photographic reminder of what Butler terms 'productive constraints' of gendered choices (1993: xi), showing acceptable masculine ways to style one's hair. The relatively subtle contrast between the *muxe*'s appearance and the appearance of the young men photographed behind *xer* visually exposes the fluidity of gender boundaries and the relative meaning of subtle cultural differences which mark the main subject of the photograph as other. Not only is this a photographic showcase of the nuances of gender; on a meta-photographic level, this representation also points to the indispensability of visual cues for recognizing and distinguishing identities, powerfully showcasing the significance of visual representation for social and cultural recognition. Within the context of Juchitán, this layering of photographic representations sets the young *muxe* against the background of masculine expectations.

Photography's ability to freeze appearances makes the lived, embodied experience of never being able to freeze time all the more obvious (Cadava 1997: 7), which is in this instance further emphasized by the subject's youth. As Parvati Nair argues, photography as a mechanism of transmission breaks up and reshuffles 'unities of time and space and [relays] the past into the present, whilst simultaneously gesturing to the future' (Nair 2011: 12). By drawing viewers' attention to the young age of the *muxe*, this photograph compels a reflection on individuals' temporal relationship to norms that govern their life, and to the temporal and, therefore, transient nature of any such normativity. These norms, which not only supersede any individual (Butler 2015: Location 64) but are also an effect of power (Butler 1993: 123) – in the photograph they are symbolized as prescribed haircut choices hanging behind the young *muxe* – can seem very rigid. However,

analysing normativity in temporal terms, while accepting the distortion that inevitably comes from one's own spatio-temporal constraints, helps to see the revolutionary potential of individual agency, even if it is derived from the very norms it seeks to oppose.

The best local testament to the pliability of such norms and their flux within post-colonial contexts is the Catholic Church's active support of the *muxe* community in Juchitán through their organizing of an annual Mass as part of the traditional celebration of La Vela, which can be best described as a *muxe* beauty pageant (*Muxes: auténticas, intrépidas, buscadoras de peligro* 2005: 86:73–95:21). Elsewhere, a bastion of conservative gender roles, whose theology is partly based on the divine sanctity of the gender binary, the Catholic Church in Juchitán actively supports *muxes*. Its local backing of the *muxes* constitutes part of their widespread acceptance within the community, but also shows how different local contexts and embodied experiences influence the expression of normativity, even in a highly institutionalized framework, such as that of the Catholic Church. Within the frame of this photograph, the *muxe*'s youth is not the only marker of fluidity and becoming. Despite their apparent fixity, the heteronormative snapshots behind *xer* are also caught in the same photographic moment, which reminds viewers that haircuts are subject to fickle vagaries of fashions. This points to the styles' own ephemeral nature, even if they represent norms that have a significant bearing on the processes of gendering. Published on a website with a global audience, the photograph urges viewers to consider transcultural processes within 'the struggle over meanings and moralities of body and sexuality, as well as the ways in which these meanings cross boundaries, interact and are articulated' (Redclift 2003: 487).

The choice to photograph a young *muxe*, someone clearly still in the process of forming their own identity, makes visible the opaque relationship between embodiment as a subjective experience and a socio-cultural position. It also draws attention to the importance of clothing as a marker of identity, since this is the only image within the series where the traditional Oaxacan clothing is conspicuous by its absence. The flesh on show represents the inescapably corporal nature of any gendered performance, and the photograph allows for a sensory, visual experience of the subject's embodiment without immediately relying on a discursive description. At least momentarily, the experience of looking allows for the shunning of discourse whose reference to the body always constitutes additional information on that body (Butler 1993: 10), establishing its intelligibility. Although looking is presented here, at least for an instance, as extra-discursive, that is not to claim that it functions in a less regulatory manner, for the *muxe*'s embodiment is clearly fixed within a specific spatio-temporal frame and against visual regulatory schemas hanging behind *xer* on the wall. Photography's inescapable link to the time and place it represents help to focus Butler's theory on a different context, where its plasticity and adaptability can be tested. In other words, photography provides a local anchor for a critical enquiry.



Figure 3. *Lo femenino*: Portrait of an older muxe

How does this process of informing theory through photographic representation happen? Ókin Frioli offers up portraits of a community defined by their gender, one which associates muxenry with ‘lo femenino’ (Mirandé 2015: 21).

The photograph of an older *muxe* looking into a mirror (Figure 3), which will be subject of analysis in the following part of this paper, represents such femininity. This is a clear uncoupling of womanliness as a socio-cultural construct from the biological reality of being female. On the one hand, such separation can be seen as proof of the radical possibilities of challenging heteronormative gender identifications. On the other hand, it is also proof of the inescapable gendering which constitutes the human as a category, even if such gendering happens to cross and merge the binary opposition of male versus female. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler argues that ‘[t]he very attribution of femininity to female bodies as if it were a natural or necessary property takes place within a normative framework in which the assignment of femininity to femaleness is one mechanism for the production of gender itself’ (2015: Location 204).

Muxenry, as represented by Ókin Frioli, clearly shows how people who fall outside of the hegemonic gender binaries can appropriate femininity. It also evidences a normative framework which makes such a designation a liveable possibility. The individuality of each photograph and its subject demonstrates how the singularity and viability of each individual’s life choices is constrained by socio-cultural structures.

The photograph of a middle-aged *muxe*, who is framed looking into a mirror hung on the wall, explicitly probes the relationship between individuality and

normative frameworks. Compositionally, the most striking feature of the image is its chaotic design. In contrast to the clean lines and straight angled perspective of the previous photograph, this one offers a tilted snapshot of a wall where the mirror reflecting the *muxe* is hung. On the wall, *xer* reflection competes for attention with an electric socket, a couple of wooden geometric tolos and a random cable running along the wall, as well as a few nails, scribbles, and other imperfections. A small sideboard strewn with fabric and make-up cuts the mirror in half. This is a conscious break with portraiture conventions, which often aim for a clean composition that does not detract attention from the main subject of the image and tends to ‘conceal the individual’s personal idiosyncrasies and expose only those features that are known to make the best impression’ (Brilliant 2013: Location 144). Here, the unsettling composition, arranged off-centre in relation to the *muxe*, is a visual reminder of muxenity as both a marginal and a fluid phenomenon, one which escapes easy categorizations.

The wall itself only serves as a messy frame for the compelling chaos visible within the mirror. The *muxe* is standing against the sideboard, admiring *xer* own reflection and fixing *xer* hair with a smile on her face. *Xe* is wearing makeup and is dressed in a sumptuously embroidered *huipil*, *xer* black hair pinned back and adorned with a bright pink flower, which matches the embroidered pattern on her chest. *Xe* is wearing a royal blue *huipil* with a light blue skirt, its border embroidery partially obscured by the sideboard. A pair of golden earrings and a golden medalion adorns the traditional outfit. *Xer* traditional dress underlines the inextricable link between muxenity and Zapotec cultural heritage (Mirandé 2015; Subero 2013) and it is this visually represented socio-cultural connection which shows that the recognition and viability of the *muxes* and their lifestyles is based on their gendered behaviour. The image of a traditionally dressed *muxe* looking into a mirror offers a visual representation of the type of gendered performance required for an association with ‘lo femenino’, a sine qua non of muxenity. The photographer’s clever positioning of the lens means that although he is not captured in the image, the *muxe* is looking at the reflection of his camera in the mirror. This way, the image that at first glance appears to show the *muxe*’s self-regard can be interpreted as an invitation to reciprocate the gaze through the photographer’s lens. This visual analysis is a response to the photographer’s invitation.

The *muxe* appears to be looking at *xer* own reflection, but *xe* must also be aware of another element reflected in the mirror, uncaptured but visible to *xer* – namely, the photographer’s camera. The subject, therefore, must be aware of other people looking at *xer* through Ókin Frioli’s lens and, through their imaginary gaze and discursive power, constituting part of the way in which *xe* regards *xer*-self. The photograph, therefore, is self-consciously hinting at its own role ‘at the interference between art and social life and [in] the pressure to conform to social norms’ which comes with the awareness of being seen in public (Brilliant 2013: Location 133).

Equally important is the compelling chaos reigning within the reflection. The *muxe* is captured to the right of the mirror, leaning against the sideboard

strewn with a palette of eyeshadows, a hairbrush and a red handbag, among other things. All of these unmistakably feminine accessories underline that, although being a *muxe* might be seen as an intrinsic trait among the Juchitán Isthmus, it also relies on a lot of effort being put into one's appearance in order to conform to that particular gendered identity. In that sense, this image is a contrast to Alejandra Islas' portrayal of the *muxes* in her documentary entitled *Muxes: Auténticas, intrépidas y buscadoras de peligro* (2005) where, as Subero notes, she specifically omits the process of constructing muxenity in order to naturalize it as a third gender (2013: 185). Ókin Frioli's approach could not be more different in showing not just the make-up and feminine accessories but also a large part of the photographed room entirely taken over by different types of fabric, ribbons and craft supplies, mounted onto a corner table visible on the right-hand side of the reflected image. This exposition indicates the amount of private, quiet effort that is required to feel *muxe* and to be recognized as such by others. Rather than rendering the identity inauthentic, the conjuring up of muxenity is a proof of one's commitment to enacting a specific gendered persona and its regulatory demands. The mirror in this image is an ambiguous symbol of both introspection and social scrutiny through the photographer's lens positioned outside of the viewer's field of vision, but present in its power to represent.

This tension between a private look in the mirror and a public rendering of muxenity and ways in which it is enacted reveals the multifaceted aspects of performativity in relation to identity. Both Subero and Mirandé claim that the *muxes*' sense of identity is innate and not derived from their 'sexual performance' (Subero 2013: 181). Apart from relying on a priori concepts of sexual identities, this argument assumes a neoliberal understanding of choice as an unconstrained exercise of individual agency, which is used to produce a specific gendered performance that creates one's identity. Subero also claims that Butler sees the body as an empty vessel that acquires meaning through performance (2013: 181), but Butler's view on the relationship between embodiment and discourse is not quite this linear. In her own words, 'To claim that a discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further information on that body' (Butler 1993: 10).

A gendered identity does not emerge as such as a result of performance, but is a complex and fluid process of constitutive inclusions and exclusions, enacted within a specific spatiotemporal context (1993: 123). However, although 'the "I" [...] emerges only within and as a matrix of gender relations themselves' (7), it is crucial to underline the destabilizing potential of repetition and reiteration, mounting a challenge to hegemonic relationships of power, where an analysis of differently embodied epistemic positions can begin to mount a challenge to such hegemony, without claiming to stand at an instrumental distance from it (123). Ókin Frioli's representation of the *muxe* in the mirror shows the importance of performativity in relation to gender by displaying how a gendered enact-

ment is both an introspective and an extrospective action. Within the frame, the crisscross of gazes through the mirror and across space and time visualizes this complex interrelationship in one photographic instance. It creates a space for a representation of 'lo femenino' uncoupled from procreation, but not from embodiment, creating an important fissure within the gender binary, visualizing its socio-cultural recognition in Juchitán against its lack within the hegemonic Western gender binary.

It is particularly important not to dismiss the importance of performativity in relation to the *muxes* in Juchitán because it illuminates the basis on which they are recognized as an integral part of the Zapotec heritage. Although the two photographs analysed above focus on individuals, within the series of portraits they become part of a collective, a group of people with a gendered identity distinct from men and women. Their enactment of muxenry, both in front of the camera and in everyday life happens within a specific socio-cultural context, which recognizes and allows for such an expression of gender.

The destabilizing aesthetic of this image, its deliberately chaotic composition and decentralized framing constitute a formal signal of its potentially revolutionary content. The captured *muxe* looks jovial, particularly in comparison to the rest of the series where the majority of the people photographed appear sombre. *Xer* feminine appearance in conjunction with *xer* warm facial expression, and *xer* age make her seem maternal, although such an interpretation bears an obvious heteronormative bias. *Xer* successful attribution of highly codified Zapotec femininity as a *muxe* is a clear challenge to the gender binary. This public act of appropriating femininity through muxenry in representation is all the more important because of the symbolic power of the portrayals of femininity within Mexican visual culture (Redclift 2003).

Ókin Frioli's photographs offer a glimpse into the daily life of Juchitán, where gendered choices are prescribed along the spectrum of masculine and feminine, instead of being reduced to the hegemonic binary. That is not to claim that such choices are free of stigma or integrated into the life of the community in an unproblematic way. That such category should come with its own limitations and discriminatory practices merely demonstrates that there are no gender categories which are free of these types of constraints, even if they fall within the hegemonic heteronormative prescription, since constraints help to constitute the boundaries of gender identities. However, his photographs do show that for the Zapotec community the gendered expectations encompass muxenry, of which Frioli Ókin's visual involvement is evidence. In addition to acting as evidence, his choice of using portraits for engaging with the *muxes* also further reinforces the legitimacy of their discrete gender category. This process of visual representation is both a deeply local exercise and one that demands a global audience through its online publication and wide dissemination, its very production a reflection of changing perceptions of gender and sexuality in the West. The global reciprocity of gazes resulting from Ókin Frioli's artistic involvement draws viewers' attention to the fact that any act of individual gendered

performance is also a claim to socio-cultural legibility and liveability, one which always reaches beyond the individual and beyond their community or society. His photographs, as momentary and self-contained snapshots staged and performed for the camera, underline the impossibility of containing gendered identities within available definitions, as ‘every frame suggests more than it contains’ (Bell 2014: 452). This suggestion is enough to demonstrate how conceptions of gender, despite their indispensability for our understanding of each other, and ourselves, are subject to changing socio-cultural norms, in a way not dissimilar from hairdressing fashions, but with existential consequences, particularly for people or groups excluded by current understandings and socio-cultural circumstances. ‘We are Princesses in a Land of Machos’ in its visual contribution to the global horizon of vision expands the very understandings on which its cultural and artistic legibility is based.

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