

## Behind the mask: Gender hybridity in a Zapotec community

Alfredo Mirandé, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 2017,  
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Juchitán, a small city in the Isthmus of Oaxaca, Mexico, has often been written about as a matrifocal and sexual/gender heaven. Alfredo Mirandé's *Behind the Mask: Gender Hybridity in a Zapotec Community* challenges previous romanticized views through an ethnographic study of indigenous gender and sexuality. Through in-depth and informal interviews with Juchitec *muxes*, gay men, lesbians, family, friends, and government officials, Mirandé argues that social acceptance of *muxes*—a hybrid third gender that is neither male nor female—challenges the patriarchal Mexican state run by “machismo” (p. xi).

Because of the vast number of interviews Mirandé conducts over the course of seven years of research, this thematically organized text reads mostly like an ethnographic account of his experience as a researcher and the challenges he finds in attempting to get hold of participants for interviews. Mirandé employs two types of interviews, both formal and *encuentros* (informal “spontaneous”). The latter type occur mostly with interviewees such as taxi drivers, personal gymnastic trainers, schoolchildren, or other random people he meets in public places, such as the *zócalo*, near the basketball courts, and at *muxe velas* (*velas* are sociocultural events for religious, “neighborhood, occupation, or family” Zapotec purposes in the Isthmus, p. 10). Other interviews occur in private settings, such as hair salons, which is where many *muxes* work or hang out, or in the comfort of the interviewees' homes.

Mirandé not only provides extensive descriptions of where his interviews take place, but also gives plentiful background information on his *muxe*, gay, and lesbian interviewees. I believe he does so in order to set a clear distinction between *muxe*—a hybrid third gender that takes on a *pasivo* (passive/receiver) role in sexual encounters—and *mayates* (men who assume either an active sexual role or passive role) and lesbians who have fluidity in how they dress—more masculine

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or more feminine—and can assume either a passive or active role in their relationships and may be more socially accepted when compared to *muxes* because of Juchitán's importance as a matrifocal society.

A major contribution to Latino studies literature, *Behind the Mask* makes a strong and clear distinction between sexual and gender preference not only among *muxes*, gays, and lesbians (although lesbians to a lesser extent), but also delves into the experiences of cis-gender, self-identified heterosexual male *mayates* who have sex with *muxes* “for money” (pp. 26, 90–98). In previous studies, like those of anthropologists Beverly Newbold Chiñas, Marinella Miano Borruso, and Veronika Bennholdt-Thompson, cited throughout the book, *mayates* are relatively absent from the analysis. Therefore, Mirandé allows the reader to understand the sexual experiences not only of *muxes*, but also of the *mayate* who is the *activo* (active) male partner in the sexual relationship. He highlights how *muxes* are more socially accepted and always “out,” compared with *mayates*, who are not. Locating *mayates* to be interviewed was in itself a difficult process, because of their stigmatization and because they usually deny having “sex with other men”; some are even married and see their relationships with *muxes* strictly as a job (p. 93).

Another benefit of this research is that Mirandé's large sample of interviewees illuminates a clear class distinction between being *muxe* and being gay. While *muxes* are associated with being poor and working class, gays are typically regarded as middle and upper class (pp. 151–152). Mirandé identifies class differences by neighborhood: *muxes* are typically associated as coming from Juchitán's *septima sección*, a neighborhood that is known as the poorest, yet one that has retained its Zapotec culture and language the most, whereas gays are commonly associated with *secciones* close to the *centro*, but which are not specified in the text.

*Behind the Mask* engages literature in anthropology, history, and sociology. Mirandé's use of such diverse literature makes for a broad appeal for studying and advancing social justice for indigenous third-gender people, gays, lesbians, and even *mayates*, as these sexual and gender preferences challenge Mexico as a hyper-macho patriarchal nation-state. His careful analysis on sexuality and gender in Oaxaca, one of three Mexican states with the largest indigenous population, demonstrates how indigenous peoples, past and present, have historically challenged and redone dominant gender and sexuality norms and values. His use of mixed qualitative methods and ethnographic work provides a prevalent account on *muxe* lifestyle, indigenous cultural values, beliefs, and social acceptance that promotes interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching.

Mirandé follows the growth of two-spirited literature and contrasts it with early anthropological studies of *berdache*, Native American gender-nonconforming males (p. 165). Unfortunately, his use of two-spirit literature has two shortcomings. First, he mostly focuses on literature from the 1980s, which limits our understanding of how *berdache* and two-spirit scholarship have diverged and how the latter has developed beyond the field of anthropology. Second, I believe that Mirandé could have brought in more literature from indigenous scholars and activists themselves to illustrate from their perspective how indigenous peoples have resisted Western gender and sexual binaries within their communities and at large.



Discussion on two-spirit American Indian literature becomes useful in finding similarities and differences among other indigenous groups in the Americas, which would put this study in conversation with recent scholarship on hemispheric indigenities.<sup>1</sup> Merging American Indian and indigenous Latin America literature is necessary, as it helps us examine how indigenous peoples across the Americas have resisted colonial attitudes and behaviors.

*Behind the Mask: Gender Hybridity in a Zapotec Community* represents an important contribution to gender, sexuality and indigenous studies, particularly making a major contribution to how indigenous peoples are looked at in Latino/a studies and Latin American studies. The book not only provokes disrupting gender and sexual normativity and dominant values that stem from a colonial nation-state like Mexico, but may also serve as a foundation for future scholarship on indigenous two-spirit literature within the emergent field of hemispheric indigeneity studies as it seeks to bring forward the voices of otherwise unrecognized identities.

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<sup>1</sup> Two-spirit(ed) refers to “gender constructions and roles” assumed in indigenous communities that differ from the “Western gender binary” (p. 164).

