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AUTHOR:  Dawn Marie Sax Becerra

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LITERATURE AND WRITING STUDIES.

Dr. Dawn Formo  
THESIS COMMITTEE CHAIR  
SIGNATURE  
DATE

Dr. Ken Mendoza  
THESIS COMMITTEE MEMBER  
SIGNATURE  
DATE

Dr. Linda Pershing  
THESIS COMMITTEE MEMBER  
SIGNATURE  
DATE
Foods Talk/Food Talks

by

Dawn Marie Sax Becerra
Abstract

This text highlights the women and muxe (a third gender) of Juchitán, México. The Cuentitos (little stories) found within emphasize food’s place in traditions and daily life.

Food stories and travel (both mental and physical) are written in a genre-mixing format. The introductions describe the author’s reluctance to follow classic ethnographic studies. Presented are interviews, events, and quotidian life recorded in the winter of 2004.

Key words: Juchitán, Zapotec, Food, Women, Muxe, México
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Lastly I want to thank Manuel, my love, my life, and my constant cheerleader. Thank you for our “vida loca.” It wouldn’t have been nearly as fun without you.

Oh yeah, Chuy and Roxy. I appreciate the presence of you, my four-footed friends. You each earned a bone.
Photographs

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Pronunciation Guide

Vowels are pronounced as in Spanish or Italian: a as in art, father; e as in get; i in police, technique; o as in obey; and u as in bull. The h is an almost silent huff, j is pronounced like the English h. Que and qui sound like kay and key. The r is soft and liquid. Double vowels indicated by two letters (aa) may be rearticulated or pronounced twice in succession. There are three tones of pitch, as the language is tonal, indicated by the direction of the accent: high – ù, middle-u, and low- ù.

Consonants (b,c(hard,) d,g(hard,) k,l,m,n,p,s,t,w,y) are pronounced as in English, and:

ñ—is pronounced as in the sound ny in “canyon.”
ng—should be one sound as in “long,” “singing.”
z—is pronounced as in “zealous.”
x—is pronounced as in “ship.”
xh—is pronounced as a mix of the English sh–60%, and ch–40%.
dx—is pronounced as in “seizure” or as in the French “jour.”

The glottal stop (a sudden pause) is indicated by an apostrophe-á’.

¹This guide is partly my own, but the bulk of it is from Miguel Covarrubias’ Mexico South (306). I believe that generally he did a good job of making Zapotec accessible to English speakers, but I changed some of the Zapotec spelling to reflect the more current, which mimics the more original, usage of the x, and the common combinations of x plus other consonants that may be difficult for the English speaker to sound out.
Dear Reader,

This is a fictional account relating my real journey south to meet the Zapotec people of Juchitán, Oaxaca, México. It recounts my quest to explore and enjoy oral and kinesthetic discourse through the food rituals and food habits of the Juchitecas. Although I have included more authentic conversations and events than fantasy, I hesitate to call my work non-fiction ethnography, and from that moment on, to interrupt your concentration with the constant questions that may tease you regarding "truth," and your faith in my ability to unpack and present it. As Clifford Geertz, a renowned anthropologist explains, "Anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot. (By definition, only a "native" makes first order ones: it's his culture.) They are, thus, fictions: fictions, in the sense that they are "something made," "something fashioned"—the original meaning of fictiō—not that they

1 Juchitecas are the women and muxe (biologically male, socially female) of Juchitán, Oaxaca, México. Throughout this text I will alternate between the terms Juchitecas and Tecas, as they have the same meaning.
are false or unfactual or merely "as if" thought experiments" (15).

This text mimics some ethnographic research in its scope, intent, recording and analysis, and yet in the end it refuses to conform to the (de/il)lusion of the outside researcher who maintains that she occupies a non-position, a tabula rasa, and therefore is able to be perfectly objective in presenting observations and conclusions regarding others; we all pick and choose what we see, and how we present it. I do wish to "represent the reality of a whole world or form of life," and yet I can't imagine that anyone could possibly accomplish that grand end without physically, mentally, and spiritually embodying an entire population from the beginning of time (Marcus and Cushman 29). How could one envision and configure research and reporting so that they would be able to represent, for example, those who have traditionally been denied voice, or conversely those who insist that they are the voice of the people? I met people who presented silences that seemed to speak volumes, but for me to fill-in their personal meaning would be conjecture on my part—something I strive to avoid in this work. I try to (re)present them here and
yet I know that I fall short because I choose to present to you what is offered to me by the people who elected to speak, and in addition, to offer my descriptions of the acts of those who remained silent.

What I can do is give you my own version of my own journey: the why, where, who, when, and what of my reporting, and then invite you to read my translation of the words and experience through description of the actions of the people I talked and walked with for four months in the winter of 2004. I offer you a less authoritative account than a classic anthropologic monograph, and as Kamala Visweswaran, a feminist anthropologist admonishes in *Fictions of Feminist Ethnographies*, I ask you, the reader, if you prefer a challenge, to "continually question it as ethnography" or a fictive work (41). Please enjoy the multiple levels of meaning you may experience, and glean a glimpse of people you don’t know, and yet can meet, by following my steps into the Juchitecas' world, and listening and "seeing" their stories as I did. I cannot offer you the smells, tastes, sights, and sounds of Juchitán in any other way than by serving you my version of their words and acts.
¡Buen Provecho!

Dawn
Introduction: I Taste What You Mean

The title of my work is Foods Talk/ Food Talks. This title bespeaks the substance of my work that demonstrates stories of food, and performance of food rituals and food habits, which manifest in a form of discourse. History has informed us orally and through the written word about food’s importance, but if we pay attention, the actions and products of growing, buying, preparing, and serving food speak equally as loud. In Juchitán these conversations are important and pervasive. The women and muxe\textsuperscript{1} in Juchitán are in charge of their food, in the market where they conduct the sales, at home where they cook daily, and in the numerous fiestas where they orchestrate the traditional feasts.

Food must be taken in by the human body, and it can bring contentment and joy in the ultimate acquiescence to this physical necessity. Food cures our ills and in some cases, conversely, can end our lives. One of the first things we do after birth is take in nourishment. From

\textsuperscript{1} Muxe (moo-SHAY) are men who define a third gender that is “freely accepted and tolerated in Isthmus Zapotec society” (Campbell “Renaissance” 238). They often wear the traditional women’s dress of the area and socially act as women, taking on the women’s work which is clearly defined. “Some marry women and have children; others form long-term relationships with men” (Stephen 2002) and “prominent men rumored to be homosexual who did not adopt the muxe identity were spoken of pejoratively” (Rubin 233).
early feedings that are generally between us and a family member we go on to eat and cook alone, and with others.

Food is a necessary conversation, or way of communicating, that helps to shape our unique identities. This tangible form of discourse helps us remember our past, connect with our present, and imagine our future.²

With that meal it seemed they had discovered a new system of communication, in which Tita was the transmitter, Pedro the receiver, and poor Gertrudis the medium, the conducting body through which the singular sexual message was passed.

Laura Esquivel
Like Water for Chocolate

Food is the language we use to express ourselves in a simple meal or for rituals. For passages and holidays, as medicine, for a welcome, or as a farewell, each act portrays an emotion, a message that speaks to our own and others hearts and souls, as well as to our appetites and hunger; sexual and physical, emotional and spiritual.

Food as discourse or as text is richly layered. Planning our menus the flavors co-mingle in our minds as we picture the colors and textures on the plate. While shopping, we feel, smell, and assess, the beauty of the food we buy. Cooking, we are often collaborating with a

² "Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx and Freud, in spite of their divergences, agree that eating is the origin of subjectivity" (Ellman 39).
friend or relative at the stove and chopping block, sharing the beauty of creation and memory. We teach others our recipes in order to maintain and pass on our traditions, and we explore the aesthetics and acts of our own, and others' cultures, as we continue to form our identities. And we eat. We eat together to express gratitude towards one another, to give love, to celebrate passages in our lives. We eat to live, but it is so much more.

There is a kind of sorcery in all cooking; in the choosing of ingredients, the process of mixing, grating, melting, infusing, and flavoring, the recipes taken from ancient books, the traditional utensils—the pestle and mortar with which my mother made her incense turned to a more homely purpose, her spices and aromatics giving up their subtleties to a baser, more sensual magic.

Harris Chocolat

Love, memory, joy, frustration, boredom, hate, contentment, and lust—among others—are doled out, ensconced in the dishes. This has been going on for centuries in the Spanish-speaking world both new and old. “Typically, women made men ‘eat’ their witchcraft, using their power over the domain of food preparation for subversive ends, a practice that was common in pre-Hispanic times as well as in sixteenth and seventeenth
century Castile” (Behar Witchcraft 186). Similar actions, albeit modified in their ingredients and ceremony by time, still exist in Juchitán, as you will experience with my visit with a witch. In Cuentitos, the witch explains that food will be the vehicle for the “spells” she will perform on my neighbors:

What can you do with food? If I perhaps have neighbors that I have problems with...
It is easy. What do you want? Do you want to send them quickly (kill them) or just make them stop what they are doing to you? I can take care of both of those.

Becerra
Cuentitos Bidxaa/Witch

In places where women have little or no voice, food may be the only means they are permitted to utilize for release of their feelings and creativity. Women have uncovered food as an avenue to dominate an area of their lives, their world. By withholding or presenting food, controlling the economics of buying or not, infusing their food with care and love, or purposely careless preparation, they have been able to convey their messages. Women gather at stoves and sinks, at the grinding stones and around fires, bonding while they show and tell their food stories to one another. They then
present the fruits of their labors to others, sharing their passions through the handiwork of their “text.”

In Juchitán the women have controlled their food in its acquisition, preparation, and dispersion, since before the Spanish arrived in the sixteen century. Food is, and has been, a reliable voice and an unquestionable force throughout the history of Juchitán. The Juchitecas are legendary in México. They are known as possessing greater autonomy than most other women in México, which can be seen in their ownership of market business, and control of family economic resources (Rubin 37). There are writings by the conquistadors that tell us stories about their awe and mistrust of the Juchitecas’ strength and power, most of which is based on control of the economy and cultural memory, through food.  

Food and its preparation can also be linked to the oppression of women. It can be, and often is, enforced labor, something made ugly by the powers-that-be, whether that refers to their husbands, families, employers, or owners. It exacts its toll on the creativity of women too—simply by the time-consuming effort it demands,

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3 Juchitecas refers to women and muxe of Juchitán.
4 Campbell 72 1990 qtd.in Rubin 1997; Brasseaur 1981 159-161.
leaving little energy for self. I don’t deny these truths, and yet in the Juchitecas’ control of their economics, social construct, and personal power, in and with food, I see “[...] the ways in which women have forged spaces within that oppression.” Arlene Voski Avakian, in her book about women exploring the intimate meaning of food and cooking continues: “Cooking becomes a vehicle for artistic expression, a source of sensual pleasure, an opportunity for resistance and even power. By reclaiming cooking we insure that we are not throwing the spaghetti out with the boiling water” (6).

The food stories I relate here begin with some background information regarding my research focus. Next, I present historical information about the Juchitecos. This information was gleaned through reading and inquiries in their Cultural Center Library, research in California, and through interviews in Juchitán. Following that, you will travel down the coast with me as I adjust my thesis to better suit my sensibilities and the people I involve in my work. I then take you along on five food related forays in Juchitán, Oaxaca, called Cuentitos:

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5 Juchitecos denotes either all males or males, females, and muxes. In this case I mean the latter.
Edible Discourse from Juchitán.⁶ I end with reflections, "Is the Meal Ready?" concerning my choice of inquiry and its presentation. In the Appendix I have included my original research purpose and questions, and I present a Works Cited section.

If you prefer, you may wish to stop reading right here and jump right to the Cuentitos, because you may enjoy them more by not having too many "facts." If you enjoy background information, like to sit in on decision-making, and want to join me in travel, go ahead and read from start to finish.

If I tell the smiling people who sip at it that it is made of mashed shrimps and especially buttermilk, they wince, gag, hurry away. So I say nothing, and serve it from invisible hogsheads to unconscious but happy hordes.

M.F.K. Fisher
The Art of Eating

⁶ Cuentitos is Spanish for Little Stories.
Binni Sicarú (Bee-nee see-ka-RU) / The Beautiful People

In the fall of 2003 I prepared an investigation designed for application in the winter of 2004, in the town of Juchitán de Zaragoza, Oaxaca, México. I had proposed a study to California State University San Marcos’ Institutional Review Board emphasizing the muxe and women’s roles in the Juchiteco\textsuperscript{1} family. My investigation was based on information I gathered regarding this town’s acceptance and the mothers’ preference for the muxe, muxe and women’s agency, the resistance of the community to past and present colonialization, and the present-day emphasis on language and culture. My plan was to conduct a survey of the general population, and to do extensive research in libraries and in public and private records.\textsuperscript{2}

Juchitán de Zaragoza is a town in the South of México, located on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, about 375 kilometers northwest of Guatemala and 34 kilometers north of the Pacific Ocean. The people speak Zapotec and Spanish. It is a market town that has the distinct

\textsuperscript{1} That which belongs to, or is from Juchitán.
\textsuperscript{2} See the Appendix for the original proposal and interview.
reputation of being "run" by the women.³ The muxe and women have the freedom to move about publicly, own property and their own businesses, and they maintain control over most of the money, making this town unique in the country of México (Rubin 1, 37). Although women administer the bulk of the money, the men retain a small "portion of money that is for personal use called xhqui ni (his penis)" (Campbell 234).

Juchitán has a voluminous history of rebellion and independence against the English, French, United States, Spanish and the Mexican government "and [its inhabitants] are renowned as the most ferocious, untamable fighters of Mexico when it comes to the defense of their own rights against petty tyrants" (Covarrubias 160). In Jeffrey Rubin’s book Decentering the Regime, and Howard Campbell’s Zapotec Renaissance and Zapotec Struggles, one can read the history of the Juchitecos ongoing struggles, losses, and gains. Due to their strength, and the unyielding opinions and actions that they have formed in order to keep their culture and language alive, the

³ Many from the outside say it is run by the women due to facts that follow. The Juchitecos say that it is a partnership. See Director Maureen Gosling’s movie A Skirt Full of Butterflies.
Juchitecos have resisted colonialization and continue to resist globalization.

"What have remained distinct about Juchitán through history is the importance of Zapotec ethnic identity and the use of that identity as a basis for regional political autonomy" (Stephen 2002 43). The Juchitecos have experienced some historical and present loss of their Zapotec culture and language due to hegemonic intrusion, but as in the past, they "continued to oppose foreign domination up to the present day" (Campbell 216).

Juchitan born Floria Saynes-Vasquez, an anthropologist, writes that the "strength of the ethnic identity through the language is reflected in the ways Juchiteco people are responding to the shift of their vernacular language." They have initiated a language reversal which "seeks to reverse the replacement of the native language" (250). In Juchitan language maintenance has always been important, and Covarrubias opines in his classic work México South, that "[t]his pride of the Juchitecos in their language is again a manifestation of their nationalistic complex" (305).
Since the 1970s, the Coalición de Obreros Campesinos Estudiantil del Istmo (COCEI), a grassroots political organization based in Juchitán, has been one of the only local indigenous movements that has had success in México, forging and maintaining autonomy from the central Mexican government. Zapotec ethnicity, language, gender, and religion are an integral part of the struggle of the COCEI in their formation and in their gains (Rubin 266-270). The COCEI established the Cultural Center in the 1970s and it still functions today as an anchor in the maintenance of the Juchitecos cultural identity.5

Women and muxe have always held a most important (but still second to males) role in the politics of Juchitán. There are numerous legends that describe women fending off the French,6 Americans, English, Spanish, and the Mexican power bloc in physical combat. Through their refusal to abandon their language, autonomy, and customs, they have confirmed their refusal to succumb to national

4 Coalición de Obreros, Peasants and Students of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.
5 The Casa de la Cultura was started in the 1970s by the COCEI (Student, Worker, Peasant organization of the Isthmus) which identified with the Communist leftist movement at the time. It provides Zapotec classes in language, cooking, dance, art, history. It houses a library, gallery, offices, a museum and bookstore.
rule. In the past the muxe tended to favor the powerful conservative Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Industrial-PRI). They switched allegiance in 2003 when a new political party—México Possible—a women-centered movement, stemming from the same leftist roots as the COCEI, but emphasizing gender issues, backed (but lost in a close race) Zapotec muxe Amaranta Gomez in her run for Congress.

In Juchitán, women's market savvy and ownership of food-related businesses are the most significant economic factors. Food plays an important role in all aspects of women's lives, in the political rallies that incorporate the aesthetics of the culture by way of traditional food, clothing, music and speech, in their daily preparation and market negotiations, and in the elaborate velas.

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7 Zapotec Women have been key participants in Isthmus markets since colonial times, if not before, as Torres de Laguna (1983) and many subsequent observers have noted. (Campbell 234).

8 Velas translates to Candles, but are the names of the types of yearly festivals they have in Juchitán celebrating saints, family names, sections of the city, and occupations. They are grand, expensive, undertakings that are planned up to a year in advance. There are twenty-six official, but many other unofficial yearly velas (Musálem López 55). "it seems likely that they have pre-Hispanic antecedents in rites celebrating the change of the seasons, the agricultural cycle [...] (Campbell) This is [...] another variation on or offshoot of what is known elsewhere in Mesoamerica as the fiesta system, cargo system, cofradías, or the civil-religious hierarchy (Cancian: Smith; qtd in Campbell 131)
where there is an "exchange of information and the fostering of various kinds of family, neighborhood, community and political solidarities" (Chiñas 1983).

In my presentation of events in Juchitán, I give examples of the women's agency by way of food: their negotiations in commerce, in quotidian life as well as in life passages. One can easily imagine that the Juchiteco's traditions and traditional foods that I speak about relate powerful messages within their society, and looking in from the outside, as they allowed me to do, they showed me the social, economic, emotional and spiritual power food portrays in their lives. I feel that through participation in their food-speak, I've been introduced to their history which relates to their present life, and I will always carry around a bit of them and their traditions in my heart.
Un taco de “carnitas” le dejó un gusano en el cerebro

En la sala del hogar que ha comprado para que su padre viva sus años de retiro en Sun City, las mejillas de Dawn Becerra se ruborizan al mismo tiempo que no puede controlar su risa para no perder pronunciando “chiripteca”, como la llamaba a su abuela, por años. Mi hija, que se quedó escondida en el interior de la enorme cama de madera de su cabecero, después de haber

My illness was news in the USA and Mexico

Our “House” 2004

Washing Clothes
Chaa Guete/I am Going South

Thoughts during the Journey to Juchitán

We, my husband Manuel and I, made our way South to Juchitán via the West coast of México. We drove in a truck with a camper on the top. The reasons we chose this method of transportation and accommodations are many, but the important factors are that we wanted to be able to pull ourselves out of the mainstream, on occasion, and to have our privacy and cleanliness in the bathroom. I contracted an extremely dangerous illness, by way of food and or food preparation in México a few years back, and so must be careful what I eat and drink. It is also very important that the people not see that I eschew their fare so that I don’t offend them. Having our own refrigeration, water purifier and stove are extremely important to us. México has many problems with food preservation, clean water, and agricultural controls. They often use black water to irrigate, and pesticides and herbicides are often misused.

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9 When Carlos Salinas, then a candidate for Senator, later President of Mexico, visited the Isthmus and refused to eat the traditional Isthmus cuisine, the women were not pleased (Campbell “Renaissance” 237).
The trip map to Juchitán is dotted with the places we set up camp.\textsuperscript{10} I remember most of them by their communal laundry areas and the people I met while I did my daily wash. The sites we stay in during our journeys to México are often run by a family living at the campground or on the land, and I wash our clothes in the same washboard sinks they use. Because most people from the USA and Canada who travel are accustomed to using automatic washers, they don’t consider the option of hand washing; they wait until a washer woman or a machine is located. Living in México for many years as a hand-washing, non-rich gringa, I realize that it is risky to let laundry pile up. One doesn’t always find a place to wash other than a raging river, and the cost is usually high when someone else does it by hand; therefore it is practical to hand-wash whenever one can. I do both Manuel’s and my laundry because we barter. He does most of the driving, and I wash and cook.

I met Rosa, who lived and worked with her family at the campground in Aticama, Nayarit, as she was washing her family’s clothing. This was my first conversation

\textsuperscript{10} Trip map on page 14.
this trip, with someone engaged in quotidian life in México. We talked about the area, her husband and children, and my life as a teacher/researcher. We laughed and traded stories for more than an hour as we washed our clothes.

I always encounter a Mexican woman who likes to swap tales and share a piece of her life with me while washing. Due to machismo and customs, women in the towns we stop in usually do not speak to men in more than a passing manner, and the women they meet from outside their country seldom speak much Spanish. She, like most of the women I meet at the washing spots, told me she was astounded that I spoke Spanish "como uno" (like one, like a regular (Mexican) person). I told her that I had lived in México for years, and that seemed to be a suitable introduction; she spoke with me like an old friend.

People we meet, especially the women, are usually extremely eager to hear about my and my husband's lives in the USA, our travels throughout other parts of México, and about my recipes for food and medicines of my own invention or those originating in other parts of México. I gave Rosa a recipe for making pasta with a cream and
shrimp sauce, and we ended our conversation with her advice and instructions for purchasing the giant blue shrimp from the area: from whom I should purchase them, from where they should originate, the bucket of ice they should be immersed in, and what they should look and smell like. Her suggestions yielded the freshest, largest (17 centimeters long), tastiest shrimp I’ve ever eaten. Besides their size, their blue color was dreamy! Because of the local food, friendly people, and lovely surroundings, we enjoyed two delicious weeks there.

While in Aticama I read Ruth Behar’s The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart. The book relates her (a renowned Cuban-American Jewish anthropologist’s) exploration of self, concerning the inseparability of personal experience and emotion from ethnographic observation and writing. As I read the book, I had a gnawing feeling that my planned research was wrong for me and the people I would research. The first three pages in Behar have so much meaning for me that I was brought to a full stop regarding my planned investigation. I felt profound confusion and doubt about my methods and the premise of my research. I, too, have a
difficult time knowing where to draw the line regarding what should be reported and written about. I cannot, by my nature, ignore my sentiments or close my eyes to the impact my research may have on my "subjects," with the aim of being objective. I don't want to. For me, ethnographic empathy is important and affords greater meaning. When we write we do not disappear, no matter how hard we try.

Behar writes:

In 1985 an avalanche in Columbia buried an entire village in mud. Isabel Allende, watching the tragedy on television, wanted to express the desperation she felt as she helplessly observed so many people being swallowed by the earth. In her short story "Of Clay We Are Created," Allende writes about Omaira Sánchez, a thirteen-year-old girl who became the focus of obsessive media attention. News-hungry photographers, journalists, and television camera people, who could do nothing to save the girl's life, descended upon her as she lay trapped in the mud, fixing their curious and useless eyes on her suffering. Amid that horrid audience of onlookers
which included Allende herself watching the cruel "show" on the screen, she places the photographer Rolf Carlé. He too has been looking, gazing, reporting, taking pictures. Then something snaps in him. He can no longer bear to watch silently from behind the camera. He will not document tragedy as an innocent bystander. Crouching down in the mud, Rolf Carlé throws aside his camera and flings his arms around Omaira Sánchez as her heart and lungs collapse.

The vulnerable observer par excellence, Rolf Carlé incarnates the central dilemma of all efforts at witnessing. In the midst of a massacre, in the face of torture, in the eye of a hurricane, in the aftermath of an earthquake, or even, say, when horror looms apparently more gently in memories that won’t recede and so come pouring forth in the late-night quiet of a kitchen, as a storyteller opens her heart to a story listener, recounting hurts that cut deep and raw into the gullies of the self, do you, the observer, stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand? Are
there limits—of respect, piety, pathos—that should not be crossed, even to leave a record? But if you can’t stop the horror, shouldn’t you at least document it? (1-2)

This passage brought to the surface some critical questions and concerns I had regarding my original research directed towards the muxe. Although their situation does not involve a critical crisis (such as Omaira Sánchez’), there are grave concerns expressed by the muxe community regarding the changes they have seen recently in regards to prejudice and acceptance.¹¹ The muxe and their fellow citizens live in a manner that is different from the norm in their own country, as well as in the USA, and from these outsiders’ position the muxe are peculiar. Much of the encroaching outside world seems to demonstrate little tolerance or understanding for social and gender variety, and I questioned if it would be in the muxe’s best interest to expose them to my scrutiny, and then later to the added public exposure by way of my studies and publication. I didn’t know if I should be asking them personal, revealing questions about

¹¹ See Patricio Enriquez’ movie, Queer Paradise. A muxe relates the story of a murder she believes is a hate crime against a muxe.
a lifestyle that is considered incomprehensible and immoral by much of the world. I considered México and the USA’s long-held systems of belief regarding the two gender system, and realized that outsiders could have difficulty understanding the Juchitecos three gender reality that I found fascinating and superior to ours. Would I be able to explain, from within our Eurocentric canon and language, something for them that is an acceptable "natural" choice, but for others is distant from what is believed to be normal?

My first thought was concerning the extent of first-hand knowledge I had of the muxe—there were some living in the town in México I had lived in years before—but all my information about them at that time was anecdotal and from unreliable sources. I had read the book by Marinella Miano Borruso\(^\text{12}\) called Hombre, mujer y muxe en el Istmo de Tehuantepec\(^\text{13}\) and felt that I understood Juchitán’s gender and social construction as well as one can through reading. There is very little other written history regarding the muxe. I had read a few accounts of muxe

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\(^{12}\) Miano Borruso is a Mexican anthropologist who has focused her research on the Zapotecs’ gender and ethnic construction in Juchitán, and is known in México as an expert in her field.  
\(^{13}\) In English the title is Man, woman, muxe on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The book is not available in English.
scattered throughout the books that focused on women’s power in Juchitán, and they had briefly and inadequately explained the muxe’s social and gender roles. The only other sources available were a few movies (Gosling, Enriquez,) and a few sensationalists’ articles (Clement 2003; Tuckman 2003).

Later I asked myself if my motives were sensationalist. I considered the way the USA has used homosexual issues to further political and capitalist agendas.14 Although not accepted as a valid lifestyle choice, “gayness” has now been put under the pop culture umbrella with TV shows such as Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, Queer Eye for the Straight Girl, and Will and Grace. Homosexuality has become a new style instead of a sexual or social orientation. To make light of the muxe, to categorize them using our “brand” of homosexuality, to trivialize their traditional women’s dress or their attachment to their mothers would be a tragedy, and I would hate to be a catalyst. Would my research prove to facilitate exploitation? These questions required more

14 See Byron La Masters “Gay Themes Sell.”
information and future vision, neither one of which I had.

Introspection was not helping me make any progress towards a workable solution. I chose instead to attend a festival celebrating the fishing folk of San Blas, Nayarit, where I experienced the blessing of the fishing fleet, ate local food, listened to music and saw a spectacular, dangerous, fireworks display featuring a spinning Jesus on the Cross.

Instead of making any big decisions regarding my project, I put indecision aside, and for a few days concentrated instead on the Zapotec language skills I knew I’d need in Juchitán. I had bought a small Zapotec missionary dictionary¹⁵ (the only semi-complete Isthmus Spanish/Zapotec dictionary I’d seen at that time), and realized that the language was nothing like Spanish. I had imagined that it would be similar but instead, it is more like Chinese in its tonal nature and to me, Zapotec sounds closer to Japanese mixed with the Navajo language. Unlike Spanish, it “does not distinguish gender except in the case of some Spanish loanwords” (Britton 8). There

¹⁵ Pickett’s Summer Institute dictionary, used primarily to translate the Bible for missionary purposes.
are at least thirteen different versions of Zapotec, and to find any linguistic help with a concentration in the area of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, where Juchitán is located, would be difficult, if not impossible. I trudged ahead—practicing the numbers and common phrases. That was plenty!

We left the San Blas area and arrived in the city of Colima after a few days travel along the coast, then inland through the isolated Sierra Madres. Colima is a quiet city, lovely in its stillness. It seems far away from any other place in México in attitude, although it is only seventy-five miles from the large city of Guadalajara. Not rural, not urban, not Spanish, not indigenous, it is Mestiza: a blend of the new and old. Sitting quietly at the base of the volcanoes of Snow and Fire, the first dormant and the other active, the people live comfortably at nature's mercy.

It was here that I decided to read Trinh Min-ha’s *Woman Native Other*. This is a book that I had tried to read a few months before, but could not understand. In Colima I found the peace and quiet that allowed for her thoughts to inform mine.
Trinh's book is about writing, about language, about a relationship with the other, the questioning of power and who owns it, the privilege of education, and the guilt of living in an other-than "third-world" country—enjoying its fruits to the detriment of the world. She writes about the frustration of being a woman writer in a world of men's words, using one's body to write, the oral tradition, and the reassembling of story. She examines the "proper" anthropologist, who uses scientific objectivity as a methodological goal, and with that classic election and reporting style gains the public's assumption of her/him as a purveyor of truth. Trinh states: "One of the conceits of anthropology lies in its positivist dream of a neutralized language that strips off all its singularity to become nature's exact, unmisted reflection" (53).

Reading and rereading Trinh words, I found that the questions I had regarding my research became more complex. Could I do this research and present anything of value to the people I choose to research? Is that necessary? I felt that writing about the "other" was naturally rife with subjectivity and critical enough in
choosing which details, facts and experiences to present. Should I concentrate on a theme that would not be subject to my confusion, such as learning the Zapotec language, and therefore forgo my introspection and uncertainty? That way I wouldn’t chance bothering people by my presence, my queries, and later publication. I became irritated and unable to concentrate at this point. Trinh’s writing does that to me. It demands thought, and it compelled me to reconstruct my thesis and methods of research.

I had seen Trinh’s movie, Reassemblage, the year before. It is about anthropology, ethnography, and standing next to, not gazing on, others. Many of the concepts in Woman Native Other came alive in the film. She demonstrates the old National Geographic Eurocentric style of ethnographic study that speaks for the “natives” from a superior position and alters it with overlapping images, creating a new pastiche with her style—letting the pictures of those studied speak for themselves. This idea appealed to me and my sensibilities. I could imagine working with pictures and personal narrative as a feasible “outsider’s” representation.
**Reassemblage** is a movie that within its own context questions the value of any anthropological study, including Trinh’s own. I did take issue with it; she presents the people’s words, but artistically breaks up their voices, and some would say this removes agency. Although that may be part of the message that this movie is about: letting others speak for themselves, but recognizing that their voices inevitably come through edited, and therefore mutated by the composer/director/author.

Trinh’s work helped me to work out some of the confusing sentiments I had regarding the work I had planned to do. I knew that my reporting had to be undertaken in a manner different from that of either the classic anthropologists, the present-day sensationalists, the scholarly research done from a distance, the “native,” or the casual observer. I forced myself to imagine what my presence alone would do to the actual situations I would be in, and how that could inform the subsequent reporting process. I realized that my research had to be collaboration between the Juchitecas and me. It had to be fluid so that I could explore their community
with respect to their culture, changing my methods as I learned their ways.

We pulled into a camp site on a beach outside of Acapulco, and I read three books about the Zapotec women. Relaxing, and happily swinging in the hammock for a few days, I had a breakthrough. The books I read present two women anthropologists' experiences with the Zapotecs. Lynn Steven's book demonstrates her positivist political ethnographic research in Teotitlán, which has a different social and economic makeup than Juchitán. Teotitlán is close to Juchitán geographically yet distant in terms of its economic and social structure: the women hold less power, and the muxe are not present. Beverly Chiñas' books lean closer to the type of ethnography that I appreciate. She is not hesitant to inform the reader with anecdotes and her personal experiences with the Zapotecs in La Zandunga. She takes us with her as she recalls work as a graduate student, a young researcher, and later a mature anthropologist who directs assistants new to the field.

I read Lynn Steven's Zapotec Women, Beverly Chiñas' La Zandunga, and The Isthmus Zapotecs.
Aside from a better understanding of my personal point of view regarding ethnographic research and presentation, I came to realize through reflection of my proposed investigation and subsequent readings the yet unanswered questions I had regarding ethical obligations. I was not pleased with my original plans to investigate the muxe and their role in the resistance of the Juchitecas to colonialization and globalization. I felt that I would have to change my course in order to respect both my (and what I guessed to be) their boundaries and privacy.

During my readings about Juchitán, I had noticed how food served as a thread running through the Juchitecas' maintenance of tradition. Although I was still interested in the muxe, there was a change in that I chose not to focus solely on them because the muxe and the women participated equally in their food-speak. Through the women's and muxe's control of food commerce through the markets in Juchitán, at their tables, and within the "fiesta system" that provides socialization and economic autonomy, they feed the souls and bodies of Juchitán and provide promise for the continuity of their customs. Food
is a language we all seem to use to define ourselves and the Juchitecas hold on to their foodways very tightly so that they do not lose their past, which links to their future, Zapotec traditions.

The decision to write about food and how it "speaks" was a natural one for me. I love to cook, feed others, and exchange stories and recipes with others. During the years I lived in México I came to enjoy and appreciate their national cuisines. I particularly enjoy hearing and passing on family recipes and the stories that inevitably accompany them. There is an intimate connection one makes when invited into the kitchen with a fellow cook.

In order to honor the Juchitecas' efforts in fighting for their maintenance of their identity in a grassroots, personal, and homemade fashion, I decided to present my master's thesis illustrating their food discourse in a less traditional, non-European text that would represent and honor both their and my voices. My thesis would demonstrate both women's and muxe's agency in food events, written in the form of a scrapbook. Through written text, photos, journal entries, recipes, and cooking, I would attempt to facilitate the oral and
food-speak of the living and deceased. I felt that stories of their lives, without my constant analysis, would be the best way for me to present them. I wanted to get to the heart of the Juchitecas, to share what about them makes them special, unique and real.

As the Zapotecs do after a death, \(^{17}\) I proposed to leave the windows open for nine days after my thesis was completed so that its spirit and soul will have a chance to accustom themselves to the new form they have taken—from imagination to paper. I proposed, just as they do at the velorios, \(^{18}\) that I would attempt to speak in the voices and with the essence of she-who-has-died, shifting the orality and performance of their traditions into print.

When my journey had ended and I had written the Cuentitos, the little stories the Juchitecas lived became my story because it is impossible to for me to separate them and to make them anything other than that. I had attempted, to the best of my ability, to lend voice to the Juchitecas. But my presence and subsequent

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\(^{17}\) See Lopez Chíñas "Concepto" for description of the concept of death for the Zapotecs.

\(^{18}\) Velorios are traditional wakes for the dead.
presentation of their food events were unavoidably altered by the parts of me I could not subtract from the mix: the lens I saw things through, the energy I brought as an observer, and later the choices I made in presentation. My identity was changed as they introduced their food to the already rich personal medley that was me before I arrived in Juchitán, but I came to realize that my words would never be able to make anyone understand the complex nature of the Juchiteca’s unique identities. Although I respected and honestly tried to represent their culture to you the reader, the muxe and women could better tell and show you the stories of their lives through their food-speak.
Cuentitos:
Edible Discourse from
Juchitán
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Nisiaabá Búpu (Nees-ee-a-a-bA BOO-pooh)
/Corn Drink with Foam

The first day in Juchitán I found a teacher. Everyone I talked with on the street and at the Cultural Center knew and recommended her as the one person who would be able and willing to teach me the difficult tonal Zapotec language. Manuel, my husband, and I walked and drove, lost, winding our way through the complicated little streets and alleys looking for her, until a man we had met at the Cultural Center, the same one who had given us directions, waved us down as we passed by him once again. He said that he would be happy to take us to the teacher’s house. He hopped into the truck and we set off. It wasn’t far away, and after driving a few blocks, we left the truck on a main street, because many of the streets in Juchitán were built for people and animal traffic alone, and we had the big camper on top of the truck—it was too wide. I was pleased that we got out and walked, because as soon as we jumped out of the truck, a slat sided, flat-bed pick-up slowly drove by with five full¹ Tecas standing in the bed, in fiesta dress and

¹ The women are described as llena, which means full in Spanish, because their beauty is gauged by their girth. The more weight the
wearing an abundance of gold jewelry. Four men were standing in back with them playing loud sones—the traditional loud, raucous music—on their instruments. It was a roving fiesta. Our guide told us that the Tecas were being chaperoned to a big vela on the other side of town.

When we finally made it to the big blue doors of the gate in front of the teacher’s house—the same doors everyone we asked had used to direct us (unsuccessfully) to her house— I knocked, and a slender foreign muxe slid past me out the door. She told me that I had to use a rock (she pointed one out on the ground) to knock on the metal gate doors, or the Maestra wouldn’t hear the door. I knocked loudly with the rock and the Maestra appeared in the traditional colorful bidaaní and bizuudí on the second story of her patio. She yelled down in Zapotec

more beautiful. They are free “from the oppressiveness of an imposed “slim-is-better” body aesthetic (Campbell 234).

Velas are the yearly festivals they have in Juchitán celebrating saints, family names, sections of the city, and occupations. They are grand, expensive, multi-day undertakings that are planned up to a year in advance. There are twenty-six official, but many other unofficial yearly velas (Musálem López 55).

The muxe (moo-shay) in Juchitán are a third gender which is “freely accepted and tolerated in Isthmus Zapotec society” (Campbell “Renaissance” 238).

Maestra means teacher in Spanish. People often just called her Maestra instead of her name.

Bidaaní and bizuudí are traditional clothing from the area. The top (bidaaní) is a squarish shell with bright embroidery, the skirt is huge, colorful, and floor length (Pictured in prologue).
until she saw us. She then switched to Spanish due to my and my husband’s appearance as obviously non-Zapotec, and told us she would be right down to let us in.

The Maestra was very friendly. After I told her that I wanted to learn Zapotec and was interested in the culture, especially food, she told us that she loved working with students. She had been a teacher most of her life and her son was a student at the University of Mexico. She had led local tours and taught Zapotec to many people. She told us that numerous students had lived with her, and that the muxe that passed us was visiting her from Belgium. I was overjoyed to meet a teacher so quickly: someone who had a background in teaching, and was willing to instruct me in Zapotec and the Juchitecan culture. She told me to return the next day and we would begin.

The next morning I went back to the Maestra’s house. She was there to greet me with chilacoyote water, and after we talked and relaxed for a while, we started our lessons in Zapotec. She told me that a one-hour lesson is

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6 Chilacoyote is a squash used for drinks and for eating. It is pre-Columbian.
all anyone can tolerate, the language is so challenging. She taught me for about half-an-hour until I was spent.

She said that one of the generative words in pre-Hispanic Zapotec was “xu”\(^7\) which means earthquake (there are many strong earthquakes in Oaxaca) and that xu formed the base for many Zapotec words. Adding bá, which means tomb, to xu, gives one “xubá,” which means corn. She talked about corn, their famous sixteen styles (only in Juchitán) of tortillas and explained the importance of corn to the Zapotecs. She asked me if we had been to the plaza and had búpu.\(^8\) I told her no, and she told me the story of búpu:

Búpu is a corn atole\(^9\) drink topped with chocolate foam that only one family makes here. You must go see my friend, the búpu lady, in the plaza tonight. There you will taste a drink that you can only find here in Juchitán. It is made from corn, flowers and chocolate, but she will not tell you how to make it. I don’t know how to make it either. I know the ingredients—maybe—but I don’t know the measurements.

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\(^7\) Since the x in Zapotec is pronounced sh the word would sound like shoe.

\(^8\) Búpu is a hot drink from pre-hispanic times. It is also written as bupu and buupu.

\(^9\) Atole is a corn drink. Usually drunk for breakfast or late supper, it is very thick and nutritious.
People come here and try to get the recipe, but it is guarded by the family who makes it in the plaza. Go and tell her I sent you.

That evening we set off in search of búpu. We went with Xunaxi (a teen-aged daughter of our hosts, and her brother Ema (seven years old). Xunaxi held my hand as the women do here, and the men were in the front. I was lucky she held my hand because the sidewalks are infamously huge and uneven here, and I’m famously clumsy. Some of them are three feet off the ground! I believe that is why most people choose to walk on the streets—although they are rocky and bumpy, they are less treacherous than the sidewalks.

Xunaxi was super animated because she was allowed to go out this night. She wore her going-out modern clothing. She told me that her father never let her go anywhere once it was dark. One of her younger sisters insisted on breaking the no-going-out-after-dark rule, and she was still banned from the family home after a year of exile. We were talking loudly, walking towards downtown, and had gone about five blocks, when Xunaxi pulled me closer and whispered, “There’s my older sister, and she is with a man my father told her not to see.”
told me that her sister (twenty years old—not married) was dating a married man, and that she would be terrified that we saw her, and that she would think that we would tell her dad. The sister tried to hide, but she saw us see her. Xunaxi said hello, dragging it out as only a sister with something to hold over her sister can do. It was a tense moment, interrupting our revelry. Xunaxi asked me, "Will you tell my dad?" I said, "Should I?" We laughed, and I said, "Of course not." We continued on towards town.

The night was beautiful and there were lovers in the doorways, on the sidewalks, at the corners, in the shadows. The heat and the smell of the night-blooming Jasmine lent their intoxicating essence to the scene. It's hard not to feel captivated by this city at night and easy to imagine why the town was originally named Iztacxochitlán which means the place of white flowers; it's filled with them. As we neared the main part of town there was more noise and vendors everywhere, selling their wares. I always like to stop and look at everything, but Ema was in a hurry. He had permission to ride on the little electric cars in the main plaza while we drank our búpu, and he couldn't wait. Xunaxi once
again tugged on my arm—this time as we passed a muxe. I had told her earlier that I couldn’t tell when I was looking at a muxe or a woman, and she was trying to show me (without speaking) how to identify them by their large wrists and ankles.

As we walked into the main square we heard the band. It was a traditional Isthmus group playing sones\textsuperscript{10} in the huge raised gazebo that was, as tradition has it in Mexico, in the middle of the square. There were velvet clad Juchitecas walking arm in arm around the plaza as various political groups yelled out their messages in Zapotec at the crowd. There were women selling hammocks of every size and color. The colors of the Tecas clothes, the hammocks, and golden totopos\textsuperscript{11} painted a vivid, stunning picture.

I start to drift off, but Xunaxi pulled me towards the opposite end of the plaza. She reminded me that we were there to drink búpu. “There’s the búpu lady” Xunaxi told me as she pulled on my arm. I saw a large pregnant Zapotec woman frantically whipping something in a huge

\textsuperscript{10} These sones were the traditional music of the Isthmus. It was raucous and lively.
\textsuperscript{11} Totopos are one of the sixteen varieties of tortillas sold in Juchitán. They are corn, dry, and have holes in them. They are made in clay ovens in the back yards of Juchitán.
clay pot. Behind her were twelve dried out, old, rickety, wooden folding chairs with a variety of Juchitecos on them waiting and drinking. Behind them was the old Municipal building with its many arches, framing the striking image. Most of the women were wearing their velvet bidaaní and flowing bizuudi and they spilled out over their chairs. The seated patrons, drinking with both hands wrapped around the painted clay bowls, were intent on their búpu while the others smiled, talked (In Spanish and Zapotec) and patiently waited their turn.

As we neared her, she looked up to greet her new clients. She had been speaking in Zapotec to the people who had arrived just before us, but switched to Spanish to ask us if we’d like her to serve us búpu. We eagerly answered yes, and she told us we’d have to wait; the foam was not high enough. I looked down into the clay pot that she was using. It was about two feet tall and two feet wide. The cocoa colored foam was getting higher and higher as she spun the molinillo\(^{12}\) between her hands like a stick used to start a fire. She talked as she whipped it, asking us if we had ever had búpu before. When we answered “no” she told us its story:

\(^{12}\) A large carved wooden utensil used to whip food and drink.
Búpu is a drink that was given to Aztec royalty. They honored chocolate, and cocoa was a form of money. This drink is only made genuinely here in Juchitán. My family has passed the recipe down since the Aztec’s reign. People try to make it like us, but they cannot. You will see. I first scoop some warm atole in the bowl and then I will put this foam on top. I will tell you that it has flowers in it. That is not a secret. It is very special, and you have to be born into, or marry into, my family to know the full recipe.

The foam was getting really high now, and she gave the first bowl to Ema, who looked justifiably eager. He smiled and took a big sip of the chocolate. Just as I was ready to burst with anticipation, she handed me my bowl while simultaneously topping the atole off with more of the foam. It was beautiful and so fragrant. I sat on a rickety chair, and I slurped and mmmed myself onto cloud nine. The smiles were all around. These old wooden chairs, straining to hold up the girth of the Tecas, witnessed blanket euphoria every night around seven.

We went back to the búngu lady almost every night after that. My husband, Manuel, was an addict. I told him
that he was probably an Aztec king in another life and he had found his memory in búpu. He agreed and kept on drinking. Before we left town we went back one last time. The búpu lady was sad we were leaving, but told us we'd be back. She offered to make us up the paste that you make the foam out of so that we could make it at home, but we had at least ten days of travel to get to San Diego, and so we thought it might go bad. We refused. She topped off our atole with a little more foam, and we drank up one last time.

When I saw the Maestra the day we left, she told me about a woman who had written the recipe for búpu in a cookbook. She told me that this woman was banned by the market women because she took advantage of them, asking their recipes and not asking permission to print them, and then making money on the recipes. A lot of people were bitter. She said that the recipe wasn’t the same as the búpu lady’s, but it was close. This is a recipe that I found on a hand-written card from the market. I don’t know if this recipe was written by the woman she was

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13 I switched the quantities into the standard measurements we use in the USA.
talking about, because she never told me her name and the recipe came from a vendor.

**Atole Blanco**

2 ¼ pounds corn

Water

Cook the corn in the water. When cooked, you grind it on a *metate*-stone grinding pad, or in a blender. Strain it and boil it. Serve it very hot with the chocolate mixture on top.

**Búpu**

The búpu is made with 9 dried *guié xhuba* flowers—a form of night-blooming Jasmine, and 9 fresh *guié cháchi* flowers—a type of plumaria. Add 1 ½ pieces of *piloncillo*—a type of molasses sugar, 6 ounces of cinnamon and 2 pounds of cocoa.

Toast the cocoa in a *comal*—a pan that looks like a flat wok, and grind it with all the other ingredients, in a *metate*—a grinding stone. Make a paste. Do this at least one day before you make it.

The next day put a little of the paste and hot water in a huge clay pot with a wide mouth. Whip it until it is really foamy, scoop it out and pour it over the atole.
Note: This appears to be a basic recipe for būpu. It is surely not the būpu lady’s. If it were, there would be trouble in the market. People seem to respect the monopoly this family has on būpu, and I doubt if anyone in Juchitán would risk selling the authentic recipe.
The Búpu Lady uses a hollowed-out gourd to serve the foam.
Búpu Foam ↑ Using the molinillo
Manuel drinks his búpu ↓
Selling
Chilies
Marinated Plums
Chilacoyote
Sautéed Grasshoppers
Guchachi (goo-CHA-chee)/Iguana

We had been in Juchitán for a few days, and Javier\(^1\) started talking about finding a *guchachi*\(^2\) for me. He proudly told me that he would find a big one and that his wife Itzel would prepare it for us in the traditional style of Juchitán. It was important for him to feed us *guchachi* before we left, because legend prescribes that if one eats *guchachi* in Juchitán, a return trip is inevitable. I was thankful that he looked forward to seeing us again. I do wish though, that there had been some other ritual that would have secured the same outcome. I was not looking forward to eating *guchachi*.

J: They bite! Be careful they bite! They are green and black with spots and sometimes they’re really big. I think they are really handsome. I will get one for you to eat. No? Why don’t you like them? Are you afraid because they bite? I will get it and I will bring it to you. It won’t bite you because I will tie its legs. I know how to prepare it. Yes, I must kill it to prepare it. Do you want me to get it? Don’t be afraid, it will be dead. You will like

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\(^1\) Javier is the father of the family we stayed with in Juchitán. In this story I will write J: before he speaks.

\(^2\) *Guchachi* is the Zapotec word for iguana.
it. I will bring it back here tonight, a huge and coqueta (charming) one. Itzel will cook it for you. She knows how to cook it in the traditional way with tomatoes and chilies. You will like it, and you will come back here. If you eat guchachi, you must return to Juchitán. We know that because it is true; you eat it here, and you come back. It is delicious, you will see.

I was terrified. I’d seen the iguanas lounging on the rocks in the sun. I saw them running across the roads as we whizzed by in the truck, and closer up as we walked along the paths that lead away from the beach. Without even knowing them, I did not like them. They are big and they bite. Many people have told me not to get too near them because they are mean and can be really fast. They are scaly and old looking. They look wise with their funny eyelids that go from side to side. I only know that about them from watching them in the zoo in San Diego, safely separated from them by a thick glass wall. They seem unhappy. Even sitting motionless in the sun, they seem to be sad. Their eyes are so far apart and they look like dinosaurs. Sometimes they are three feet long and
fat. I don’t want to eat one. I don’t want Javier to get me one, and I don’t want him to kill it for me.

Javier went to the second section, where they sell them, to buy the guchachi but came back empty-handed. He told me that the selection was limited, and they were too small. I was relieved. I didn’t really want a guchachi but couldn’t tell him. I didn’t want to offend him by refusing this gift that means so much to people in Juchitán. Besides corn totopos, 3 beans, chocolate, and búpu, it is the most traditional food of the region. I told him that I appreciated his kindness, but I didn’t want to cause him any extra work.

Everyone in Juchitán has guchachi for special occasions and many men hunted guchachi. You could find them for sale in the second section of the city: women carry piles of the live creatures on their heads or set them on the road with little leashes tied around them so that they can’t escape. Their legs are tied together and their mouths are tied too because the guchachi bite hard.

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3 Totopos are a dry tortilla made in clay ovens behind peoples’ homes. Many women sell them in the market.
J: I saw my friend Oscar in the market. She (a muxe)\(^4\) will cook the iguana for you. She will cook it in bitter cream. It will be a rare treat, and we can go to her house when I find a big iguana. She and her mamá make iguana in a very special way. It is delicious. You will see. I will get an iguana tomorrow.

The first thing I saw as I stepped out of the camper the next morning was Javier’s teen-age boy holding a big squirming lizard-like creature by its tail. I tried to act casual and appreciative and also tried unsuccessfully to not look at the poor animal. I very seldom have the disagreeable “pleasure” of meeting my meals face to face.

No one told me why, but I saw that the kids were taking care of the killing and cleaning of the iguana, and Itzel was going to cook the guchachi. Oscar the muxe and the cream sauce were not mentioned again. Itzel had sent the girls off to the market to buy the ingredients and the daily couple kilos of tortillas. The kids had set the iguana free, but it moved slowly. They had not fed nor given it water for a day. This whole process was

\(^4\) The muxe (moo-shay) in Juchitán are a third gender which is “freely accepted and tolerated in Isthmus Zapotec society (Campbell ‘Renaissance’ 238).
making me feel very uneasy. It is hard to have someone do something special for you that you absolutely don't want them to do. They tortured me by giving me my "last look at it alive." I begged them to kill it immediately, and in agony, I slipped back into the camper with the excuse that I had to make coffee for my husband.

An hour or so later I summoned up the courage to step outside.

J: Look Aurora, here are the eggs. This guchachi was full of eggs. This will be delicious. Itzel!

I saw the beheaded, de-legged iguana next to little round eggs the size of marbles floating in a bowl of blood water. Two of Javier and Itzel's children were sitting next to it on the patio floor, holding up pieces of their handiwork. Itzel came outside to pick up the chunks of guchachi that she washed and prepared to cook. I tried to look at it and show my appreciation, but Itzel knew how I felt. She is a very sensitive woman. She didn't tease me like the others.

J: Now you'll come back!

I was thinking about the fact that it wasn't a given yet, that I'd come back, because in fact I had not eaten it, and was trying to think of ways my body could be
there eating it while my mind was peeling a nice juicy mango. I went in the kitchen to watch the preparation.

This is Itzel’s recipe:

_Guchachi Guiña / Iguana and Chilies_

1 big iguana
1 ¼ kilo of very mature tomatoes -chopped
½ kilo green chili deseeded and chopped
½ kilo red chili deseeded and chopped
7-8 cloves of garlic -chopped
2 ½ liters water
Salt to taste

Clean the iguana well—leave the skin on. Take out the eggs. Cut it up (don’t use the tail or the claws).

Boil the iguana and skim off the foam. Put the eggs in after it boils for ten minutes. Add the tomato, chilies and garlic.

Cover and boil for an hour.

Add salt.

Serve it like soup with lime and tortillas, panela cheese, and dried chili salt.
Itzel loved to tell and show me how to make regional recipes. She told me about variations on this one, how they sometimes put the guchachi in aluminum foil with the same ingredients minus the water, and steam the iguana. She said that the best way to serve this meal was with sautéed grasshoppers on the side. I had eaten sautéed grasshoppers in the market in Oaxaca. They sell them everywhere. They were ok, kind of like potato chips, but I really don’t generally like grasshoppers because I have memories of boys putting them down my shirt in elementary school. I told Itzel that I should just have one delicacy at a time in order to savor it. She agreed, and then told me that she thought the iguana was done.

The children started filing into the kitchen. They probably came for a variety of reasons, not the least being hunger. But this day they also came to see the gringa eat her iguana.

Itzel served me a huge (It looked huge to me!) bowl of iguana soup with some iguana eggs, a big chunk of iguana meat, and a leg. She called Javier. He came in to watch the proceedings and to eat.
I sniffed it for a long time and considered the bowl. I told her that I didn’t need so much meat, and that she should give some of mine to her (nine) children.

J: NO, that is for you, you should have it!

I asked if the legend would apply, and that I would be destined to come back to Juchitán, if I just consumed the leg and not the rest of the iguana. He said, “yes,” so I offered up my plate to Itzel. She speared the big chunk of meat and plopped it back into the pot. She sensed my discomfort. He didn’t.

I played with my food. It was hot, and so I didn’t look like I was overtly avoiding it by moving it around my bowl. I asked a lot of questions regarding the recipe while I mustered up the courage to dig in.

J: This is how you eat the eggs. Do like I do. You bite a little end off the soft shell and then you just suck it out. Like this.

He did just that. I chased the eggs around my plate for a couple minutes while my hosts laughed and joked. Instead of capturing an egg, I made contact with a leg. I decided to pick it up and try it. I nibbled it and it was tough, and I will probably never know if I really liked it. I had worked myself up so much that I was simply
tolerating the situation instead of enjoying it. It tasted mostly like the chilies and tomatoes that were part of the soup. I tried to get an egg and finally got one on my spoon. Javier had left the kitchen (I suppose he got tired of waiting for me to eat and was hungry), and the children all had taken their bowls to the table or other spots around the house to enjoy their meal. Itzel and I were left in the kitchen, and she asked me pre-egg how I liked the soup. I said 'good' and she looked me straight in the eyes and treasonably said, "It's ok Aurora, I don't like it either." We both laughed hysterically, and I never ate the egg. With this exchange, Itzel explained that I had not offended her or Javier.

A year has past and I still dream about iguanas. I see their beauty a little clearer than when I was there, and yet I’m still afraid of them. I still don’t want to eat them. What’s more I learned that you don’t have to like the guchachi for the legend to apply, because it is true—I dream about going back.
Live Iguanas for Sale
Sliced Iguana
magazine cover 1984
Dawn’s Dead Iguana
Tangú yú doll
selling iguanas
Bidxaa (Bee-JA-a)/Witch

She chants really fast, and between the sound of the basil slapping me, her fast Spanish and Zapotec, and the church lingo she uses I understand little of what she says.

Becerra
Cuentitos/Witch

Allá se encuentra las brujas.¹/That is where you find the witches.²

I ask “Do they all live there?”

Flor tells me: “No, the most powerful one lives in the third section of the city.”

D³: Can we go see her?

F⁴: Maybe, but let’s try to see another one first. This one has helped my sister and mother with a lot of things. When my sister needed to get a man, she went to this curandera and got a cleansing, and she made a special mixture that my sister used to find an esposo (she used the term for husband, but I later find out that

¹ This means—over there you find the witches. Flor is pointing to the other side of town.
² I use the terms brujas (witches,) and curanderas (healers,) interchangeably throughout this story because the people I spoke with in Juchitán use both. Usually in Mexico a curandera would be considered a healer or bone-menders, and a bruja someone who does magic. Because the Catholic Church considers witches to be sacrilegious, people will use the term curandera in order to justify their consultations. The witches who use the devil are particularly feared (Covarrubias 381-389).
³ D is the author, Dawn, or my name is Aurora in Spanish.
⁴ F is Flor, Dawn’s friend, a young woman from the family we lived with in Juchitán.
he was a married man, and she had become a mistress). She also helped my mom with her cancer, but then she got sicker, and had to have surgery to take out the uterus anyway. She charges less than the other one, too.

Layers of fragrances: chocolate, coffee and the warm smell of corn tortillas waft towards us as we get closer to downtown. We walk through the market by way of the main square, where we see the flower and herb vendors selling their fresh fragrant plants. The scents mix with a light breeze blowing through the already bright white hot morning, reminding me why the town is named after the night-blooming jasmine. There is commerce buzzing around us. People are seriously engaged in the negotiations that put food on their family’s tables and the big, gold necklaces around their necks.

We’ve come this way because we must stop with my friend’s comadre\(^5\) to buy the supplies that the witch will need to cleanse me. This market woman has her stand on the street in front of the plaza. She arrives early in the morning (around 4:30 a.m.) every day to prepare to

\(^5\) Comadre and compadre are used to denote anything from good friend to a relative. It is someone who will stand up for you, and take care of your children and spouse if anything should happen to you. They will often be the God-mother or God-father of your children, or your in-laws. (Sault)
sell her herbs, and closes up by noon. The vendor says we are late (it’s 9 a.m.) to find the flowers that I want to use for my for búpu⁶ research, but we have no problem buying the basil I need to bring to the witch. She tells me to come back in a week and she will have what I need. She will have to go to Oaxaca City (about five hours drive) to find the special flowers I want to buy. “Come back early on Monday and they will be here,” she says as she hands me a little flower to smell.

F: Vamos a ver la bruja Mari/ We are going to see the witch, Mari. We need to buy all the things she needs for a cleansing.

The vendor designs a magnificent bouquet of aromatic basil for us. She then asks if we need an egg, but she says that she hasn’t got any more duck eggs left today. She tells us not to forget the bapporú (Vick’s VapoRub) and sends us on our way.

We walk through the main enclosed part of the market that offers any and all animal products for sale. The smell of blood and meat is extremely strong inside the market. There are whole animals and assorted parts

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⁶ Nisiaabá búpu is called búpu for short and is a drink that I write about in Cuentitos.
hanging from poles and rods. I ask my friend about the egg that we are looking for.

D: Do we need the duck egg?

F: Not always.

D: Then let’s go. We can come back for it if she asks for it.

F: OK. Don’t you like it here?

D: No. It is too early for me and meat. Sorry, we can come back later if we need to.

Flor laughs at me and asks me if I’m pregnant. Because, she says, if I am pregnant I need to eat meat so that my baby will be strong. I tell her I’m too old for babies, but she tells me stories about women older than me who give birth. She has a very hard time understanding why my husband and I don’t have children. This is very common in Mexico; we are always regarded with suspicion because we have no children. Often my husband is assumed to be gay, or the other possibility is that I am unable to conceive. The choice to not have children is seldom entertained or believed.

F: Ok, let’s go.
D: Do men always call the women here? (We have been cat-called and loudly yelled at walking down the street, by men in cars.)

F: Yes, but it doesn’t mean anything. Maybe they think you are muxe from North America.\(^7\)

D: Does it bother you—the yelling?

F: No. Here we are.

She knocks on the scrolled metal security door. I can see a huge inside patio garden and a young girl sticks her head out from around the corner.

F: ¿Está la señora?/ Is the señora home?

The girl tells us that the curandera is in Mexico City shopping. She won’t be back until next week, but we can come by then. This is the way it is in a country where fewer than ten percent of the people have telephones. One must be ready to change their plans according to the current circumstances. Because I lived in Mexico for many years, I understand and have learned to embrace their more casual attitude towards time and dates, but there are a lot of missed appointments here and a slippery meaning of “late” that can drive the

\(^7\) In Mexico the USA is sometimes called North America.
people who are from cultures such as the USA to desperation.

D: I guess it’s ok, we don’t have the duck egg and bapporú anyway.

F: Let’s go home and eat, my dad and your husband went fishing this morning. Maybe we have won the lottery in Bagre (a type of catfish.)

_I believe men are generally still a little afraid of the dark, although witches are all hung, and Christianity and candles have been introduced._

_Thoreau Walden_

Days later she asks me if I’m ready to go to visit La Mujer de Negro, the strongest witch from the third section. I ask her why this witch is called that.

F: Because she always wears black clothing. I never saw her in other colors. She doesn’t wear the typical clothing from Juchitán, but she is from here. She is very powerful, and uses La Santa Muerte. Many people are afraid of her. I am not scared; she was our neighbor when

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8 La Mujer de Negro means The Woman in Black. I will use her initials LMN for the rest of the story.
9 La Santa Muerte is The Saint of Death. Some people call her La Santa Muerta which means the same thing.
I was a child. She does things that are curses but she will cleanse and heal you too. She is very powerful.

D: Should I be afraid?

I start to wonder if LMN may be a little too "black magic" for my taste. Years ago in Mexico City, I went to see curanderas for my ills. I am fascinated by them. Each one has her own rituals and methods, but I always tried to steer clear of those associated—even remotely with Satan—just to hedge my bets.

La Santa Muerte dates back to the pre-conquest Aztecs. Later banished by the Roman Catholic Church as devil worship, they took her underground, but she’s seen a revival in the last forty years. La Santa Muerte is considered a most powerful saint, called to duty by blowing cigar smoke on her image. She listens closely to your wishes, but exacts a heavy price on your faith: you are to give her something in return for her gifts or she may take one of your family members. She is considered the opposite of the Virgin Mary by the Vatican: a bad witch, the personal saint of jailed prisoners and the poor who suffer the hunger, injustice, corruption, and crime of Mexico’s toughest neighborhoods (Bremer). I decide to buck-up and go see the witch with an open mind.
The witch lives in a quiet neighborhood on the other side of the river, the Rio de los Perros. She has just returned from the annual witches' festival in Catamaco, Veracruz, and is home and available to see us. There are two huge Doberman Pinchers guarding her house. My friend calls out loud for the witch. She appears in her doorway and quiets the dogs, although they don't stop growling. We walk by their enclosure and hug the far side of the wall. They look and sound particularly vicious.

LMN is obviously happy to see Flor and asks about her family. She inquires about one of Flor's sisters. LMN reminds her that she had told the sister not to get involved with a certain married man, but she never listens. They continue talking about consultations that the witch has given for the family. Everything she has promised to do for them has happened just the way she told them it would. Flor occasionally turns to me and says things like, "I told you she could do whatever you ask her to," and "she is expensive, but worth it." Some of the things she says make me a little uncomfortable, but I am glad they talk openly in front of me. LMN tells Flor that she is still trying to sell her house so that
she can move to another area, but no one will buy it because they are afraid that it has a witch’s curse.

Meanwhile I look around the little consultation room to which LMN has led us. It is a very small space with a long carved wooden table and an altar that takes up one whole wall. The altar has a black opaque curtain hanging in front of it. She has her chair set behind the table and there are two chairs on the other side. She invites us to sit. The room is spotless with very few items outside the altar. She is about forty years old, with strikingly sharp Spanish features for this area, black hair, black eyes, thin, and wearing modern clothes: black pants, a black shirt and black shoes. She laughs loud and often, and stares directly into my eyes as she speaks to me.

LMN: Are you worried about something or is something making you nervous?

D: If I am sick?

LMN: We will burn it (she points to the basil I have brought). Did you bring an egg?

D: We forgot the egg. (We went to buy the basil that morning and because we were deep in conversation, we once again forgot the duck egg and bapporu).
LMN: If you bring an egg, we can clean you and the yolk will absorb the “bad,” and then I can read the egg. I don’t have eggs here for you because they could absorb what is here in the room, and then I could interpret your problem wrong. One time I attended a client who was in a trance and I had a Tortola (a kind of dove) egg from Catamaca. I used the egg, and it had a yolk of a dog, it was very ugly. It was nothing from Mexico. That is why I don’t like to have eggs here. (I was a little confused, but what I understood was that she did not want to be responsible for whatever came out of the yolk. If the client brought their own egg, they would have to acknowledge that is was truly their fate or illness, and not the witch’s energy).

LMN: Would you like me to cleanse you now?

D: Yes, please.

LMN passes from her side of the table to ours and has me pull my chair away from the table so that she can walk around me. She takes the bouquet of basil from me, says a quick prayer to her altar and then starts whacking me with the basil. She hits me hard as she circles me. Sometimes she runs the basil up and down from toes to head, and sometimes around in circles, but it’s all
hitting. She chants really fast. Between the sound of the basil slapping me, her fast Spanish and Zapotec, and the church lingo she uses, I understand little of what she says. It sounds like Santa Muerte, Jesus, Satan, and a lot of words strung together and spoken so fast that even the best Spanish or Zapotec speaker would be lost. I finally realize that she is saying "Levantate, Aurora!" which means "Rise up, Aurora" (my name in Spanish is Aurora). I start to get up after the fifth or so time she says it, but Flor pushes me back into my seat (I guess she meant levantate in a biblical way). Flor is laughing, but that does not deter LMN or my intent. LMN doesn't pay any attention to anything but her ritual, and I am trying to remember everything she's doing and to be cleansed at the same time. (If you choose to, you may listen to the cassette tape at this time).

This goes on for about seven long minutes: The smell of basil is pervasive, LMN is sweating, and I am now nervous. I can't say that I am exactly in pain, but my skin is prickly, it stings, and I am stunned. LMN holds the now black basil far away from her body, like a smelly rag, and says that it is bad. She points out the black wilted leaves and tells me that I have a lot of "bad" in
me and that if I want to work on it further, I have to bring an egg so that she can tell me what the "bad" is, and subsequently cure it. After we all have a moment of silence, I ask her if it would be alright to ask her some questions. She agrees.

D: Do you ever work with food?¹⁰

LMN: I can work with food, you just tell me what is wrong and the work becomes mine. I work with the Santa Muerte and the Saint Satan and I do my work well. Those who come here know how I work.

D: What can you do with food? If I perhaps have neighbors that I have problems with...

LMN: It is easy. What do you want? Do you want to send them quickly (kill them) or just make them stop what they are doing to you? I can take care of both of those.

D: What foods do you use for this?

LMN: You can make the food you want, I will just put on the condimentos.¹¹ That is my secret. I can prepare the

¹⁰ When Flor and I had asked around the market for foods that one could use for accomplishing various ends such as finding love, or doing harm to a person, all of the market women and muxes (ten in this survey) we asked told us to see the witches, that they knew what to use.

¹¹ Condimentos are spices, herbs, flowers, and flavorings. I'm not sure what condimentos she is referring to, because she does not tell
condimentos you want. They don’t have flavor or odor. Within nine days things will be calm.

D: You can do ANYTHING I want?

LMN: Yes. Everyone can eat from the same banquet, and if the condimentos are not for you, you will not be affected by them. No one will feel anything except the person who is designated. Everyone can eat.

D: And if someone wants a boyfriend, what do you do?

I look at Flor and smile because I knew that Flor is looking for a boyfriend. It had been a long time since she was in love, and that had ended badly with the man marrying someone else. She was looking for someone to marry.

LMN: It depends on who you “put your eye on.” (She turns to look at Flor).

LMN: If you want to marry someone that is promised—I can break up the couple. I can do anything. You have to say what you want. If you want to just have fun, I can do that too. You have to be very clear. You will get what you ask for. Maybe you think you want to love forever,
but you don’t really mean that. You have to decide, and
tell me.

D: Would I have to come to you every day?

LMN: No, you just come here to look for what you
want. I will give it to you—nothing more. Those are my
ethics.

I look at Flor again and say “just a nice unmarried
boyfriend would be nice.” We all smile, and change the
subject:

D: I have a feeling that I may have intestinal
parasites. Can you help me?

LMN: There are parasites and there are parasites
(she laughs and gives me a sly smile—one of the parasites
she is referring to is a curse). You better just bring
the egg—don’t guess!

D: May I ask you about your altar?

LMN: She removes the veil and says: this is La Santa
Muerte, and there’s Saint Satan. Because it is the Friday
of Saint Week (Lent), I have the veil covering them.
There is my father, his father, and my great-grandfather
(she points to old photographs, some on tin).

D: Why did you pick La Santa Muerte and Satan?

LMN: They picked me.
D: Oh, I see.

LMN: It was my great-grandfather's tendency. He made a contract with the devil; he passed it on to my grandfather and my father, then to me. Whether I wanted it or not, that is how it went. That is why I have worn black since I was eighteen years old. I cannot wear make-up, those are the rules. I, now, have to pick someone from my descendants, but from those that are still coming. *No ha nacido*\(^\text{12}\) not yet. I will know.

LMN: I've just arrived from Catamaco, Veracruz, where I was at the convention (there is a witches' convention there every year) and I won't lie, the people change into things you can't recognize. I can't explain it. It ends fast, and you don't know what happened. There are competitions and you can see how powerful you are compared to others.

I really want to talk about this with her, but I feel that we have been here a long time and don't want to take advantage of her courtesy.

D: May I come back for another cleansing?

\(^{12}\) *No ha nacido* means that the baby hasn't been born yet. You cannot tell if this sentence infers male or female.
LMN: Yes, but bring a duck egg and Rue, not basil. You should also bring Listerine. It is a very expensive cleansing. It will cost three hundred pesos (thirty dollars). But you will be very clean, very clean. When you come here make sure that everything you wear is clean. Your underwear should be white. Don’t worry, I’ll prepare everything, everything (she laughs hysterically).

LMN: Don’t forget; never let anyone have anything that is yours, especially a photograph. They can do much harm to you if they use your personal things. Be careful.

LMN: I will be gone for eight days (A week from the day you are on—in Mexico) but you may come back then.

D: Thank you, I’m very happy to know you.

LMN: The same to you.

She does not touch me nor shake my hand. That is very strange in Mexico, but I imagine it is something that witches don’t do. I will have to wait until I visit again to ask why she didn’t touch me.

I became very tired of the oppressive heat in Juchitán soon after we visited LMN and never returned to visit with her. We tried to make it back after a brief respite at the Pacific Ocean, but the winds were too strong and they weren’t letting people drive through to
Juchitán. That happens a lot on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec during the spring.

Two days after we saw LMN, Flor told me that she had something to tell me in private. She had gone to the market and was having a Coke at a friend’s stand when an old boyfriend came by and asked her to go out with him that evening. She said that she had always loved him, but he ended up marrying a friend of hers after they had split up years before. He was presently divorced and was interested in rekindling the love that Flor and he had experienced. She credited it to our consultation with the LMN, and the comments and questions I had asked LMN.
Bá du lu guixí (Ba do lou gee-chi)
/Wedding Bread Delivery

I am from-the-north and it’s hot; too hot for only eight a.m. I have said yes to my friend’s request, although I’m really not sure what she has asked me to do. It’s like that when you don’t exactly understand the language or the culture.

When I enter the neighbor’s house, I see hundreds of small loaves of yellow bread on the table, some topped with white sugar swirls. Women and muxes\(^1\) wrap special chocolate discs in thin napkins as others pile bread onto the xicalpextles,\(^2\) and then place them on the floor in front of the family altar. “Our Lady of Soledad” and photographs of dead relatives stand watch over the marquesote.\(^3\) The altar has been cleaned and has new candles and the fragrant copal incense that they use in the Catholic churches, and to guide the dead, burns. Fruits, sodas, and a bottle of mescal stand around the saint. All of this is present to help bless the bread’s journey from the groom’s house to the bride’s.

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\(^1\) The muxe (moo-SHAY) in Juchitán are a third gender which is “freely accepted and tolerated in Isthmus Zapotec society (Campbell 238).

\(^2\) Xicalpextle are the traditional painted bowls made from hollowed-out gourds

\(^3\) Marquesote is bread that is traditionally used for wedding invitations. The recipe follows.
The colorfully dressed Tecas from Juchitán are fairly quiet; the familiar ritual they perform seems to lead them through the process. They have done this many times, as their mothers did before them.

There is much noise around me, because many family members live in these houses together. In one corner a daughter dressed in modern clothing, jeans and a t-shirt, plays with a baby in GAP overalls in an expensive playpen. They seem out of place here on the grey cement floor. She is not helping with the bread nor interacting with the women. In another room divided by an open curtain, a few meters away, three young girls lay on their stomachs on one of the three beds that crowd the small space. They watch a flickering Star Search reality show. Mexican television is often very sensational and emotional, and true to form, the kids on this show wear stiff, fluffy clothing and make confessions regarding their likes and dislikes about each other. I can hear their high, squeaky singing. Outside, a boy plays with a ball, bouncing it against the wall of the house. I wait for about an hour as I sip the tamarind water they’ve served.
All the bread has been placed in front of the altar.

I get up and stand with the rest of the women who are looking at the display that represents a mix of both pre-Hispanic and colonial religion and ritual. After a few minutes of silent admiration, genuflection, and signs of the cross, the women lift the platters and xicalpextle off the floor and balance them on their heads. They speak both Spanish and Zapotec and are animated and excited. I enjoy the moment, appreciating their multi-colored embroidered bidaani' and bizuudi' with their crowns of painted gourds topped by golden loaves of bread. I begin to understand the conquistadors' written praise, awe, and can even imagine the fear they expressed in their written accounts, for the beauty and power of these spectacular women.  

Taking all this in, I come back to the moment as a huge platter of too much stacked marquesote is put in my arms. The platter is enormous and I know that I cannot do as the ritual demands—to balance it on my head as I walk

\footnote{Bidaani' and bizuudi' are the traditional velvet embroidered tops and long flowing skirts that women and muxe wear (See them in the prologue).}

\footnote{See Brasseaur (159-161).}
down the uneven stone and dirt streets through the neighborhoods.

The procession begins with a lot of noise as we burst out from the house’s gates onto the thin street. Laughing and waving neighbors come out on the street to watch. They all know what it means, and who it’s for, by the appearance of the groom’s mother out in front. This ceremony is lively, beautiful and very important for these people. My selfish hope is that I don’t fall down or dump the bread, and that thought makes me even more self-conscious and clumsy.

After a ten minute walk through the town, we arrive at the house of the bride’s family where the bride’s mother and some women wait for us. The precious bread is placed on the floor in the yoo biido in front of The Virgin of Guadalupe. This saint has an entire spotless and spacious room dedicated to her. There are offerings and burning candles that surround the photos of the ancestors on the saint’s table.

A few moments pass in the yoo biido, and then the bride’s mother shuffles us off to the living room, where

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6 The home altar usually found in a dedicated room—if the family can afford it.
everyone crowds onto furniture that is configured so that we face one another. There is little distance between me and the Tecas who are speaking Zapotec and Spanish around me. It is now 10 o’clock in the morning and there is a beer in my hand. My eyes search the room for instruction, and I copy movements. No one tips their beer up to drink, so I wait. I don’t understand the limited stiff conversation, and I’m really hot in this small room. There are maybe twenty women sitting and standing, most with a beer in their hands. I watch, wait, and melt into the chair for an uncomfortable amount of time. Without any kind of change, sound or event that I can perceive, the groom’s mother raises her beer, says some words which mean “to the bride’s mother” and we drink all of one beer and then another. Now the conversation is freer; the women seem to wait for this moment of permission. The conversation is in Zapotec and Spanish and everyone is animated. Adding to the scene, the mother of the groom is dressed in an elaborate huipil⁷ and has on heavy gold jewelry which is part of the traditional dress. She seems very pleased.

⁷ Huipil is the Spanish name for the Juchitecas traditional top.
She fixes her eyes on me and in Spanish asks: “You, what are you doing here?” Everyone now turns towards me and I realize that they too probably have wondered. The heat of the room intensifies the effect of the beers I’ve just gulped down. I thoughtfully but giddily reply in Spanish, “I am here to study Zapotec and your food.” The women smile and nod their heads. She then asks in Zapotec, “Do you want another beer?” I am taken aback; first of all that she asks me in Zapotec, second that I understand and third that I answer, “ma,” which affirms—in Zapotec—that I do indeed want another one. She nods to the woman next to her, who gets beer from the refrigerator in the living room and hands us each another one. “Me entendiste?” she says in Spanish, doubting my understanding of the question. I then explain to all that she had just asked if me if would like another beer. Raising the beer to the mother of the bride, I loudly say “Guide nu’u!” Amazed and tickled, these women who laugh loud and easy once again return to the raucous, hot, and happy festivities. They accept my presence and a few of

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8 Did you understand me?
9 “Let’s drink” in Zapotec.
them invite me to sit and visit with them at the market in their stands.

Just as suddenly as we started drinking, we stop. All the women set down their beers—some half finished—get up and file outside. We each receive a few loaves of the marquesote, and some of the napkin-wrapped chocolates we've just delivered.

We've just been invited to the wedding, Juchitán style.

We make our way back to our house through the skinny streets, and the Tecas leave the group one by one to return to their usual days. At home I collapse in the orange and yellow hammock that swings between the Ceiba trees and dream of chocolate, beer, colors, and laughter.

When I wake up, I see Itzel through the threads of my hammock. She is there at the table, looking at the gifts of bread and chocolate we were all given by the bride's mother. She tells me more about the marquesote as she breaks off pieces for family members while they come and go. She starts talking:

Are you awake now?
Do you want some agua de chilacayote$^{10}$?

I believe that Marga made a decision, or knew by experience or instinct, to allow me to perform the 'bringing of the bread' before she told me about it. She continued to tell me other facts about the bread, and the wedding ceremony:

We use this bread to symbolize our cooperation in the wedding. It is made by the family of the groom and is brought to the family of the bride two months before the wedding. It is very special bread that everyone loves. It shows that the families are now compadres.$^{11}$ Marquesote is a really important part of the guendaxheela,$^{12}$ and we always make it. We also make marquesote for the all-saints day—the dead like it too! When the bride receives the bread, her family delivers it the next day to the guests who will be invited to the wedding. They bring a piece of bread and a tablet of chocolate as an invitation. If the guest accepts the bread and chocolate, they will give money, maybe fifty pesos, to the person who delivers the invitation, and then that means they

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$^{10}$ Agua de Chilacayote is a local pre-Columbian water drink that is made from a squash, water, and sugar.

$^{11}$ Compadrazco is a Mexican tradition in which you will stand up for each other in all social and personal situations (Sault).

$^{12}$ Guendaxheela is wedding in Zapotec.
accept. The family might write the guest’s name down on the list of those invited. Sometimes people remember that way, sometimes they just know. By doing this exchange, they are allowed to eat and drink at the fiesta.

The mother of the groom rents a baker and a bakery for the bread-making. They have to do that because there is a lot of bread to be made and almost no one has a suitable oven in their house. We all meet at the bakery at nine o’clock in the morning. There should be at least nine of us. The groom’s mother asks her friends and relatives to help. If she can’t find enough women she has to hire people, but that doesn’t happen very often.

Do you want me to write down the instructions?

This is how the marquesote is prepared:

13 Put thirty egg whites—those big eggs—into each of the eight big ollas de barro.14 We save the shells of the eggs for the necklaces that we wear around our necks for good luck while we make the bread. Then you have to start

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13 While she tells me this recipe, she switches pronouns from you to we, us, one, and she. I have tried to translate the Spanish as closely as I can to match her meaning. When we share recipes in English we do the same thing—going from I to the personal you and then to the ‘people in general’ you. We will often use we when it is a family recipe.

14 Clay pots in Spanish.
making foam with the molinillo.\textsuperscript{15} This can take four hours to complete. It has to be really foamy and stiff when we’re done. We can’t stop the beating once started, or it will fall! Also one must be careful that one is not mad or hot-sexually, and that her eyes don’t have a hot gaze, because then it never gets foamy! I think that this is very important because she could make everyone suffer for her inconsideration. Then one of the helpers or the baker adds the egg yolks one by one while we are still stirring. If we make a lot of foam, we get to take some home. Everyone at the house is waiting to see if we bring it home!

During this time, we talk a lot. It takes a long time to make the foam stiff. During the day they bring you lunch, dinner, atole,\textsuperscript{16} and sodas; they have to keep you strong for the work. Okay, now the baker adds the rice flour that is called guiitu’dee and the sugar which have been mixed and sifted—some people add a little royal.\textsuperscript{17} This has to be added slowly, little by little.

When that is all mixed, you add melted butter—but not too hot!

\textsuperscript{15} Molinillo is a wooden utensil used for mixing ingredients.  
\textsuperscript{16} Atole is a traditional corn drink.  
\textsuperscript{17} Royal is gelatin.
Then it all goes into the big pans. Once it bakes, it is cut into smaller blocks while it is hot and then it goes back in the oven to brown on both sides.

When it cools, you can make designs on it with sugar and egg whites. Sometimes we write the novios\textsuperscript{18} names on the top and sometimes little designs or crosses on them. When we are finished, we have calluses on our hands, and our arms and legs hurt too. The big olla is between our legs, that’s why our legs hurt. At one o’clock we finish mixing it, by four it is done cooking, and by five or six we can go home. It takes the whole day to make it. It is not easy! I help my friends and family because they will help me when my children get married. I am lucky to have only two boys because I will only have to send the bread for them. I have seven girls, and so I will have other work to do for their weddings. Maybe some will elope and get married by the civil wedding, and I won’t have to pay so much. It is okay with me! I don’t want them to be \textit{raptado},\textsuperscript{19} though, it is very ugly. She continued sharing the difficulties in her own marriage, and her fears

\textsuperscript{18} Fiancés in Spanish.
\textsuperscript{19} Raptado is a form of kidnapping and rape that was started by the conquistadors. It did not necessarily lead to marriage in the past but now usually does. The marriage is complete if all families agree it is so, with the caveat that the boy may return the girl to her family if it is found that she is not a virgin.
regarding her inability to pay for weddings for her children.

That is the recipe for the bread you carried today. You can learn about us here in Juchitán by doing things the way we do them. We learned from our mothers and our children may learn from us. That is why we do them the same as the ancestors did.
Tangü yú with xicalpectle

Bringing the Bread  Marquesote
An old Volkswagen drives by. It has a loudspeaker tied to the roof with wire that goes around and in through the windows. The message coming from man in the slow moving car is that the Señora Orizaba died the night before. He announces the date that the family will be holding the velorio. He lists all the family members, and then the little car moves on to repeat the message at the other end of the street.

Eight days later, I find myself walking down a dark, heavy-eyed street at four in the morning with a granddaughter and some friends of Señora Orizaba. The air is already hot, although the morning is yet not even a whisper. A few bare light bulbs hang forlorn over doorways, otherwise everything is dark. Few are awake in Juchitán. A dog or two are barking in the distance, but most all I hear are the hollow clicks of our heels as we walk through the streets. The little talking we do is in low tones; neither our voices nor our ears are ready for noise.

There is smoke in the alley, and it thickens as we turn into the dim passage that leads to the back of the

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1 Velorio is wake in Spanish.
house where we are going to make tamales for the ninth day velorio. We follow two aged Tecas\(^2\) in black skirts with black scarves over their heads. From the back they look like chubby penguins swaying back and forth as they slowly shuffle down the passage. Like gifts, they carry squares of folded banana leaves in their hands. We come out after them into the huge enclosed yard, where there are many busy women with faces that span generations, all wearing aprons, many wearing black cloth over their long, black braided hair. There are a few men around the sides, chopping wood and looking on.

Four brick fire pits have enormous copper pots boiling over them. Women dressed in flowery skirts with black tops, stir and monitor their progress. The yard is large, and there are people in all corners: chopping, stirring, folding, washing, arranging; everyone is doing something. Tables and chairs are scattered throughout the dirt yard and in a back area there are roosters, chickens, and cows.

People continue to arrive with the oldest sitting two by two on the back bench seats of bicycles transformed into taxis. A woman greets the elderly,

\(^2\) Tecas are women and muxe (the third gender) of Juchitán.
kissing them and seating them on the periphery. These are the very old women, many of whom are toothless, and dressed in black. They have performed this ritual countless times, and come to monitor the young and not-so-young. They know that their time will come too. They will eat the beef tamales today to honor their friend, but soon will rest, while in turn others maintain vigil.

I am introduced to a sister of the deceased. She welcomes me and hands me a cup of hot chocolate with cinnamon and piloncillo \(^3\) mixed in, and a piece of the egg bread that traditionally accompanies the chocolate. The chocolate taste commingles with the smell of the fire, and brings back warm personal memories of campfires in Northern USA. I can only imagine what these smells signify for these people. A week has passed since their loved one died and there is still sorrow lingering from that passing.

I have not brought any banana leaves, and I am obviously an outsider, as made evident by my face and body, so I am given a job reserved for the young girls—I separate the strips of sugar cane strings for the wrapping and tying of the tamales. No one tells me how to

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\(^3\) Piloncillo is a type of dark sugar and molasses sweetener.
do the job; I must just watch and learn. We finish separating the strings from the sugar cane, and so I look around for a moment. I found someone to speak with me in Spanish, and I asked a few questions about the food preparation.

The live cow bought for the velorio cost three thousand pesos, and everyone who comes will contribute to its purchase. The family worked the whole evening killing, cleaning, and preparing it for the tamales and beef soup that the tradition dictates. There are cow udders hanging from lines that are strung across the yard, and pots of chopped coagulated blood waiting on the table. A man comes with a wheelbarrow, pays for, and carts off the skin and head of the cow. Another comes to buy the ears and buckets of intestines. Nothing is wasted.

I notice a woman who is elbow deep in masa. The cauldron she is mixing it in is three feet deep and she has to reach down to the bottom in order to mix it well.

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4 About three hundred dollars.
5 Masa is the corn dough used to spread on the banana leaves or corn husks to make the tamales.
Another woman comes over and adds *epazote* and liquid lard. The mixer-lady is straining and sweating, and another woman is wiping her brow as she struggles to lift and fold the thick dough. She looks exhausted. I go over and ask her if I can help her mix. They both look at me like I'm a naughty child. The woman mixing the *masa* says "No, I am the sister and I must do it." If I have help the *masa* will be bitter!" I say, "Of course!" and move on to look at something else.

In the yard there is a big cauldron of yellow mole sauce made with *masa*, coastal yellow chilies, tomatoes, tomatillos, yerba santa, and cilantro; this will be spooned into the tamales. A pot of the beef soup that is being prepared for the workers’ breakfast is boiling, and a pot of beef chunks, the *masa*, and the huge cauldron for the tamales are almost ready. One or two women are at every pot, monitoring its progress.

Suddenly there is a cacophony of voices, pans, skirts, etc. The *masa* is ready and everyone, as if by a signal, goes to the long table, opens up their packet of banana leaves as the bowls of ingredients to fill the

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6 *Epazote* is an herb that is used in Mexican cooking. We often see this "weed" growing here in fields.
tamales are delivered to the table. The women spread out their banana leaves. A bowl of masa, a bowl of mole, and a big plate of beef chunks are all placed down the middle of the table. A young girl runs back and forth from the steamy cauldrons to the table, keeping the bowls full. The ten women around the table expertly spread the masa on the leaves, spoon some mole onto them, and then place big beef chunks in the middle as they pass them down the assembly line. They fold the leaf over the sides to look like a gift, and then use the long strings of the sugar cane to tie the little squares. When they have a bowl filled with the tamales, a young Teca comes and picks it up to put it into the pot. After making hundreds of tamales, they run out of banana leaves and made a few of Northern Mexico’s (the tamales that we are accustomed to here in California) traditional corn husk tamales until they run out of mole.

Once again I ask to help, this time at the tamale cauldron. Again the answer is no, but for a different reason. The woman setting the tamales tells me that the result of more than one person placing them in the steam bath is that the tamales will not set, the masa will stay mushy. This woman set at least one thousand tamales in
the pot during the hours we were there making them. It is a beautiful image: green banana leaves and yellow-beige corn husks all in perfect little packages. With that finished, she puts a tablecloth tightly over the pot, tucking in all the edges so that the tamales can steam over the intense fire.

The work is almost done, the tamales are starting to smell like sweet corn and aromatic herbs, and a few hours ago the hot sun came over the horizon. It is just past dawn now, and the young women start passing out breakfast. Breakfast is Bëla bixhuuni. Because we are guests they serve us first. I ask them, with trepidation, not to spoon in the chunks of coagulated blood. I have a very difficult time eating meat, and at six-thirty in the morning coagulated blood is a little too challenging. They seem surprised but are happy to accommodate me. The soup has the delicious local spices that I love in it, and the women look to see if I like it. I smile a lot and make the sounds of approval that are known here and in my home; mmmmm.

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7 Bëla bixhuuni is beef soup with chunks of coagulated blood floating in it.
Now the tamales are really steaming. The woman who set them occasionally removes one from its bath to check to see if it is done. There is a lot resting on the know-how of this woman. She has the reputation in town as a tamale expert.

There is an obvious hierarchy in the eating and cooking order. The guests, middle-aged and very old women eat first, along with any men who are present. The men and young women then deliver the bowls according to the directions of an older woman, who continues filling the bowls. This woman eats last, and she is in charge of distribution of the meal, which indicates her great importance in this event. I find out later she is a daughter of the deceased. Next, the young women eat. The older women who have been in charge of the pots and the control of the food eat last. Then the young women wash all the pots, pans, dishes and utensils.

After I eat, I am introduced to another daughter of La Avispa;\(^6\) the woman who died. She is sitting in the saint’s room where the body was placed. Someone has to

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\(^6\) La Avispa “The Wasp” is the woman who died. She was known for her speech patterns. She swore a lot and was very direct in her comments and criticism. She was well loved and had many friends. About fifty and then later one-hundred of these friends were present while I was at the velorio.
sit and pray in the room at all times, and it is her watch. The saints' room has four huge, white, wax candles, and various other candles are lit on the altar and on the floor. Copal⁹ burns in the room and there are flowers everywhere. There is river sand made into the form of a cross where the body laid on the floor. After the body was removed the day after death, flowers replaced it. The petals are on the cross, and new visitors bring more flowers to spread, more candles to light, money for the funeral, and mescal. There are two thin adobe bricks wrapped in paper where the head of the deceased lay. On the saints table there are statues of the saint and pictures of ancestors.

The windows are open in the saint’s room in order to allow the soul to go back and forth between the form of the dead and the form of the living. The belief in Juchitán is that both forms are present in this world; they simply manifest as different beings. It is the ninth day after the death, and the soul has had these days to accustom itself to the other side, and they to their loss. If the deceased has not left unfinished business,

⁹ Copal is a tree resin that is burned in the churches, saint rooms, and homes where people have recently died.
the Zapotecs believe that after this passage, she can
rest in peace. They believe that death is the purest
relaxation, and that they may achieve peace and
contentment in death. In another room, all of the
articles that were present during the death have been
shut in in order to contain the calor.\textsuperscript{10} This will be
opened tomorrow.

The daughter sitting in the saints' room tells me
about her mother. Before she died, La Avispa went to say
good-bye to all her women and muxe friends in the market
and to forgive her enemies. She had told this daughter
how happy she had been to be able to take her leave. She
had also picked out her clothes to be buried in. The
Zapotecs in this area usually put all of the clothes of
the deceased in the casket when they bury the body, but
La Avispa had decided weeks before her death to have only
a few choice items put in the casket with her.

The daughter tells me about how her mother was \textit{bien}
\textit{picardía}\textsuperscript{11} and that during this \textit{velorio} the women would
speak like her mother, remember stories of her mother,

\textsuperscript{10} Calor translates to heat but in this case it is something that the
Zapotecs believe that the dead and their material possessions hold
for days after death. You can "catch" calor and it will make you
ill.

\textsuperscript{11} Someone who speaks with double meanings, jokes a lot, and in her
case, swore a lot.
and focus all of their talk on La Avispa. She told me that they were speaking in Zapotec and that I wouldn’t understand, but there were a lot of funny, double-meaning, and racy stories being told.

I ask: What if your mother or someone else who died didn’t like beef tamales while they were alive, would you still serve them today? She told me that her mother indeed did like them, but if she had not, “She is not here eating now. It is our tradition in Juchitán to make beef tamales for the velorio. The dead will get what they want to eat on Día de los Muertos.”

The velorio is a mix of Catholic and Pre-Hispanic rituals. Tomorrow morning, extremely early, the sand and flowers that make up the cross will be brought to the graveyard to rest. This will be the official burial. The black bows that are made up to display on the windows and doorway will stay until time and the elements wear them away and the black mourning clothing will be worn for at least a year by the family. The room may be swept now, but not before the cross is removed.

During the day, everyone who knew La Avispa will arrive, give some money to the daughter, leave flowers,

12 Day of the Dead.
drink mescal, and then eat in the same area we made the tamales. They will spend the day talking about La Avispa, and attempt to speak in the same manner she spoke. There is music and a lot of drinking. People will cry and laugh with the family. No Zapotec family likes to be alone, in death or life. They love and need to be a part of their community. In forty days from the death there will be another day of mole and friends and family. They will get together, eat, and speak about the deceased. On the first Day of the Dead after the death they will place the deceased favorite foods, drink, and objects that were special to her, at the gravesite. They will spend the evening there. After that day, the dead should not return. They officially take their other form and rest.

This pattern is always followed. If the family cannot afford it, neighbors and friends will cooperate and perform the rituals. It is important to the Zapotecs to show as much respect as they can by following these prescribed proceedings.

13 Mole is a traditional dish made with different ingredients in different parts of Mexico. The mole that they will make on the fortieth day will be made with chicken, chocolate, chilies, nuts, and many spices.
When we left after making all of the tamales, eating, and paying our respects, we were given ten tamales each and sent on our way. We returned later for a few shots of mescal, more tamales, béla bixhuuni, and conversation. There were at least one hundred people there memorializing La Avispa when we finally made our way home.
En Homenaje a
La Avispa
1920 - 2004
Ma Nuu Genderó La? (ma nu-u gain-dare-O la)/Is the Meal Ready?

Maybe it would have been more appropriate to present a day in the life of a Juchiteca—beginning the day by waking up at 4 a.m. to go outside and put the beans on the brazier for a day of cooking, then at the end of the evening, standing by the sink outside under the Ceiba tree, washing the day’s pots and pans. Those hours from 4 a.m. to 10 p.m. filled with the routine of making chocolate for the children’s breakfast, standing in line for tortillas, walking to the market to buy and sell her vegetables, and meeting with the committee in charge of making the food for the neighborhood vela. The afternoon would be filled with making the afternoon meal as marchantas¹ come by the house selling their cheeses and other wares door to door, and she plans for her boy child’s wedding wondering who will be her companions in the preparation and the bringing of the bread. Then, just before bed, she swings in side-by-side hammocks enjoying her daughter’s company as the daughter breastfeeds her child. She finally drinks a cup of atole with a little

¹ Marchantas are traveling saleswomen. They travel all through the Isthmus selling their various products. They usually travel by bus to Oaxaca to buy goods that are difficult to find in Juchitán.
piece of bread just before going to sleep in the hammock that swings from the same Ceiba tree where dishes from the day’s meals lay drying in the lingering heat of the evening.

Could there be a more illuminating way to demonstrate the importance of food as discourse, in a regular day, during the daily grind, than illustrated in my choice of stories? Maybe I missed the boat. I had experienced all of this too: the daily food exchanges, market shopping, planning for the velas; the many quotidian indicators of food as language that the Juchitecas demonstrate.

And what happened to the muxe? Did they get lost in all of this talk of food? No, my experiences with the muxe indicate that separating them from the biologically born women of Juchitán, in terms of food discourse, is a mistake. This separation is something that I brought along with me as the baggage of a culture that only recognizes two genders, and within that understanding sees one of them as generally being the provider of food. Looking at the muxe through the lens of the USA’s two gender model, I would conclude that the muxe are homosexual men who are fems, bottoms, or queens. But this
categorization would be lacking in depth because it would not explain their vital roles in Juchitán. The muxe fulfill a partnership role in food discourse which puts them in the same important position as the women as conduits of culture. The muxe are recognized as muxe, are proud as muxe, and valued as muxe, and yet my research tells me that considering food as discourse, the muxe and women are almost interchangeable: they both work in the market, they both cook and pass on the traditions of cooking, and they both plan and carry out food rituals and events equally. My choice to not single them out was a wise one.

Both the women and muxe created and are still creating a lasting legacy in Juchitán, one that can be celebrated and admired not because they are muxe or women but because they are “doing” identity through food, and they are doing it with passion and finesse just as the Juchitecas have done since history can recall.

In the Cuentitos I demonstrate lines of food discourse that tell stories: in Nisiaabá Búpu—ancient memory, family and community loyalty; in Guchachi—welcome, humor, acceptance of outsiders, and animal spirit power; in Bidxaa—hate, love, faith, medicine, and
female power; in Bá du lu guidxi—the joining of families, worship, and continuance of tradition; and in Hriapa biaani—group sorrow, the expression of gratitude, food traditions, and the spirit of community.

I am satisfied that I chose to focus my research work in another direction than I had originally proposed, but I continue to ask more questions about my agenda. Should I have been more concerned about political advocacy and scholarship in my work? Could my feminist consciousness have more strongly framed my stories? Can I develop this work to promote better understanding and women’s consciousnesses? Could I have provided a different setting so that I better facilitated the women’s voices/actions in my stories? Would they have chosen to tell other stories in a different manner if I had asked again?

The answer to all of these questions is yes, more than likely. To politicize or advocate almost anything, I could have easily jumped on the feminist, postmodern, Marxist, queer studies, postcolonial or any number of bandwagons that would have informed my process and conclusions in this research. The question is whether this work would be valuable, liberating, or worthwhile to
anyone whom it directly affects. My confusion still resides in the question of who is the best person to decide how a particular study should take place. Can one research and then come to a wise and practical assessment that does no harm to one’s “subjects” and indeed somehow lends them insight or joy? How can the outside researcher make these decisions? There are always more informed voices of authority than mine, i.e. the “subjects” of my queries. Even if I channel the voices of those who seek my assistance in the telling of their stories, don’t I somehow influence the outcome of that project?

At this time and in this place, I am satisfied. The questions I continue to ask will always be present. To imagine that I could accomplish everything I went to see and do in one visit to Juchitán is unreasonable. I know now that to write about four months of experiences so different from those in my country, culture, and family, in one book is difficult.

My challenge was to encourage the Juchitecas to be comfortable in speaking their food discourse with my presence and then to later facilitate your understanding of their message via my words. I know that I would be more satisfied if I could bring you there and you could
shop, cook, eat, drink, sit, and talk with the people who
made the stories, but alas, this is what I can give you. I hope that you accept my Foods Talk/ Food Talks as a
reminder that food can be used to show meaning and to
claim agency. Food is talking loud, whispering, and
signing deliciously all over the world!

I asked if the legend would apply, in that I would
be destined to come back to Juchitán, if I only consumed
the foot, and not the rest of the iguana.

Becerra
Cuentitos Guchachi
Appendix

Research: January, 2004

1. Purpose of project and background.
   I will interview the adult women and muxes (biologically male, socially female) of Juchitán, México, to determine why and how they have preserved their language, and why and how they are attempting language reversal (Spanish to Zapotec) in their town. The Juchitecas have resisted colonialization since the Spanish arrived in Mexico and I believe it is because they have maintained their indigenous roots. The Zapotecs of Juchitán are again in danger of losing their autonomy due to globalization. I will attempt to elucidate their past resistance through language, dress, matrifocal society, gender roles and fiesta system, and to present a working and effective model of resistance through cultural stasis.

2. Participant population and recruitment procedures.
   I will interview Zapotec Indians in Juchitán, México. They will be contacted and prescreened, to ascertain their interest in participating, by personal friends/colleagues of mine that live in the area. They will be informed as to the scope of the project and the questions that will be asked. I will solely interview people who have been referred by friends/colleagues who are inhabitants of the surrounding communities.

3. Details of the procedures to be used.
   I will be using, as a guide, the questions attached. I will be asking the participants these questions verbally, as many of the people will not be able to read. I will ask them if I may tape their answers. If they choose not to let me use the tape recorder or if I see that it is uncomfortable for them, I will write and/or reconstruct the conversation at a later time.

4 Description of the debrief/feedback that will be provided to the participants.
   Participants will be told that they may choose to withdraw or stop their interview at any time. Participants will be asked once again if they are comfortable allowing me to use the information that I have gathered in the study, for use in the paper, at the end of our interview. I will give them the option of withdrawing the notes and erasing the tape if they choose to. I will inform them that I will provide them with a copy of the paper when completed. I will inform them that I will not be using their real names in the paper.

5. Potential risks to the dignity, rights, health or welfare of the human participants.
   After they have spoken they may feel that they have disclosed too much personal information.

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1 This is the original questionnaire I had intended to use in my research. I did not use it.
6. Safeguards used to minimize the risks, including how I will handle confidential information.

These people will be hand-chosen by local scholars. They will be informed as to the questions and information that I will be seeking.
I will give them the option to drop out at any time.
I know the Zapotec culture as I have lived with them, I will be cognizant of their discomfort if present, and discontinue the interview.
None of these questions are threatening within their community.
I will give them the option to withdraw their interview.
I will not use their real names when I write the paper.

7. Benefits of the study.
I will show the strength, fortitude, and uniqueness of these people, highlighting the manner in which they have maintained their language and power. This paper could bolster self-esteem for these people and present a unique and powerful societal model to us.

8. Risk and benefit ratio.
I believe the risk is small (5%) with the safeguards in place; option to withdraw, names changed in the paper, the benefit great (95%) for the reasons stated above in #7.

9. Qualifications and experience of experimenter.
I am a graduate student in Literature and Writing. I speak fluent Spanish. My thesis and investigations involve the Zapotec people. I lived in Oaxaca and worked at a University-Universidad del Mar- in the area of Juchitán. I taught Zapotec children in villages and in an orphanage in Oaxaca. I am familiar with the area and culture and have many -academic as well as non-academic- personal friends who will help me identify the interview participants who are interested in my project.

10. Procedures used to obtain informed consent.
I have included the verbal consent I will use with the participants. Because many of the participants will be illiterate I will be using this method. I will ask if they would like to sign the form or prefer to give me verbal permission on the tape.
Because these people have a fear of government intrusion, which usually involves indecipherable written contracts, and many have little or no reading skills, I will not use long confusing forms.
Questions for the Juchitecos:

1. How old are you?

2. Where were you born?

3. How many children do you have? Boys? Girls? Others that live in the home?

4. What language(s) do you speak? At home? At work?

5. What language(s) do the other people in your house speak?

6. Who taught you and your child Zapotec?

7. Which language do you prefer to speak in?

8. When and how did you learn your language(s)?

9. Did you go to school? How long? What did you speak there? Write? Read?

10. What do you think the government thinks of you, speaking Zapotec?

11. Why do you think Juchitecas continue speaking Zapotec?

12. How long have people been speaking Zapotec? Do you know any history or stories about this?

13. Do you have any muxes in your family? Extended family?

14. Do you accept them? Does the rest of your family?

15. Why do you think they are accepted here and not in the rest of Mexico?

(If they do have a muxe in the family I will ask the next 3 questions, if they apply.)

16. When did you know ________ was a muxe?

17. What does (____muxe____) do for a living?

18. If something happened to you and you could not care for your family, who would carry on for you?

19. Do you go to fiestas? How many per year? Why do you go?
20. Does everyone in town attend the fiestas?

Consent:

I will verbally ask them this. Many people do not read and would be intimidated by an official form. I will tape record their answer or I will ask them to sign if I am sure that they can read and they want to sign.

I (Dawn Becerra) will be asking you some questions regarding Juchitán’s Zapotec language, muxes and fiestas. I will use this information to write a paper which I may publish in the United States. Do you agree to provide this information for my paper?

If you choose, at the end of our interview, to take back the tape recording or my notes, I will give them back to you while we are here.

Do you understand and agree?
Works Cited


La Masters, Byron. “Gay Themes Sell” *Burnt Orange Review*. 


Tuckman, Jo. "Cross-Dressing Candidate Causes Stir."