

Teaching Alternative and Indigenous Gender Systems in World History: A Queer Approach

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AT THE AFROFUTURISM CONFERENCE held by the New School for Social Research in May 2015, Joshua Allen started the “Organizing at the Intersections—A Decolonial Project: Queer Liberation and Racial Justice” workshop with a question: *What gender would you be if you did not have to adhere to the gender binary?* Joshua had each participant in the auditorium introduce themselves by “they/them” gender pronouns and answer this question. This question does a lot of work. It assumes something that mainstream society in general has difficulty imagining: that how we have been taught to see the world is not natural and universal, and that we could actually imagine ourselves outside of those terms we are accustomed to. What else might you be, outside of those categories of “male” and “female”? What else could gender identity be?

In light of recent media around transgender people, a large segment of the public has become more sensitive to definitions of gender. As teachers become more aware and respectful of their students’ preferred gender pronouns, there is a need for students, and teachers, to understand gender variance broadly. Regardless of the increased visibility of transgender individuals, learning about different ways

of making sense of gender, particularly indigenous gender systems, makes for good historical thinking.

However, the bulk of these media portrayals of transgender individuals reinforces a gender binary, one centered on people that fall in line within the accepted confines of male and female. The media tends to ignore those who put the stable binary into question, such as genderqueer and gender non-conforming (GNC) individuals. Alok Vaid-Menon, one of the members of Dark Matter, a trans South Asian performance art duo, wrote an article in *The Guardian* on the ways that the “transgender tipping-point” reifies the gender binary, and remains another form of exclusion for gender non-conforming individuals.¹ Difference is easily swallowed up by the status quo, but is made to appear same and comfortable, and the general peace is restored often at the expense of the integrity of such difference. My approach to both gender and history is not to end in a place where one thinks, “*how strange the past was*” or “*how strange those other genders are*,” but rather to think about *how strange and particular one's own contexts and assumptions are*, amidst a vast array of interpretations of reality throughout time and space.

Increasing visibility of trans people in the media does not automatically lead to all transgender individuals feeling respected and recognized for who they are. As a cisgender queer Japanese American male, I struggle with my desire for recognition from others, yet know that my self-worth is ultimately not based in a legitimacy affirmed by a society that has previously rejected various facets of my identity. I refrain from a pedagogy that tells people who identify as trans, gender non-conforming, and genderqueer what their history is, and that tells cisgender students how they should understand individuals who identify as trans, GNC, or genderqueer. In the spirit of better allyship, I emphasize the practice of listening to rather than speaking for, both as historical practice (listening to what documents can and cannot tell us) and pedagogical practice (listening to student thoughts and answers that teachers might not understand immediately).

Unfortunately, there remains a lack of accessible primary sources on alternative and indigenous gender systems in world history. This article’s reliance on outsider knowledge production speaks to the need for funding more research from within marginalized communities.² Too often, I have relied on the words of other people such as anthropologists rather than of the individuals themselves.

As much as possible, I aim to rely on materials produced by trans and queer people of color.

This article emphasizes three concepts illuminated through teaching about alternative and indigenous gender systems in world history: 1) queer critique, 2) the historical thinking skill of contextualization, and 3) indigenous knowledge systems. The article begins with a queer critique of the status quo gender binary, opening up space for alternative and indigenous understandings of gender. The following section asserts that a greater grasp of the historical thinking skill of contextualization is facilitated by engaging alternative and indigenous gender systems. The third section focuses on indigenous ways of knowing, to create a more global context of knowledge production. Throughout, I bring in examples from my own teaching in a Title I high school in New York City, with predominantly African American and Latino students. Some of the lessons I mention have been developed in my ninth grade global studies class and twelfth grade government and economics class. Most materials were developed in collaboration with co-teachers over the years. Finally, the last section examines a lesson created by me and another ninth grade teacher for our unit on the consequences of colonization in Latin America that incorporates the *muxes* of Juchitán, Mexico. As Alfredo Mirandé wrote:

Muxes are biological males who also manifest feminine identities in their dress and attire, but they are not transsexual nor are they seeking to become women. They both self-identify and are generally recognized and accepted as a third gender, rather than as men or women, adopting characteristics of each gender.³

In the midst of teaching about the cultural destruction caused by European colonizers, the muxe in Oaxaca give evidence of how pre-Colombian ways of imagining the world continue today.

Additional non-binary gender systems and identities, such as *hijras* in India and two-spirit people in various Native American communities will also be discussed.⁴ Gayatri Reddy explained:

Hijras are phenotypic men who wear female clothing and, ideally, renounce sexual desire and practice by undergoing a sacrificial emasculation—that is, an excision of the penis and testicles—dedicated to the goddess Bedhraj Mata. Subsequently, they are believed to be endowed with the power to confer fertility on newlyweds or newborn children.⁵

As summarized by Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen in *Queer Indigenous Studies*:

Two-Spirit was proposed in Indigenous organizing in Canada and the United States to be inclusive of Indigenous people who identify as GLBTQ or through nationally specific terms from Indigenous languages.”⁶

These are only a few of the wide-ranging non-binary gender systems throughout world history. One could also focus on many other examples, such as the *Mino* warrior women of Dahomey/Benin, the *Mashoga* in Kenya, the *Sekrata* in Madagascar, the *Metis* in Nepal, the *Kathoey* in Thailand, the *Waria* in Indonesia, the *Xanith (Khanith)* in Oman, or the third gender category *Māhū* in Hawaii and other Pacific Islands.

Literature Review

Many works addressing gender in world history focus primarily on the roles of women in world history,⁷ reinforcing the notion that a rigid gender binary is the only way of understanding gender throughout history. This also de-emphasizes the privileging of men as the norm in history by making gender a subsection focused only on women, as if masculinity did not require interrogation in its social functioning. Merry Wiesner-Hanks argued that women’s history has remained unattended within world history, in spite of movements within and around the history discipline (social history and cultural studies amongst others) that seemed likely to bring the two together.⁸

Within history pedagogy, the last several decades have produced new research on the relationships between student identities and history narratives.⁹ These works have shown the importance of helping students make sense of new information that might challenge preexisting history narratives, and providing evidence that student identities shape how they relate to and incorporate new historical information.

Other research has focused on the ways gender is constructed and policed within and through schools and society. Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell Ginet argued that gender, class, and power relations are mutually constructed within particular school settings.¹⁰ Paul Willis’ work suggested that male students negotiate the ways they are socialized into gendered class positions, and that those roles influence

their relationships to schooling.¹¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay" addressed how boys' gender identities are policed within society, and how the DSM-III created "Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood" for those who did not adhere to the established gender binary, naturalizing masculinity and femininity as normal and healthy set categories, and pathologizing gender variance.¹²

Within much world history curriculum, the inclusion of gender presents contemporary binary categories as universal and natural, rather than historicizing the gender binary as one among many ways of categorizing and understanding gender. On the New York State Regents exam, gender or women's history is not included as a major theme within the multiple-choice history questions. Women's rights and roles come up in questions on human rights issues in the twentieth century, and as an example that could be used in the thematic and document-based question (DBQ) essay sections (the August 2012 exam had the women's rights movement in Great Britain as one of three DBQ essay examples; in January 2008, within the documents on Peter the Great and clothing for the DBQ essay, the changes in women's clothes is discussed in two documents; and for the June 2009 thematic essay, the example of "women under the Taliban in Afghanistan" is suggested). New York State's curriculum framework for global history, revised in 2015, suggested only four places for including gender: for the Neolithic Agricultural Revolution, the changes in roles between men and women (p. 11); in discussing gender roles within religions and belief systems (p. 12); in teaching about the Enlightenment, with a specific suggestion to use Mary Wollstonecraft (p. 21); and in examining imperialism from various viewpoints, women being one of those different perspectives (p. 22).¹³

UCLA's National Center for History in Schools has produced a set of national World History standards; one of their five spheres of human activity is social history:

Through social history, students come to deeper understandings of society: of what it means to be human, of different and changing views of family structures, of men's and women's roles, of childhood and of children's roles, of various groups and classes in society, and of relationships among all these individuals and groups.¹⁴

Rather than allowing a definition of gender that promotes broader inquiry, these standards and exams bound social history within men's and women's roles, missing vast historical complexity.¹⁵

In my early years of teaching, I found the book *Experiencing World History* to be a great overview of various themes in world history.¹⁶ The book tries to be conscious of its task and limitations, and has gender as a central category of analysis within social history. In introducing the theme of gender, the book acknowledges gender variance, but, nonetheless, such variance is marginalized, maintaining the central focus on diversity within the male and female categories across place and time. The centrality of the gender binary is maintained.

A Queer Critique of the Status Quo

One of the basic moves within queer theory is to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar. This inverts what we take to be natural and given, and opens up space for new lines of inquiry. Through queer theory, gender non-conforming people are not the problem, but rather society and our social categories are the problem. What if those who do not fit the gender binary are not the trouble, the problem needing to be fixed? Students ought to see their own contemporary understanding of gender as the “other” gender system, to see how exotic, strange, limited, and narrow our dominant categories of gender are. Rather than a focus on tolerance and acceptance by mainstream society, a queer critique emphasizes contextualizing peoples and individuals within their full complexity. This aspect of queer theory extends into the history discipline, through this constant tension with alienation as a critical lens. History requires this movement between understanding the past as foreign and being able to relate to the past through some semblance of shared understanding. Simultaneously, we must interrogate the complexity of the present moment, to become alienated from the image of the present moment we see reflected/refracted through the past.

Studying gender diversity allows students to imagine the world differently, to think about gender beyond predefined terms. Gender is less about nature and more about contextualized cultural practices. Teachers must trouble gender, “to show that the naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality.”¹⁷ In other words, when we present the gender binary as the natural order and ignore the realities of gender variance across species, let alone our own, we conduct violence in limiting the possibilities of reality. All too often, the gender binary is

presented as a trans-historical and natural category in world history. This cuts off possibilities of knowledge for students, and for engaging historical richness and complexity.

Another central aspect of queer theory is a constant critique of power. Part of the violence in relying on alternative gender systems to teach you something is in the assumption of being able to speak about and for others. This maintains one's dominant position as the subject, speaking about objects of history. It is important to cultivate this stance of not-knowing in both gender and history. Within historical thinking research, Bruce VanSledright emphasized the importance of accepting that we cannot know the past, recognizing this delicate balance of knowing what we can know, having access to some of that knowledge, and acknowledging our limitations on knowing others.¹⁸ We can, however, get students to ultimately speak from a position of knowledge about themselves, and what learning about alternative gender systems has helped them understand about their own position within the contemporary gender binary.

Queerness works against the rigidity of societal grammars. Language, social norms, and gender are dynamic, and the underlying grammar of each is equally dynamic. I have heard cisgender people express frustration about having to deal with someone's shifting gender pronouns, and argue that the use of "they" pronouns for an individual is grammatically wrong and inconveniences them. However, many individuals acknowledge the ways that their gender identity shifts day to day, rather than adhere and remain committed to one gender identity throughout their lives. Transgender ought not be understood as a new box to set beside "male" and "female." The prefix *trans-* here permits a movement across. I find the analogy of light useful here, in how light has properties resembling both a particle and a wave. Transgender allows this movement across gender, where if we take a snapshot at a particular moment, one's gender might be in a particular position, but might just as readily shift to a different position at any other moment. It is mainstream society's inadequate capacity to think differently that ought to be the upsetting factor here, rather than being upset with those who challenge those inadequacies.

When I teach about gender inequality in my senior government and economics course, I assert that the gender binary is limiting for everyone, including men. I show Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk, "We Should All be Feminists," which engaged men

and women in how the gender binary restricts everyone. Adichie asserted, “The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are.”¹⁹ What if we could explore gender outside of two boxes rather than feel punished for not adhering to the norms?

In addition to pushing against the grammar of gender, students must be exposed to gender terminology. One of the first lessons I teach in the gender inequality unit is gender vocabulary, including gender non-conforming, genderqueer, and transgender. A number of queer and trans community organizations (such as FIERCE, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, the Transgender Law Center, and the Western States Center) have great workshop and pedagogical materials available online. Most recently, I used materials about the gender spectrum provided by Teaching Tolerance to help students become aware of the relationships between these terms. Many students have heard terms like transgender, but have never had a chance to clarify what these terms refer to.

Questioning the gender binary is not always easy for students, however. In teaching about gender inequality, many of my male students have expressed discomfort and walked away from the conversation. These ideas threaten their sense of security in the world, and the laws of nature as they understand them. Some of my students have claimed to accept transgender students, but refused to call them by their preferred gender pronouns. I try to scaffold these challenges to their world order in ways that allow them to keep their ears open, walking that line so they are both disrupted in their comfort, yet still willing to listen to those challenges. Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development seems relevant here.²⁰ In my experiences as a teacher, students have nuanced and complex ways of thinking about social phenomena, and when trusted in their capacities and intelligence, students are incredibly willing to engage challenges. By challenging our adherence to a status quo gender binary, we might all be better off.

Historical Thinking and Contextualization

Inquiry into gender in world history develops the historical thinking skill of contextualization because gender already embedded within a range of societal systems (political, economic, cultural) at each particular moment. Sam Wineburg has redirected history

classrooms toward cultivating historical thinking skills, explaining, “the heart of contextualized thinking is an awareness of continuity and discontinuity with the past.”²¹ Emphasizing the skill of contextualization ensures that gender diversity is approached in all of its complexity, both in the past and present moment.

By contextualization, I also refer to the practices developed by cultural studies, which shifted historical work towards understanding the social dynamics and systems of power within the historical moment. Cultural studies historian E. P. Thompson was described by Stuart Hall:

Thompson insisted on the historical specificity of culture, on its plural, not singular, definition—‘cultures’, not ‘Culture’: above all, on the necessary struggle, tension and conflict between cultures and their links to class cultures, class formations and class struggles—the struggles between ‘ways of life’ rather than the evolution of ‘*a way of life*’.²²

Contextualizing particular cultures and gender systems must not turn such systems into static concrete entities, but rather acknowledge the dynamic relational tensions between specific categories.

As pedagogues, we must also contextualize our political stance,²³ which is unavoidable in any history curriculum (the promotion of the “normal,” “traditional” curriculum is just as political as those deemed “radical” or “politically motivated”). In teaching such curricula, I aim for students to have a better understanding and respect of transgender, gender non-conforming, and genderqueer individuals in their communities. This political stance must not be dogmatic, but must lead to rigorous historical inquiry and interrogation of students’ own worlds. I conduct activities that push students to see how their own gender performances are complicated, in spite of the rigid binary we all might have in our heads. For instance, one activity begins with students taking an outline of a person’s body. Inside the line, they write the aspects of their own identity, and outside the line, the perceptions, expectations, and assumptions people make about them. Students then discuss the dissonance between how they understand themselves and how others perceive them. Another activity is to give students a list of pursuits, characteristics, and preferences, and ask students to write down ones they like or relate to. Then, I have the whole class put that same list into a box for “female” and a box for “male.” This gets students to see how their gender perceptions generally are not cleanly distinguished by these gendered boxes.

By acknowledging one's politics, one can be cognizant both of how to hold a political stance, and how that stance might cloud historical inquiry.²⁴ Tracing gender through world history includes owning our desires for a past that legitimizes marginalized peoples in the present, and emphasizing an honesty in reading the past in its full complexity—even when it tells us what we don't want it to. David Halperin's “Is There a History of Sexuality?” addressed the desire for gay people to trace the history of homosexuality back to the ancient Greeks, as a means to historical legitimacy, to be a part of a story of humanity that was always present in the narrative. Halperin moved to abandon the idea of sexuality as a timeless concept, which creates an almost mythic heritage for the LGBTQ community to link to. Instead, a historicized, contextualized set of accounts might help LGBTQ individuals find insight while understanding these examples within their unique and specific cultural paradigms.²⁵

Doing world history requires categorical definitions that allow flexibility for meanings to be fully contextualized, yet have enough specificity that we feel like we're talking about something that can be traced across place and time. If we define gender as specifically male and female, we set up blinders, limiting our capacity to recognize what might lie outside of those two categories. Joan Scott addressed the difficulty of using gender as a category for historical analysis, defining gender as “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.”²⁶ Incorporating another view, Judith Butler's work meanwhile emphasized gender as a set of performances and practices.²⁷ Thinking about gender in these ways helps us understand, for example, how and why gender is used to signify power relationships in political cartoons and colonial imagery throughout world history, beyond just roles of men and women in heterosexual relationships. In lessons on Queen Hatshepsut, students examine the performance of gender and power in ancient Egypt. Queen Hatshepsut has been depicted in ancient sculpture with the traditional beard of a pharaoh (as a symbol of power), along with breasts, signaling attributes of both genders simultaneously. Such an example opens up such this problem-space of gender as a signifier of power, and gender as contextualized performance.

Part of the contextualization that must happen in the present is with the term “gender identity.” Gender identity is a contemporary construct, embedded within a Western and contemporary notion of identity politics that underscores the individual’s autonomy over their identity. In many Western societies, individual identities are the central unit of political power, as in “one-person-one-vote.” However, many societies focus on larger family units or clans as the main unit of political power. Gender can become a function of those larger units of political power, and less focused on the individual. For example, there have been recent photo-essays of “sworn virgins” in mainstream media such as *National Geographic*, *The New York Times*, *Slate*, and others. Featured photographer Jill Peters stated, “‘Sworn Virgin’ is the term given to a biological female in the Balkans who has chosen, usually at an early age, to take on the social identity of a man for life.”²⁸ One might initially look at these images and match them with an understanding of the contemporary transgender identity in the United States.

Yet deeper contextualization of these individuals challenges our assumptions of gender identity as solely an individual choice and function. We cannot understand the *burrnesha*, the “sworn virgins” in Albania, Montenegro, and Kosovo, in terms of individualized gender identity, but rather as gender embedded within economic systems and family structures.²⁹ As Antonia Young stated, “It is the economic factor which is crucial to the need for certain women in this patriarchal society to take a man’s role in order to head an otherwise maleless family.”³⁰ Gender in this situation almost becomes a function of economic and family reproduction. This is also not an example of a liberatory or egalitarian alternative gender system, but a negotiation of gender grounded in a patriarchal society. Women must adopt a male gender expression in order to serve in a (male) position of power in the family. Gender identities and performance can shift not because of individual identification, but out of economic necessity within a patriarchal society and reproduction of the family unit into future generations.

When teachers go over the basics of a civilization through acronyms such as GRAPES (Geography, Religion, Achievements, Political system, Economic system, and Social structure), lessons that contextualize gender allow students to see that each of these factors is not a trans-historical concrete entity that stands alone, but that

these categories interact—and look differently—in each particular context. Deeper historical inquiry into gender requires teachers to move past rigid categorical boxes of analysis, to take such graphic organizers to the next level of critical thinking about interwoven systems. In the case of the *burrnesha*, gender is tightly woven with politics, economics, and social/family structures.

Plato's myth of Aristophanes offers another interesting case for understanding both the context of today and the past. The myth of Aristophanes is a non-binary origin story of gender and love, and requires a discussion of contextualization between the past and present. In this myth, Aristophanes provided an explanation of the origins of love and how humans seek companionship to feel whole. He warned humans to respect the gods, and explained how humans started with three genders (or sexes, depending on the translation). The genders are the children of the sun (like two women put together, with four arms, four legs, and two heads), the children of the earth (two men together, with four arms, four legs, and two heads), and the children of the moon (one man and one woman together, with four arms, four legs, and two heads). The existence of the genders is a result of humans' relationships to the gods. Zeus splits the three in half to put them in their place, which then explains gay men, lesbian women, and heterosexual couples, each seeking their other halves.

These gender categories in the text are not scientific terms, but reference cosmology and religion. Wineburg's emphasis on contextualization called for applying a range of contexts, the *Zeitgeist*, the linguistic practices of the time, amongst other factors, to make sense of a text.³¹ One must understand Plato's use of myth as a philosophical device, and embed this story within Plato's larger symposium discussion of the origin and nature of love. The introduction to the Cambridge translation contextualized how settings such as the drinking party of the symposium usually included relations between older and younger men, and how these relations were embedded within the larger social fabric of Athens.³²

Contextualizing our present condition includes understanding how our sense of the gender binary is rooted in the Judeo-Christian story of Adam and Eve (*not* Adam and Steve). Alongside scientific arguments, there are these investments in who we are based on religion. This myth has come up more recently within the song (and video with animation) from the 2001 film "Hedwig and the Angry

Inch.” The song “The Origin of Love” uses Plato’s myth by someone in the present reaching into the past and finding historical legitimacy, or at least connection to the past, through this three-gender system.³³ I have introduced this text and video for students in the past as supplementary to papers they have written about gender inequality and understandings today, but this text and video would work well to emphasize these very different contexts, uses, and meanings. While the focus in Aristophanes’ speech is more on the origins of love, for Hedwig in a contemporary context, the focus becomes on legitimizing an origin of the androgynous third sex. Teaching this text and video could focus on the juxtapositions of what this story means in the context of Plato’s Athens, and of today.

Indigenous Knowledges, Imagining Otherwise

Teaching about indigenous gender systems addresses how the bulk of world history curricula privileges European ways of knowing and thinking about the world. Enrique Dussel’s *Philosophy of Liberation* (1985) asserted that Europe has been portrayed as the central producer of knowledge, which distorts the geopolitics of knowledge. For Dussel, dialectics is a European construction that maintains Europe as central, and all “others” remain in an “othered” and negated position.³⁴ Global history state standards and exams generally reproduce this relationship, wherein non-white peoples and places become historical as they encounter Europe, or do things that resemble European achievements and values.

Dussel’s concept of analectics demands that subjugated knowledges (such as indigenous knowledge systems) be understood within their own epistemological contexts. Dussel’s analectics focused on alterity, as an affirmation of the other in its own right, resulting in a more global understanding of knowledge production:

Clothed in noble, warlike, healthy, Nietzschean virtues, white-skinned and blond-haired like the Aryans, Europe throws itself upon the periphery, on the geopolitical exteriority, on the wives of other men, on their children, and on their gods. In the name of Being, of the human world, of civilization, it annihilates the alterity of other peoples, other cultures, other erotics, other religions. Thus it incorporates them or, in another way, violently expands the frontiers of its world until it includes other peoples in its sphere of control.³⁵

When we present gender as a naturalized and stable historical binary across world history, bound within a European epistemology of religion, science, and politics, we reproduce violence over the alterity of other peoples. A world history that assumes men and women as the limits of gender across human history negates and silences vast global intelligibility.

The hijras in India become a common example of a third gender group because they challenge the Western constructs. Gayatri Reddy's *With Respect to Sex* (2005) attempted to shift the conversations of hijras beyond merely an exoticized third gender, as other and different, beyond simple gender identity.³⁶ This political employment of hijras to challenge the binary nonetheless misses hijras in their own right and complexity. In teaching about the hijras, we must focus on hijras within their complex contexts and epistemologies. Reddy historicized the term "hijra" less as a term comparable to the concepts of "man" and "woman," but rather within regional Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jainist epistemologies, terms, and texts.³⁷ Hijras exist within a wider range of categories beyond gender and sexuality, but within religious, economic, political, community, and social systems. Reddy specifically contextualized the hijras within *izzat*, the moral economy of respect, rather than as an isolated system of gender. Teaching about gender and hijras in India then becomes not some one-off lesson, but an opportunity to deepen students' holistic understanding of how social systems are always intertwined and interdependent. Gender goes well beyond what our bodies look like, and becomes a conduit for social values, such as *izzat*.

In the classroom, one could pull excerpts from interviews in *With Respect to Sex* as documents about various hijras' own stories. Of course, these texts are filtered through Reddy's study, which points to the limitations of how much one might claim to know after studying about hijras. The limitations of the text could ground an important class discussion. One might ask students to reflect: What can you understand and connect to? What do you realize you cannot understand? What do you share in those experiences?" This could be followed by an activity that gets students to contextualize their own contemporary system of gender and economy of respect as the object of inquiry. What might someone from another society find peculiar about our gender binary system? What might an anthropologist observe and comment on about our gender binary?

Another useful text for teaching about indigenous gender systems is Ramon Gutierrez's *When Jesus came the Corn Mothers Went Away* (1991), which focuses on the Pueblo Indians pre-contact and throughout Spanish colonization.³⁸ This case study shows that European colonization in the Americas changed not only gender relations, but also the relationships of power and gods and genders. European expansion in many ways swallowed up the alterity of indigenous peoples, their ways of knowing, and their gender systems, imposing European methods instead.

A focus on alterity in world history opens up student thought to new possibilities, and stirs up sedimentary knowledge that appears stable and concrete. There are many works that speak to this opening up of possibilities, within communities of color, and trans and queer communities of color, to not accept the world as given to us (that binds and polices us), but to put the very foundations of that world into question. I begin this article citing Joshua Allen's work at the Afrofuturism Conference, as an opening to future and yet unimagined possibilities. Works such as Emma Pérez's *Decolonial Imaginary* (1999), Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* (1987), and Sandy Grande's *Red Pedagogy* (2004) similarly turn to indigenous epistemologies to open up new possibilities and imaginings.

Teachers ought to emphasize global power dynamics in knowledge production, and how indigenous people have intellectual sovereignty, defined as “Indigenous people’s right and power to invent and account for themselves” rather than be spoken for and about.³⁹ In order to break with the ways white European anthropologists have produced knowledge about indigenous peoples, many Native American LGBTQ people have turned to the term “two-spirit”:

Two-Spirit affirmed their belonging to cultural traditions by displacing anthropological terms—notably, *berdache*—thereby setting a new basis and method for Indigenous knowledge. After the term’s proposal, scholars writing from within non-Native intellectual histories tended to understand that *Two-Spirit* replaced *berdache*, but most tended to miss how the term massively shifted the bases of knowledge production by interrupting anthropological authority to define Indigenous truth.⁴⁰

Historical inquiry into alternative and indigenous gender systems moves world history from a singular Eurocentric narrative and epistemology to more expansive global epistemologies.

Teaching About the Muxes

Taking a lesson I taught on the muxes in Oaxaca, Mexico, this section weaves this lesson together with the threads of queer theory, historical contextualization, and indigenous knowledge systems into a more coherent curriculum unit. The lesson about the muxes in Oaxaca, Mexico was embedded in a larger unit on the effects of Columbus in the New World, which I co-planned with the other ninth grade global studies teacher at my school. In this unit, we covered the impacts of Christianity, the slave trade, and the *encomienda* system in the Americas. The unit emphasized aspects of cultural destruction through colonization, so we decided to finish the unit with readings on ways that indigenous societies have resisted and persevered in spite of cultural destruction. Students were given a choice between three readings for their final assessment, which was a roundtable discussion. The choices were between the Day of the Dead, the slave trade in Africa and its economic impacts today (we offered this option because some students requested more information on Africa's economics after the slave trade), and the muxes in Oaxaca. Students were instructed to annotate an article, answer embedded questions to the text, and make connections to the past using both historical texts we read during the unit and supplemental readings to their article.

The lesson included a focus on the muxes because of their roots in indigenous epistemology and pre-Colombian social systems, and to challenge students' understanding of the gender binary. The group that focused on muxes received an adapted 2008 article from *The New York Times*, "A Lifestyle Distinct: The Muxe of Mexico," alongside photographs from the article.⁴¹ Supplemental texts included images of We-Wha, the "Zuni man-woman," as photographed by John K. Hillers. We-Wha was a Zuni individual who at the time was identified as a *berdache*, a term which has since become largely seen as a derogatory term. Students also read the 2011 article from *The Guardian*, "The 'Two-Spirit' People of Indigenous North Americans," which contextualized the contemporary term "two-gendered":

Since everything that exists is thought to come from the spirit world, androgynous or transgender persons are seen as doubly blessed, having both the spirit of a man and the spirit of a woman. Thus, they are honoured for having two spirits, and are seen as more spiritually gifted than the typical masculine male or feminine female.⁴²

As a first run draft of the lesson, our source materials were unfortunately primarily from mainstream media articles.

A full curriculum unit focused on the muxes could further highlight the intersection of gender, colonization, and indigenous knowledge systems. The unit could focus on the essential question, “How does gender function in society?” with a more focused content question, “How do the muxes fit within the greater Juchitán and Mexican society?” Developing this into a broader curriculum requires more academic texts, and more contextualizing documents. Alfredo Mirandé’s “The Muxes of Juchitán—A Preliminary Look at Transgender Identity” is an ethnographic documentation of an anthropologist’s forays into the world of muxes. Mirandé asserted that “muxes are an indigenous third sex/gender category, which is less about sexuality, sexual identity, or doing transgender and more about retaining the language, cultural categories, practices, and worldviews of indigenous communities.”⁴³ The 2002 documentary film *Juchitán Queer Paradise*, currently available online through the Department of Canadian Heritage, illustrates how the muxes fit within the larger culture of Juchitán.⁴⁴ Although this documentary has some nudity, there are many interviews and social context clips to better represent the muxes.

In teaching this individual lesson, we failed to provide much background on gender studies, evidenced by how some students dealt with the texts. This topic requires thoughtful conceptual work to queer understandings of the gender binary, to help students embrace challenges to their sense of gender. For example, when I taught this lesson without proper context, one student drew a mustache on a photo of one of the muxes. When we had a one-on-one conversation about it, the student expressed how the muxe seemed wrong and unnatural. Coming from Mexico himself, it was outside of his understanding of what men and women were supposed to be. We had already covered conversions to Christianity as a part of colonization, so I prompted him to make the connection to how this had been a way of understanding gender in Mexico before Europeans arrived, similar to indigenous religious beliefs and practices that were prohibited under Spanish rule. I asked him about times he has been misunderstood, mislabeled by others in ways that he didn’t like, or seen in ways that went against how he sees himself. I both tried to listen to where he was at, acknowledging his own

context, and then challenged that position. Through those one-on-one conversations, he felt more comfortable with being challenged in how he thought about gender, and why it is important to respect how people understand themselves. This led me to realize that the whole class needed better background materials on gender and how to think beyond the binary.

To further develop students' skills in contextualization, a unit on the muxes ought to also contextualize the ways Latin American intellectuals have pushed against the Eurocentric model of history, including but not limited to Rigoberta Menchú, Eduardo Galeano, Gloria Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez, Ramón Grosfoguel, Walter Mignolo, and José Rabasa. Rabasa's subaltern studies and historiographical work questioned history as a function of the state, putting forth forms of indigenous resistance against disciplinary cages.⁴⁵ His work also pushed against state and Eurocentric temporalities, wherein the muxes become an antiquated vestige, existing like a time capsule in the jungles of Juchitán, rather than challenging a temporal judgement of "modern" and "traditional." The radical existence of the muxes in Juchitán point to how "modern" such "traditional" indigenous pre-Colombian notions of gender have been and continue to be over centuries.

Contextualizing the muxes pushes against the rigid identity of a state-centric Mexican history, enhancing students' understanding of the geographic concepts of location and place. When we teach things like the history of "Mexico," there is the tendency to create monolithic images of essentialized culture. Focus on gender within Juchitán as a particular site of inquiry requires students to understand how Juchitán's social milieu complicates this idea of Mexico as a universally machismo culture. Beverly Chiña's *The Isthmus Zapotecs: A Matrifocal Culture of Mexico* (1999) argued that Juchitán is actually a matrifocal society, where women play a strong role at more of an informal and hidden level, amidst a patriarchal system.⁴⁶ Mirandé's earlier article also contextualized Juchitán gender and homosexuality within the Florentine Codex, challenging earlier readings of homophobia that mirrored the Spanish disdain for homosexuality, and presenting a broader range of Mayan and Aztec tolerance or dislike of homosexuality. Mirandé goes on to contextualize Juchitán as a historic space of resistance against the Spanish and other European influences.⁴⁷

We can also contextualize gender in Juchitán within a broader global history of matriarchal/matrifocal societies. Heide Goettner-Abendroth's *Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures Across the Globe* (2012) dedicated a section to "The Strong, beautiful women of Juchitán" within a larger section on South American and Central American matriarchal societies.⁴⁸ Students could do some comparative readings of Juchitán with other pre-Columbian gender systems, and help students get a broader sense of the diverse context of non-binary gender systems within a range of Native American societies.

As a site of indigenous knowledge systems, Juchitán and the muxes engender resistance to colonization by tracing the continuity to pre-Colombian times. As the assigned *New York Times* article described:

Anthropologists trace the acceptance of people of mixed gender to pre-Colombian Mexico, pointing to accounts of cross-dressing Aztec priests and Mayan gods who were male and female at the same time. Spanish colonizers wiped out most of those attitudes in the 1500s by forcing conversion to Catholicism. But mixed-gender identities managed to survive in the area around Juchitán, a place so traditional that many people speak the ancient Zapotec language native to the area instead of Spanish.⁴⁹

This level of contextualization helps students see the muxes not as random vestiges, but as continuities embedded within larger cultural and social systems.

In presenting this notion of indigenous knowledge systems, one might incorporate discussions in North America of the older term "berdache" against the more contemporary adoption of the term "two-spirit." Will Roscoe's work has helped move the conversation and terminology away from the outdated term, coined by anthropological fascination, to identities based in indigenous ways of knowing gender.⁵⁰ Roscoe's *The Zuni Man-Woman* (1991) has been recognized for how it "presented historic gender diversity as less about sexual identity and more about the cultural categories of Indigenous communities."⁵¹ To better contextualize the idea of indigenous knowledge systems in a curriculum unit on the muxes, Scott Lauria Morgensen provided an analysis of how indigenous gender identities such as two-spirit can too easily be coopted into non-native queer modernities, through settler colonization of knowledge production.⁵² Morgensen emphasized how native

queer modernities (such as two-spirit) are at odds with forms of Western queerness, which remain adherent to homonationalism⁵³ and settler colonialism, continuing histories of policing and defining indigenous bodies according to European ways of knowing. The task of contextualization is to try to understand what that identity of muxe means, not within European epistemologies, but through the various cultural, political, religious, and economic indigenous (and colonized) knowledge systems of Juchitán.

Ultimately, teachers must remain ever mindful of how to present study of the muxes without exotifying or objectifying them. To reiterate, how can such study ultimately turn the lens back onto the students as object, to alienate students in productive ways from what they assume to be natural and universal? Students ought to return to the essential question—"How does gender function in society?"—and examine how their own gender identities fit within the world in which they live. Rather than reifying our categories and affirming what we think we know, what if history allowed our present conditions of knowledge to be disrupted, to reveal that we live in our own strange times, our own particularity and peculiarity?

Notes

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WELL, IT'S GETTIN' NIGH ONTO SUNDOWN, SO I MIGHT'S WELL CLOSE SHOP. BUT FIRST THING IN THE MORNING I'M GOIN' TO HIT THAT DESERT TRAIL AN' SEE WHAT I CAN SEE!

I GOT A BETTER IDEA, SALLY! FIRST THING IN THE MORNING WHY DON'T YOU TURN THAT BADGE IN, AND LET ME CALL THE PREACHER?

DON'T YOU EVER GIVE UP, FLASH?



DURN IT ALL, SALLY, WHY WON'T YOU MARRY ME? I NEVER SAID I WOULDN'T MARRY YOU, FLASH...

YOU MEAN YOU WILL MARRY ME!!!

SURE, I WILL, FLASH... BUT I WON'T TURN IN MY BADGE!



IF YOU WERE FAIR, FLASH, YOU WOULDN'T LET MY JOB STAND IN THE WAY OF OUR MARRIAGE!

YOU WANT ME TO MARRY A SHERIFF AN' BE THE LAUGHIN' STOCK OF THE WEST? I SUPPOSE YOU WANT ME TO KEEP HOUSE FOR YOU, TOO!

NO OTHER SHERIFF EVER KEPT THE PEACE IN RED DOG! IF I TURN IN MY BADGE, IT WILL BECOME AN OUTLAW TOWN OVERNIGHT! WE'VE GOT TO CONSIDER OTHER FOLKS, NOT JUST OURSELVES!

IT'S EITHER ME OR THAT NICKEL-PLATED STAR! YOU'VE MADE YOUR CHOICE, AN' I'M THROUGH!

