



April 2017

Two-Spirit Mexica Youth and Transgender Mixtec/Muxe Media: La Mission (2009), Two Spirit: Injunuity (2013), and Libertad (2015)

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Recommended Citation

Estrada, Gabriel S. (2017) "Two-Spirit Mexica Youth and Transgender Mixtec/Muxe Media: La Mission (2009), Two Spirit: Injunuity (2013), and Libertad (2015)," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 38.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol21/iss1/38>

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Two-Spirit Mexica Youth and Transgender Mixtec/Muxe Media: *La Mission* (2009), *Two Spirit: Injunuity* (2013), and *Libertad* (2015)

Abstract

Independent directors Peter Bratt, Adrian Baker, and Avila-Hanna create differing trans-border queer Indigenous media that resist Eurocentric cis-heteropatriarchy. While Bratt's feature-length narrative film *La Mission* (2009) features a masculine Mexica gay teenager who survives fused homophobic and trans*-phobic violence, Baker's short animation *Two Spirit: Injunuity* (2013) makes stronger trans* and two-spirit Mexica youth identity affirmations. Avila-Hanna's short documentary *Libertad* (2015) offers the clearest transgender narrative of the three films as it focuses on a California transgender Mixtec immigrant activist who is coming of age as a woman with the aid of hormones and gender affirming surgery. This article's trans*- and Indigenous-centered film analysis complements their three works. Related classical and contemporary Nahuatl, Mixtec, and Zapotec time/space cosmologies that link the southern direction with youth or water structure this film analysis of Mesoamerican permutations of non-cis-normative, or trans*, identity. Expanding upon the Chicana and Mexica queer spatial analysis in Facio and Lara's *Fleshing the Spirit* anthology, this current work actually builds upon Estrada's previous *nahui ollin* (four directions or four movements) Indigenous film methodology. Starting in the East and moving in a cross-wise motion of east/masculinity, west/femininity, north/elders and south/youth, this article follows a *nahui ollin* and Indigenous trans* approach to interpreting the youth-oriented *La Mission* and *Two Spirits: Injunuity* films. Cosmological readings of Mixtec and Zapotec southern directions that involve female water deities guide the final film interpretation of *Libertad*. Dressed in Zapotecs women's clothes that evoke watery femininity, *Libertad*'s Mixtec transgender protagonist gains access to her transgender gender affirming surgery through activism and prayers to a Mixtec Madonna linked to the ocean. Each media uniquely adds to a constellation of gay, two-spirit, and transgender Indigenous images that feature strong Indigenous gender activism, cosmological directionality, and prayer.

Keywords

Mexica, trans*, two-spirit, media, spatiality

Author Notes

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Introduction

Mexica, Mexican American Indian, and Chicana gender scholars report that a lack of queer Indigenous cinema and Indigenous methodology contribute to experiencing *nepantla*,¹ a term that means both “*tierra entre medio* or in-between spaces” in the Nahuatl language and cultural-linguistic “displacement” in Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* lexicon.² Independent directors Peter Bratt, Adrian Baker, and Avila-Hanna address the film-induced *nepantla* by creating affirmative trans-border queer Indigenous media. This article’s trans* and Indigenous methodology film analysis complements their three works. Specifically, related classical and contemporary Nahua, Mixtec, and Zapotec time/space cosmologies that link the southern direction with youth and water structure this film analysis of various Indigenous permutations of being non-cis-normative, or “trans*,” here defined with the asterisk to include “not only identities such as transgender, transsexual, trans man, and trans woman...but also...genderqueer, neutriros, intersex, agender, two-spirit, cross-dresser, and genderfluid.”³ While Bratt’s *La Mission* (2009) features a masculine Mexica gay teenager who survives fused homophobic and trans*-phobic violence, Baker’s *Two Spirit: Injunuity* (2013) makes stronger trans* Mexica youth identity affirmations. Avila-Hanna’s *Libertad* (2015) offers the clearest male-to-female transgender narrative of the three films as it focuses on a California Mixtec activist who is coming of age as a woman with the aid of hormones and gender affirming surgery. While the two Mexica media demonstrate trans* relationships with the four Mexica directions of east/masculinity, west/femininity, north/elders and south/youth, the Mixtec film reflects trans* interpretations of Mixtec and Zapotec female deities and powers linked to water, youth, and the southern direction.

***La Mission*: Literature Review, Plot, and Nahui Ollin Mexica Film Methodology**

Not only does the literature on *La Mission*'s plot miss the nuanced articulation of trans*phobia and homophobia, it highlights Mestizo mixed-race, class, and sexuality intersectionality to the exclusion of the Mexica spirituality reclaimed in the film's plot. For example, Hernández finds that all the *La Mission*, *Mi Familia*, *A Better Life*, *Tortilla Soup*, and *Quinceañera* Chicano/Latino film patriarchs "evolve...to become more patient, tolerant, and accepting fathers,"⁴ and she locates the *La Mission* father's homophobia as "rooted in Catholicism and Mexican machismo."⁵ In a similar fashion, Richard Reitsma's analysis of *La Mission* centers on conflicts between macho Chicano "ethnic identity" and queer Chicano "sexual identity,"⁶ a tension that Alcalde also observes.⁷ Blizek only generally observes the "Native" American aspect of how "the religion of the characters is mixed" in *La Mission*,⁸ noting that Bratt's urban Quechua identity and activism broadly "plays a role in the healing experienced" by *La Mission*'s father protagonist.⁹

In light of more nuanced trans* and Indigenous inquiry, this article argues that the plot of the 2009 feature-length narrative film *La Mission* actually criticizes Mexica cis-heteropatriarchal violence against male-bodied femininity, homosexuality, and women.¹⁰ The movie features the Mexica protagonist ex-convict Che (Benjamin Bratt) who violently throws his high school senior son Jes (Jeremy Ray Valdez) out of his San Francisco Mission District home upon finding pictures of Jes kissing Jes' boyfriend Jordan (Max Rosenak). Che's feminist African-American neighbor and love-interest Lena (Erika Alexander) helps to stop this father-son street brawl. However, a cis-heteropatriarchal Mission District gang member Smoke (Alex Hernandez) shoots Jes when word of Jes' gay

sexuality leaks into the neighborhood. Although Lena sleeps with Che, she leaves him when she witnesses Che threatening Jordan in the hospital where Jes lies in a coma brought on by the shooting. Jes recovers with the help of prayers from Che's Native American elder Virgil (Edwin "Hayna" Brown). When Jes refuses to return to live with Che, Che begins to drink heavily. Che only disavows the cycle of cis-male violence and homophobia upon witnessing an Aztec Dance street memorial for the recently deceased Smoke. In the film's conclusion, Che drives a low-rider car graduation gift for Jes to the University of California at Los Angeles where Jes and Jordan will go to school together.

Che teaches barrio youth to call themselves "Mexica" in the film. Because he eschews being a generic Mestizo mix of Spaniard and Indian and rejects the presumed "superiority" of Mestizos over "inferior" Indigenous peoples, his Mexica religion and trajectory deserve more Indigenous-focused film analysis. Expanding upon the Chicana and Mexica queer spatial analysis in Facio and Lara's *Fleshing the Spirit* anthology, this current work actually builds upon Estrada's previous *nahui ollin* (four directions or four movements) Indigenous film methodology used in an analysis of the Nahua and AIDS-inflected gay film *Latin Boys Go to Hell* (1997).¹¹ This first of four directional sections focuses on the Nahua eastern direction that represents masculinity and "New Beginnings."¹² Starting in the East and moving in a cross-wise motion of east/masculinity, west/femininity, north/elders and south/youth, this article follows a *nahui ollin* and Indigenous trans* approach to interpreting *La Mission*.

La Mission credits include eighteen Mission District "Aztec Dancers" who play a pivotal healing role in this youth-oriented coming-out film.¹³ Off screen, many of these dancers lead or participated in the neighboring Sacramento Ceremony of Eagles and

Jaguars that supports the coming of age of Indigenous, Chicano, and Mexica young male warriors. This dance ceremony represents their efforts to provide spiritual growth for their youth who like Jes struggle with gang violence, poverty, addiction, and gender violence. Amezcua describes the *nahui ollin* structure of the Eagles and Jaguars ceremony in which young men stop, “at all four cardinal points and listen to words of advice from four different groups that include young, women, elders, and men.”¹⁴ As a reflection of the young men’s ceremony structured by *nahui ollin* spatiality, this article considers what *La Mission*’s men, women, elders, and youth say in relation to coming-of-age in a context of Mexica cis-heteropatriarchal violence.

La Mission: Tlahuizcampa (Dawn Place/East) – New Beginnings in Masculinity

The hate crimes against Jes are motivated by cis-heteropatriarchal conflation of Jes’ gay sexuality with a presumed trans* identity. The clearest example of the linkage of sexuality and gender occurs when the Mission youth gang member Smoke happens upon Jes and Jordan at night. From the safety of his car and in the company of two other gang members, Smoke calls Jes “Cinderella” and asks “which one of you wears a dress and plays bitch?” even though Jes and Jordan are wearing men’s clothing. This “Cinderella” naming harkens to a scene from the Chicano prison gang film *Blood in and Blood Out* (1993) in which Benjamin Bratt also starred. In one *Blood in Blood Out* prison scene, the convict Popeye (Carlos Carrasco) begins to sexually claim the new prisoner protagonist Miklo (Damien Chapa) by stopping a transgender woman prisoner from aggressively flirting with Miklo, saying to her, “Hey, Cinderella, go find yourself another fella.” Popeye subsequently attempts to rape Miklo at knifepoint while calling him a “bitch” and a “*puto*” (fag). These

names represent Popeye's effort to affirm his own masculine role as the rapist and to disassociate himself from both from the transgender inmate identity and from the feminized prison sex trade role into which he tries to press Miklo. Similarly, before shooting Jes in the chest in *La Mission*, Smoke points the gun at Jes and says, "suck on this *puto*." For Smoke to call Jes a "Cinderella," "bitch," and "puto" before he penetrates Jes' body with the bullet from his phallic gun invokes a dual rejection of Jes' sexual and presumed gender identities. It also invokes a genderqueer erotic pleasure of male-trans* penetration. Smoke's desire to kill off any embodiment of male femininity replicates both Balboa's colonial Spanish murders of forty trans* Indigenous people in Panama and the Eurocentric cis-heteropatriarchal gendercide that Spaniards continued in California Indian and San Francisco Ohlone "Mission" districts.¹⁵ That Jes survives being shot by Smoke and Bratt's director camera indexes the film's general resistance to two-spirit gendercide. Sadly, the barrio shooting reflects the 2016 Orlando Pulse Massacre Afro/Latino casualty demographics. Instead of politicizing more Euro-American concerns of marriage equality, *La Mission* deals with the poverty and reality of Indigenous and of color LGBTQ hate crimes with good reason. The 2012 Colorlines study confirmed that 73.1 percent of anti-LGBTQ homicide victims were people of color – with black/African Americans accounting for 54 percent and Latinos for 15 percent; and transgender people of color experienced the highest rates of murder overall.¹⁶

Despite the fact that the butch Jes identifies as gay and as neither effeminate nor trans*, he is seen as a both a gender and sexual deviant within the film's barrio gang logics of cis-heteropatriarchal masculinity.¹⁷ After the ex-con Che finds the photo of Jes and Jordan kissing at a gay bar, Che confronts Jes and demands that Jes explain why Jordan

has “his tongue down your throat,” and accuses Jes of becoming Jordan’s “brown Mexican bitch.”¹⁸ Here, Che is troubled that Jordan’s whiteness indicates that Jordan is sexually dominating the Indigenous Jes, a reference to asymmetrical race relations that intensify with the internal colonization of Mexican and Northern Mexican Indian lands by the US in 1848 and the ongoing gentrification of the Latino Mission by the San Francisco white middle-class in the 2000s.¹⁹ Che’s presumes that Jes is being orally penetrated by Jordan’s tongue in the picture and therefore anally penetrated by Jordan’s penis during sex, that Jordan is the insertive male and who defines Jes as a passive feminine “bitch” or feminized male. However, when the muscular Jes first initiates sex with the thin white middle-class Jordan, Jes points a fake gun at Jordan, symbolically taking on the hyper-phallic, violent, lower class, man of color, “top” role that is stereotypical in *macho papi* pornography.²⁰ Jes’ tendency to perform violent male aggression reoccurs when he decides to tackle Che from behind during the gay photograph argument that escalates as Che literally throws Jes out on the street. Here, Jes again symbolically reasserts his ability to play a violent masculine top role, even though he ends up on the bottom in that particular fight against the stronger Che before Lena and concerned neighbors break up the father-son scuffle.

Later, when Che momentarily agrees to take back Jes into his house, he attacks Jes by asking him if Jes is a man or a woman in accordance with his understanding that “God created man and woman” and no other genders in the Hebrew Bible. This is a presumption that transgender and intersex scholars of Aggadic literature have refuted, some even suggesting that Adam was originally “one creature both male and female” before the Eve feminine is divorced from Adam’s body.²¹ When Che asks Jes, “which one are you?” a

shocked, Jes emotionally replies, “I’m your son,” in a strong affirmation of his male gender identity.

The defensiveness of Jes’ answer emphasizes a gay split from trans* identity politics, and it is unclear if Che could ever have accepted a trans* child within that conversation. Perhaps he would behave much like the *Gunn Hill Road* (2011) Latino father who returns to the *barrio* from prison and unsuccessfully attempts to halt his transgender daughter’s transitioning that includes post-pubescent feminine dress and romance with young men. Even in two-spirit films, accepting Indigenous fathers of trans* children are conspicuously absent as they are often part of a generation more assimilated into cis-heteropatriarchal Western media, religion and institutions in contrast to mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers. Six Nations Mohawk director Shelley Niro offers one of the few early examples in which an Aboriginal father embraces his effeminate male-bodied two-spirit child who is wears matching bright red lipstick, sparkling beaded earrings, and a skin-tight shirt in the finale of *Honey Moccasin* (1998). Even if strong trans*-identified characters are absent from the *La Mission*, Bratt’s film does make inroads in battling Mexica cis-heteropatriarchy by at least dealing with homophobia and the cis-heteropatriarchal slippage that gay is synonymous with trans*.

Facio and Lara explain, “The East represents ‘New Beginnings’ and the energy of sun or fire”²² reflecting the sunrise that begins each day. *La Mission* works hard to show a new beginning in masculinity by fighting homophobia and disconnecting gay identity from presumed trans* identity. The new beginning of Mexica masculinity is enabled in part by Che’s confidante and *compadre* Rene (Jesse Borrego) who initially houses the homeless Jes and then comes to Che’s house for Jes’ things. Jes’ mother died long ago, so Che is the

sole parent with whom he needs to speak. In the brightly painted orange and blue kitchen, Rene casually tells Che, “You know, for what it’s worth, man, nobody’s trippin’, hey.” “Nobody’s tripping because it ain’t their son,” Che retorts. Jes’ godfather Rene contests, “Maybe, but then again maybe it ain’t such a big deal” that Jes is gay. Che responds, “If you believe that homie, you’ve been living in this fucking city too long.” Rene laughs softly saying, “Maybe so, maybe so,” but he quickly tries another logic on Che. Rene relates praying for the health and life of his disabled son. He indicates that fathers should appreciate that their sons live at all, foreshadowing Che’s finale sentiments towards Jes. Che listens to this last part, but makes no pledge to stop his cis-heteropatriarchal beliefs that are causing a rift between himself and his gay son.

Only after Jes is shot and Smoke killed does Che reconsider his Mexica cis-heteropatriarchy after the following Mexica dance finale montage. As the drunk, unemployed, and unshaven Che shuffles from the liquor store with a new bottle of tequila, he stumbles upon the Mexica dance memorial for Smoke. He nears the front of the street altar as the diegetic beating of the carved wooden *huehueltl* (upright drum), *teponaztli* (lateral two key log drum), and melodic *tlapitzalli* (flute) echo loudly in the background.²³ Che watches the vibrant multigenerational Mexica dancers who are filmed in the midst of completing various dance obligations. A slow zoom into Che’s face reveals his furrowed brow of troubled recognition. The reverse shot reveals a recent photo of the newly deceased gang youth Smoke who earlier threatened Che on his bus and then nearly killed Jes with a revolver. The focus zooms closer into Che’s face and the reverse shot also zooms closer into Smoke’s smug face in the photograph across which the *copalli* incense smoke is now blowing. The diegetic drumming becomes quieter and slower. After images of Smoke’s

crying mother pass, a low flute becomes louder as the camera returns to Che's face. The deep *huehuetl* beat and the music tempo begin to pick up speed and volume as a cut to another close-up of the altar photos shows Smoke not as the hardened young gang member in baggy black clothes but rather as an innocent young schoolboy and then as a toddler holding a kid's plastic bat. A film montage follows a rapid succession of cis-heteropatriarchal violent scenes in which Che verbally and physically attacks Jes interspersed with flashes of the Mexica dancers and Smoke's altar. At the end of this montage, the several Mexica dancers disappear into the rain one by one in slow motion as Che watches in front of the altar where Smoke was killed.

In the film's climax, Bratt uses zooming shot-reverse shot sequences with Che and the deceased Smoke's street altar photographs to elicit identification of the protagonist with Smoke. Che begins to realize that Smoke shot Jes in the same rage of homophobic violence that had fueled Che's own physical abuse towards his son. When Che threw Jes out on the street he screamed, "From now on, you're fucking dead to me!" Smoke's subsequent attempt to kill Jes literally fulfilled Che's cis-heteropatriarchal mandate. In seeing Smoke's memorial photo, Che also may have realized that Jes could have just as easily died in the same violent Mission environment that killed Smoke. In fact, Smoke's macho act of violence towards Jes in turn may have resulted in Smoke being killed on the street in gang-related revenge. Smoke's death and possible murder are never detailed in the film. As a result of the ceremony, Che begins to dis-identify with the cis-heteropatriarchal cycle of violence that motivated Smoke to nearly kill Jes. The reawakened Che embraces a Mexica philosophy of a new beginning in masculinity by disavowing his extreme cis-

heteropatriarchal violence. In the closing scene of the film, he drives the *Tonanzin*-detailed high school graduate gift low-rider car to UCLA for Jes.

La Mission: Cihuatlampa (Women's Place/West) – Black-Red Feminism

Facio and Lara define the west as the “Place of Women.”²⁴ In Nahua culture, western femininity is the natural complement of eastern masculinity, a gendered concept of non-oppositional balance that Macehualli/Kickapoo scholar and midwife Patrisia Gonzales notes in Nahua medicinal practice.²⁵ Although *La Mission* does not feature transwomen in its cis-gay male plot, it does make key alliances with cis-heterosexual women of color feminisms through Lena’s African-American character. Reitsma notes that Lena “is the presence of peace and non-violence in the film (from practicing Buddhism to decorating her apartment with a feng shui ambiance).”²⁶ Lena is Che’s love interest throughout his abusive and healing cycles. Lena works in a domestic violence shelter in San Francisco and is quick to defend her body and Jes from Che’s physical domination. When Lena returns home to find Jes and Che fighting on the sidewalk, she immediately assesses Jes’ bloodied face and then turns on Che when he grabs her arm violently from behind. Snatching her arm away she confronts him by pushing him away and shouting, “Get your hands off of me! If you touch me again, I’ll have your ass arrested so quick it’ll make your head spin!” She effectively de-escalates the fight at some physical risk to herself. She consistently defends Jes against Che’s cis-heteropatriarchal sentiments.

Lena represents the feminine archetype to which Che prays in the Mexica Mother Earth understanding of an image later named as the Marian *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. In an

early scene, Che explains that he is painting Jes' graduation gift car with her image and calls her "*Tonantzin*" (Our Mother) and identifies with "Mexica" culture in the process. On Che's back is engraved a large tattoo of *Tonantzin*. However, in his understanding of a Mexica *Tonantzin*, Che cannot access this feminine force internally as his conflict resolution skills are deformed by the cis-heteropatriarchy honed in California's racist, classist, and non-rehabilitative prison system.²⁷ Blizek comments that *La Mission's* Catholic "female images...bring a feminine spirit and energy to the characters and to the film...in direct contradiction to the treatment of women in this hyper masculine culture."²⁸

Che's vision of an attendant feminine *Tonantzin* is at odds with the more powerful vision of women deities that *Fleshing the Spirit* authors and Lena voice. Brenda Sendejo criticizes this sexist *Guadalupe* dynamic, recounting that she once left the worship of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as she identified *Guadalupe* with the Tejana Catholic Church's long history of masculinist and racial oppression.²⁹ Lara calls for a decolonial "bridging of sexuality, maternity and academic life as a part of an erotic spirituality" that includes "activist" understandings of *Guadalupe/Tonantzin*.³⁰ Lena answers Medina's call "to trust not in the male Godhead," and to not re-inscribe patriarchal religion.³¹ Lena's choice of female deity is the Hindu goddess Kali, in contrast to a subservient Mary. Kali is depicted in Lena's apartment as a statue of a black-skinned woman wearing a necklace of severed male heads and wielding a bloody sword in one of her four arms. "You know, she's like the Virgin Mary, except with teeth," Lena explains to Jes. Clearly, Lena identifies with a woman's sacred ability to protect herself, others, and the right actions of *dharma*.

When Che comes crying to Lena after Smoke shoots Jes, Lena sleeps with Che. The sex scene reveals a large scar on Lena's waist that evidences her abusive past with

men. Lena quickly calls off the relationship after she witnesses Che put a choke hold on Jordan outside Jes' hospital room. Even under physical threat, Jordan rejects Che's violent mandate to stay away from Jes. The next day, the following dialogue marks Lena's shift out of romance. Lena speaks to Che who stands below her on the stairs that go up to her neighboring apartment. Che sports a tan and brown *guayabera* shirt that complements his athletic build. His charming smile is framed by a black mustache, goatee and slick-backed hair. Lena is shot in a high angle which highlights her moral high ground in her rejection of Che's romantic advances. Dressed in large hoop earrings, a casual jacket, reddish scarf and shirt, and shining lip gloss, Lena exudes a mature dignity. The smooth dark skin and relaxed curls cascading to her shoulders demonstrate an erotic power also expressed in her strong convictions to support justice and women's rights in poor people of color communities.

Lena: Che, that night together was the first for me in a long, long time.

Che: Listen, Lena, whoever hurt you, whatever happened in the past, that ain't me.

Lena: The truth is, I don't really know who you are, Che. But I've been around enough men like you, men who use violence and intimidation to get what they want and I am done with that.

Although Lena begins with an understanding tone, she becomes defensive as the conversation evolves. She quickly withdraws after Che grabs her arm to try to convince her to reconsider dating him. In response to Lena's query, Che can't explain why he choked Jordan.

When Lena closes her door after this encounter, she never again opens up romantically, although she does comfort Che in the film's final scenes when he shows remorse for his past actions. Lena's self-defense and boundaries against Che's violence are

examples of how women can protect themselves from perpetuating “generations of alcoholism and domestic violence.”³² As a woman who refuses heteropatriarchal violence but desires heterosexual relationships, Lena has a hard time in this film. She consistently utilizes her strong African-American voice to protect Jes, herself, and battered women in San Francisco. Lena can represent needed female masculinity in a cis-heteropatriarchal world. She also evolves Che’s own sense of internal and external gender balance.

La Mission: Mictlampa (Death Place/North) – Elders and Tonalli (Spirit)

The editors of *Fleshing the Spirit* note that “The North represents the ‘Place of Elders’”³³ and “maturity.”³⁴ North/elders is the Nahua complement of south/youth. Medina reminds that northern wisdom comes through “moving through the cycles of life,” including death, a movement that requires constant “adaptation.”³⁵ In many ways, change is the lesson that Che stubbornly refuses to learn when his desire to have a heterosexual son is frustrated. Indigenous Ho-Chunk and Mexica elders consistently remind Che to eschew the violent cis-heteropatriarchal gendercide that is not endemic to Indigenous traditions. The real transformation for Che comes in the film’s finale when he is helped by the northern spirits of his ancestors and of the dead through Mexica dance. Thanks to the northern spirits of ancestors, Che regains his senses.



Figure 1: Che (Benjamin Bratt) and Mexica Dancer (Celia Mana) in *La Mission*

Through the Mexica dance memorial, Che comes into the transformational energy of his Mexica ancestors in the north. One of the meanings of the Mexica northern direction is the symbol of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* or *Tonantzin Tlalli* (Our Mother Earth) who is depicted on a candle on the back side of the altar in Figure 1. Her original shrine is in the northern part of Mexico City at Tepeyac and her festival week that begins December 12 is a time that initiates winter solstice and the northern season of winter. The finale Mexica dance sequence features a high angle shot of Smoke's mother (Estaire Godinez) sobbing uncontrollably, holding Smoke's picture, and dressed in a black skirt and Catholic black lace *mantilla* on her head. A close-up of Che's furrowed face reveals that he is moved by the dance and Smoke's crying mother. The reverse close-up of Smoke's mother reveals tears streaming down her face, followed by another set of close-up images of Che and the sobbing mother. The series of shot and reaction shots between Che and the weeping mother in black in the dance montage indicate that Che increasingly identifies with the mother's

grief. The mother in black wakes up Che's own parental instincts as Che at some level must process both motherly and fatherly sentiments as Jes' sole parent. Her voice is symbolically the voice of *Tonantzin* who mourns the death of her children. Influenced by the mother's tears, Che himself is able to mourn the loss of his son and begins to reject his own cis-heteropatriarchal ways.

In the last images of the Mexica dance finale montage stands the drummer elder Mexica dance woman (Celia Monge Mana) dressed in a matching red *huipilli* (blouse) and *cueitl* (skirt) trimmed with shimmering gold, a *copilli* (headdress) of pheasant feathers (*quetzalli*), and *ayayotes* (medicinal tree seed ankle rattles).³⁶ On the front of Celia Mana's *huipilli* is a detailed *nahui ollin* (four directions) image from the first page of the Nahua pre-conquest circa 1400-1521 Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, pictured with reconstructed colors in Figure 2 below. Gazing intently towards Che, she delivers a resounding blow to her *huehuetl* as she is the last dancer to slowly disappear in the rain. Che is left alone in the end of this sequence. He places his tequila on the altar in memory of the youthful Smoke, makes the sign of the cross, and mournfully faces up. Che closes his eyes intently into the pouring rain.

In part, a ceremony is done at the spot of Smoke's death to cleanse the street of his ghost and to fortify his *tonalli* (spirit) as it makes its journey to the next world. The central *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer* figure that Mana wears is *Xiuhtecuhtli* (fire lord), a solar deity who radiates *tonalli*, heated energy or day. Each Mexica person is also animated by *tonalli*, and *tonalli* departs from the body after death. It is one of three "souls" to do so. "Flowers, a candle, some fragrant copal incense and cigarettes attract" the *tonalli* in Nahua ceremonies.³⁷ The candles, copal and other offerings that include the tequila that Che sets

down on the altar are directed towards Smoke's soul, and the ancestral souls or *tonalli* invoked in the Mexica ceremony help Smoke's *tonalli* leave the area and finish its journey to the next world.

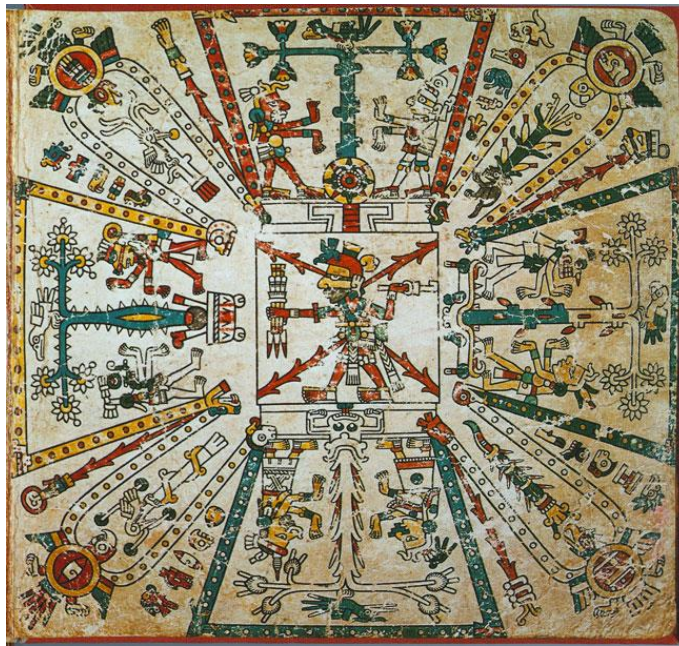


Figure 2: Page 1 of the Nahua *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer* (circa 1400-1521)

In the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer* image, the nine standing anthropomorphic deities of the night prominently figured in the *nahui ollin*. *Tlahuiztlampa* (dawn place direction) inhabited by male deities on top represents the east. Across is *Cihuatlampa* (woman place direction) in the west below occupied by female deities.³⁸ *Mictlampa* (death place direction) is north on the left and *Huitztlampa* (thorn place direction) is south on the right.³⁹ However, these north/south directions may be switched if this *nahui ollin* represents a sky map rather than a terrestrial one. *Mictlantecuhтли* (death lord) would fit better in the north/right direction of death while the rain deity *Tlaloc* is more logically placed in the

south/left.⁴⁰ Tlaloc does have some associations with the south as seen on the massive Mexica calendar stone that depicts Tlaloc/Quiahuitl (storm) in a quadrant touching the southern *tonalli* day sign of *tochtli* (rabbit).⁴¹ The stone depicts Tlaloc/Quiahuitl's destruction of the third creation by a rain of fire as recounted in Nahua origin stories.⁴² Although this reading emphasizes Nahuatl deity names, the four direction structure of the Mexica cosmos also integrates many shared elements with the related Zapotec and Mixtec calendars and cosmologies. For example, the same serpent-toothed, goggle-eyed codex "image of the rain god might be variously named Tlaloc, Dzauī, or Cocijo in Nahuatl, Mixtec or Zapotec" respectively.⁴³

The dance's conclusion with Tlaloc's rainfall is meant to show the return of energy and life-giving forces that the *tonalli* sends back to his/her/their loved ones. Many Nahuas continue to send off the *tonalli* of the departed only to call "...them back annually as the life-giving rain clouds."⁴⁴ The visual dissolve of the Figure 1 Mexica dancers into the rain emphasizes the idea that Nahua spirits can inhabit the element of rain. That the dance suddenly ends with a thunderstorm represents the endless cycle of life and death. The rain not only cleanses Che of his own emotional sicknesses, it fertilizes mother earth and helps to create yet another cycle of life. Che crosses himself and then faces into the rain at Smoke's memorial in acceptance of the cycles of fertility and death that the Mexica dance invokes.

La Mission: Huitzlampá (Thorn Place/South) – Youth Queeranderismo

The twenty *tonalli* (day) signs appear in the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer* codex in Figure 2 stacked in fives in each the four directional corners including a grouping of southern direction days that link with queer sexuality and sensual desire. The five *tonalli* stacked in the southern corner that begin with *xochitl* (flower) on the bottom and end with *tochtli* (rabbit) on top can link to the five *ahuiteteo* (pleasure gods) who represent both enjoyment and excess. *Macuiltochtli* (5 rabbit) in particular represents drunkenness, the affliction which grips Che. The excessive drinking in the gay bar is also what leads Jes to take the pictures with Jordan that expose Jes' sexuality to Che. *Macuilxochitl* (5 Flower) is a deity of song and dance who can represent joy and excesses in pleasure.⁴⁵ *Xochitl*/flower can also link to being genderqueer or gay as indicated by the Modern Nahuatl term *maxochitl* (hand flower).⁴⁶ The Classic Nahuatl term *xochihua* (flower possessor) indicates an effeminate man, transgender woman, or homosexual.⁴⁷ Although subtle, the ancient Nahua codex *tonalli*/day of flower resonates with queer Mexica gender and sexuality expressed by Jes.

South is the Nahua "Place of Youth"⁴⁸ and youth is a key element in *La Mission*. Facio and Lara affirm "the critical interconnectedness between our sexuality and spirituality" as a key aspect of Nahua southern directionality.⁴⁹ As a gay high school senior, Jes best represents the final direction of youth. The following dialogue comes after Jes is released from the hospital but chooses to stay at Jordan's place rather than return to his dad's home. Dressed in his characteristic *cholo* flannel shirt, baggy pants, and sunglasses, the tattooed Che drives uphill from the barrio to the upscale neighborhood where the only

Mexicans there appear to be the gardeners. When Jes refuses to leave with Che, Che tries vainly to convince Jes that Jes does not racially fit in there. In the low angle shot, the shorter Jes symbolically gains the higher moral ground while the taller Che is again initially left on lower ground, just slightly below Jes morally and visually. They argue once again.

Che: I'm all you got, remember?

Jes: I got a lot more than that. I got myself. If you can't accept me for what I am, for who I love, I think you should leave.

Che: Whose little speech is that-yours or theirs?

Jes: You humiliate me in front of the entire neighborhood, and then you threaten Jordan for visiting me in the hospital, and you can stand here and ask me that?

Che: Listen, I'm gonna give you one minute to get your ass in there and get your shit together. If you ain't out by then, I'm gonna leave here without you. ¿Me entiendes?

Jes: You still don't hear me, do you, Pop?⁵⁰

Here Jes shows maturity in firmly refusing to return to Che's home. In contrast to their earlier fight in which Jes explosively self-identifies with the epithets "*joto*" and "faggot," and to a subsequent argument in which Jes somewhat negatively states that he "didn't choose to be this way," this dialogue shows Jes accepting "what I am...who I love" and specifically referring to being gay and loving Jordan.

When Che gives Jes the "one minute," warning with his finger, Jes flinches knowing that his father could very well land yet another blow on his face. Jes vocally breaks the cycle of cis-heteropatriarchy and plots a movement out of the *barrio* violence that motivated much of Che's hypermasculine violence. In this dialogue, Jes not only promises to leave Che's home for good, he charts a permanent move from the working class of La Mission to the classes and campus of UCLA where he is later shown taking

advanced mathematics classes while still wearing a Day of the Dead T-shirt. His advancement to seek respect through academic success contrasts markedly to Che's physically abusive sense of gaining respect that are endemic for many poor urban Indigenous and of color youth. Jes' nonviolent resolution in these scenes emphasizes that he will not follow in his father's footsteps of violent confrontation, even though he might eroticize his own machismo in gay sexual performances.

Jes' integrated healing is an instance of what Bernice Dimas calls "queeranderismo...*curanderismo* [healing] in motion for queer *cuerpos* [bodies] y *espíritus* [spirits]." ⁵¹ His integrated erotic, spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical healing has resulted in great strength. Jes exemplifies queeranderismo that includes healing the historical and intergenerational trauma of cis-heteropatriarchal violence in "private and communal spaces." ⁵² In the spirit of queeranderismo, Jes heals from near-fatal gay hate crime attacks with the help of his boyfriend, Mission community, Western medicine, and Indigenous healers. In contrast to the initial fight in which Jes tries to match Che in brute hyper-masculine strength, the disabled Jes now resorts to words and inner strength with great success.

Jes' response to the Ho-Chunk elder Virgil indicates that some Mexica peoples are willing to accept spiritual help from both Mexica and northern Plains spiritual leaders, a pattern that Facio documents in her own experience with Lakota, Otomí, and Mexica elders. ⁵³ Virgil demonstrates the proper treatment for youth and aids Jes in his own queeranderismo. After Che throws Jes to the sidewalk outside his house for being gay, Virgil speaks out to end the street violence. When Lena and then Gary (Patrick Shining Elk, Eastern Shoshone) step in to stop Che from attacking Jes, Che continues to resist his

friends who hold him back from the fight. Then, from off to the side, Virgil states, “Nephew! That’s enough!” to Che in a measured but strong tone. In response to Virgil, Che finally stops his attack and immediately leaves the scene. Here, Virgil places Che in the relative position of youth as “nephew” and Che must stop and obey his elder. In saying, “I think you should leave,” Jes shows that he has internalized some of the elders’ voice into his own voice. Jes’ negation of cis-heteropatriarchal violence also echoes Lena’s strong feminist voice. As Che leaves at the elders’ request at the fight, so does Che also depart from Jordan’s house when that request for nonviolent space is again repeated firmly by Jes.

Jes passively learns from the Ho-Chunk elder who twice affirms that Jes’ life as a gay youth is worth saving from cis-heteropatriarchal violence. After Jes is shot, Virgil agrees to pray for the comatose Jes whom he calls “my grandson,” showing respect for Jes’ preferred male gender identity. Taking the place of a Nahua healer or *ticitl* who may heal through calling back a person’s *tonalli* or spirit back into the sick body,⁵⁴ Virgil offers a Native American blessing involving a song, water, and an eagle feather. The Native American Gary assists him next to Jes’ hospital bedside by holding the smoke and abalone shell used for smudging. Jes recovers on the next day. Although Jes’ recovery is silent, it is a turning point in the plot. Rather than succumbing to cis-heteropatriarchal violence, Jes fights back from the brink of death and survives to free his body from the intended gendercidal hate crime. That Jordan is completely faithful and attendant to Jes’ needs is also a great help in Jes’ recovery. Jordan supplies the romantic love that buoys Jes’ struggle to be gay in a Mexica cis-heteropatriarchal family. With the aid of the Ho-Chunk elder’s spiritual leadership, Lena’s feminist exuberance, and Jordan’s gay love, Jes lives to

complete life-saving physical, emotional, and spiritual *queeranderismo*.

Facio and Lara created the southern direction of their anthology mindful of the future of Indigeneity stating, “We are responsible for teaching our youth...what will our legacy be?”⁵⁵ Surprisingly, *La Mission* gives no barrio support for Jes in terms of other youth queer Mexica or Chicanas/os/xs who could form a circle of friendship, support, nightlife, and even love interests. As evidenced by the dance community that agreed to support this film with their presence, queer Indigenous, Mexica, and Chicana/o/x community is strong in *La Mission*. Reitsma notes that it is actually the Euro-American Jordan who “brings Jes to the promised land of social upward mobility, education and an integrated gay/Chicano identity,” in contrast with other films such as *Quinceañera* (2006) that deploy a criticism of gay white gentrification of queer Chicano neighborhoods.⁵⁶ Reitsma concludes that Jes retains a sense of being Chicano at UCLA, but necessarily moves out of the Mission to advance socially.⁵⁷ Although Mexica dancers provide the ceremonial catalyst for Che to begin his own healing from the cis-heteropatriarchal violence he inflicts on his son, Jes himself never consciously approaches any Indigenous people outside his family. Despite wearing a “Yo Soy Xicano” emblem t-shirt and displaying multiple visual markers of indigeneity in his room, Jes never verbally identifies as Mexica as Che specifically does in a conversation with a Mission Chicano youth. This visual/oral split in intergenerational Indigenous identification may indicate a drift or change within the Mexica and Native American traditions that are strong in the Mission District and in Che’s and Jes’ healing processes. Jes’ Native American healing is also aurally woven into the fiber of his comatose body and spiritual experience of Virgil’s

healing song at the hospital. The film leaves open how he will carry on Indigenous traditions, healing, and community activism in the future at UCLA.

Two Spirit: Injunuity: Genderqueer Iyollo Chicome Ollin (Hir Heart Is 7 Movement)

Adrian Baker's (Hopi) *Two Spirits* is one part of the larger *Injunuity* half-hour series project that includes several other Native American animations on such topics as Haudenosaunee spiritual laws and San Francisco Bay Ohlone rights to ancestral shell burial mounds. The complete four-minute *Two Spirits* animation first emphasizes historical two-spirit traditions, a legacy of settler colonial Christian repression of two-spirit ways, and a reclaiming of two-spirit traditions in urban and reservation contexts. While the animated Mexica Mica Valdez introduces the idea that two-spirit is a term that liberates one from the "boxes" of other Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) identities, the next four two-spirit animated presenters explain their own positive two-spirit experience.

In contrast to *La Mission's* emphasis on external representations of masculinity and femininity that include Jes' presentation as a masculine gay young man, an animated Mica Valdez differently expresses the Mexica east-west qualities of masculinity and femininity internally in *Two Spirits: Injunuity*. An internal Nahua seventh "center direction" space encompasses permutations of both age and gender. Hernández-Ávila explains the center writing, "East. West. North. South...each of us is at the center of the cross...each of us...emanates from this center towards the four-directions" and towards the father sun above and mother earth below.⁵⁸ This Nahua center direction is *iyollo chicome ollin* (his/her/hir heart is seven movement/directions). It is this *iyollo chicome ollin* two-spirit

bodily space to which this article turns with a Mexica analysis of *Two Spirit: Injunuity*. Rather than giving each body an external gender-situated, east or west, male or female, definition, Baker's animated short contemplates being two-spirit, both genders at once internally. Beginning the *Two Spirits* animation are black two-spirit definition title cards in white lettering. The first card reads, "Two Spirit: A Native American possessing both a male and female spirit." The second continues, "An umbrella term used to describe the fluidity of Native American gender identity and sexuality with respect to traditional tribal roles." Unlike the gay cis-gendered *La Mission*, *Two-Spirits: Injunuity* consciously offers a safe *iyollo chicome ollin* space for two-spirit gender-fluid Indigenous youth as Valdez contemplates being both or neither genders within two-spirit traditions.



Figure 3: Mica Valdez (Mexico) looks East in *Two Spirits: Injunuity* (2013)

A close reading of *Two Spirit: Injunuity* sequences reveals multiple genderqueer Indigenous youth spaces. As slow electronic ambient music plays in the background, a red

curtain opens on a wooden stage and Valdez appears suspended as a thin wooden puppet surrounded by empty boxes. Sporting black hair and brown skin, Valdez wears a purple shapeless dress with three Native-motif feathers patterns. Held up by puppet strings and lit by a harsh spotlight, Valdez begins by saying, “Gay and lesbian, bisexual, transgender, it feels like they are all boxes, categories that you have to fit into and they can’t change.” Check marks appear in the animated boxes beside her. Then the checks disappear as do the strings that are moving Valdez’s puppet figure from above. Valdez’s animated figure jumps up on the boxes and then jumps completely out of the gender-limiting frame and into a more two-spirit-positive *iyollo chicome ollin* space.

Valdez reappears in the colorful field of sunflowers, poppies and other native wildflowers that return as a positive theme in the end of each of the five narratives. As Valdez announces a new two-spirit identity in the flower fields, Valdez transforms from a thin puppet to a medium-sized person in a dress. Valdez adds, “When I learned about being two-spirit, it felt more natural to me.” The fragments of the old puppet-self drift away on the wind. Here Valdez’s return to a natural body size resists the undernourished and gender-restrictive body norms of popular culture. Valdez continues, “It felt like it acknowledged more than the surface of somebody’s identity. I feel like it encompasses also a way of carrying yourself in the world.” Although the female-bodied Valdez who is drawn wearing a dress, lipstick and long hair identifies as a “she” in a hyperlink attached to her name, in the video itself Valdez does not use gendered pronouns. This choice may speak to the gender fluidity of Valdez’s two-spirit identity during the interview process. Certainly one can consistently present as feminine on the “surface,” but identify by a “carrying yourself in the world” with a dual gendered or non-binary spirit.

Valdez's return to a natural shape also signifies a return to a balanced spirituality in nature as represented by the sunflower and wildflower fields and green rolling hills in the background. The *chimalxochitl* (sunflower or "shield flower") hold another subtle meaning for a viewer with a Nahuatl directional lens. Generally, the sunflower is a Mexica symbol for a military shield and it is part of offerings of respect for a main warrior solar Mexica deity *Huitzilopochtli* (hummingbird on the left), nobles, warriors and commoners in Sahagún's several Nahuatl tomes of the late 1500s, *The Codex Florentine*. The Mexica authors record that the "banquet host, accompanied by singers and drummers, performed a ritual debt-paying offering of sunflowers and tobacco tubes at the pyramid of Huitzilopochtli...where he laid offerings of shield flowers... and lit tobacco tubes."⁵⁹ However, for Valdez, the protection of the sunflowers isn't about integration into a masculinist military or merchant vision of Mexica society; it is about knowing who you are as a two-spirit person and about connecting with the power of earth and the sun *tonalli*. In a larger context in which 56 percent of Native transgender or gender nonconforming students attempt suicide,⁶⁰ to protect oneself from gender and Indigenous identity attacks from the outside with internalized Indigenous knowledge and connection to the *tonalli* of earth and sun is a necessary life-saving skill. Symbolically, Valdez offers the protection of two-spirit knowledge like a *chimalli* (shield) for the target audience of two-spirit youth with all its multi-gendered potential and high suicide/hate crime rate profile.

The *chimalxochitl* heads are most likely drawn facing east. Even the *chimalxochitl* offer *tonalli* they reflect heat and light in the form of intense yellow like a miniature *Tonatiuh* (sun or S/he radiating goes) that rises like a hummingbird at dawn.⁶¹ In this case, both Valdez and the *chimalxochitl* are facing east to indicate the Mexica direction for new

beginnings of a masculinity as expressed in the female-bodied two-spirit Mexica person. In *The Path to Quetzalcoatl* (1977), Mexica *tlamatini* (maestro/sage) Andres Segura draws upon classic codices and modern physics language to suggest that solar and cosmic energy descends to earth as “positivo, negativo, y neutro (positive, negative, and neutral),” something like a positive proton, negative electron, and neutral neutron. From this modern Mexica perspective, Mica’s two-spirit expression may represent a fractal example of a neutral force in motion throughout the cosmos.

Like Valdez, the Diné/Latina spokesperson Esther Lucero also contemplates being both or neither genders within two-spirit traditions. As Lucero finishes the four-minute segment, she emphasizes youth empowerment in a gender-neutral way and is aided by relatable visuals. Lucero begins her encouragements as a frowning flower is drawn with an animated pencil on lined paper, followed by a neutral face sketched in the middle circle of the male, female, and transgender mixed-male-female-genderqueer signs. Then a weak arm is erased and redrawn as a strong arm. Lucero narrates:

Young people who are just exploring who they are, I want you to remember that there were some tribes out there who didn’t even call you a specific gender until you decided what that is. I want you to know that you are empowered, and anything that you may go through, you can overcome, that you have the strength, and that you are valuable and that you belong here.

The lined drawings fade into a colorful field of flowers on a green meadow under a bright blue sky. The thematic bright field of flowers dissolves and blows away as the diegetic calming flute music continues as the credits roll. As images form and dissolve, so can Native American gender and sexuality identities. It is important to stress that the video neither prescribes a certain transition from one gender to another nor directs youth to identify by a certain gender expression. The possibilities are open and fluid.

The final image of natural flower beauty emphasizes the internal state of identity satisfaction and contrasts to a world in which violence against Indigenous LGBTQ/two-spirit youth is too common. LGBTQ2 online websites such as those offered by *Native Youth Sexual Health*,⁶² *NativeOut*,⁶³ and *WeRNative*⁶⁴ are making concerted efforts to offer Native LGBTQ/two-spirit youth the support they may lack at home or in their communities.⁶⁵ The *Indigenous Traditions: Transfaith* two-spirit website provides links to the animated *Injunuity* and to more than over a dozen videos that speak to two-spirit and Native LGBTQ youth.⁶⁶

That the film targets Mexica two-spirit youth in addition to Federally-recognized two-spirit Native American youth is a new media development. At the end of *Two Spirit: Injunuity*, the featured two-spirit spokespersons are equally credited by Indigenous Nation with their animated portraits in the order of their appearance. They are “Mica Valdez (Mexica), Nazbah Tom (Navajo/Diné), Arlando Teller (Navajo/Diné), Charlie Ballard (Anishnaabe/Sac & Fox), Esther Lucero (Navajo/Diné).” Valdez’s Mexica urban Indian label brings up complicated Indigenous debates about privilege, appropriation, community, and identity, debates Facio and Lara immediately acknowledge in the framing of their anthology’s Chicana and Mexican American Indian identities.⁶⁷ Part of these debates hinge on the urban Mexica diasporic non-Federally-recognized identity of Valdez that complicates a narrative of government recognition. To the sides of the Valdez’s main *Two Spirit: Injunuity* image fall a series of word hyperlinks that go along with the Mexica and two-spirit ideas that Valdez is narrating. To click “Mexica” brings one to three web pages, the last of which contains the following statement from Olin Yoliztli Calmecac:

Mexica (Meh-shee-kah) is the original Nahuatl (the so-called Aztec language) way of pronouncing Mexican, Mexicano, and Chicano and Chicana. (1325 to 1521) Mexica is the only one of our cultures and civilizations which has enough surviving material from which we can reconstruct our Anahuac nation. [We] should embrace Mexica identity as a collective identity for all of us that we use in order to reconstruct our Anahuac nation and as a means of Liberation.⁶⁸

This explanation shows a willingness to incorporate ancient Mexica traditions into the future of identity and politics for contemporary Mexica. Mexica also rejects the Mestizo colonial construction that posits a superiority of Mexican mixed people over pureblooded Indigenous people. While many Mexica in traditional *altepetl* (water-hill or pueblo) still maintain very specific *altepetl*-linked and language-linked identity that does not travel easily, centuries of diasporic movements and newer transnational immigrations have created variations in how urban transnational Mexica now identify.

This reclamation of a transnational urban Mexica identity contrasts to the hyperlink for “Navajo” that accompanies the three Navajo spokespersons that goes directly to the online Official Site of the federally recognized Navajo Nation. In contrast with *Injunuity*’s inclusivity, Debora Reese (Nambe Pueblo) positively reviews *Two Spirit: Injunuity* by invoking federal recognition as the measure of indigeneity. She writes, “Native resiliency and sovereignty are pushing back and embracing Two Spirit people,” and lauds the actions of “Native Nations” to secure marriage equality to all “who are enrolled in a federally recognized tribe,” as an “exercise of tribal sovereignty.”⁶⁹ Reese’s important perspective on American Indian tribal government legislation regarding two-spirit/LGBTQ issues is a critical one. However, the relative equality of the Mexica and Navajo tribal designations and hyperlinks demonstrate that *Injunuity* creators are mindful of the differences of federal

recognition legal status without policing those differences as absolute markers of indigeneity.

Libertad (2015): Zapotec Muxes, Southern Naya, and Mixtec Transgender Activism

Nahuas have a long history of passing through what is now the Anglo-centric settler colonial border of the northwest Mexican and southwest US deserts. Not only is early Nahua origin in the greater Southwest, centuries of trade existed between central Nahuas and Pueblo Native Americans before various groups like the Nahuatl-speaking Tlaxcalteca founded their own 1600s-1700s colonial-era settlements at Spanish missions in San Antonio, Santa Fe and elsewhere in the greater Southwest, Mexico, and Central America. The US occupation of Native American, Mexican, and Mexican Indian lands in 1848 did not cease the Nahua and Nahua-descendant transnational migrations across US, Mexican, and Indigenous borders, especially toward the end of the twentieth century and into the 2000s.

That post-Revolutionary Mexican intellectuals chose to nationalize the Aztecs as the main indigenous root of modern day Mestizos was problematic in that it relegated Indigenous Nations to the past and to static locations.⁷⁰ Spanish/Aztec-centric Mestizaje formulation not only tends to ignore the incredible diversity of non-Nahua Indigenous Nations, it diminishes key African and Asian contributions to Mexico as well.⁷¹ Both Mexican and US institutions struggle to recognize and address the needs of diasporic transborder Mexican American Indians. This analysis seeks to further resist both the Aztec-

centric Mestizo state and US American suppression of trans-national indigeneity by focusing on transborder Mixtec and Zapotec transgender representation in film.

Recent demographics in both the US and Mexico provide an important context of changing transnational Mexican American Indians populations. 25,694,928 or 20.1% of the 2015 Mexican population auto-identifies as being Indigenous.⁷² Reflecting a much lower percentage of Mexican indigenous identification, the US 2010 census found that the fourth largest group of Native Americans are “Mexican American Indians” who numbered a mere 175,454 out of 31,798,258 US Mexican-origin people. The 2015 Mexican census finds important diversity among Indigenous people, listing Náhuatl at 2,886,105, Maya at 1,645,930, Mixteco at 819,970, and Zapoteco at 813,697. Although Nahuas are the largest grouping of Indigenous pueblos in Mexico, members of the Macro-Mayan-language family alone or Oto-Manguean-language family alone outnumber those of the Southern Uto-Aztecan-speaking groups to which Nahuas pertain.⁷³ Clearly, the vibrant Indigenous profile of contemporary Mexico extends well beyond the Aztec history canonized in Mestizo Mexican history.

With the passing of the neoliberal 1994 North American Free-Trade Agreement that devastated Indigenous agricultural markets and contributed to the neoliberal degradation of Indigenous natural and political resources, Indigenous migration from the Oto-Manguean speaking Zapotec and Mixtec communities to the US dramatically increased. For example, over 50,000 Mixtec farmworkers work in California’s agricultural fields.⁷⁴ In response to these migrations, institutions like the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB; Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations)

continue to organize across borders on behalf of Oaxacan Indigenous women's and men's rights to migrate, work, and maintain Indigenous identity.⁷⁵

The immigrant transgender Mixtec activist Alejandra Santiago is the striking subject of the film *Libertad* (2015). Its director is the Mexico City-born Mestiza Mexicana Brenda Avila-Hanna. Filmed in Santa Cruz and Capitola Beach of Northern California, *Libertad* is a fourteen-minute short in which Alejandra describes her successes as a Mixtec transgender woman. Emigrating from Huitzo, Oaxaca, Alejandra intimates the transphobia of her native pueblo. As Alejandra carries a statue of *La Virgen de Juquila* down the steps of the Capitola Wharf, her Mixtec-Spanish-accented voice intones, "Somebody is watching over me, and I am so thankful for that." Dressed in an embroidered flowery Isthmus Zapotec *huipilli* and skirt, she explains of her village, "Everybody is religious, especially Catholic. I have two choices, either run away from the prejudice in my hometown or die." She places the statue on a broken wooden wharf pillar and transfers the flowers in her hair to the feet of the Virgin who stands upon a carved maguey base. As she prays to the image, the diegetic synthesizer blends into soft piano arpeggios and melodies. She continues, "And you feel the pressure, for me also from my religious perspective that, you know, God says that this is a sin; God says that this is wrong; you are going to hell. I wasn't able to ask anybody for help...my mother. When I left Oaxaca, I took it as the opportunity to be me." Alejandra states that she intends to return to Oaxaca to take care of her aging mother. Tearfully, she recounts that she can now only visit her deceased father's grave to finally tell him, "I'm your daughter."



Figure 4: Alejandra Santiago and La Virgen de Juquila in *Libertad* (2015)

Although Alejandra is from a Mixtec pueblo, she wears an Isthmus Zapotec women's clothing in a tribute to the Zapotec *muxes*, a term Zapotecs changed from the Spanish word for "woman," *mujer*. Isthmus Zapotec *muxes* of Oaxaca are especially known for their particular integration into Zapotec religious, linguistic, economic, political, family, and social life as a male-to-female third gender.⁷⁶ Subero proposes that the *muxes* in Alejandra Isla's *Muxes: Auténticas, Intrépidas, Buscadoras de Peligro* (2005) express their own fluid Zapotec "muxeninity" separate from normative femininity and masculinity.⁷⁷ The Isthmus of Tehuantepec Zapotec *huipilli* and dresses were first made famous in national post-Revolutionary Mexican art and photography by the queer Tehuana and German artist Frida Kahlo. As represented in Salma Hayek's *Frida* (2002) and in Frida's own self-portraits, Frida could express love for men, women, and wearing men's clothing. Frida's strength of vision, socialist political stances, and Tehuana aesthetic style

are reflective of Tehuana women who are known for their female power relative to many other groups of Indigenous and Mestiza women in Mexico, including Mixtec women.

However, in pre-Conquest codices of the 1400s and early 1500s, Mixtec women were often painted in complete complementary political relationship with Mixtec men.⁷⁸ As cis-heteropatriarchal hegemony increased during the colonial period, Mixtec and other Mesoamerican Indigenous women lost much of their localized political power and land-based holdings and genderqueer or transgender women became more oppressed. Of course, because Spaniards burnt most of the historical Mixtec codices and suppressed Indigenous gender practices, it is difficult for Mesoamerican gender historians to ascertain what the ancient two-spirit Mixtec identities were. The highly conflicting colonial documents and the deeply transphobic interpretations of uncritical modern scholars continue to complicate this field of study.⁷⁹

The modern Isthmus Zapotec flower design of Alejandra's *huipilli* has a particular directional meaning that can refer to flowers, the south, femininity, youthfulness, and water. Royce explains that for the Juchitan Zapotec famed for its *muxes*, dying is the process of going from "*nayaa* (wet, fresh, green) to...*nabidxi* (dry)."⁸⁰ After all, humans are born soft and wet in the amniotic fluid and completely dry out and harden after death. Royce continues, "Water (*nisa*), of course is *nayaa*, but the sea (*nisadó*), and the rain (*nisa guie*), are especially so." For Juchitán, rain and wetness come from the Pacific Ocean that is situated directly south. "The south wind (*bi nisa*)" that comes from the sea literally means "water wind" and is linked with youthful femininity. It brings on the rainy season *gusiguié* called "season of flowers."⁸¹ Zapotecs embroider the flowers on the *huipilli* and include flowers in ceremonies to represent feminine *nayaa* wetness, youth and life. Like well-

watered fruit and plants, women's vitality is visually linked with their lushness and voluptuousness rather than their thinness which connotes being too dry or ill.⁸² The complement of the wet youthful feminine south wind is the old male north wind, "a fierce drying wind" that is call "*bi yooxho* or the 'old wind.'"⁸³

Dressed in a Zapotec *huipilli* with the feminine flower symbols for wetness, Alejandra faces south under the Capitola Wharf that extends into the origin of *nayaa*, the Pacific Ocean. At the end of the film she packs up her *Virgen* into the box and places some of the flowers as offerings in the ocean itself. The flowers she offers from her hair to *La Virgen de Juquila* are symbols of youth, femininity and life. As she prays to the statue, she narrates the one great desire of her life, to finish her transition into greater *nayaa*, voluptuous femininity. Alejandra's prayers to *La Virgen* for greater femininity are answered with health coverage for hormones and a gender affirming operation, the means to achieve gender "Libertad" (Freedom). These hormones are what give Alejandra the roundness of breasts and hips that help her embody a voluptuous quality of feminine, youthful, and fresh *nayaa*.

Alejandra explains the costly nature of gender affirming hormones and surgery. She recounts, "It's been ten years, eleven years, since I've been on hormones and...hormones are expensive." However, a delay in having the gender affirming surgery she desires is caused by the \$19,000 fee to complete the medical procedure. Despite the costs, she bravely resolves, "I'm going to make that possible because I want to be me. I want to be complete. I want to be my full self." Here, she intimates a desire for vaginoplasty or breast augmentation surgery. To Alejandra's good fortune as a medical employee, changing medical coverage laws for transgender surgery and a sympathetic boss' interventions are

making the surgery possible without the high cost. As a medical assistant at the Santa Cruz Planned Parenthood, Alejandra works with transgender medical issues and reports, “I’m so happy that insurance will cover it.” She smiles and thanks her boss Dr. Jennifer Hastings who helped link her with transitional surgery procedures. Dr. Hastings recounts that Alejandra first convinced her to expand her practice in transgender medicine.

For Alejandra to attain the insurance in the USA that pays for the surgery is an incredible victory for her and her Indigenous, transgender, and immigrant communities. A contrasting narrative occurs in the fourteen-minute short film *Afuera* in which a transgender Latina protagonist returns to sex work to pay for her hormones and loses the love of her undocumented monogamous boyfriend when he finds out about the difficult choice she made. In contrast with *Afuera*’s illegal sex work transgender theme, *Libertad* concludes with both Alejandra and Dr. Hastings being honored as Santa Cruz Pride Parade Grand Marshalls for their work in offering transgender health services.

Through hormones, Alejandra achieves in adulthood a female puberty usually experienced by female-bodied adolescents. As documented in the film *Mexico’s Third Gender* (2015), many muxes also celebrate their puberty transitions later in life. Celebrated Juchiteca *muxe* politician Amaranto Gómez laments the ways in which many of her fellow *muxes* are been won over by Western aesthetics as they migrate back and forth from Juchitán, Oaxaca to Mexico City. Once in Mexico City, many *muxes* stop wearing Zapotec women’s clothing and begin dangerous augmentations of their bodies through injections and non-regulated hormones offered via street markets. Dressed in the Juchitán *huipilli* and skirt embroidered with glowing flowers, she scolds, “*Se puede ser femenino, pero desde una cultura propia* (It’s alright to be feminine, but from one’s own culture).” Although

Alejandra wears westernized green scrubs in her medical work at the Santa Cruz Planned Parenthood, she also celebrates Oaxaca's incredibly deep history of Indigenous gender diversity by donning the *muxe huipilli*. Amaranta also warns that when these body modifications turn hard, block joints, and obstruct veins, “*no hay manera de salvarle* (there is no way to save you).” Alejandra's medical transitions contrast with the dangerous route taken by some *muxes*. Her hormones and surgery are closely monitored by trained physicians in transgender medicine. This decreases the risks of illness and even death that some *muxes* experience as many seek to gain the watery, feminine, youthful, and beautiful qualities of *nayaa*.

For the corn-agriculturalist Mixtecs of Alejandra's Huitzo and Oaxaca, rain and water are also extremely important. Mixtec scholar, Aurora Pérez affirms that her very language is called the “Language of the Rains” and that her people are called the People of the Rains, or Ñudzavui who traditionally worship “Lord Rain.” She recounts the millennia of practice in which women give offerings to women deities linked with water. She says, “The Serpent of the Rains—the Plumed Serpent, the “whirlwind,” is very important...because they are the ones who bring the rains all over the Land of the Rains.”



Figure 5: Lady 3 Flint offers flowers to Lady 1 Eagle underwater in *Codex Nuttall*

Interpreting the circa 1500 Codex Nuttall in a video presentation, Perez reads the Ñudzavui pictorial narrative of Lady 3 Flint painted in Figure 4 above who “turns into the Plumed Serpent and goes into the river carrying the copal incense burner and a handful of reeds, which we would call flowers...to venerate the Grandmother, the Nana Ñuu, in the river to solicit a son or a daughter.” The grandmother who governs the sweat bath used in birthing rituals grants the wish of a daughter. Pérez easily confirms that these practices of leaving offerings continue with contemporary Ñudzavui.⁸⁴ Ironically, due to a colonial history of oppressive poverty and the loss of forests that create rain, water is scarce in Perez’s home and Ñudzavui face harsh discrimination from neoliberal economics and Mestizo Spanish-speakers which prompts Ñudzavui emigration. Alejandra is evidence how Mixtec immigrant also carry religious beliefs into their new northern environments.

Although the Mixtec immigrant Alejandra identifies as Catholic and prays to an Indigenous Catholic Marian icon, the particular ways in which she offers flowers to the ocean elicit a Mixtec and Catholic syncretic reading. The ocean shore placement of *La*

Virgen de Juquila resonates with a traditional veneration of life-giving water deeply rooted in Ñudzavui culture, a tradition that became intertwined with Catholic practices over time. *La Virgen de Juquila* answers many prayers for the mostly Oaxacan Chantino, Ñudzavui, and Zapotec populations that venerate her as a brown-skinned native woman fluent in Indigenous languages. She represents an indigenization of a Catholic female icon similar to that of the *La Virgen de Guadalupe/Tonantzin Tlalli* (Our Mother Earth). As Lady 3 Flint once inquired for the fertility powers granted by a female deity underwater, so Alejandra prays to the ocean/*Virgen* for the feminine qualities that are granted through the miracles of hormones and gender affirming surgery. Images of Lady 3 Flint and Alejandra both show audiences a feminine Ñudzavui figure who embodies feminine empowerment with aid from a Ñudzavui female water-linked deity.

Conclusion

Given the high rates of two-spirit/Indigenous LGBTQ violence and suicide, media needs to address the lack of positive representations of two-spirit/Indigenous LGBTQ youth. A *nahui olin* analysis of *La Mission* helps illuminate the queer Mexica markers of age and gender. In the east of masculinity, men voice a new beginning for greater non-violence towards the Mexica gay youth Jes who is also perceived as being genderqueer in the cis-heteropatriarchal system of La Mission. In the west of femininity, Lena operates as an embattled but strong woman who shouts her resistance to gendered violence at key points in the film. In the north, ancestral Mexica dancers help to heal Che's gender intolerance and alcoholism. Finally, Jes' voice as a youth carries through as a statement against the

homophobic and trans*-phobic violence he endures from his father and from Smoke. In *La Mission*, Mexica reclaim a more balanced and inclusive gender perspective. The directions in *Two Spirits: Injunuity* are more internal. Internally, the Mexica Valdez identifies as both male and female and therefore symbolically both east and west. The north-south continuity of ancient Mexica ways into the new media lives of youth is also prominent within her Mexica identity. While Mica Valdez expresses an inner sense of being Mexica, Jes performs Mexica and Indigenous identity through his healing and kinship relations. Alejandra's Ñudzavui transgender woman story brings in important issues of new transgender immigration from Indigenous Oaxaca. Using Indigenous language to describe Indigenous film, this article notes that *Libertad* effectively blends the search for *nayaa* through prayers to the ocean/*Virgin de Juquila* for hormones and gender affirming surgery.

All three films reflect differing trans* identities and new permutations of Mesoamerican gender traditions. Unlike the urban reclaimed Mexica identity of Jes and Mica, *Libertad*'s Mixtec protagonist Alejandra is actively fleeing her origin Indigenous community intensely persecuted by Spanish-speaking Mestizo populations and impoverished by transnational neoliberal policies. Of course, while Alejandra's rural pueblo emigration differs from the more settled urban Indian identities of Mica and Jes, her story does not invalidate Mexica Indigenous identification. The two Mexica media contain important differences. While *Two Spirit: Injunuity* is clearly about Mexica identity for youth, *La Mission* leaves the future of Jes' Mexica identity more open. Even though the masculine muscular Jes of *La Mission* is surrounded and healed by Native American and Mexica traditions, he verbally self-identifies as neither Mexica nor two-spirit. On the other hand, *La Mission* show a stronger *danza* queer-friendly Mexica community and has

more specific cultural knowledge to impart in its dance images. Jes' final destiny with Jordan at UCLA may include a future for his sense of indigeneity. Both *La Mission* and *Two Spirits: Injunuity* present viable queer Mexica identity for youth, but only *Two Spirits: Injunuity* makes clear a future for overtly trans* "two-spirit" Mexica youth identities.

Media by Hanna-Avila, and Baker satisfy Facio's call for "the eradication of oppression towards our two-spirit relatives."⁸⁵ Baker's historical narrative of overcoming two-spirit gendercide especially honors Dimas' call to honor "two-spirit ancestral ways of loving."⁸⁶ While this article progressively considers a gay masculine character, a trans* two-spirit spokesperson, and a male-to-female transgender activist, there is no intent to trace a linear continuum from masculine gays to transgender women with genderqueer people somewhere in between. Rather, all three transnational media are examples of resisting Eurocentric cis-heteropatriarchy. And all three directors add to a quickly evolving three-, four-, or even thirteen- dimensional constellation of Indigenous trans*media that feature strong Indigenous gender activism, cosmological directionality, and prayer.

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Filmography

Afuera. 2016. 14 min. Steven Liang

Blood In Blood Out. 1993. 180 min. Taylor Hackford

Frida. 2002. 123 min. Salma Hayek

Gunn Hill Road. 2011. 96 min. Rashaad Ernesto Green

Honey Moccasin. 1998. 47 min. Shelley Niro

La Mission. 2009. 117 min. Peter Bratt

Latin Boys Go to Hell. 1997. 71 min. Ela Troyano

Libertad. 2015. 9 min. Brenda Avila-Hanna

Mexico's Third Gender. 2015. 22 min. Bernardo Loyola

Muxes: Auténticas, Intrépidas, Buscadoras de Peligro. 2005. 105 min. Alejandra Islas

The Path of Quetzalcoatl. 1977. 130 min. Deganawida-Quetzalcoatl University

Quinceañera. 2006. 90 min. Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland

Two-Spirit: Injunuity. 2013. 4 min. Adrian Baker

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