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Teaching about the Muxes in the United States: Cultural Construct Gender Identity, and Transgression in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This study focuses on the manner in which gender identities challenge heteronormativity and are understood as a way to interpret the sexed body through culture in the documentary *Muxes: auténticas, intrépidas, buscadoras del peligro* (2005), directed by Mexican filmmaker Alejandra Islas Caro. In the context of a *Gender Issues in Latin America* course taught in a North American university, we explored how certain theories by thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Pierre Bourdieu, and Judith Butler, among others, contend that sexual preference, gender orientation, and sexuality, can be built as a cultural constructs, contrary to popular beliefs on the subject. Some of the students found that those theories conflicted with preconceptions that they brought into the classroom. The documentary shows the everyday experiences of the “muxes,” a group of homosexual, cross-dressing, and transsexual persons who live their identities through a series of performative acts in the town of Juchitán. In doing so, they transgress the traditional roles and expectations that a patriarchal society has for both their men and women. Furthermore, their actions are presented in the film as everyday acts of defiance towards heteronormative patterns—that is, manners of interpreting the sexed body that have come to be considered acceptable by patriarchal societies. Islas Caro’s documentary allowed students to transcend the apparent dualities (i.e. man/woman, masculine/feminine; heterosexual/homosexual, etc.) that it is so commonly associated with this field of study. In addition, discussion and activities showed that students were better able to understand the theories that had been previously discussed in class, with special attention to the notions of sex, gender, and sexuality as social constructions.

Keywords

muxes, Islas Caro, Juchitán, gender identity

Teaching about the Muxes in the United States: Cultural Constructs, Gender Identity and Transgressions in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract:

This study focuses on the manner in which gender identities challenge heteronormativity and are understood as a way to interpret the sexed body through culture in the documentary *Muxes: auténticas, intrépidas, buscadoras del peligro* (2005), directed by Mexican filmmaker Alejandra Islas Caro. In the context of a *Gender Issues in Latin America* course taught in a North American university, we explored how certain theories by thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Pierre Bourdieu, and Judith Butler, among others, contend that sexual preference, gender orientation, and sexuality, can be built as a cultural constructs, contrary to popular beliefs on the subject. Some of the students found that those theories conflicted with preconceptions that they brought into the classroom. The documentary shows the everyday experiences of the “muxes,” a group of homosexual, cross-dressing, and transsexual persons who live their identities through a series of performative acts in the town of Juchitán. In doing so, they transgress the traditional roles and expectations that a patriarchal society has for both their men and women. Furthermore, their actions are presented in the film as everyday acts of defiance towards heteronormative patterns—that is, manners of interpreting the sexed body that have come to be considered acceptable by patriarchal societies. Islas Caro’s documentary allowed students to transcend the apparent dualities (i.e. man/woman, masculine/feminine; heterosexual/homosexual, etc.) that it is so commonly associated with this field of study. In addition, discussion and activities showed that students were better able to understand the theories that had been previously discussed in class, with special attention to the notions of sex, gender, and sexuality as social constructions.

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1. Introduction:

The objective of this paper is to describe and analyze the manner in which the documentaries *Muxes: Auténticas, intrépidas y buscadoras de peligro* by María Alejandra Islas Caro and *Ser trans: Más allá del rosa y del azul* produced by National Geographic¹ served as support materials to develop understanding of the manner in which Latin American societies have assumed certain conceptions of gender identity. The selection of documentaries over fiction film aimed to familiarize the students not only with the topic but also with the meta-language and analytical tools associated with this subject, which some of the participants used in the aforementioned films. In particular, this study focuses on analyzing the manner in which a group of students at a U.S. university worked across borders and frontiers—actual and imagined—developing and using their intercultural competence to understand the notion of transgender identity and the limits of binary and heteronormative categories in certain places in Latin America.

2. Background and Method:

The course in which the research took place discussed a variety of topics associated with gender in Latin America through the analysis of a variety of cultural objects, such as literary texts (short stories and novels), songs, photo novels, and movies. In doing so, it aimed to expand the epistemological horizon of the students when establishing the differences between sex and gender, the social construction of gender, and the limitations of gender categories based on binary patterns, and introducing students to the everyday presence of heteronormative patterns in Western society. The group included students of a wide variety of ages. Among their occupations, 53.8% of the students were teachers. There were native speakers of both English and Spanish as well as heritage speakers of Spanish.

In order to complete this research project, I gathered a series of materials, including the standard questionnaire provided by the coordinator of the project, which students voluntarily completed in an anonymous manner. I also used the first-day assessment materials and some fragments from final essays on the topic of the muxe.

At the beginning of the semester, most students in the class did not seem to be aware of the diversity of approaches to gender studies. They

¹ YouTube user Proyectotodomejora has posted this video online, and this is the source used in the works cited list.

seemed to associate the label “gender studies” with a very vague and traditional view of feminism. This identification was not a passive one as some of the students made it clear that they expected the class to reinforce such expectations. From the moment that the students received their copy of the course syllabus, it was clear that the presence of a section dedicated to discussing transgender identities was something challenging for a few students. A first-day assessment quiz of the class revealed that the majority of students did not understand the difference between a cisgender person² and the many and nuanced identities of those who identify themselves as transgender women and men—that is, those who feel that their gender identity is not in agreement with the biological sex that they were assigned at birth. This is a border-crossing issue that transcends both the frontiers of either the U.S. or México, because it is a subject in which academic knowledge, everyday behaviors and social perceptions are constantly mutating.

The first-day assessment of the course also revealed that most students were unable to differentiate between gender identities and sexual orientation/preference. As a consequence, the documentaries worked also as illustrations of the establishment of such a difference in the concepts of Judith Butler.³ This contribution was an important one, because students initially struggled with the postulates of this philosopher, in particular, with her questioning of heteronormative sexuality as something absolute, and also with the strict application of binary patterns when it comes to gender identities. Another issue evidenced in the first-day assessment and in classroom discussions was the lack of precision regarding the meaning of each letter in the acronym “GLBQTI,” used by Butler in her articles.⁴ At

² Although the majority of sources seem to understand the term “cisgender” and opposed to “transgender,” Anne Finn Enke in her article “The Education of Little Cis: Cisgender and the Discipline of Opposing Bodies” analyzes the origin of a term that she considers problematic inasmuch as, for many, using it and acknowledging themselves as such constitutes a sort of “pass to normalcy,” allowing them to exclude those who do not recognize themselves in the term: “It is hard to overstate how dramatically sex/gender congruence, legibility, and consistency within a binary gender system buy a privileged pass to social existence, particularly when accompanied by the appearance of normative race, class, ability, and nationality. The term cisgender was to name that privileged pass” (64). During the semester, a minority of the students in the class categorized themselves as “cisgender.” They frequently tried to characterize those who were not perceived as part of the category as “strange or displaying a strange behavior.” In a future experience in the course, it would be useful to use this text as one of the readings assigned in preparation for the class, in order to effectively prevent this kind of behavior.

³ Students had been previously assigned a selection of readings from *Gender in trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and *Undoing Gender* by Judith Butler.

⁴ The acronym stands for “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” “queer,” “transsexual,” and “intersex.” Butler incorporates this categories in her research, clarifying that she is convinced of the fact that the experience of sexuality is not summarized or unified by the use of any given categorization.

this point, the need became obvious to explain, as clearly as possible, the terms “cisgender,” “transsexual,” “transvestitism,” “queer,” “drag queen,” “intersexual,” “heteronormativity,” and “sexual orientation/preference,” among others. These terms occurred frequently in the readings assigned to the students, who kept struggling with their meaning. Typical questions and comments included: “Who would be an intersexual person?” “Is it the same to be intersexual and to be transsexual?” “Are there transgender people who also happen to be transsexual?” “How is this possible?” “I always thought that the fact that a man liked to use women’s traditional clothes meant that he was sexually attracted by men.” “How can you talk about a drag queen who is not also a homosexual men?” “Aren’t they all homosexuals?” “Their hairdos, their makeup, the way they dress... No true man would like that.” “How did it come to be that we have so many categories?” “I declare myself cisgender. I like to be a woman and I have no issue whatsoever with meeting this society’s expectations for what it means to be a woman.”

In spite of regular calls for an open and respectful attitude, some of these comments kept reentering the conversation either during the actual class meeting time or during office hours. At this point, I introduced a selection of segments from the documentary *Ser trans: Más allá del rosa y del azul*, as an illustration of some of the concepts previously discussed in the classroom. The testimony of the Colombian transgender professor Brigitte Luis Guillerno Baptiste was particularly significant in helping to clarify the questions and concerns that the students had. Because the professor was a faculty member in the Universidad Javeriana of Bogotá, Colombia, and the director of the Humboldt Institute, a local institution dedicated to research on science and ecology, students seemed to accept him as a legitimate authoritative voice.

In the beginning, the documentary presents the testimony of a group of transgendered women and men discussing their transition processes. Then, the camera starts with an extreme close-up of Professor Baptiste’s heels, before taking some distance to show her attire: Jean miniskirt, long hair, earrings, handbag, and a blouse. As she is walking, we hear a deep voice telling the audience: “Body and life, in general, are much more flexible than we are led to believe, thus I do not pretend to be a woman; neither I am interested in being a man. I am not interested in any of the definitions about this matter. If they want to think that I am a woman, and they like it, fine, and if they do not, [fine] also.”⁵

⁵ Original quotation as follows: “El cuerpo y la vida, en general, es mucho más flexible de lo que nos quieren hacer creer, entonces yo no pretendo ser mujer ni me interesa ser hombre. No me

In a different segment of the documentary, Professor Baptiste provides information about her personal history, indicating that she is married to a woman who was aware of the intention of her partner to live her gender role in a transgender way. She also has two daughters for whom she is their father. At this point, some of the students interrupted the class and indicated that they finally understood what it meant to be a transgender person with a heterosexual orientation. They had read Judith Butler's thoughts on this subject before and had struggled to come to terms with the concepts that she had introduced. Professor Baptiste's command of academic discourse was clearly attractive to the students. She was comfortable not only with her own scientific specialty, but also with gender perspectives whose metalanguage she dominates. Her position as an academic authority and the alignment of her thoughts with Butler's readings helped the students develop a certain amount of empathy and openness that had been lacking before listening to her testimony.

At this point, we began the discussion of the documentary *Muxes: Auténticas, intrépidas y buscadoras de peligro*. Its author, Alejandra Islas Caro is an UNAM (Universidad Autónoma de México) graduate who teaches at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos.⁶ Students received her documentary about the muxes with a positive attitude in the "Gender Issues in Latin America" course, as proven by their answers to the questionnaire that they filled in before watching the film. Ninety percent of the students stated that they were hopeful that the film would provide them with useful information about gender dynamics in Latin America. In the 105 minutes of its footage, the documentary explores the everyday life of a group of muxes who live in the city of Juchitán de Zaragoza in the state of Oaxaca, México, located in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec near the Pacific Ocean. In order to contextualize the documentary we discussed the definition of muxe provided by Marinella Miano Borruso, an anthropologist who advised Islas Caro when she was working on the film.⁷ Miano Borruso, in her article "Entre lo local y lo global. Los muxe en el siglo XXI," indicates that the man/woman dichotomy is enriched in Juchitán by the addition of "a peculiar trait: There is neither stigma nor social marginalization of the homosexual male, muxe in the Zapotec [language]. To the contrary, those from Juchitán state that there is a

interesan ninguna de las definiciones al respecto. Si quieren pensar que soy mujer y les gusta bien, si no también."

⁶ UNAM stands for Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

⁷ We discussed some of her research in the classroom.

‘complete acceptance and integration of the muxe’ in their culture” (2448).⁸

The muxes had been conceptualized as a so-called “third gender” in the Zapotec communities, a circumstance that predates the arrival of the Castilians. Thus, local history and popular lore emphasize their visibility and their traditional acceptance in the community. They usually do not have children, which make them great caregivers for their parents. In the movie, we learn that there is a legend involving Saint Vicent Ferrer, patron of the city, who would have been in charge of distributing men, women, and the muxes through the world. However, the bag with the latter broke when he was in Juchitán, and this is one of the ways in which the local population interiorizes how so many of the muxes came to be in the aforementioned city. The yearly procession in honor of the local patron is organized by the muxes. Although an outsider may perceive it as a sort of gay pride parade, the reality is more complex: This is a religious parade organized by the muxes, and yet the Catholic Church explicitly condemns what this institution categorizes as homosexuality.

Islas Caro gathers a group of muxes of diverse ages, occupations, and education: Young, middle-aged, and elderly muxes; homemakers, family assistants, hair stylists, chefs, merchants, interior designers, and teachers. As a consequence, the audience watches a variety of points of view about what it means to live as a member of this community in Juchitán. The film showcases in a variety of ways the visibility of the muxes. For example, the film emphasizes as a sign of accord that the teacher is not stigmatized in spite of his known gender identity.

Furthermore, according to the testimony of Eli Bartolo Marcial in the documentary,⁹ the city has many names associated with it. Historians and politicians favor Juchitán de Zaragoza; the Nahuatl name is Ixtaxochitlán; devout Catholics call it Juchitán de San Vicente, etc. Some of the names mentioned by Bartolo are a tribute to the visibility of the muxes in the identity of the city, for example, Muxetlán and Juchitán de las Locas. More relevant to the notion of intercultural communication, so important when teaching foreign film, Bartolo indicates that the appropriate name “for gringos and foreigners: The Queer Paradise.”¹⁰ Many of the students in the classroom eventually took issue with this

⁸ Original quotation as follows: “Un rasgo peculiar: No hay estigma y marginación social del varón homosexual, muxe en zapoteco. Al contrario, los juchitecos afirman que en su cultura hay una ‘completa aceptación e integración del muxe’.”

⁹ He is a muxe and also one of the advisors and producers of the film. He is a local teacher and has also written a dissertation entitled “Maestros preescolares muxes. Del fantasma de la homosexualidad al guardián de la moralidad” with a scholarship from the Colegio de México.

¹⁰ Original quotation as follows: “Para los gringos y los foráneos: The Queer Paradise.”

notion. As the film progressed, they indicated that it was obvious to them that the level of tolerance and acceptance towards the muxe was neither evenly distributed in the whole community nor equally present in all historical periods.

The documentary also emphasizes the relationship between the muxes and their mothers, their many contributions to the community, their indisputable leadership in issues such as AIDS and STDs prevention campaigns, and their participation in the so-called “velas,” which are extremely popular local celebrations.¹¹ On the other hand, Islas Caro also gathers the testimony of local community members who are critical of the transvestitism practices of the muxes. As a consequence they would like to censor their presence in the velas. After listening carefully to this testimony, it seems that visibility is the issue at hand, as the complaints seem to focus on the ostentation of their outfits, the use of makeup, or the pretentiousness in using women’s restrooms. In particular, in the segment titled “Contra-travestis I,” a woman of Juchitán discusses what she perceives as the negative change that the muxes have endured in recent generations. While chatting with a woman her age, she indicates that the behavior of the muxes has always been accepted in the city. However, she expresses dismay about the fact that their behavior has become progressively visible and is nostalgic of a past era in which the muxes would dress with guayabera with embroidered flowers and a necklace of coins. She expresses her intolerance in the following terms: “Then, they go supposedly dressed as women, supposedly [wear] braids of two levels, that I do not know what and they paint themselves as clowns and they feel that they are already women.”¹² At this point, one of the students in the class, who had been among those less empathic with any behavior that challenged heteronormativity in the film, expressed her agreement with this woman: “She is great, that woman. Who is she?”¹³ As a consequence, we had a discussion of respect as a great ground to build effective intercultural communication.

The last segment of the documentary is entitled “Algunos sueños muxe,” and it is focused on the dreams and aspirations of the muxes for the future. Among those mentioned are respect, better understanding, a partner, and surgery to become a woman.

¹¹ It is explained in the documentary that their origin can be traced to the Catholic religious tradition. The inhabitants of Juchitán used to stay awake all night long, *en vela* in Spanish, in homage to the saints. Nevertheless, the “velas” have evolved into a non-religious event enjoyed with family and friends.

¹² Original quotations as follows: “Luego van dizque vestidas de mujer, dizque trenzas de dos pisos, que no sé qué y se pintan como payasos y sienten que ya son mujeres.”

¹³ Original quotation as follows: “Está estupenda esa mujer, ¿quién es?”

3. Classroom experience:

Introducing the movie took time in three different class meetings. There were frequent interruptions for clarification and debate. Although alternative accommodations were offered to those students who might have felt uncomfortable with the subject, everybody stayed. However, there were frequent challenges to the creation of a productive environment for intercultural communication. In particular, some of the older students seemed to struggle with suspending judgment about the behavior of the muxes, which resulted in frequent interruptions to reframe and redirect debate onto a more productive path. At a certain point, one of the students in particular was asked to remember that, in an academic environment, his/her comments should show respect and intellectual openness instead of prejudice and intolerance.¹⁴ As a consequence, he/she reframed his/her comments but never stopped finding something negative to say. For example, to signify the great skill of one of the muxes in creating clothing items for her doll, the student indicated that it was “unbelievable that he/she could do that with such rough hands.”¹⁵ In order to say that a certain muxe was a great dancer, he/she would not say “how wonderfully this is muxe dancing” or “how wonderfully he/she is dancing,” but rather “how wonderfully *the crazy one* is dancing” (my emphasis).¹⁶

In any case, this was not a typical reaction. Most students made every possible effort to understand the variations of the everyday life of the muxes on the isthmus. Whenever they had a question about a concept that was alien to their own cultural experience, they formulated their questions in a respectful manner. Some of the comments and questions show this attitude, and some show resistance to conceptualizing their world with a terminology that they perceived as alien. Some of the comments and questions elicited by the film included: “Do all muxes live in the same area?” “How can Juchitán be considered a paradise for the transgender community if the oldest man interviewed for the film discussed how his family hurt him?” “What does queer exactly mean?” “In the US if a man wears a pink t-shirt he is thought to be ‘queer.’ Is this use of ‘queer’ correct?” “Why are there so many names and categories for somebody who is a homosexual?” “Are there muxes who are transvestites and muxes who do not do it?” “Do they all belong to the same category?” “Are there

¹⁴ Comments included “¡qué degenerados!” or “¿Les dan por todos los lados?”

¹⁵ Original quotation as follows: “Increíble que con esas manazas tan toscas pueda hacer eso.”

¹⁶ Original quotations in Spanish are: “Cómo baila de rico este/a muxe,” “cómo baila de rico él/ella,” and “cómo baila de rico *esa loca*.”

muxes who have gone through with surgery, or do they just wear clothing, put make up on, and behave like women?”

Hilarity ensued when the students listened to the diverse names that the people of Juchitán had for a member of the muxe community: “Choto,” “dello,” “maricón,” “mariposón,” “al que le gusta la mojarrita en caldo,” “al que le gusta el arroz con pollo,” and “iguana verde,” among others. The discussion of why they thought this was funny led us to a discussion of the role played by laughter in dealing with certain experiences and also a quick review of the manner in which each culture conceptualized heteronormative patterns.

Edward T. Hall (1976) indicates that a person screens those elements of culture that are meaningful or appealing to him/her in the environment in which he/she grew up. “What man chooses to take in, either consciously or unconsciously, is what gives structure and meaning to his world” (p. 88). If we connect what this anthropologist utters with some of the initial questions that the students had when they were discussing the movie about the muxes, it becomes obvious that the students’ questions and struggles went beyond the understanding and naming of gender patterns that were not binary. If it was hard for them to understand the diverse spectrum of gender categories provided by Butler in her articles, it was even more challenging to accept that a society with pre-Hispanic roots in the isthmus of Tehuantepec had discussions about a so-called third gender and a complex variety of behaviors related to their approaches and experiences with gender.

One of the voices in the movie discusses the importance of female virginity in the area, and how its preservation until marriage results in some of the younger males in the community choosing to initiate their sexual life with a member of the muxe community. It also discusses the manner in which some men exchange sexual favors for money with the muxes. Some of the names received by those involved in such relationships are “mayates,” “mayuyus,” and “chichifos,” depending on the level of their relationships and the underlying motivations for having them. According to the documentary, this behavior does not mean that the men who get involved with the muxes lose their status as heterosexual males.

At this point, one of the students indicated that this was a strange behavior as any males who had a sexual relationship with other males, whether for pleasure, money, or whichever other reasons they may have, would always be considered a homosexual person. At this point, the instructor showed the limitations of such a view by introducing examples of indigenous peoples in Latin America who share a view of sexuality analogous to that of the muxes. Students were also encouraged to go back to the readings of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler about rethinking

gender categories and sexuality as cultural constructions that they had discussed earlier on the semester. In particular, we went back over Beauvoir's challenge to the notion of natural behavior for women and men, which she characterizes for the most part as social constructs. In reading Butler's texts, written almost half a century later, students noted that Butler goes beyond Beauvoir, inasmuch as her challenge is not limited to gender roles, but also she discusses the notions of sex and sexuality.

In her (2005) article "Constant Queering: Practicing Responsible Pedagogy at Syracuse University," Elizabeth Sierra-Zarella insists on the importance of adopting this kind of attitude in order to avoid on-campus discrimination towards those who do not fit the expectations of heteronormative ideologies: "The notion of social construction which says that things are not natural, that things are made through culture and history and relations of power, is extremely useful for trying to begin to destabilize ... student's notions of sexual identity as natural and normal" (p. 110).

Verónica Hidalgo, in her (2005) article "Cultura, Multiculturalidad, Interculturalidad y Transculturalidad: Evolución de un Término," emphasizes the manner in which some cultures favor a dynamic attitude towards the social and cultural construction of gender whereas others favor a more static attitude: "...if a certain culture shows a static character, in time, the society will be impoverished as a consequence of narcissism and null enrichment" (p. 77).¹⁷ In contrast, when the opposite happens with a certain culture, "this [culture] will adapt to the changes that might happen, and, thus, it will evolve with the passing of time, having an effect of mental representations of value" (p. 77).¹⁸ As a consequence of the latter situation, these attitudes towards values will become progressively complex. Taking into consideration the postulates of Hidalgo, it is evident that some of the students were willing to accept the dynamic nature of cultures with more openness than others. Those who favored a static approach to culture displayed ethnocentric behavior and were not willing to accept the possibility that cultural constructions of gender in Juchitán might not be in agreement with their own culturally constructed categories.

Thus, students characterized what they saw on the screen as "strange" and, as such, unintelligible. According to Hidalgo, it is important to find a balance between ethnocentrism and what she considers to be its

¹⁷ Original quotation as follows: "... si una cultura presenta un carácter estático, la sociedad se empobrecerá con el tiempo a consecuencia del narcisismo y el nulo enriquecimiento."

¹⁸ Original quotation as follows: "Ésta se adaptará a los cambios que se produzcan y por tanto, evolucionará con el paso del tiempo, afectando a las representaciones mentales valorativas."

opposite, that is, cultural relativism: “If we had to represent both concepts (ethnocentrism and cultural relativism) for the length of a continuum, each one would be at the opposite end of such [a continuum]” (p. 81).¹⁹ In her reflection, she states that both extreme positions are dangerous, as they result in either a pejorative attitude (that would be the result of extreme ethnocentrism) or an uncritical attitude (that would be the outcome of extreme cultural relativism). For her, neither of these attitudes is desirable for the classroom setting. Her proposal is approaching other cultures from a position of respect towards difference. However, this respectful attitude should not be confused with the adoption of the same value system proposed by the culture that we perceive as different from ours.

In this context, it is pertinent to discuss the book *La comunicación intercultural* by Miguel Rodrigo Alsina (2012). He indicates that “ethnocentrism hypothesizes that what is yours is what is adequate and what you perceive as alien goes from the exotic to the inadmissible” (p. 82).²⁰ Thus, for some students (less than half of the class) it was impossible to show empathy and openness towards Zapotec culture and its relationship to their own notion of heterosexuality. In contrast, most students recognized the experiences in the documentary as different from their own culturally acquired categories, but they arrived at the use of the same vocabulary favored by both Hidalgo and Rodrigo Alsina, which is the acknowledgement of “complexity” as a desirable challenge when it comes to dealing with cultures different from our own. The inhabitants of Juchitán challenged what some of the students had previously perceived as “universal patterns” of value for human sexuality and gender identity.²¹

Regarding the use in the classroom of the term “queer,” we went back to the proposals of Judith Butler in her volume *Undoing Gender* (2005). Thus, the term may not be reduced to “wearing a pink t-shirt” as framed by one of the students. The documentary about the muxes encouraged students to accept that there were many possible ways to

¹⁹ Original quotation as follows: “Si tuviéramos que representar a ambos conceptos (etnocentrismo y relativismo cultural) a lo largo de un continuo, cada uno estaría situado en el extremo opuesto del mismo.”

²⁰ Original quotation as follows: “El etnocentrismo postula que lo propio es lo adecuado y lo ajeno va de lo exótico a lo inadmissible.”

²¹ In his text, Rodrigo Alsina (2012) quotes Tzvetan Todorov as a source for his analysis of the universalist dimension of ethnocentrism. Thus, Alsina states that: “Ethnocentrism has a universal aspiration which starts from a particular position of a certain culture, which is [then] generalized” (p. 82). As a consequence, “its values, those of this particular culture, become *the* values” (p. 82). Original quotations as follows: “El etnocentrismo tiene una aspiración universalista a partir de una posición particularista de una cultura que se generaliza” (p. 82). And also: “Sus valores, los de esta cultura particular, se convierten en *los* valores” (p. 82).

experience and live gender roles. Thus, there are homosexual men who do not like to practice transvestitism and prefer to always dress in clothing that has been traditionally associated with males; there are also homosexual males who only like to wear clothing traditionally associated with women during the velas, such as the “tehuana” dress; there are the so-called muxes “vestidas,” that is, those who like to use make up and clothing traditionally associated with women at all times; there are males who cross-dress and would like to go through with surgery to become transsexual women; there are males who had previously married and had children and, at a certain point, had decided to live alone as muxes, among many other choices. Watching and discussing the experiences of the muxes were crucial to the understanding the notion of “queer,” a term that has been associated with the rejection of heteronormative patterns. From this point of view, the latter work as fictions with a marginalizing effect in society. As Butler discussed in *Undoing Gender* “sexual difference is clearly out of favor within some reigning paradigms in queer theory” (p. 185).

Watching the performance of gender and its roles in the muxe community,²² one can sense the resistance that many of them have to being classified as either men or women. Felina Santiago, one of the muxes who is interviewed by Islas Caro, summarizes this challenge to heteronormative patterns: “Trying to play the role of a heterosexual boy? And neither am I a woman. [What happens] is that I am different. What you are, you cannot stop being.”²³ At this point, students seemed to be polarized in two positions. A group of the students seemed to feel uncomfortable with the notion that there were categories and options beyond what they had previously thought. Thus, they stated: “I like my gender identity, nothing about is bothersome to me;” “I was happier before there were all of these confusing classifications;” “it seems to me that both Butler and the muxe think that I can be one thing today and the opposite tomorrow, which is very strange.” In contrast, there were students who showed more openness in trying to understand the manner

²² In his article “Travestidos de etnicidad zapoteca: Una etnografía de los muxes de Juchitán como cuerpos poderosos,” Juan Antonio Flores Martos (2010) discusses the clothing of the muxes, who only started dressing with “tehuanas” in the 1990s “as a device or mestizo performance that allows the expression of changing sexual identities or [sexual identities] in flux” (p. 24). Flores affirms that Butler’s theories on the performativity of sex and sexuality have a great ethnographic example in the many experiences of the muxes of Juchitán. Original quotation by Flores Martos as follows: “Como un recurso o performance mestizo que permite la expresión de las identidades genéricas sexuales en flujo y cambiantes.”

²³ Original quotation as follows: “¿Tratar de hacer el papel de un niño heterosexual? Y tampoco soy mujer. Es que soy diferente. Lo que eres, no lo puedes dejar de ser.”

in which the muxe live and experience their sexuality. They noted as positive that there was more acceptance and tolerance towards this matter in the isthmus of Tehuantepec than there was in the areas of México and Latin America with which they were acquainted. It was also clear to the students the limitations of inclusion. In considering and debating the subject, we came to a conclusion analogous to that reached by Jen Gilbert in her (2014) book *Sexuality in School. The Limits of Education*. She indicates that the acronym LGBTQ, as inclusive as it seems to be, “is a fragile construction” (p. xvi) inasmuch as the real possibilities to live sexual roles, gender identities, and sexuality certainly exceed such a limited alphabet.

In general, the documentary seems to have had a positive impact when it comes to the development of empathy and self-awareness by the students in the course. As the discussion of the movie advanced and we went deeper into the understanding of the muxe universe, the students of the course perspicaciously started to compare what they had learned in previous classes with what they had seen in the film. Taking also Miano Borruso’s (2010) texts as a reference, they came to the conclusion that the experiences of disillusion of the muxes had many points of contact with the experiences that many women had had when they were trying to assert their identities. Feelings and sentimentality were clearly a comfortable common ground for the whole class. Some of the comments included: “Poor thing!” “It is obvious that, when it comes to heartbreak, he/she has suffered.” Thus, students began listing experiences of the characters in the Latin American novels and short stories previously discussed in the class. For them, the line between life and fiction was a porous one that they tended to cross back and forth repeatedly.

Another debate ensued during discussion of the manner in which the movie showed that the homosexuality of males was accepted in the community, but that was not the case for women. Some of the students went carefully over the words of muxes such as Felina Santiago and Mística Sonenez, and concluded that, in the realm of the Zapotec society, some of the muxes preferred to avoid altogether having a life partner because they thought that such a choice would mean that they would be susceptible to experiences that Mexican anthropologist Marcela Lagarde (1997) has characterized as “cautiverios de género.” In her text *Los cautiverios de las mujeres: madresposas, monjas, putas, presas y locas*, Lagarde introduces the notion of “cautiverio,” that is, captivity, in order to describe the situation of women within a patriarchal society. “Captivity defines women politically, and it becomes clear in the specific relationship of women with power, and it is characterized by the deprivation of liberty,

by oppression” (pp. 36-37).²⁴ Santiago and Sonenez did not want to have to go through tasks traditionally associated with women, such as cooking, cleaning the house, washing clothes, and ironing, among others. They did not want to perceive themselves as subordinated to a male, either. In this sense, the students, Miano Borruso, and Flores Martos arrived at a similar conclusion. For them, the muxe community provides the opportunity to separate sexuality and social responsibilities, to a certain degree. Thus, Miano Borruso, in her article “Género y homosexualidad entre los zapotecos del istmo de Tehuantepec: El caso de los muxe,” indicates that the traditional Zapotec model “represents a rigid prototype for the regularization, social and cultural, of sexual practices and for locating homosexual—and bisexual—behavior in an explicit or latent manner” and not necessarily the “queer paradise” that some believe it to be.²⁵ In the article “Géneros, sexualidad y etnia vs globalización: El caso de los *muxe* entre los zapotecos del Istmo, Oax.” Miano Borruso and Águeda Gómez Suárez insist on the fact on this very same point:

... liberality towards masculine homosexuality, however, is not matched by a similar attitude towards feminine homosexuality. As much as a *muxe* has certain presence and social prestige, on the contrary, a lesbian would never achieve the social status of the *muxe* and is generally repressed. The very forms of naming them—*nguiiu*, in Zapotec and *marimacho* or *tortillera* when speaking Spanish—have a derogatory connotation that the word *muxe* does not have, indicating that the Zapotec society is a sexist one.²⁶ (p. 3)

Another important aspect of the classroom discussion of the film was the opportunity that the documentary provided to discuss the notion

²⁴ Original quotation as follows: “El cautiverio define políticamente a las mujeres, se concreta en la relación específica de las mujeres con el poder y se caracteriza por la privación de la libertad, por la opresión.”

²⁵ Original quotation as follows: “Representa un prototipo rígido para regularizar, social y culturalmente, las prácticas sexuales y para ubicar la conducta homosexual—y bisexual—, manifiesta o latente.”

²⁶ Original quotation in Spanish as follows:

... a la liberalidad hacia la homosexualidad masculina, sin embargo, no corresponde una igual actitud hacia la homosexualidad femenina. Al contrario de un *muxe* que tiene presencia y cierto prestigio social, la lesbiana jamás alcanza el estatus social del *muxe* y generalmente es reprimida. Las mismas formas de nombrarlas—*nguiiu*, en zapoteco y *marimacho* o *tortillera* cuando se habla en español—tienen una connotación despectiva que no tiene la palabra *muxe*, lo que indica que la zapoteca no deja de ser una sociedad sexista. (p. 3)

of double/triple marginalization, a concept that helped some of the muxes make sense of their place in society. The understanding of this phenomenon in the movie comes through the use of humor, a repeated resource for *Islas Caro*. One of the muxes, the aforementioned Eli Bartolo Marcial, who works as a teacher, is filmed in a car as he indicates diverse categories for the muxes, related to social position, occupations, etc. In this context, he conveys the manner in which terminology relates to class and location. Thus, he establishes that there is a difference between “locas y putos” on the one hand, and “gays y homosexuales” on the other. The latter terms are preferred by the middle and higher classes, which are rejected by Bartolo because he considers them to be alien to the local Zapotec culture. In front of the camera, Bartolo emphasizes that the preference for the “newer” terminology is a manifestation of “a new classism and sexism that exists among the new rich people in Juchitán.”²⁷ He mocks the discrimination implied in such hierarchies, referring to “other categories” applicable to the men from Juchitán according to Zapotec lore. Thus, he claims that those with a peasant background “have a sweet penis,”²⁸ and those dedicated to fishing “have a savory penis.”²⁹ With this episode, most of the students commented on the many layers of marginalization (race, socio-economic status, etc.) to be added to their gender identity.

The importance of this concept of double/triple discrimination became apparent when the students had to study the works of Chilean writer and activist Pedro Lemebel, whose novel (2001) *Tengo miedo torero* was discussed in class immediately after the documentary on the muxes. Just like Bartolo did with the muxes, Lemebel discusses the manner in which being a member of the LGTBQ community results in a combination of social and economic marginalization, which becomes particularly apparent when there person is not wealthy and has roots in the indigenous community (Lemebel had some mapuche ancestors in his maternal family). When Lemebel describes his experience as a gay man in the Stonewall bar in New York, he states his concerns about all the layers of discrimination and challenges that he endures:

And how are they going to see you if one is so extremely ugly
and lugs everywhere his/her malnutrition of a Third World

²⁷ Original quotation as follows: “Un nuevo clasismo y sexismo que hay entre la gente rica nueva de Juchitán.”

²⁸ Original quotation as follows: “Tienen el pito dulce.” Please note that there is some word play involved in Spanish, as a “pito” is also a word for a whistle.

²⁹ Original quotation as follows: “Tienen el pito salado.” Please note the additional play on words as “salado” means both savory and salty in Spanish when it comes to taste.

lunatic. How are they going to give you the ball if one has this Chilean face, astonished in front of this Olympiad of homosexuals, potent and well fed, who look at you with disgust as if they were saying: We are doing you the favor, little Indian, of bringing you to the cathedral of gay pride.³⁰ (p. 71)

When students discussed this and other texts in class, most of them immediately connected Lemebel's experience with the double/triple discrimination that Eli Bartolo Marcial had denounced in Islas Caro's documentary. Furthermore, some of them successfully incorporated this notion into their term papers.

When the students reflected on the documentary, the majority of them felt that the film exemplified concepts that we had initially discussed through Judith Butler's writings: The differences between the notions of sex and gender, the manner in which people live their sexuality beyond heteronormativity, etc. The testimonies of the muxes that they heard on the documentary and Professor Baptiste's case seemed to stick with them as a source for reflection.

In one of our last discussions of Islas Caro's documentary one of the students suggested that the prefix "trans-" could relate to the manner in which people transit from one gender identity to other. After discussing whether this could or should be applied to the muxes, we came to the conclusion that their own categorization should be respected instead of imposing our own set of expectations and categories. Thus, identifying transsexual men and women and the muxe community would not be establishing a line of communication across cultures but rather imposing our own categories upon another culture that also deserves respect for its own concepts. And yet, in a globalized society such as ours, Miano Borruso and Águeda Suárez indicate how the notion of transsexuality is gaining ground in the muxe community, in particular, among younger generations. Thus, in the past, "The *muxe* did not need to be a woman to have its place in society, the gender performance was an important axis of its social recognition" (Miano Borruso & Gómez Suárez, p. 8).³¹ However, in members of younger generations, surgery seems to be becoming a route to fulfill their gender identity aspirations.

³⁰ Original quotation as follows:

Y como te van a ver si una es tan refea y arrastra por el mundo su desnutrición de loca tercermundista. Como te van a dar pelota si uno lleva esta cara chilena asombrada frente a este Olimpo de homosexuales potentes y bien comidos que te miran con asco, como diciéndote: Te hacemos el favor de traerte, indiecita a la catedral del orgullo gay.

³¹ Original quotation as follows: "El *muxe* no necesitaba ser mujer para tener un lugar en la sociedad, la *performance* de género, era un eje importante de su reconocimiento social."

In the review of the post-screening questionnaire, I noticed that most of the students, that is, 77% of them, acknowledged that the documentary had been surprising because it had made them familiar with the manner in which people lived gender roles in Juchitán. The very same percentage of students also expressed that it was obvious in both in *Islas Caro's* movie and Miano Borruso's texts that patterns of discrimination were still present in the muxe community. The remaining 23% tried to establish a comparison between the situation of the muxes and the LGBTQ community in Cleveland. One of the students articulated this as follows:

In spite of the pessimism that one can observe in Marianella Miano's texts, I still think that Oaxaca may not be a 100% paradise for the locas but there is acceptance and there are many advances in a community with limited economic and educative resources. When I compare the Zapotec society with the situation in Cleveland, Ohio, the muxes would not have the same freedom here that they would have in their community there. Thus, Miano's appreciation is partially erroneous, pessimistic, and negative.

Another student wrote that there was a chance that there were communities with similar practices in the United States, which could have been ignored by the media:

I was surprised to find a very accepting community for the muxes, from what our media shows, it seems the U.S. does not have a place like this, although now I tend to think if there's one in Mexico, there has to be a community here that the media hasn't highlighted."³²

Another student indicated that, although some of the information was surprising, it had just expanded the information and concepts that he/she already had.

4. Data Analysis and Implications:

As previously discussed, students completed two voluntary and anonymous questionnaires, one before watching the film and the other one afterwards. The former focused on expectations and the latter on how

³² For a discussion of the role played by the so-called "two-spirit" in the Native American culture, a traditional reference is *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* by Walter Williams.

such expectations had been modified and other final considerations. In this segment, I would like to highlight some of the results, which are relevant for my analysis. In Chart 1 it is possible to review how often students watch foreign film, with a majority of students (90.9%) indicating that they do it regularly, which shows a certain level of openness towards other cultures and a willingness to work with a cultural framework different from their own.

Chart 2 measures the interest of students in a cultural context different from that of the United States. Opinions here are divided, as 80% optimistically perceive themselves as free from prejudices; 10% of students think that their approach to different contexts is strong; and 10% of students think that theirs is poor. After contrasting the information in the chart with my classroom notes, my impression is that this statistic is particularly telling, as there was a minority of students who struggled to understand and accept as legitimate the gender and sexuality conceptualizations of the muxes. Chart 3 focuses on the manner in which students assessed the film, with a majority of them considering it to be very interesting (81%) or interesting (19%). There were not purely negative assessments of Islas Caro's documentary.

Chart 4 illustrates whether students felt shocked by the manner in which non-heterosexual groups were represented in the film. A minority of students felt this way (18%), a percentage that matched up perfectly with the amount of students who showed prejudice and made ethnocentric comments while we were watching the film. Somewhat over half (56%) of the students claim that they were not affected by the film, a percentage that is in agreement with the majority of students who asked questions trying to get a deeper understanding of the most controversial issues represented on the film. The remaining 26% of students matches those students who showed a great interest in this topic, but claimed that what they saw on the screen was just an expansion and/or an illustration of concepts that were not new to them. Finally, Chart 5 represents the percentage of students who would recommend Islas Caro's documentary to other people and the level of support for such a recommendation. All of the students recommend the movie, and 55% of them strongly support such a recommendation.

5. Conclusion:

The experience of watching and discussing the documentary *Muxes: Auténticas, intrépidas y buscadoras de peligro* in the classroom introduced the students to a certain manner of living gender roles beyond heteronormativity in the city of Juchitán. Among the objectives fulfilled by

watching the documentary, I would like to highlight the manner in which the movie allowed students to better understand the theories that had been previously discussed in class, with special attention to the notions of sex, gender, and sexuality as social constructions. As shown through the data analysis of the questionnaire provided by the project coordinator, fragments of the final essays, discussion of the students' comments and first-day assessment materials, the movie successfully illustrated both the diversity of approaches to gender studies (and the way in which such approaches went beyond the students' initial expectations) and the manner in which these notions do not stay static but rather they mutate through the filters of crossing borders of time and culture.³³ It also assisted the students in the intercultural communicative competence objective of becoming more self-aware of the socially constructed nature of many aspects of their own culture, and the manner in which the pretense that some values emerging from their own culture can be universally upheld is a symptom of ethnocentrism allowing people to disregard and discredit any cultural manifestations that they perceive as strange, alien, and, as such, threatening. We were also able to acquire a wider understanding of the term "queer" through the sui generis manner in which the muxe community transgresses heteronormative patterns. In discussing the validity of the notion of a so-called "queer paradise" in Juchitán, we also discovered the reverse of acceptance with the evident sexism towards feminine homosexuality (which is invisible and repressed) and the many layers of discrimination involved in the idea of double/triple discrimination. In challenging so many categories, the muxes illustrate the manner in which communication across cultures, borders, and frontiers usually escapes and goes beyond the categorizations and frames created by anthropologists, philosophers, historians, psychiatrists, and any other kind of scientists and researchers.

³³ Watching and commenting sections the documentary *Ser trans: Más allá del rosa y del azul*, located and filmed mostly in Colombia, made for great complementary material that allowed the students to relativize and reframe what they were watching in Islas Caro's documentary.

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Appendix

Chart 1: How often students watch foreign films

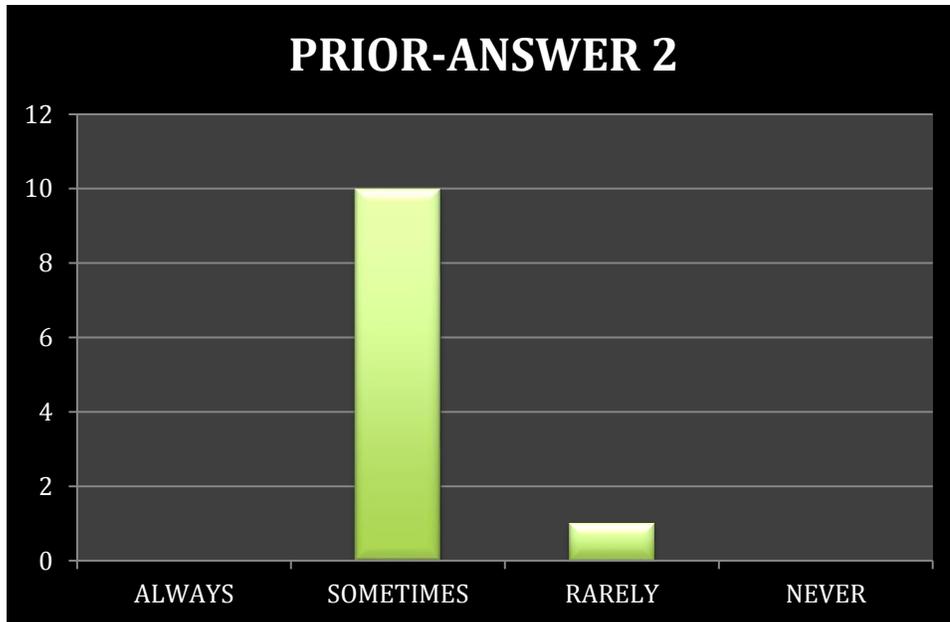


Chart 2: Student interest in cultural content differing from that of U.S.

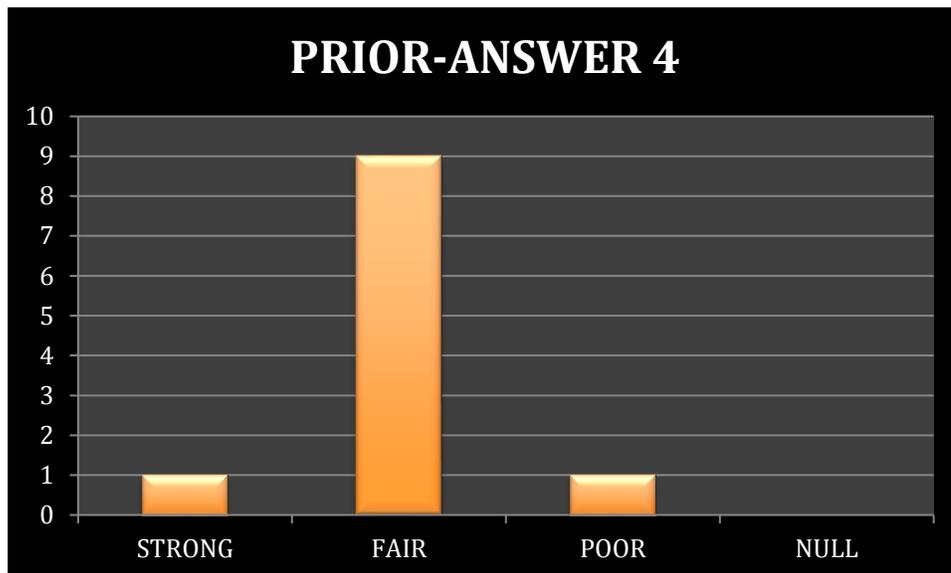


Chart 3: Students' assessment of the films

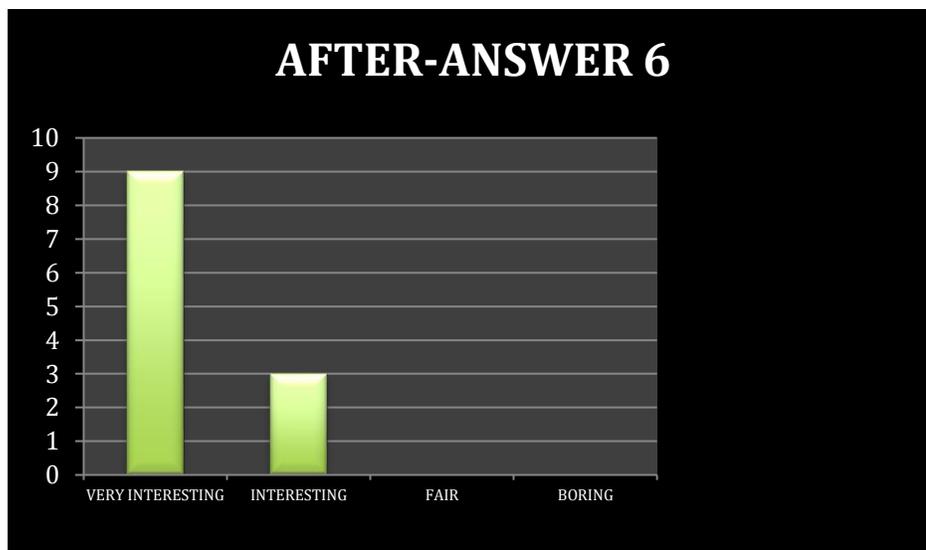


Chart 4: Degree of student shock in the representation of non-heterosexual groups in the film

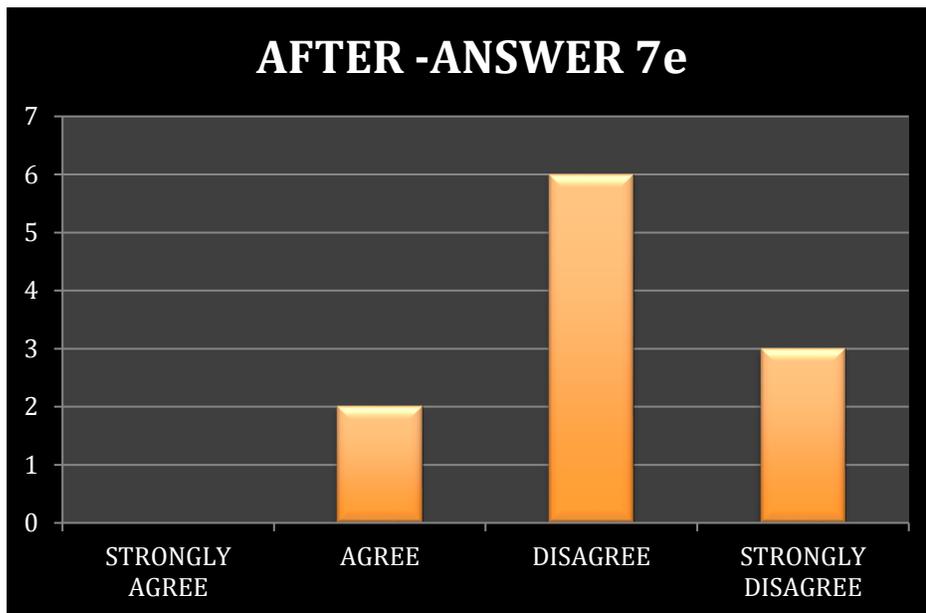
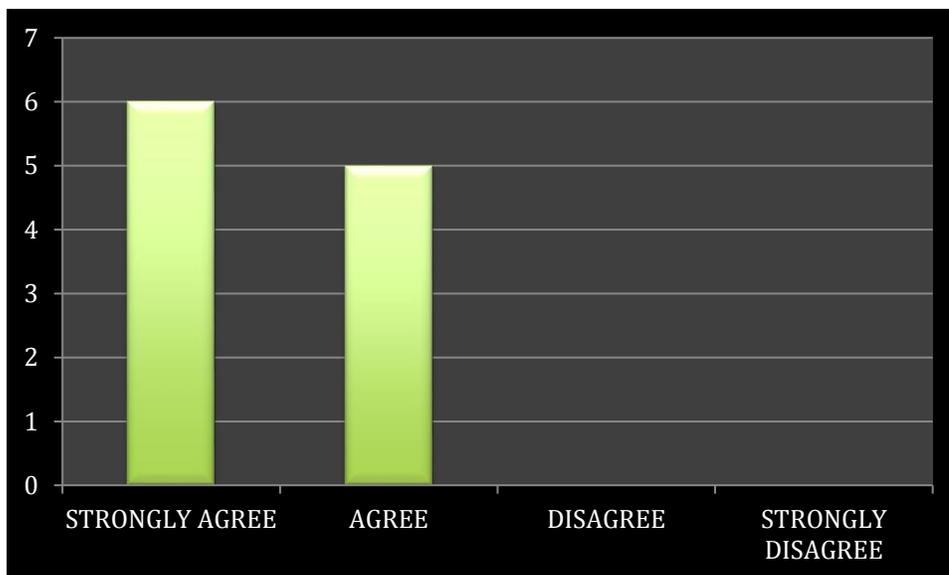


Chart 5: Percentage of students would recommend Islas Caro's documentary



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