

# **Behind the Scene**

**The enactments of human sexuality in Tehuantepec, Mexico**

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# **Behind the Scene**

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**Verónica Rodríguez Cabrera**

## **Thesis**

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To Roberto, for his passion for academics  
To Valeria, my light



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Performance at the Sta. Maria atrium

Previous page:  
Labour carts attending a *Convite de Flores*



## Introduction: situating Tehuantepec

### *Binigundaza*

In the Tehuantepec Isthmus, there is a legend told by the name of *binigulaza*, the oldest in the Zapotec tradition.

Linked to the history of creation, it has been handed down to us over the course of a long itinerary, incomplete and blurry, piece by piece, overcoming abysses. Then suddenly the trail is lost, and we must resort to stirring up the tradition, breaking up the word, bringing forward and backward the stress in order to rediscover it. And it can be found like a new sign, and sometimes, in each place of the same period, different.

Do to its flexibility, the word *binigulaza* can have any number of meanings, depending on where the stress is placed; and each of these meanings can correspond perfectly with a differed legend.

*Binigulaza*, philological concerns aside, simply means a group of men who existed a long, long time ago...It is also told, without focusing on the word's meaning, that it is only applied to one group of men, that not all were *binigulaza*, only a few...In syllables, *bi-ni-gula* or *gulaza* means the wind which came up against another and dispersed; however, by joining the first two syllables and placing the stress on the final *I* —*biní*— it becomes a groove or segment, a straight line like a groove, separated and broken. But this is mere curiosity...When broken into two segments, the fragment *gulaza* —*gu-laza*— means a root or tangle (the first); and a fibre (the second); putting them together gives us the meaning “that which is flexible like fibre.”

In this case, the *binigulaza* were people born from the roots of the trees...*Gula* in Tehuantepec, or *gola* in Juchitán means ancient, and *za*, cloud: hence ancient people, who had their origin in the clouds...A thousand times we have believed that *binigulaza* means people who came up against their own, or their enemy...*Gulá*, also with stress, but uttered with the voice turned inwards, in such a manner that it imitates a lament, means

broken, dispersed, separate. Together with the particle *za*, meaning “from one another”, we have “people who are dispersed or separated one from another”. However *za* also means music, dance and revelry. Perhaps the initial separation comes after having heard the music and danced. In the past tense it is correct to say *gulazá* or *gundazá* (Henestrosa, 1987 [1929]: 23-28) [trans. J. Kelly].

*Binigundaža*, or “the men who spread the dance,” is just one of the meanings under which Andrés Henestrosa published a series of Zapotec legends and fables that recreated the mythical origin of the Zapotecs from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. In his eloquent prose, Henestrosa correctly refers to the word’s multiple meaning and its corresponding legends; to the dynamicity of the Zapotec language and the fact that simply by altering the stress, the word becomes something else; to the heterogeneity of elements which form part of the world of Zapotec life; to the overlapping of time, space, reality and fantasy; to the incomplete; to the undefined; to the fragmented; to all that invites us to reflect upon how to capture complexity. It is precisely here where I find the point from which to approach the subject which forms the basis of this study: the complexity of human sexuality in Tehuantepec.

This introductory chapter considers the elements which contribute to situate of what is here referred to as the complexity of human sexuality in Tehuantepec, one of the Isthmus communities. I begin by providing a brief account of my personal interest in becoming involved with the daily life of the local people, and how this concern relates to the academic endeavours of a doctoral thesis. I then state the research problem, or paradigmatic situation, centred on the disjunction between the representations and practices of the actors with respect to human sexuality in Tehuantepec. Following on from this, I provide a description of the setting in which the actors are situated, with this last point I seek to illustrate the diversity of meanings and sceneries that imply a problem as complex as that of describing Tehuantepec. Last, I close this chapter by setting out how this thesis is structured.

### **Focusing on Tehuantepec and the research problem**

From things that have happened and from things as they exist and from all things that you know and all those you cannot know, you make something through your invention that is not a representation but a whole new thing truer than anything true

and alive, and you make it alive, and if you make it well enough, you give it immortality. That is why you write and for no other reason that you know of. But what about all the reasons that no one knows? (Hemingway, 1958: 30-31).

As far back as I delve into my childhood memories, Tehuantepec was for me the place from where my parents emigrated to Mexico City forty years ago. It was the town they left behind them, like many others, in search of better opportunities for education and employment. This was the *terruño*<sup>1</sup> my family was to visit year after year in order to rejoin their people, to immerse themselves in the life and customs of their town, to “take part in” and “be part of” the small worlds rendered alien, partial and discontinuous by the distance.

Thus I was presented with an opportunity to get to know the customs and traditions of our people; to form part of the network of actors which, through a sense of belonging or an affective bond, shared experiences and ways of life; to participate in cultural events and demonstrations which made clear the presence of the “istmeño” inside and outside of Tehuantepec;<sup>2</sup> to promote activities that succeed in producing benefits on a local level;<sup>3</sup> and yet, even forming part of these connections, I was still only able to perceive everyday life in Tehuantepec in a partial or fragmented manner.

Together with the experience of living the Isthmus customs in the manner sketched out above, there were also the other moments I shared with my family in the local community; in which we would grow up leaving *Di'dxaꝞaa* or the Zapotec language behind us (as children), where traditional dress was no longer worn—or only worn by grandmothers in everyday life—but kept only for festivals. Time and time again, these partial visions seemed to be affirmed every time I came up against the common representation of the Tehuantepec Isthmus, often describing the

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<sup>1</sup> Gilberto Giménez uses this term to refer to small cultural micro-regions with a strong local flavour that can be defined on a municipal scale. Other concepts related to this idea are those from Hoener: “territorios próximos” [close lands], Arturo Escobar: “place” and Luis González: “matria” [mother land]. See (Escobar, 2008; Gilberto, 2006; González, 1972; Hoerner, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Such as carrying out *velas* or Isthmus festivals wherever their live, making the local to be present in the global.

<sup>3</sup> A clear example of this is the formation of philanthropic associations for activities such as promoting culture, sports and the restoration of the local patrimony.

region as a fascinating site, in some respects exotic, to contemporary Mexico:

No one who has visited the hot, wind-swept towns of Tehuantepec or Juchitán and stepped into the busy markets with their brassy tehuana and teca merchants or witnessed the lavish velas that mark community religiosity can fail to be impressed by the vitality of Isthmus Zapotec culture and the unusual mix of indigenous and European traits that distinguishes it (Zeitlin, 1990: xi).

The Zapotecs of the Isthmus<sup>4</sup> often evoke connotations of ethnic pride, political autonomy, indigenous communal life, the peasant's self-sufficiency, the spirit of struggle, economic and commercial skill, as well as being a "matriarchal" society in which homosexuality can be shown without ill feeling. It is commonly assumed that Zapotecs exercise political, economical, social and cultural control in the region, despite of being continuously disputed by various actors including other ethnic groups,<sup>5</sup> and which have been 'conserved' on account of their capacity for struggle and political resistance<sup>6</sup> (Binford, 1983, 1985, 1993; Campbell & Tappan, 1989; Reina, 1997b: 4; Rodríguez, 2003: 101-104; Tutino, 1993).

These representations only served to extend my fractured image. On the one hand, how can one not feel represented by this attractive image of ethnic and cultural pride in which the inhabitants of the Isthmus, above all those with whom we share this origin, are cloaked? And on the other, how to make sense of my own experience and what I had known

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<sup>4</sup> Four groups, differentiated in terms of culture, history and language, have been identified as derived from the Mesoamerican Zapotec people: the Zapotecs of the Central Valleys; the Zapotecs of the Northern or Sierra Juárez; the Zapotecs of the South (Coast and Southern Sierra); and the Zapotecs of the Isthmus. See (Rodríguez, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> In Mexico, this situation can be considered unusual since the majority of ethnic groups living in the country have been considered as minority redoubts, marginalized or excluded from the development and modernization process driven by various levels of government. See (Bonfil, 1999; Florescano, 2000; Villoro, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Some authors have considered the Isthmus as a disputed territory owing to the presence of continuous processes related to the politico-organizational control and/or management of the region. These are often linked with what are considered to be the advantages of its geographical features and its respective economic potential. See (Rodríguez, 2003).

until then as the Tehuantepec world, something which did not seem to fit together with this unified image of the Zapotec world.

To begin with, I let myself be impressed —as Zeitlin (1990) suggests— by assuming that the discontinuity or fragmentation was an obvious consequence of the state of exile or orphanhood from the *matria* often suffered by migrants like myself. I had also related this idea when considering my relatives in Tehuantepec as a small network that was insufficient to represent the general Zapotec way of life. In this line of thought, even a crazy idea crossed my mind: those Zapotec representations must make reference to the past, or even to Zapotec ‘authenticity’, but not so much to the present times.

I began to investigate the local practices and the repertoires of the Tehuantepec Isthmus, and upon doing so I was able to perceive a certain lack of sense in these assumptions. Firstly, I realised that what I had initially assumed to be far removed from the Zapotec way of life, the experiences of my parents and other family members, gradually began to acquire a stronger bond and greater weight, something confirmed when each of the cases I approached in the fieldwork resulted, in the same way, partial pictures.

The Zapotec would occasionally be evoked in order to affirm changes in time, or on other occasions to affirm its continuity, or establish differences; it was even used to brandish social or political demands which accompanied the reassertion of cultural particularity. It was then that I was able to perceive that, according to the situation with which I was presented, the representation of the Isthmus societies assumed many different forms. I was then able to recognize that the echo of many of these voices had solidified in certain texts, texts in which a strong tendency to reproduce superficial romantic and idealist images of the Isthmus reality has been observed, especially with respect to its women.

What we would like to propose here is that the majority of the descriptions of observers not native to the Isthmus made up to the present date with respect to Zapotec women (be they from anthropologists, travellers, painters, journalists or feminist intellectuals), have reproduced an essentialist and exoticizing discourse (Campbell & Green, 1999: 2).

It is precisely the debate on the supposed existence of an Isthmus matriarchy that I shall use as my point of departure in order to illustrate what to the present day I have managed to identify as a discontinuity or partiality. In other words: the presence of paradigmatic situations or stereotypes and the existence of other realities in the everyday life of

Tehuantepec which often remain in the background, or have not been incorporated. Here it should be noted that a rich and copious body of work has been developed on the Isthmus region and its women, a body of work to which I can turn in locating some possible connections in this entanglement.

This exercise does not set out to make an attempt to capture a totality; rather it seeks to avoid the reductive manner in which fragments of this totality have been apprehended, thus simplifying its complexity. That is to say, it aims to avoid reducing everyday life in Tehuantepec to a series of determinisms, be they cultural, economical, technological, social or even natural, which regularly omit, or relegate to the background, all of that which interfere with overviews, or what seems to be *par excellence* a unity or dominant.

Among other topics,<sup>7</sup> this is the case with respect to matriarchy in the world of the Zapotec Isthmus, something often linked to various issues related to sexuality in which debates over their true validity or inaccuracy tend to eclipse the identification of settings, actors, problematic situations and agencies which arise in everyday life. In this context it would seem pertinent to deconstruct or to make complex the intersections between this matriarchy and human sexuality in Tehuantepec, the topic to which I shall devote myself in the second chapter of this thesis.

Thus, instead of attempting to corroborate or demystify the existence of common statements or currently performed patterns of realities related to matriarchy, it seems more fruitful to delve into the processes of how these pictures are produced instead of only describing what they are. This is the reason why I started to inquire into sexuality. I did so by following the next general question: How is human sexuality enacted in Tehuantepec? As sub-questions I considered the following: How are those enacted practices assembled? How is the ontology of these associations? How is the order they produce? How is the agency of these associations?

These lines of inquiry, or axes, provided me with guidelines which allowed me approach a pragmatic sociology or Actor Network Theory which helped me with the exploration of the complex; where the heterogeneous, the multiple, the dynamic and also the tension between the general and the particular contributes to this complexity (Mol & Law, 2002). It also led me to observe the existence of regularities in a different manner; as an indispensable tool for being able to trace connections

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<sup>7</sup> Such as Zapotec culture, Isthmus development and Zapotec resistance.

which succeed in making evident the irregular that is commonly passed over.

In this respect, my research sought to transcend the apparent homogeneity embodied by a common habitat, regularities and universalisms. The argument is centred on the importance of demystifying the ‘distinctive’ or the ‘characteristic’ which often subsumes the human sexuality of Isthmus communities such as Tehuantepec, functioning as a sort of container for exotic and singular practices. This is the motivation that lies behind the five research themes considered in this thesis: beauty, gendered spatiality, sexual life, motherhood and intimate violence. Each of these themes contrasts the actor’s local practices with a series of statements associated to Isthmus matriarchy, regional development and cultural determinism.

The work begins by building on the concept of complexity as the product of the dynamic, heterogeneous and multiple associations which make up ‘the social’. That is to say, as a consequence of the enactment and re-enactment of a set of practices which assembles complex networks (Latour, 2005; Law, 1992), because of which the Different confronts the Given and evokes, on its own accord, the production of new and different situations (Albertsen & Diken, 2000: 14).

Finally, I shall leave the reader to guess “all the reasons that no one knows”, evoked by Hemmingway above, about why and how I decided to carry out this study in Tehuantepec and not in any of the other Zapotec communities of the Isthmus. However, I should like to make clear certain elements of my own fragmentation or identification, that is to say, as a woman, as a Zapotec, as a Vallista, as a Blaseña, as a mestizo, as an immigrant, and as a Tehuana. Moreover, I must also point out that to break away from the construction of generalities and stereotypes has not been an easy task, something which will become clear in the following section of the chapter.

### **Some difficulties in the field: gaining access to common places**

My arrival at Tehuantepec to carry out a study on the Zapotec region and its present day culture was not alien for those who live there. From the start I must confess that I was fortunate enough that my presence was well received by the locals who showed to be friendly and open to discussing matters related to their customs and traditions alongside their personal experiences. In this respect I was fortunate that my stay in the field always benefited from the support, solidarity and availability of those with whom I had contact.

The initial dynamic of my fieldwork, however, was influenced by these agglutinative visions of Zapotec, or the *Tehuano* world, which stood in the way from the daily practices of the actors. Accordingly, my first impressions on everyday events in Tehuantepec were generally not free from the stereotypical images and representations which, due to their recurrent character, have become part of the common culture of the Isthmus. One such example is the description I made of the *convite de flores*, one of the first events to which I was expressly invited as part of my initiation into the customs of the people; the local representations which shows how peoples' lifeworlds are still alive at present (see inset).

*The Convite de Flores*

Fireworks announce the *Convite de Flores*: a procession where locals parade through the streets of Tehuantepec, and one of the seven days' festivities held in honour of the *Santo Patrono* in each *barrio*.<sup>8</sup>

First there are the labour carts, pulled by a couple of bullocks and decorated with flowers and banana leaves. However, instead of the usual farming goods they carry every day, the carts carry young people and whole families, including the oldest members who still enjoy participating in this parade. Horses are ridden by men of any age, wearing hats: *charro* 24,<sup>9</sup> some with *charro* suits, and others in white shirts and black trousers.

Women of all ages walk behind the carts, wearing a variety of regional dresses. Most poor women wear everyday dresses: humble but clean, with long and wide skirts and square shaped blouses called *huipiles*, complemented by false gold jewellery. The better off women wear sophisticated long and wide dresses, full of colour and decorated with hand-stitched embroidery, complemented by ostentatious, oversized, gold jewellery usually worn on special occasions such as this. All the participants, be they rich or poor, wear vivid and colourful outfits, mainly decorated with stamped, machine or hand embroidered flowers. Hairstyles usually include large plats with colourful wide ribbons and natural or plastic flowers.

<sup>8</sup> In Tehuantepec, like the majority of the communities of the Isthmus, a *barrio* or a *colonia* is far more than a place of residence or an administrative unit. It gives to its inhabitants a sense of belonging, an identity, a historical consciousness that will leave its mark all their lives and will also define their final resting place after they die: the cemetery of their *barrio*.

<sup>9</sup> A type of hat introduced by Juana C. Romero (Doña Cata) at the beginning of the twentieth century, to top the male suit. The garment is pointed and originally was made of beaver skin with silver threads which at that time cost 24 silver pesos (Chassen-López, 2006; Hernández-Díaz, 2006).



The traditional music band of around ten members usually follows the groups at a distance; they play regional songs called *sones* to cheer up the festivities. The hosts, *Los Mayordomos* or *la Sociedad* (The Society),<sup>10</sup> are also an important part of the parade: they are responsible for offering food and drinks to participants when the procession finishes. As soon as the participants arrive at the end of the parade, everyone receives their thanks and provisions. If there is more than enough food, this one is normally distributed among the audience.

The *Xuanas* (men) and *Xelaxuanas* (women), who are the ancestral Zapotec authorities of each *barrio*,<sup>11</sup> parade near the *mayordomos*. Most of their roles have already been passed over to the municipal authorities; however, they have retained an important function related to the religious festivities of the Catholic Church. The *Xuanas* and *Xelaxuanas* form a large group since new ones are elected every year, and the post is held for life. During the parade the *Xuanas* walk carrying votive candles, previously blessed with incense at the neighbourhood church in a ceremony which precedes the parade whilst the *Xelaxuanas* accompany them in another group.

The parade starts at the *barrio* church where dancing groups dressed in ancient clothes perform episodes of former local activities such as fishing: the performers pretend to catch fish by casting their nets among the spectators. This performance is particularly enjoyed by children who run constantly as they repeatedly try to be caught by the nets. Dances represent nature, legends, rites and myths; all of them are performed with mastery by children and adolescents, directly in front of the crowd that gathers at the atrium of the church to watch the dances.

The *convite de flores* event can be frequently observed in Tehuantepec, since, according to tradition, it often marked the start of each festival of the

<sup>10</sup> *Mayordomos*, are usually a couple who wish to take charge of the annual festival of their *barrio*. Recently more women than men have decided to take the commitment, although they are usually accompanied by a male member of their family (father, brother, son) during the celebrations. *La Sociedad* is made up of a group of citizens by the residents of a *barrio* in order to represent them in local decisions as well as obtaining funds at the annual festival. They organize dances and ceremonies, the benefits of which are destined for social work in the *barrio*.

<sup>11</sup> Today, the tasks of these representatives are related to the care and maintenance of the church. Their functions have changed throughout history as this is one of the few posts which have survived from the old Zapotec organization. Previously a *Xuana* was a notable figure who provided amongst other things, the necessary faculties to carry out ritual sacrifices at the ceremonial centers. Today, they carry out other functions such as providing moral advice, previously carried by the *Chagola* (the Preacher), or the care of the temples, previously carried out by the *Gopa yudu*. See (Cajigas, Alberto 1961b; Chicatti, D., 2006a; Mecott, 2005).

eighteen traditional *barrios*. At least once a month, it is possible to observe scenes which I referred in my representation of the *convite de flores* to and which certainly are enjoyed by both insiders and outsiders. This representation later allowed me to reflect on how it is possible to fall into the common or stereotypical places related to generalizable ways of life in Tehuantepec.

All this was confirmed after witnessing how, like the *convite de flores*, there are other local manifestations in which the Zapotec way of life is often represented or evoked for different purposes, such as school events, celebrations, programmes promoted by the cultural centre, and academic symposiums.

As I was sharing the everyday experiences of some of the local actors, it became possible to realize how some of these images are produced. It was then that other actors and other realities appeared to me, making it clear that despite the fact that the *convite de flores* is probably one of the most popular representations of the life of the Isthmus people, it portrays a vanishing era in which the inhabitants of the region used to obtain most of their basic provisions from the natural environment of a region endowed with rich natural resources and a favourable climate. In a way, the celebration is a remembrance of a way of life which is generally evoked by local people as their legacy from the past, but today is quite different.

At this point, I also realized that behind the scenes of a festivity such as *convite de flores* a series of monetary and non-monetary exchanges takes place in order to make it possible. The horses, the adorned carriages, the women's dresses and jewellery are often lent or rented. This substantially modifies one's perception of the celebration since those wearing jewels might not be as rich and those dressing humble might not be as poor as they seem. However beyond the suppositions that can be deduced from this, attention is drawn to the transformations which have modified what could previously be identified with the everyday, since for many members of the community, these objects have ceased to form part of their daily life and they must now turn to those who own them, Zapotecs or not, in order to participate in this representation.

This led me to agree with Law's metaphor of the *hinterlands*, making reference to the existence of undefined, and necessary realities, hidden as "Otherness", depending on one's perspective. In other words, these possible, probable and improbable inscriptions, materialities and acts which could be taking place (Law, 2004b: 14,27), especially if we consider that what is manifested makes up just one part of history, and

the fact that such Otherness is apparently invisible, does not mean it does not refer to realities that are carried out in practice.

With this new perspective, I decided to immerse myself in the everyday practices and experiences of the actors in order to take up my exploration of how human sexuality is enacted in Tehuantepec. One of the factors which contributed to this decision was my consideration of the Actor Oriented Approach, following the actors and thus locating the various interfaces that are present in social interaction. That is to say, how individuals or social groups mediate and transform those processes or factors which, directly or indirectly, affect or seek to transform them (Long, 2001: 26; Olivier de Sardan, 2005: 12-13). I found this proposal attractive on account of the dynamic character that it affords the actors with respect to their own processes of change, interests, repertoires, livelihoods and lifeworlds which interfere with others in a multiple and discontinuous manner.

In this manner, regular visits and family networks allowed me to continue opening doors and taking part in everyday activities such as accompanying actors to their daily work in the field, participating in the market, visiting shopping centres, contributing to the preparation of meals, participating in ‘uses and customs’,<sup>12</sup> helping with the care of animals, taking part in various events, attending secular activities, exchanging music, opening the door and chatting to all those who either visited me or visited my parents, my daughter or my husband who at times joined me during the fieldwork. Each of these situations allowed me to make this work possible.

Before discussing such material, however, it is necessary to summarize to the reader some of the changes that have taken place in the region and that were pointed out to me by the actors, and those which I was unable to perceive at first sight, and which were far removed from the romantic scenes associated with the *convite de flores*. I do so with the aim of setting Tehuantepec escenarities in which the cases I shall subsequently refer to in the course of this work are to be situated.

### **Tehuantepec: a set of multiple impressions**

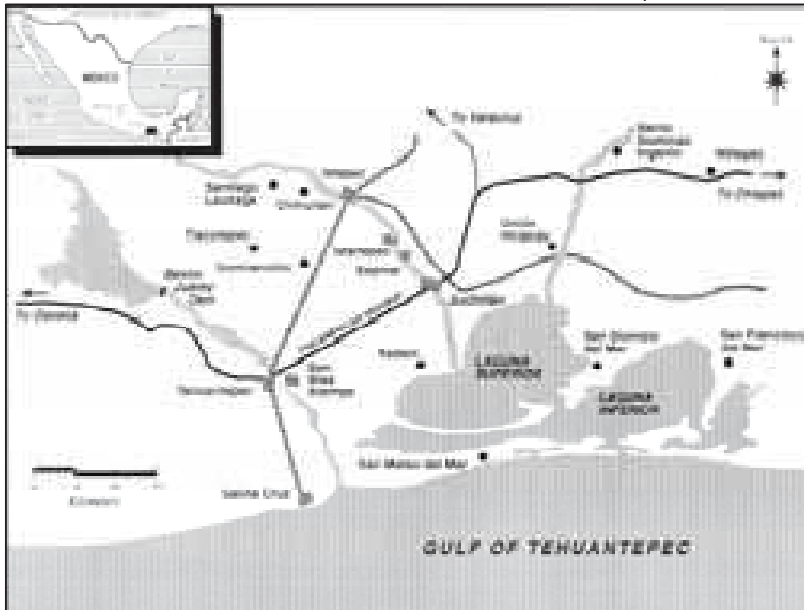
In politico-administrative terms, Tehuantepec is commonly referred to as a city, as a municipality and as a region located in the south west of the Mexican state of Oaxaca. Linguistically, the word Tehuantepec is of

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<sup>12</sup> The notion of ‘uses and customs’ or customary law/rights is used broadly to describe indigenous governance systems.

Nahuatl origin<sup>13</sup> and is often translated as “wild beast’s hill” or “tiger’s hill”, depending on the source consulted.<sup>14</sup> The word also gives name to one of the rivers, the isthmus, the gulf, and to the railway system on the country’s thinnest strip between the Pacific and Atlantic Ocean. However there are also those who use the name *Guisji*,<sup>15</sup> a Zapotec word whose meaning is translated as “reverberating heat or fire” (Reina, 1997b: 5). The official name, however, is Santo Domingo de Tehuantepec, given by Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, in honour of the Dominican congregation seated there (Arellano, 1998; H. Ayuntamiento de Santo Domingo Tehuantepec, 2009).

The Southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec



Source: (Campbell *et al.*, 1993: 5).

<sup>13</sup> The word Tehuantepec comes from two Nahuatl words: *Tecuani*, meaning wild beast, and *Tepetl*, meaning hill; thus Tehuantepec means literally, wild beast hill (Instituto Nacional para el Federalismo y el Desarrollo Municipal, 2005: 1; Ortega, 2006: 5).

<sup>14</sup> For example, the historian Eliana Acosta makes reference to the Nahuatl word *zapotecatl*, translated as “people of zapote”, in addition to summarizing how it was used by the Mexicans, thus reclaiming it from the Spanish. See (Acosta, 2007: 6).

<sup>15</sup> It is also known by two Zapotec words *guixi* and *sidi*, that is: the salt town, on account of the sea salt deposits near (Chicatti, D., 2006b: 22).

According to official figures, the municipality has a surface of 965.8 km<sup>2</sup> (372.9 sq. miles). Its urban population is 39,529 inhabitants, with some 57,163 throughout the municipality; 27,724 are men and 29,439 are women (INEGI, 2007). Tehuantepec has fifteen traditional *barrios* and 75 communities are under its administrative jurisdiction (H. Ayuntamiento de Santo Domingo Tehuantepec, 2007). The town, as the inhabitants refer to what is administratively constituted by the municipal capital, is located on one of the banks of the *gu'gu roo Guisú*, or the Tehuantepec River, as it is known in Zapotec or Spanish, respectively. The settlement is located 100 m above sea level in an extremely warm zone with little oscillation in temperature throughout the course of the year; between 30 to 37 degrees in the hottest months and between 18 to 20 degrees during the coldest (Chávez & Ramírez, 2000: 2).

Tehuantepec stands out as one of the most representative communities of the region and the Zapotec culture, this being the first settlement founded by the pre-Hispanic people (Chicatti, D., 2006b; Sepúlveda, 2006). However, for others, this foundational exclusivity is contrasted with the idea that Tehuantepec was always an administrative centre, both before and after the Spanish conquest, and not the place in which the “authentic Zapotec people” was established, something which is claimed by the neighbouring inhabitants of Juchitán de San Blas Atempa (Tutino, 1993: 50-53). Tehuantepec can also be considered one of the most traditionalists, proud and individualist of Zapotec towns. Its inhabitants are also associated with the local nickname “*Tebuano traidor*” [Tehuano traitor], since in the post-revolutionary period, one of the captains of the armed forces in Tehuantepec refused to attack the French forces as they fled from the Mexican capital towards the South (Binford & Campbell, 1993: 19; Coronado, 2004: 459-477; Mecott, 2005).

The productive and economical activities are those of the indigenous-peasant form and way of life (Tutino, 1993: 52); that is to say, a subsistence mode of production and the sale of surplus products. This form takes on its distinctive features when we consider that the Tehuanos benefitted from an area that was rich in natural resources and with considerable economic potential; likewise for the existence of a clear gender-based division of labour in which the male produced and the female traded.

The agriculture of the Isthmus is linked to the hydrological potential of the Tehuantepec River, and specifically its system of irrigation

channels. Generally, cattle, sheep and pig based livestock activities are considered complementary to agricultural and domestic activities. Craftsmanship is also considered an important economic activity, especially in terms of pottery and the manufacture of Tehuana clothing.

The region's importance in terms of communications and infrastructure routes should also be mentioned; such as the *Ferrocarril Transístmico* system; the Panamerican Highway and its adjacent networks. The region is also home to one of the country's three petrol refineries, as well as port infrastructure providing capacity for the largest fishing fleet on the South Pacific Coast. All this has doubtlessly served to differentiate the life of those who inhabit the region.

From this perspective, a first approach to Tehuantepec and the Isthmus region can be made, one which opens the way to intuiting the existence of complex processes of change in the Isthmus societies. This is suggested almost immediately upon superimposing the images representative of an idyllic past, such as those evoked in my representation of the *convite de flores*, and those of the Tehuantepec of contemporary times.

I would now like to make reference to what I call "other partial contexts of change". Here I use the word contexts since these take some of the general referents of the region, fed by the experiences obtained during my stay in the field; moreover, they are partial in the sense that this gaze on the local reflects only some of the fragments of the larger totality of changes that have taken place in Tehuantepec and in the Isthmus, many of which escape my detection. Therefore, this journey first attempts to provide an initial idea of the forms in which a regional rural-urban scenario has been produced, and how some of these changes have been experienced by the population.

### **Living in Tehuantepec, the overlapping of yesterday and today**

#### *Once upon a time*

For many local residents, Tehuantepec has not stopped being marked as a privileged place. Not only on account of having been the centre selected by the ancient Zapotecs on which to found a new town, but also for its geographical situation, its commercial and productive activities, for the modernizing pole of the region, and certainly for being the cradle of Zapotec culture. Amongst local historians, the myth states that the

Isthmus region was born following the battle of 1496,<sup>16</sup> when the Zapotec-Mixtec alliance defeated the Aztec army at Cerro de *Giengola* (Giengola Hill).<sup>17</sup>

Various narratives based on archaeological evidence and written or oral histories often commemorate these acts in different local spaces, such as activities for school children, political actions, popular representations, commemorative celebrations and radio programmes. After attending a number of these events, in addition to consulting written and oral references, I was able to identify that points of divergence still exist when it comes to locating the origin of this battle although the various authors agree on the following events.

The Zapotecs and Mixtecs formed an alliance in order to confront the forces of the Aztec king Ahuitzotl, in the knowledge that he would react with force to the previous offence of assaulting a tax committee. The Zapotec king Cosijoeza and the Mixtec king Dzahuindanda had the intention of fighting until the end but after seven months of battle, at the top of the Guiengula hill, the Aztec king Ahuitzotl proposed a pact between the two armies which ended the war. The princess Coyolicatzin, one of Ahuitzotl's daughters, became engaged to the King Cosijoeza as part of the peace alliance.<sup>18</sup> Cosijoeza accepted the pact, kept the land, funded Tehuantepec, and was also awarded more favourable conditions for the payment of taxes. The Zapotec king rewarded the Mixtec people, who wanted to remain in the region, with the land known today as the Mixtequilla (Chicatti, D., 2006b: 17-20). Both settled down and extended the Zapotec empire which subsequently came to be occupied by the Spaniards (Miano, 2002: 31).

Zapotecs and Mixtecs are not the only ethnic groups which have inhabited the region. Huaves, Zoques, Mixes and Chontales form part of the local ethnic mix. To this it should be added that during the Colonial

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<sup>16</sup> Some historians believe Huaves and Zoques were already in the region before the establishment of the Zapotec people, and they were conquered by the Zapotecs (Tutino, 1993: 43).

<sup>17</sup> The top of the Giengola hill was chosen for the battle by the Zapotec and Mixtec armies for strategic reasons, since it provided an excellent viewpoint and it was surrounded by hostile terrain. Men and women well supplied with water, food, rocks and poisoned arrows lay in wait for the Aztec army (Chicatti, D., 2006b: 18; Sepúlveda, 2006: 6-11).

<sup>18</sup> According to the legend, a magician made it possible for Cosijoeza to meet the princess before the agreement, and on account of her beauty, the king fell in love with her immediately (Chicatti, D., 2006b: 19-20).

period immigrant groups were subsequently incorporated into the region. These came from Turkey, Lebanon, Africa, France, Spain and include mestizos; more recently, those referred to as Vallistos have also been incorporated.<sup>19</sup> Today, all these groups give form to a diverse and heterogeneous socio-cultural space as a particular form of human appropriation which constitutes their own territory.

It should also be mentioned that even if certain groups found themselves largely identified with specific towns or territorial spaces, as is the case with the Huaves, who are located in the lower lakes of the region, the majority of these are difficult to distinguish, especially when many have adopted elements of Zapotec and/or contemporary culture, such as clothing and language (Acosta, 2007). This is one of the reasons why the Zapotecs are considered as the cohesive and dominant group in the region (Mendieta y Nuñez, 1949; Reina, 1997b).

From personal experience, the ethnic difference is one of the elements of differentiation also present amongst the Zapotecs in the Isthmus. It is not the same to be a Zapotec from Juchitán as to be one from Tehuantepec.<sup>20</sup> This social distinction goes further if one includes political, economic or cultural status, and if one also adds factors such as age, neighbourhood, kinship, co-parenthood and religious differences. This multicentricity has itself evolved into a complex society where every space has a dynamic social differentiation, in which both old and new elements constantly influence human relationships. This heterogeneity is extended upon linking the previously mentioned human elements to other non human ones that result equally as complex. This is the case with respect to the material, the natural, the technological and their effects on local everyday life.

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<sup>19</sup> *Vallistos* are migrants that came from the high region of Oaxaca known as the Valles Centrales. Although they are not often identified with a specific ethnic group, some of these referred to it as their ethnic descent.

<sup>20</sup> This differentiation applies to each Zapotec town on the Isthmus. To mention some of these: the *Blaseños* come from San Blas Atempa an old *barrio* of Tehuantepec which obtained its own administrative autonomy as a municipality within the same town; the *Juchitecos* who come from Juchitán; and the *Ixtaltepecanos* who come from Ixtepepec. All of these are associated with their own nickname and associations. See (Coronado, 2004).



*Impressions of living in the Isthmus*

Visitors as well as local inhabitants associate the locality with extremely hot temperatures. “*Ay nana,*<sup>21</sup> *puro calor hace aquí*” (it is so hot here) are the most common words among Tehuanos. People usually start their activities at dawn, trying to avoid the highest temperatures of the day (Covarrubias, 1986 [1946]). This is one of the reasons why men are often associated with resting in the house following a hard day at work in the fields or at sea, whilst the women walk around the town or the market offering their products for sale (Taz, 1988).

For many of those who work in the field, the day normally starts at four o'clock in the morning, for the remainder, the start varies in line with their activities, the distance to be covered, the mode of transport used and the established times, alongside many other factors. It can be said that owing to the range of activities, the local rhythm has become increasingly quickened, similar to that of large cities.

According to the testimonies and references obtained, the climate has been worsening. Two decades ago, weather conditions were quite different: the region had a tropical, humid climate and a temperature of around 26 degrees for most of the year, although this fell slightly in the winter (Newbold, 1975: 19). Sunrise used to be accompanied by a fresh mist which provided enough water for farming.<sup>22</sup> People used to take a shower, water their yards, and rest under the shadow of a tree in order to lessen the highest temperatures of the day. Strong rainfalls were expected during the summer.<sup>23</sup> As time has passed, rain has become less frequent and plentiful: in 1975 there were 880 mm of rain on average and today there are around 250 to 280 mm (Chávez & Ramírez, 2000: 2; Newbold, 1975: 19; Pérez-García, 2001: 23). Alongside these changes in weather patterns, the landscape, once characterized as rural, has also been transforming.

Household space has changed in line with population growth. Nowadays the backyards, in which people used to carry out a variety of household activities, have disappeared with new houses being built in their place. Buildings and streets have devoured yards and trees. The new stacked urban space has even made fresh air a scarcity with the result that

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<sup>21</sup> *Nana*, a Zapotec word which means mother, but which is commonly used to infer closeness to one's interlocutor.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Valeriano, January 31<sup>st</sup> 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Rain falls mostly during the summer, from May until October, being July, August and September the months with highest rainfall.

houses have become more suffocating. The style of urban development derived from the population growth has also affected settlements established around agricultural land,<sup>24</sup> and others whose inhabitants still work the land.<sup>25</sup>

In any of agricultural places, it is still common to hear cocks and birds singing at sunrise. This is followed by the sounds of dogs, pigs, cows, and bullocks, the last of which were commonly used to pull carts and to till the land for agricultural purposes. Today, throughout the growing season,<sup>26</sup> it is also common to hear the sound of tractors warming up their engines in order to travel to the agricultural sites of the community to plough the land.

In the town and its surroundings, there are other sounds. From early in the day, and in certain places throughout the whole of the night, the noise of motorbikes, cars and transportation and passenger trucks have become part of the environment. As the town returns to life, the sound of radios, announcements through loudspeakers, the bustle of the inhabitants on their way to work or going about their household chores can be heard, as well as the murmur of voices which begins at the market and continues until almost midnight.

Multiple landscapes exist within the municipality and its surroundings. On occasions it is possible to come across spaces associated with the rural: with trees, more space between the dwellings and smells related to the countryside and keeping animals in the backyard. On others, one can find oneself in urban concentrations, with a huge variety of sounds, traffic, smoke and insalubrious odours. Although only few, there still exist areas in which human intervention is limited, either due to the difficulty of accessing them, or because of lack of infrastructure. In this way, depending on the locality, the sounds, smells and landscapes often take on their own shades.

#### The *gui'gu roo Guiz'ji* (Tehuantepec River)

One of the most obvious changes and one to which the population seems to be most sensitive is related to the river. Its Zapotec name used to

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<sup>24</sup> Such as *colonia El Jordan*.

<sup>25</sup> Such as San Blas Atempa.

<sup>26</sup> Land starts being ploughed and sown during April and May, just before the rain fall season. It continues until October and November, when maize is harvested. Peasants who have irrigated land also cultivate the land during autumn and winter.

describe it well: *Gni'gu ro Guizzi* or the vast Tehuantepec River, which has today been reduced to a small stream on whose ancient banks a flat space has been improvised which can be used as a football pitch or an amphitheatre for cultural events.<sup>27</sup>

For centuries, the river shaped the daily life of the people who used its water to feed livestock, irrigate small plots of land, for domestic purposes, or to catch fish for their own consumption. People recall the times when the river was crossed by a *panga* (barge); when men and women used to bathe naked in the water; when women used to wash their clothes half naked while their children swam like fish during hours; when water distributors used to fill the leather hide containers carried by donkeys.

Most old people still remember when in their free time they used to jump into the water from the bridge and spend hours swimming. All these activities have been recounted on numerous occasions and are present in the collective memory of the population who has developed stories, songs, poems, myths and rites from their relationship with the river.

They also remember when its size increased, overflowing and flooding Tehuantepec, leaving death and desolation in its wake.<sup>28</sup> On two occasions, the floods were so intense that the river destroyed the two bridges connecting the east and west of Tehuantepec, and the north and south of America. Today things have changed: the river's water is 'stored' in a dam<sup>29</sup> and the rainfall has diminished significantly. Now, only a tiny stream flows through the same basin towards the sea.

In this region, water is the most important agricultural resource; it was one of the main justifications for the building of the Benito Juarez Dam. However, contrary to claims made at the time, the irrigation of land

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<sup>27</sup> The event called *Guendaliza'a*, promoted by the cultural centre, takes place here. One of its objectives is to bring the ethnic people of the Isthmus closer. See (Hernández, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Heavy rainfalls produced regular floods, the most important of which occurred in 1599, 1886, 1896, 1925, 1939 and the last in 1944. See (Chicatti, D., 2006b: 33-36).

<sup>29</sup> At the beginning of the sixties, the water from the Tehuantepec River was stored in the Benito Juarez Dam and the No. 19 irrigation system (DR19). The district never completed the planned irrigation scheme and today 40 per cent of the land is idle due to salty soil and 15 per cent of it is swamped because of high levels of groundwater. In addition to this, the drains that run towards the Upper Lake carry a wide range of agrochemical products such as urea, nitrates and pesticides (Rodríguez, 2003; Warman, 1972, 1993).

has become increasingly difficult owing to the drastic reduction of rainfall in the region that is required to feed the dam, as well as the deterioration of the irrigation canals which implies water leakages and other problems. In 2006 the dry season continued longer than expected and the water authorities, acted unilaterally and without considering the farmers' needs, in a decision to store the entire reservoir and ration it for mainly human consumption. Somehow, with time the Benito Juarez dam has become increasingly useless, with drastic consequences for agriculture in the region.

Leaving irrigation channels without water also implies leaving the population that lives nearby without water. Some have access to piped water once or twice a week but this access is insufficient to cover most of their daily and basic needs such as feeding animals, taking a shower, or washing clothes. Previously, these needs used to be provided for by water from the irrigation channels. So important used to be the channels that some settlements have been identified popularly as *El Siete*, *El Ocho*, *El Once*, *El Trece*, etcetera;<sup>30</sup> which is the number of the nearest irrigation canal to the settlement.

The 'technical' decision to stop water access through the closure of the irrigation channels did not only affect agriculture, it also had a drastic effect on the economy and social life which prevails throughout the irrigation system. Some small businesses that take advantage of this system, such as car washes, improvised swimming pools and small restaurants were forced to close down since the canals were left without water temporarily.

The void left by the disappearance of the river has been filled by massive deposits of rubbish, waste and polluted water, a vivid occurrence today, where everything which cannot be incinerated in the open air remains piled up in large heaps until storms carried inland by hurricanes manage to remove the waste material, carrying it out towards the sea. The problem of pollution is of such importance that it deserves to be discussed individually in the following section.

#### *Pollution: an unsustainable issue*

A clean town until the 1950s, even though the majority of the population at that time did not have urban services such as piped water and drainage. The town looked clean and the majority of rubbish was organic or biodegradable. People used banana and corn leaves as well as paper for

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<sup>30</sup> The Seven, The Eight, The Eleven, The Thirteen.

wrapping goods. Households used to dispose of the rubbish in their own backyards. Glass or metal bottles were sold or kept by the households in order to be reused.

Today in Tehuantepec rubbish is everywhere: the river, the streets, the orchards, the plots of land, the canals, the central park, in front of the market. One can see it and smell it wherever one goes, even the trees and the cacti display a collection of plastic bags trapped in their branches and spines, fighting for space with leaves and flowers. During the day, one can see huge columns of smoke pouring from the rubbish on the river bank or the municipality's improvised rubbish dumps, and at night the bright flames become visible from far away decorating the landscape in a tragic way.

People are certainly unhappy about this situation. They recall times when the landscape, the river, the beaches and the mountains were pleasant and beautiful. People demand that local authorities solve the rubbish problem, since it could easily be solved by finding a place to deposit and burn it. Furthermore, some demand that the dam is opened from time to time in order to clean the river and, as was done in the past, allow it to carry some of the rubbish out to sea. However, the rubbish problem is far more complicated today than in the past: today most of the rubbish is made from plastic and other non-biodegradable materials and populations and authorities have still not found a way to deal with these new materials in a proper manner; the problem remains, increasing all the time.

The problem of rubbish is so pronounced in Tehuantepec, that it has become an Achilles heel for the municipality who is unable to deal with so much rubbish which causes problems for the regular collection service and the payment of the salaries of the municipality's cleaning workers. Both situations often lead to the blockage of bridges crossing the river, and the Panamerican Highway, which normally have considerable vehicular toll.

### *Sacred places*

The hills and the mountains which have been sources of mythical inspiration on account of being considered sacred places, strategic points and references for identity have also changed with time. For the people of the Isthmus the mountains and hillsides which characterize the landscape are full of meaning. Once upon a time, the hills were places of Gods, places which inspired legends and sustained traditions such as the *Huave* wizard who was called in order to pacify the tigers that lived on top of *El*

*Cerro del Tigre* (The Tiger Hill) and used to kill the livestock. When the wizard arrived at Tehuantepec, he had a giant turtle as his companion who helped him convert the tigers into rocks which are today visible from far away (Chicatti, D., 2006b: 25-26).

*El monte* (hills and land covered with natural vegetation) also provided refuge to a diverse range of animals such as tigers, wild boar, deer, armadillos, rabbits, iguanas and *tejones* (*badgers*), as well as birds such as pigeons, buzzards and *chachalacas*. Nostalgic grandfathers with certain remorse claim to have hunted all these animals to feed their families on special occasions.

Today the urbanized hills, as well as the majority of the towns, are overcrowded with dull, cement-grey coloured houses interconnected by an anarchic cobweb of electrical cables. Drainage and water pipes run everywhere at surface level, resembling scars on the urban face of these parts of Tehuantepec. Rubbish piles up on the pathways until a heavy rain pushes them down hill. *El Cerro del Tigre*, one of the ancient sanctuaries which still has a catholic chapel on top, has been taken over by the urban expansion of the city. Other hills, further away from town, have been less fortunate: they have disappeared little by little due to mining activities carried out in order to extract the building materials required for the growing building industry. Even the archaeological site, The Giengola Hill, the most important in relation to the history, mythology and rites of the Isthmus is now subject to *ilegal pero permitida* (illegal but permitted) mining for building materials.

The increased population growth has devoured spaces where nature and its related forces once reined and even land dedicated to farming has been given up to this growth.

### *The agricultural region*

In the old times, the Oaxaca Isthmus was one of the most productive regions of Mexico, with ups and downs until the nineteenth century (Tutino, 1993: 41-61). Agricultural production was one of the key bases of trade: almost 85 to 90 percent of households obtained part of their income from agriculture until around 1975 (Newbold, 1975: 39).

From independence at the start of the nineteenth century, through to the present day, government policies have brought ups and downs to the Isthmus agricultural economy. They have tried to turn the Isthmus into an agricultural growth pole through diverse policies of intervention which have also resulted in new conflicts and alteration in Isthmus life (Tutino, 1993: 41-61).

Today agricultural work on the Oaxaca Isthmus is labour intensive, yet according to official data, it employs 33 percent of the labour force in the region, 10 percent more than the national level (INEGI, 2001, 2007). Nevertheless, according to my observations, this percentage is higher if one considers children and women who also work as agricultural labourers and are not considered in formal statistics.

On the Isthmus, agricultural labour is mostly native. *Blaseños*, *Juchitecos* and *Vallistos* have gained fame as farmers, whilst the *Tebuanos*, many of whom are owners of the land, have not been characterized as such. The agricultural income level in the region is quite low: 48.3 percent of the agricultural labour force receives less than twice the minimum wage salaries,<sup>31</sup> in 2000, 20.7 percent received less than the minimum wage, and 21.3 percent received no salary at all (Saavedra, 2003: 12). According to these figures, it seems difficult to survive just on agricultural production, in spite of the fact that this activity still manages to provide food to the vast majority of the population.

The majority of local experiences point out old and new problems related to agriculture, one of which is the dismantling of government support for the countryside such as: (i) the disappearance of government programmes and institutions that supported agricultural activities; (ii) the deterioration of agricultural infrastructure; (iii) the enforcement of international regulations and agreements which have left the agricultural sector unprotected; and (iv) the disappearance of support policies such as technical and financial services. This means that today, peasants are forced to seek their own solutions to all of these problems (Niño & Regalado, 2000).

Due to the economic, social and production crises, land tenure has become more polarized<sup>32</sup> and new related social problems such as national and international migration have emerged, casting doubt over the future. At present, wheat, sorghum and corn are the main crops that guarantee a financial income in the region. Corn, beans, pumpkins, chilli peppers, cucumbers and melons are also cultivated but are usually consumed at local level. Fruit plantations, are often left without being harvested, the

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<sup>31</sup> A minimum wage salary in Mexico in 2009 was about 8 US\$/day.

<sup>32</sup> Land and property problems are still an important part of the Isthmus way life, especially due to diverse reforms which promoted the benefits of private ownership. Today, 80 percent of the land is social (communal or ejidal), and just 20 percent is private. See (Binford, 1993; Rodríguez, 2003; Warman, 1993).

majority of the producers explained to me that aside from lemons, this is no longer often a profitable activity.<sup>33</sup>

#### *Busy markets and merchants*

Trade in local markets seems to have lost its charm; today traders must face fierce competition from new supermarkets, established on the outskirts of big towns such as Salina Cruz and Juchitán. In Tehuantepec, many *barrio* markets are quite empty for most of the day. Only the central market retains some of its previous splendour at any time and day of the year. However, even this is not free from problems. The structure, especially the roof, is to be found in a state of disrepair, to the extent that the stallholders have had to leave the market on a number of occasions, be it due to the requirement for thorough cleaning or, as has been happening recently, in order to safeguard their life and investments from a sudden collapse. It is for this reason that the front corridor of the Municipal Palace has been flooded with 'temporary' stalls which have become focus points of political attention and even set on fire on various occasions.

The transactions in the market take place throughout the day, from seven o'clock until the evening (sometimes even at midnight) people go to the market to buy daily supplies. In the morning, it is common to find traditional dishes for sale which have already been cooked such as: *pozol* (cornmeal mush), *tamales*, *iguana*, *chorizo*, pigeon, eggs, chicken, jelly, biscuits, natural fruit, sweets and drinks. During the evenings one can also buy bread, cheese, flowers, and domestic articles. At night, some stands in the market sell dinner dishes including: *tamales*, cheese, cream, biscuits, chocolate, and milk.

The supply of prepared foods is probably the most notable, since throughout the town, including its neighbourhoods and colonies, there are different stands offering cooked local meals, *tlayuda*,<sup>34</sup> the *garnachas*<sup>35</sup> and *cecina* (salty beef) being among the most popular. Yet fast food has also arrived on the Isthmus and pizzas, hamburgers and sandwiches are common among young people.

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Eladia, merchant and banana producer, 3 April 2006; interview with Marcelino, coconut picker, 10 May 2006; interview with Joel, peasant and lemon producer, 5 May 2006.

<sup>34</sup> A typical dish throughout Oaxaca State which consists of a huge roasted tortilla, prepared with beans, cheese and meat.

<sup>35</sup> Small fried tortilla, prepared with meat, hot tomato sauce and vegetables.



One of the activities that most attracted my attention was how merchant women have found new ways to sell their products, in the face of the closure or disappearance of market niches, such as the railway system, the increase of local traders and the arrival of supermarkets. Their improvised stands, made of wooden tables and chairs, can now be seen everywhere, and some streets are packed full of them. This means that the stalls can be installed and removed at their convenience, similarly to in the past at the market when merchandise was placed on top of a blanket so as it could easily be gathered to be taken home whenever the stallholder wished to do so.

Some of the women, mostly girls, also put these stands at the front door of their houses so that they can keep an eye on the stand while they carry out other domestic duties at the same time. When the stall is hidden from view, vendors set up placards to advertise it, placed in strategic places where most people can see them. At these stalls, it is possible to find almost anything required throughout the day, such as fruit and vegetables, pizza, ice, firewood, sweets, cigarettes, shampoo and toothpaste. This diversification of trading places has made the drastic fall in other spaces for local trade less evident, such as trading in train carriages, when compared with the good times when the town and its markets were full of activity and life.

The women of the Isthmus have a well deserved reputation for being merchants: it is said that each woman learns how to carry on the business of buying and selling all kinds of things from their mother or sisters, or by social learning. Similarly, it is acknowledged that from the youngest to the oldest, women seem to lead regional trade and tend to manage the domestic finances. Men however, have always kept a low profile in such matters, although, I was able to observe that this is not an uncommon activity for them.

*Other well known economic activities*

Some ancient productive activities have remained on the Isthmus, while others have disappeared and new ones emerged. People earn their livelihoods through artisan work of different kinds: they create clay pots, water containers and figures, and also dedicate themselves to embroidering regional dresses; some weave hammocks, others work gold jewellery such as filigree; and yet others make a variety of wooden objects

such as *butaques* (small wooden chairs), saint figures, boxes, spoons, and Zapotec *biliguanas*.<sup>36</sup>

Some people have learned traditional medicine from their ancestors, others deal in esoteric beliefs and make witchcraft works as protection against the evil eye, a common belief among the population.

The people of San Blas are famous for harvesting coconuts, a dangerous task when one considers that the majority of palm trees are more than ten meters high and pickers must climb and work using a machete at that altitude in order to harvest the coconuts and to clean the palm from dead leaves; this is to say nothing of possible unwelcome visitors such as rats, rattle snakes, and that all of this is done without any safety measures.

Tehuantepec is an intermediary town providing different kinds of services to the rural municipal hinterland. People from the region have to travel to this town in order to resolve administrative problems at the municipality and to buy different kinds of agricultural inputs, tools, domestic electrical goods, china, home furniture, and medicines; they also come in order to visit the doctor, the bank, the pawnshop, to make phone calls and to use the Internet. One can find small family businesses related to these kinds of services; some have maintained the trade for generations, as is the case with the Mafud, Esteban and Pantaleon families.

There are also those who offer professional services, such as doctors, nurses, dentists, engineers, architects, lawyers and teachers. Perhaps the two main regional trades are teachers and soldiers: there is virtually no family in the region without a teacher or a soldier.

As in any other region, there is a myriad of practical trades normally run within the family, by mechanics, builders, plumbers, electricians, blacksmiths, carpenters and stylists. Some manage to find employment with contractors working for big companies, but most work on their own.

The Isthmus people try to do everything possible to earn their living. A good example is the *motocarros*: a local device built with the front of a motorcycle stacked to a wooden van. Despite the risks involved, these have become a common mode of transport among the population due to their load capacity. I recall a merchant woman who happened to be so overweight that she managed to overturn a *motocarro* as she was trying to get on. There are plenty of bizarre stories such as this one, which would be no more than a funny anecdote to tell, if people had not lost their lives in accidents.

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<sup>36</sup> Wooden tile used in the lower part of the traditional red tiled roof.

There are also other businesses, among the most popular of which are the *centros botaneros* (beer centres) and *cantinas* (bars) where people, mostly men, go to drink and share conversation at any time of the day. Nightclubs and discos have recently been established and are frequented by young people during the weekends and public holidays. There are also social events, such as disco nights, mainly organized by the gay community.

Government institutions are commonly visible due to their vehicles which bear the official logotype and workers' uniforms (*Pemex*, *Telégrafos*, Comisión Federal de Electricidad (*CFE*), Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (*IMSS*) are some of the institutions). These types of jobs are appreciated by the population, since they offer stability and reasonable working conditions and the post can even be handed down from father to son.

In contrast, the conditions of the labourers should be mentioned as some of the most unstable: for example, early in the morning, along the road to Salina Cruz, groups of men can be seen waiting for passing trailers to reach a verbal agreement with the driver in order to accompany him to the port to unload the vehicle.

The variety of trades and services offered is such that it is reflected in the economic data for the region. For 2006 it was calculated that 43 percent of the population worked in services.<sup>37</sup>

### *Traditional festivities*

Social and cultural life in Tehuantepec, and on the Isthmus in general, is commonly related to festivals. Each *barrio* has at least one festival every year in order to celebrate the day of their patron saint. This festival lasts for a whole week and there are at least one or two *bailes*, a fun fair and religious festivities at the *barrio* church.<sup>38</sup> There are fifteen old *barrios* and ten new colonies, meaning there are 25 one-week festivities throughout the year. If one adds to this number baptisms, first communions, *quince años*, weddings and other social events such as the Carnivals, the Day of the Dead, Easter, *las posadas*, Christmas and New Year's Eve, then there is hardly a week in the year without some form of celebration, and there is also not enough time, money and energy to attend all of them.

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<sup>37</sup> 42.7% of the population of the Oaxaca Isthmus work in services (H. Ayuntamiento de Santo Domingo Tehuantepec, 2007; INEGI, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Mass, parties, celebrations, bullfights, fireworks, parades and popular dances take place on different days.

Social bonds force people to attend certain festivities when they have a moral obligation to the people inviting them, since in Tehuantepec it is customary to contribute goods and duties, or cash whenever the event implies spending large amounts of money. Also funerals are a large commitment. In addition to the elements which make up their cost — including the coffin, candles, prayers, musicians and mass— generous, close relatives must prepare food and drink for all those who visit the household to express their condolences during the nine days following the funeral.

This is why people have developed uses and customs in order to contribute to the expenses implied by this type of social events which somehow involve the entire population of the town. Even if somebody cannot provide money or goods, he/she is allowed to help out with related duties, taking care of all the people who come to the event. Building a social network in the town is a fundamental survival strategy for any household in order to cover their expenses throughout the year.

The economic deterioration of the region has implied that, as time passes, it has become harder for certain members of the community to meet all these social *compromisos* (obligations). Therefore, some of them do not attend events when they are expected and others do not contribute in the expected way, in either quantitative or qualitative terms. There is a feeling amongst the population that tradition regarding these matters is changing for the worse. People are not as generous as they were before, and now give cheap, plastic presents solely to comply with their duty, whereas before they used to give substantial presents such as *centenarios* (gold coins), fridges, beds, wardrobes, TVs and stereos.

For some inhabitants the local authorities have contributed to the deterioration in the image of the festivities by capturing the spirit of this practice in order to take advantage of it for commercial purposes. That is the case of *la Vela Sandunga*, organized by the municipality which, on account of its high cost is a good source of income for the municipality, although it marginalizes most of the population since only the wealthy members can normally afford the means to attend.

Despite the erosion of these collective practices, the population waits anxiously for any sort of celebration, especially those of their *barrio*. This is the time to wear new clothes, to spend money, to participate in parades, to go dancing or to the fun fair, to visit relatives, neighbours and friends from other *barrios*, to eat, drink and dance as much as their bodies, budgets and judgments can endure, to indulge in excesses not usually committed on other days of the year. People feel proud of being a

Zapotec, a Tehuano and a member of their *barrio*, and the pride of being a *mayordomo* in these celebrations still remains; people do so willingly, despite the economic sacrifice implied by these community obligations.

Cultural activities are highly relevant in the region and several public organizations reinforce traditions among the population. The *Casa de la cultura*<sup>39</sup> is in charge of teaching the dances, music, songs, poetry as well as legends and traditions of the Isthmus. An important cultural activity has also been developed recently. The activity is called *guendaliza'a* and is an attempt to rescue and harmonize the cultural diversity of the Isthmus villages. It includes different activities such as the sale of regional products, the organization of lectures and talks on the indigenous culture, the presentation of videos and movies, and, most notably, a dance and music show on the old banks of the Tehuantepec River. During parties or celebrations, everyone seems to get on well with others, as if there were no resentments, or that these ones had already been solved or forgotten.

This diversity of actors is constantly enacting day to day life. Therefore it is not strange that the majority of them carry out a mixture of the economic activities already mention as well as being involved in some of the scenarios evoked in this festivity. This recount, although partial, allows the perception of the multiplicity of actors, escenarios, meanings, and enactments that are produced in an overlapping fashion in Tehuantepec.

### *The rebellious spirit*

Often the most eye-catching and recurrent themes are remembered from the political and military episodes of the Isthmus. Amongst the various texts considered, passages have been extracted which are often recalled each time the local history is reinterpreted, especially when these make reference to the episode of the alliance with the French army for which the Tehuanos are known as 'traitors'. What was for some an act of treason against the country, was for others simply the result of the act of one individual, see (Mecott, 2002, 2005). The interesting point about this polemic is that it continues to be one of the most commonly referred arguments in order to vilify the Tehuanos and split them from those communities which dispute the inheritance of the rebellious warrior spirit of the ancient Zapotecs.

In this respect, the occasion on which the Zapotec town fought as a single force in the defence of their sovereignty is remembered, as was

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<sup>39</sup> Cultural centres.

the case during the colonial period, when in 1660, on account of the abuses committed by the Spaniards they decided to rebel, killing the regional authority, the Governor Avellano, and taking the administration of the village into their own hands for almost a year. Later they were punished and their main leaders, both men and women, were dismembered on a public scaffold (Chicatti, D., 2006b; Ortega, 2006: 30-32).

According to historians and researches, there have been several moments when the Zapotec people have united and shown their courage in dealing with an external enemy. These include: when Tehuantepec was declared a Province in 1821 and subsequently dissolved in 1924;<sup>40</sup> when they fought during the North American intervention in 1847;<sup>41</sup> when they fought to obtain autonomy from the Oaxaca State, recognized by the Federal Government in 1853;<sup>42</sup> when they fought against the French intervention from 1862 until 1864. In recent times (1970s), partially influenced by the 68 Movement in Mexico, the villagers of Juchitán and other smaller communities rebelled and took over the local administration in a movement that came to be known as *Coalición Obrera Campesina Estudiantil del Istmo* (COCEI) (Working, Peasant and Student Coalition of the Isthmus).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The Tehuantepec Province extended from Acayucan to Tehuantepec, the latter becoming the capital of the Province (Mecott, 2005: 20).

<sup>41</sup> The Tehuantepec Battalion defended Veracruz City and Mexico City. After the battle, the Tehuantepec Battalion took on the name 'Patricios' in remembrance of their Irish companions killed in the Chapultepec Battle (Mecott, 2005: 29).

<sup>42</sup> On the 29th of May of 1853, President Santa Ana kept the promise he made to the Isthmus leaders and decreed the Tehuantepec Isthmus a territory, naming General Domingo Ibañez de Corvera as its main authority. In the Tehuantepec Department, Máximo Ramón Ortiz was designated as governor, with José Gregorio Meléndez as Military Commander. The Isthmus Territory was dissolved by decree in 1855 (Mecott, 2005: 41-46).

<sup>43</sup> The COCEI fought for local governance in order to improve the living and working conditions of peasants and workers. They tried to block the State impositions made in the name of development and stopped the abuses of landowners and companies which forced people to work long working days for little money. The movement succeeded in establishing the first opposition popular municipality in Mexico as a result of the alliance between COCEI and PPS (Popular Socialist Party, a political party). Although the life span of the COCEI administration was very short—only two years, 1981-1983—it nonetheless managed to improve the municipal services, to regulate urban and rural working conditions, and to pursue the demand for recognition as an

Today there are many different organizations on the Isthmus some of which have a political character, others an economic, cultural or social one. Some of these organizations have taken shape from former organizations such as Cooperatives and Ejidal Committees, others from previous movements such as the COCEI, and there are new ones which appear under the banner of local governance, local autonomy, and environmental issues.<sup>44</sup>

The Isthmus people have certainly won battles in the political arena at local, regional and national levels; however, one of the most important battles is usually fought as part of everyday life, in ways which testify to the fact that they are continuously adapting to new challenges. During my time in the field, I was able to appreciate this when I saw the labour strike of the primary school teachers, which grew from a demand for improvements to salaries and working conditions to become one of the most important social movements in the Oaxaca state, until it was finally suppressed by the Mexican armed forces at the end of 2006 (see Universal, 2006).

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indigenous community with its own territorial rights. At the same time it promoted cultural projects by means of a local radio and a cultural magazine. COCEI was punished in 1983: the army was deployed and remained in control of Juchitán for over four years. Some of the leaders of the movement were killed, whilst others disappeared or were put in jail. Today the villagers continue with the organization, to the present day, they have recovered the local administration in different times and retaining presence in the community. See (Bañuelos, 1993; Rubin, 1993).

<sup>44</sup> Some organizations present on the Isthmus are: Working, Peasant and Student Coalition of the Isthmus (COCEI), Collective Work Group of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (GTCI), Union of Indigenous Communities of the North zone of the Isthmus (UCIZONI), Gubiña XXI, Committee of Communal Rights “Guuze Benda”, Network of Youthful Indigenous Organizations of The Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Huave Cultural Group Mi Kualaj Xa Kambaj, Regional Coordinating of Youth of the Isthmus (CREJO), Tourist Eco development Playa Cangrejo, Communal Rights Committee of the Llano, Communal Rights Committee Guuze’ Benda, Ecology and Agrarian Traditions Group (GUETA), Cooperative of Consultants for Social Development, Union of Free Fisherman, Volunteer Committee for the Environment (COVOMA), Rural Research and Training Center, etc.

*The political situation*

Today there are two main parties in the regional political situation of the Isthmus: the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). Somehow, these parties have inherited old grievances among the population whilst incorporating new ones thanks to the patron-client electoral strategy pursued by all of them in order to gain votes in favour of their candidates. Through their party affiliation, support and moral commitment at future elections, people have access to different kinds of goods and services: *despensas* (stocks of food), cement, *laminas* (metal sheet roofing), t-shirts. They would certainly have problems solving matters with the local administration if they did not support the candidates who win the elections.

Tehuantepec has been the stronghold of the PRI in the region; meanwhile Juchitán has traditionally represented the left wing political opposition to the State. This political dichotomy in the region has been the root of more than just political differences between Juchitán and Tehuantepec. Probably the best known reference to this difference is embodied in the names used by both towns to name each other: the people of Juchitán call the Tehuanos traitors, naming themselves and their town as heroic; Tehuanos, on the other hand, refer to the people of Juchitán as simple “*Tecos*”, in a scornful way, considering them as rebellious (Binford & Campbell, 1993). This social labelling permeates the interior of the region, producing distinctions on varying scales and creating profound divisions between those who live there.

Throughout the years the PRI party governed the Tehuantepec municipality in a patrimonial style, but the political preferences of the people began to change. In the 2006 elections, which did not include local authorities, the PRD enjoyed huge success, even in Tehuantepec, making this the strongest blow ever dealt to the PRI in the region. The precedent to this situation occurred one year before in the San Blas Atempa municipality, previously an old *barrio* of Tehuantepec, where PRI and PRD contested the outcome of the local elections and therefore established two municipal authorities and administrations. Today Tehuantepec is governed by the opposition represented by the PRD, an administration which must confront large scale and continuous conflicts which bet on the destabilization and exhaustion of this government; amongst them is the supposedly accidental but nonetheless systematic burning of the municipal palace, alongside the current properties of the municipal president, only time will tell where this painful road to a more heterogeneous political life will lead.



## **Conclusion of the chapter**

This presentation has made reference to Tehuantepec as one of the most representative communities of the Isthmus, precisely on account of being considered, amongst other things, as the origin of the Zapotecs from the Isthmus. This discussion of some of the aspects linked with this community, alongside its different names and meanings, is an attempt to make clear that Tehuantepec is not an example, a setting or mere container for a certain human group, unique and homogeneous.

The diverse, multiple and heterogenous character of actors' practices shows the importance to focus these interactions in specific contexts and settings, due to their complexity. Above all, because actors' interactions seem not to be deterministic, linear and static; they give the impression to link different elements, to mix past and present and to produce plenty of differences.

The aim of this research is to capture the way in which this complexity takes place in the actors' everyday life; fragmenting it and focussing it only on aspects associated with human sexuality, whilst attempting not to lose sight of its complexity. It is for this reason that this thesis does not focus just on women; common notions of the Zapotec, or regional development projects. Still, they are taken as referents to be deconstructed, in order to refer case studies in which the complexity of human sexuality could be seen as it is enacted. This means putting attention on those actors, scenarios and context which tend to be left out of sight.

## **Overview of the thesis**

Chapter two offers a review of the theoretical and methodological approaches, as well as the concepts which contribute to make visible the various issues associated with human sexuality in Tehuantepec. The chapter sets out to illustrate how human sexuality results in an intersection where it is possible to articulate discourses, practices and interactions of the actors with respect to their surroundings in everyday life. This assertion is made having identified general, and to a certain extent deterministic, commonplaces and assumptions by which the Isthmus and Tehuantepec are often characterized. The chapter arrives at the theoretical and methodological importance of seeing beyond 'foregrounds' as the tendency adhered to by this work, precisely because it allows one to perceive the complexities and the broad spectrum of branches and connections with respect to human sexuality. It also acknowledges the

impossibility of capturing a totality, and hence the fact that this representation is partial will most likely provoke debate and a greater exploration of the themes it tackles.

Chapter three deconstructs the stereotype of beauty in the Isthmus, namely the Tehuana, in order to reveal the prominence of the different beauties present in different settings. The chapter shows how beauty is enacted: the practices which are exposed illustrate not only the different beauties, but also the different contexts, materials, valuations, innovations and tensions inherent to their production. 'Embodied beauty', I post, seeks to capture the complexities of the various human beauties and their flexibility to change, whilst also look to invoke difference or otherness as something frequent, and not as a minoritarian reduction in the contemporary world.

Chapter four considers the relationship between spatiality and gender, posing the question: if these concepts are related, how is this relation? Recourse is made to some of the most common statements based on the fields of action and gender in Tehuantepec in order to reflect upon the definitiveness and immutability of this association. In order to illustrate its complexity, I propose the notion of 'entangled boundaries' as one of the possible ways for recognizing the fact that even if it is possible to perceive a relationship between the two categories, these repeatedly crosscut, entangle and overlap in a manner that is both unexpected and without clear or predefined boundaries.

A similar exercise is carried out in the exploration of sexual practices insofar as certain ambivalence, somewhere between looseness and rigidity, is recognized in the local norms. Thus, chapter five seizes the opportunity presented by this paradox in order to show the settings in which this ambivalence assumes more than two forms. Several cases are presented which provide evidence of the reasons leading other actors to give preference to, and enact, one type of practice or another. I arise 'Sexual bodies' in order to capture the multiple and dynamic connections where commongrounds are not fixed, nor deterministic, when actors link and enact and re-enact sexual life in Tehuantepec.

Chapter six considers the supposed definitiveness associated with motherhood. It shows how practices and meanings are continuously exposed to change, becoming situations which are not often expected, if at all, as well as being indefinite and to a certain extent, struggles. 'Battlefields of human reproduction' is the allegory I use in order to capture the uncertainties and conflicts which suggest the constraint of rethinking notions and assumptions related to motherhood whilst hinting

at other connections in which motherhood forms part of broader and more complex networks, such as reproductive health, population policies and the right to choose.

Chapter seven explores intimate violence from a different point of view. Thus instead of exploring the origin and causes of this violence, it concentrates on how, networks of intimate violence have been enacted and disarticulated. This allows the consistent and inconsistent character of networks of intimate violence to be perceived, networks which form part of fluid assemblies, yet in whose activities and dynamics reside detection, resonances, disassociations and expansions. Thus, I consider ‘counteracting intimate violence’ as a good perspective that recognizes that the actors are not passive victims, but dynamic actors in the production of ‘room for maneuvering’ and change with the aim of breaking up networks of intimate violence.

Finally, the Conclusion recalls the way in which this research was conceived, as well as the practical and theoretical difficulties faced along of it. It also reflects on the focus of the research linking it to the research questions with respect to human sexuality in Tehuantepec. From here the main findings and the limits of the research are mention.

At this point it is convenient to state that this study does not pretend to capture human sexuality as a totality, nor does it give a complete overview of the sexual practices everything they may be associated with in Tehuantepec. It is only a partial account aimed to evoke scenes and situations that may be shared by some, yet objected by others—thus opening up space for further research.







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Living at *El Ocho*

Pg. 36:  
The market at the railroad

Previous page:  
Going to the market

## Human sexuality in Tehuantepec

### Abstract

This chapter deals with the research problem of this thesis providing the theoretical and methodological guides which oriented it. It provides an overview of the emblematic scenes in which the women of the Isthmus have been protagonists, scenes which mark the point of departure for discussing the relevance of deconstructing generalizations and stereotypes associated with Isthmus societies, specifically those related to patriarchy and development, in order to perceive their intersections with human sexuality. In turn, this will suggest other situations with which they are connected, above all those which are not often present in the foreground but which nonetheless undoubtedly take place in the local community. The chapter also considers the reasons for the selection of various aspects which are often linked to sexuality: beauty, gendered spatiality, sexual life, motherhood and intimate violence, are considered from the perspective of post-structuralist feminism, the Actor Oriented Approach and Actor Network Theory, and in terms of their probable contribution towards rural development and women's studies. Concepts such as networks, bodies, enactment, agency and interfaces are keys to seek the complexities of human sexuality in Tehuantepec.

### Introduction

Just like the queen bee, it is the mother who governs in Tehuantepec. For hundreds of years, the female tribal system has been miraculously preserved. The branches of some strange trees are like serpents. And like serpents, the waves of black and heavy hair move around the dreamy eyes of the women who yearn for their man. In Tehuantepec, it is the women who are active (Eisenstein, 2006 [1930-1931]: 18) [trans. J. Kelly].

The cinematographer, Serguei Eisenstein recorded this landscape between 1930 and 1931 upon visiting Tehuantepec to carry out a film project which was never concluded. Decades later, the writer Elena Poniatowska<sup>45</sup> made her own presentation of the women from a different Isthmus community:

In Juchitán Oaxaca, men don't find where to get into but in their women, children hang from their breasts and the *iguanas* see the world from the top of their heads. In Juchitán (...) the trees have hearts, the men have their *pito* [pecker] either sweet or salty as it pleases,<sup>46</sup> and the women are extremely proud of being women, because they carry their redemption between their legs and bestow upon each their own death. This amorous act is referred to as "la muerte chiquita" [the small death] (Poniatowska, 1994: 77) [trans. J. Kelly].

In 1997, the work of a group of German researchers who lived in Juchitán between 1990 and 1991 was published in Spanish. This one highlights the visibility of women:

We arrived in the city in the morning and we saw only women in the streets. Upright, their shoulders inclined to the rear, their heads held high, and their gazes frank, all were heading in the same direction. The large undulating skirt, the corpulence and a load carried upon their head accentuated the majesty of their everyday chores: we reached the market in the centre of the city together with them (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1997a: 17).

There are numerous references such as these to the Zapotec women of the Isthmus, Tehuanas and those from Juchitán, as they are often generalized outside the local. These representations have not been the first, and nor will they be the last, to be centred around the visibility of women (Artes de México, 2000; Brasseur, 1981 [1859]; Cajigas, Alberto, 1961; Campbell & Green, 1999; Dalton, 2000; Meneses, 1997; Newbold, 1975; Ruiz, 1993). Nevertheless, they are the ones which attracted my attention, since it would appear that they refer to the same situation, in spite of the intervening years. Indeed, it was these very scenes which subsequently became part of what lead me to the backbone of this work:

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<sup>45</sup> This is accompanied by a series of photographs by Gracierla Iturbide. See (Poniatowska, 1994: 97-111).

<sup>46</sup> Poniatowska refers here to a traditional Isthmus story which tells that fishermen because of being at the sea have a salty pecker while the *campesinos* because of being at land have a sweet one (Poniatowska, 1994: 77).



the complexities of human sexuality in Tehuantepec. The notion of this complexity captures the requirement of recognizing the disjunction between the repertoires and practices of the local actors associated with the sexuality of the Isthmus communities. The starting point for such recognition is a reflection upon themes suggested by the previous accounts: beauty, gendered spatiality, sexual life, motherhood and intimate violence. This latter theme was subsequently added on account both of other evocations and its relevance in the field. However, to reach this point, there was a great distance to cover, which I summarize below.

From the outset of this research, I must state that my intention was to study the controversial relationship between actors and interventions related to economic development and thus the requirement to establish closer links with those who have been affected by such interventions. I was interested in knowing how these societies —above all, their women —have been affected by various processes of intervention, as well as how their processes of struggle and resistance are embodied by the way they are represented. All this sought to contribute to a better understanding of human action in contexts of intense external intervention. Contrary to other coastal regions (Visser, 2004) the Isthmus has never being a desolated or ppheriferial area.

During the course of my visits, and the field work which forms the basis of this thesis, I came to realize that my first objective fitted into those common spaces, which often characterize the Oaxaca Isthmus: the Zapotec, matriarchy, economic potential and a constant struggle to retain livelihoods and lifeworlds (Binford, 1985; Campbell *et al.*, 1993; De la Cruz, 1983; Mecott, 2005; Moore, J. P., 1952; Warman, 1993)<sup>47</sup>. It was then, that I was able to acknowledge, and personally experience, how it was relatively easy to be lead by the actors themselves into being a witness of the presence of these general perspectives which are repeatedly recorded in representations of Tehuantepec: festivals, female commerce, traditional productive activities, archaeological sites, the practices of customs, as well as discourses and accounts which seek to reinforce the culture and its ethnic pride; in short, all which in some manner could not be avoided in order to enter into the world of the Zapotec Isthmus.

This situation caused me to critically reflect on these general perspectives and identify the diversity of situations and contexts in the region which have been presented in the general introduction to this work. Thus did it become clear that there are elements which interfere

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<sup>47</sup> For a different focus about the Isthmus region that it is close in the aproach of this study, see (Léonard et al., 2009).

with these outlooks, such as other ethnicities, immigrants, poverty and marginalization, non-Zapotec practices, and other processes of breakup, discontinuity, inconsistency and conflict, which may be present even among Zapotecs and women themselves. The recognition of foregrounds guided to identify those common representations of Isthmus people tend to oversimplify the richness and complexity of the everyday lives of the actors and the various elements which surround them.

Hence, my attempt to identify discontinuities between the repertoires of the Isthmus and the practices of the actors at local level. In the first instance, I found myself tempted to demystify stereotypes, or what Law calls “currently performed patterns of realities” (Law, 2004b: 143), on account of the generalized acceptance with which reference is often made to the actors, and not because these scenes do not have a place in the local.

However, afterwards, based on the evidence, I discovered in academic and artistic material, and also from the field work, the deconstruction of the discourses which surrounded human sexuality seemed to be a more attractive proposition, both on account of their manifest relevance and because from this point it became possible to perceive the production of differences and their links with broader themes, as well as their discontinuity with the practice of local actors; in other words, the existence of *complexities* (Mol & Law, 2002).

Beauty, gendered spatiality, sexual life, motherhood and intimate violence became themes upon which the issues which arose from the discourses, my observations and the references of the actors in the field all converged. This helped me, amongst other things, to identify struggles and the different ways in which the actors have confronted them in their everyday lives, in turn allowing the discovery of many perspectives which are seldomly perceived in the Isthmus and suggesting directions for future research. The information which I have gathered is presented in a narrative form, articulating case studies which are based on the accounts of the actors.

In order to indicate how I arrived at the deconstruction of assumptions focussed on the Zapotec, matriarchy, development and resistance as something given, it is necessary to describe my own process by which my reference points of women, development and society came to be modified. This contributes to a reflection which promotes a better understanding of human action with respect to sexuality in contexts of developmental processes for change.

The purpose of this chapter then, is to present how the research questions came about and were reflected alongside the theoretical and methodological references which guided them. Firstly, some of the precedents from which the Isthmus myths of Zapotec societies and the visibility of its women have originated are presented. Secondly, some of the possible intersections of these representations with Western feminist thought and gender studies will be introduced. Thirdly, the perception of differences between discourses and events in the everyday lives of the actors will be highlighted. Fourthly, the approach which supports the link between the practices of the actors and development will be presented. Fifthly, the complexity of the production of the social, in which this research is rooted, will be considered. The sixth section presents the simplification of this totality into the five themes associated with human sexuality presented by this work. Finally, the methods which helped to carry out this research are discussed.

### **Women and feminine visibility in Isthmus societies**

The prominent role of Zapotec women seems to have arisen as a result of their significant participation in commerce. Women's dominion in the economic and public space of the Zapotec communities is a recurring theme in the literature (Campbell & Green, 1999; Miano, 2002; Newbold, 1975; Von Tempsky, 2005). The development of women in this region has been related to the geographical importance of the Isthmus, the obligatory passage of people and commerce between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, as well as between Central America and the south of Mexico, and the north of the country, up towards the United States of America. According to Leticia Reyna, the incorporation of men into armed struggle and the void which this left in the 'nuclear' family (Reyna, 1997: 14-15) over the course of the twentieth century caused women to search for ways to obtain a monetary income by means of commerce. Here it should be mentioned that this practice had already been observed by Torres de Laguna from as early as 1580 (Torres de Laguna, 1973). At any rate, the fact is that this male activity has linked women to a productive and more autonomous role than that of men.

Their incorporation into the market was relatively easy and natural, since when there was the high demand for economic activity and services, the Zapotec women were also well equipped to participate in the public domain. First, due to the fact that some decades before, they had become active in the region's commerce as a means of sustaining themselves and

their children, something which provided them with economic independence, security, freedom of movement and interaction with society as a whole; and secondly because they did not belong to a society whose relations were patriarchal (Reina, 1997a: 15).

There are other situations which have also contributed to the centrality of women. The attitude and behaviour of women in social and political movements has meant that some authors have portrayed them as having a brave character (Bañuelos, 1993; Rojas, 1964). Their visibility in the cultural practices of the region has awoken interest in their beauty, their participation in the domestic and public domains, their sexuality and the support they provide for their culture (Covarrubias, 1986 [1946]; Chicatti, E., 2006; Henestrosa, 1993; Poniatowska, 1993, 1994; Reina, 1995; Sokoloff, 1993). Many of the 'virtues' of the women of the Isthmus have attracted the attention of both insiders and outsiders, and have been captured in an innumerable collection of works, including paintings, photography, lithography, poetry, music and cinema (Campbell & Green, 1999; Lozano, 1992; Montellano, 1998; Segre, 2007; Zamorano, 2005).

... huge women, mountainous women, drum-like women, rattle-like women, women who do not have any pain, solid, daring, sweat running down their body, the soft and dangerous movements of their arms, their mouth in strict correspondence with their sex, the double admonition of their eyes, women who are good because they are excessive (Poniatowska, 1994: 78).

Representations such as these have largely contributed to the creation of the women's dominant image in Isthmus societies, whilst providing the basis for the inference of a profoundly matriarchal society (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1997a; Covarrubias, 1986 [1946]; Starr, 1908). However in opposition to this, there are also those who question the idea of such a society, suggesting other scenarios that can be seen in these communities, such as the apparent monopoly of men in public and governmental positions, as well as in the traditional system of *cargos* (traditional uses and costumes), and in activities related with artistic representation, such as poetry, painting and musical groups (Campbell & Green, 1999; Miano, 2002). In addition to the above, it is considered that in all areas, above all in the domestic environment, the division and distribution of labour is far from equal since in addition to commerce, women are often also responsible for chores. Thus, it has been suggested that in spite of the prominence and power visible in public, in private, women are forced to

accept a double working day in light of the limited or non-existent participation of the male in the household.

Objections to patriarchy become even more important upon making reference to other practices which have been identified as cultural forms of masculine control over women. Such is the case of the proof of virginity which continues to form part of marital rituals. Similarly, the use of physical violence by men towards women in the domestic environment, tends to be another constant which affirms that in spite of the participation and particular visibility of women in the Isthmus societies, there also exists a system of preference towards men which limits and dominates women in highly intimate matters related to their self-esteem, their value in the collective, their physical integrity and the control of their bodies (Dalton, 2000; Miano, 2002; Newbold, 1975; Ruiz, 1993).

With respect to the acceptance of sexual diversity, particularly the masculine homosexuality of the *muxes*, as the Zapotec men-women are also known, there are those who argue that this tolerance of masculine homosexuality can principally be attributed to the high value attached to women and femininity. Some arguments link this to individual structures of “institutionalized homosexuality” where the feminization of men is socially recognized by the social function it fulfils, such as caring for parents in their old age, contributing to the upbringing and maintenance of the family, and participating in the festivals which contribute to provide continuity to the system of customs and traditions of the culture (Enríquez, 2005; Miano, 2002; Miano & Gómez, 2006). The apparent acceptance of sexual diversity has even been reflected in works of art, reports and documents,<sup>48</sup> which distinguish the Isthmus from the remainder of the Mexican Republic and have been responsible for the creation of an image which portrays the region as a paradise for homosexuality, above all for masculine homosexuality, or the *muxe*'s (Islas, 2006).

Zapotec society adds another peculiar feature to its dichotomist organization: it would not seem that there is a social stigma or marginalization attached to the homosexual, who in Zapotec, is called a *muxe*'. Contrary to this, there is an acceptance of the *muxe*' in the gender organization of the society and in its ethnic

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<sup>48</sup> Indeed, one of the recent works by the choreographer Jaime Razzo, is entitled “Muxes” and aims to present Isthmus homosexuality as an affirmation of masculine femininity (Fernández, 2007). Moreover there is one well-known film named Muxes -Authentic, Intrepid Seekers of Danger. See (Islas, 2006).

cultural universe which is uncommon to our Western society  
(Miano, 2002: 149) [trans. J. Kelly].

The differentiated form in which the practices of the actors are manifested in the local has been considered from various fields of knowledge, disciplines, approaches and schools of thought. These works have attempted to unravel, affirm, refute or simply represent the atypical elements which provide the region with its visibility and relevance, above all when this is compared with the rest of Mexico. This means that on more than one occasion, the atypical nature of the relations between genders has been emphasized as something intrinsic to the Zapotec societies of the Isthmus (Campbell & Green, 1999; Chicatti, E., 2006; Miano, 2002; Newbold, 1975; Poniatowska, 1994; Reina, 1997b; Ruiz, 1993; Zamorano, 2005).

It is important to mention that putting attention on the output of some of the previous works (cited above), it was possible to find arguments which question or cast doubts about this atypical character of gender relationships. This highlighted the necessity of deconstructing the myths and stereotypes related to women and homosexuality in the region, precisely because they do not reflect situations which affect for worse women's life —such as in the case of intimate violence, excess work and the control of their bodies (Campbell & Green, 1999; Newbold, 1975)—, since they do not attract the attention of observers. From this argument, my concern of intimate violence begun and was confirmed later on with the actor's experiences. Other authors have identified that many of the descriptions, representations and discussions which refer to gender in the Isthmus have had a mythical character attributed to them, insofar as they respond to superficial visions and stereotypes which make clear “Western” constructions of seeing and conceptualizing the differences of non-European societies (Campbell & Green, 1999), whence my interest in researching other studies on women, leading me to encounter a wide body of debate in feminism.

### **Intersections with women's studies**

Upon beginning my research on the theoretical references related to various issues related to women, I came to appreciate that various affirmations, categories and methods of analysis of feminism have served as a guide, be it in a cloaked or explicit manner, for the explanation of the practices of the actors in the Isthmus, as the following quotation illustrates:

Our habitual question, most solid and generally admired, was: How is it possible that in the midst of a patriarchal country, characterized by machismo, a society centred on women and oriented towards their subsistence could maintain itself, even more so in a region which geographically and economically is key to world commerce and traffic? (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1997a: 25).

Thus it seems pertinent to mention here some of the principle approaches which have contributed to characterizing the women of the Isthmus and their practices in its societies as I shall return to them throughout the different themes which make up this work.

Women have assumed centrality in a number of contexts, above all in the feminist movement which arose in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century in the context of a social and ideological struggle for individual rights and guarantees derived from the Enlightenment. The common idea of feminism has been associated with a desire to alter woman's position in society, something which has meant that much of the debate in this current of politico-academic thought has been oriented towards understanding and taking action on the problematic of the women in a patriarchal system which it has been argued has dominated practically in all aspects of human life (Delmar, 2001).

This group of questions has given birth to a large number of studies which consider women from a variety of diverse disciplines and methodologies (Grant *et al.*, 1987; Pilcher & Coffey, 1996). Henrietta Moore (1988), presents an anthology which discusses the conceptual and categorical debate which has permeated women's anthropology, which points out how this criticism of masculine favouritism has been doomed to attempt to dilute what has been identified as the "universal subordination of the woman", a term which makes reference to the deterministic form of feminine submission, or rather, as a consequence of characteristics, attributes, tasks, attitudes, valuations and concealments established by nature or as a social and/or cultural product which is accepted as universal (Moore, H. L., 1988). Thus if one accepts the premise of the universal subordination of women as valid, it is not at all strange that the Zapotec women of the Isthmus seem an unusual and strange reference point, in the face of works which often confirm their peculiarity.

Much of this school of thought has been based on analytical distinctions which differentiate between factors such as roles or activities, spaces of action (both public and private), judgements, rights, responsibilities, in line with gender, something from which the supposed

gender organization of the Isthmus does not escape. However, the consequences of this diversity of studies and the results of these materials on a global level have included the requirement of broadening conceptual and methodological frameworks based on gender differences, insofar as they lead to binary oppositions which only account for the man-woman as a single set of gendered relations, as if this were a unique and antagonistic opposite which attached human relations to conceptual frameworks and pre-established value judgements.

Whence the necessity of recognizing that women are not isolated entities that are to be found trapped in certain domains, activities and moralities (Borooah *et al.*, 1994), whilst recognizing the broad range of differentiation both within and between sexes. This goes beyond the supposition which assigns individuals to physical characteristics and specific, singular and linear behaviours. The various manifestations of differences of gender, identity and ethnicity contribute to questioning the dichotomies, universalisms, structuralisms and determinisms through which feminism has gone (Beasley, 1999), be they theories, practices and/or concepts. This search has suggested different positions, approaches and notions, significantly altering the questions associated with feminism, as Delmar explains:

...such differing explanations, such a variety of emphases in practical campaigns, such widely varying interpretations of their results have emerged, that it now makes more sense to speak of a plurality of feminisms than of one (Delmar, 2001: 9).

Amongst these schools of thought we can find: radical feminism, socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, lesbian-feminist schools, women of colour, post-structuralism feminism (England, 1999; Rich, 1999). Here it must be recognized that there are also positions which currently seem separate from feminism, but which nonetheless have been influenced by it, such as masculinity and gender studies—in which homosexuality has been recognized as a third.<sup>49</sup> With respect to the notion of gender itself, it is possible to associate it with a category, an approach or a concept which can support possible differences which are not reflected through the biological distinction referred to sex, at the same time as being able to capture possible similarities between and within genders (Frantzen, 1993),

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<sup>49</sup> The term “third” is often used to make reference to the differentiation of an “other”, meaning this can be associated with individuals who do not consider themselves either men or women, so as to be able to make reference to the existence of more than three, four or five genders. See (Roughgarden, 2004).



and which is also justified by individual situations of change influenced by feminism, as explained by the following quotation:

The reasons for gender's emergence as a distinct area of study are not obscure. Widespread social changes in the relations between women and men have transformed old assumptions about the inevitability of gender inequality into new questions about its causes, shape, and significance (Gerson, 1990: 301).

The gender approach, although relatively new, is not exempt from theoretical, methodological and conceptual controversy, above all when it converges with post-structuralism perspectives which demand all types of determinisms to be abandoned, be they discursive, theoretical or even practical (Harding, 1996). This proposition interested me insofar as it has been observed that within many gender studies, some deterministic postulates continue to persist, such as the assumption of the reproduction of a patriarchal system, as well as forms and structures which generate relations of power and inequality across genders. In addition to this current of feminist thought, there is also a requirement to remove oneself from all types of reductionist determinisms, including gender (Harding, 1996).

Within this orientation, some feminist studies have refocused on considering the perspective of the actors from the point of view of the individual, observed in their everyday practices, towards more complex and wide ranging settings, which consider the influence of other types of human relations, including physical and contextual elements (Strathern, 1987a, 1987b). It should be mentioned that these transformations in feminine thought and women's studies have scarcely been able to permeate the representations of women and the feminine in the Isthmus. Indeed, I have only been able to recognize Miano's proposition of treating homosexuality as a third gender (Miano, 2002).

This led me to reconsider the limitations of the gender approach, which until that moment had been a common space, and it was only then that I was able to appreciate the differences and adopt a more relativist stance with respect to gender in the Zapotec culture of the Isthmus, which in a certain manner is often explained as a sort of backdrop that is sometimes affixed to nature and on other occasions built upon socio-cultural determinisms. This idea led me to account for certain considerations regarding the Isthmus, which, at first glance I had past unnoticed but which nonetheless have played a central role in this work.

## Perceiving differences

A central aspect of considering differences is precisely the diversity of the region, both human, and physical and contextual. The social groups which inhabit the Isthmus of Tehuantepec are multiple and diverse; indeed even just by considering the Zapotecs, it is possible to distinguish between Juchitecos, Tehuanos, Espinalaños, Ixtaltepecanos and Blaseños (Coronado, 2004). This fragmentation is extended further upon consideration of the other ethnic communities and groups which form part of and inhabit the Isthmus, but which are not Zapotecs, such as the Huaves, Zoques, Mixes, Mixtecos and those referred to as Vallistos. Similarly, within each of the communities and towns, there is also differentiation by *barrios*, *colonias* (borrows), ethnic groups, families, professions, age and of course, gender, amongst others, and it should be noted that even being male, female or homosexual is not the same within Zapotec groups. Indeed, the diversity of these three groups is revealed upon perception of the multiple articulations between the aforementioned elements such as age, personality, identifications and activities.

This new perspective of perceiving the actors invites one to reflect in a different manner upon that which occurs in their everyday life and in their specific contexts, since even if the repertoires of the Zapotec societies of the Tehuantepec Isthmus stimulate the search for the possibility of refuting the thesis of the universal subordination of the woman, the act of making this assumption is accompanied by the search for how it is produced, leaving the rich spectrum of articulations which are performed by the women of the Isthmus themselves to one side.

According to the proposition of post-structuralism, in order to understand what happens with respect to women and their societies in the Isthmus, it is necessary to be conscious of many more elements than just the Zapotec, gender and culture, with the aim of observing the interactions which affect the actors in different manners, such as geographical characteristics, and historical, cultural, economic and political processes, which have been experienced by each community in diverse ways. It could be said that even in the case of each of the actors' experiences it is possible to talk of a microcosms in which human aspects are influenced by others.

In the Isthmus, these interactions are fundamental, insofar as it is one of the regions in which important and continuous processes of external intervention have taken place, as has been mentioned at the start of this work. Thus, these are processes which have involved communities, individuals and the environment in different ways and for different

periods of time. Consider, for example, the introduction of a commercial fishing port, or the oil refinery, which illustrate how the many changes have affected the various actors in different manners, including women.

This complexity led me to search for more comprehensive theoretical frameworks which allowed for an understanding of how the various individuals interact with each other and the world which surrounds them.

### **From within a new enclosure**

One of the approaches which allowed me to move closer to the practices of the actors from a perspective not based on the acceptance of structural or cultural determinisms was the Actor Oriented Approach. This approach offered me the first directions with respect to my initial concern for the impacts of development projects' intervention in the everyday lives of the actors. However, even when this concern moved towards complexities of human sexuality, many elements of this approach continued to be indispensable to my research.

This innovative anthropological proposition arose in the 1990s, although its precedent dates back to the 1960s when Norman Long conducted an extensive study of social change in the ethnographic study of projects of rural development, something which has also been referred to as a "school' of anthropology of development" (Olivier de Sardan, 2005: 12). In addition to the understanding of the "the 'social life' of development", this proposition considers the internal and external factors which have direct or indirect impact upon the responses, experiences and perceptions of the individuals or groups that are affected (Long, 2001: 14-15).

all forms of external intervention necessarily enter the existing lifeworlds of the individuals and social groups affected, and in this way they are mediated and transformed by the same actors and structures (Long, 2001: 13).

As part of this approach, external intervention projects intersect with local actors in multiple forms and generally in a way that is unexpected with respect to what has been planned. The interesting part of this proposition is that it considers the actors as 'active participants' instead of mere observers or recipients in processes of developmental intervention. It is from this point that interactions, negotiations and struggles arise between various types of actors, both present and absent, influencing situations and affecting actions and results. Here, the notion of an 'interface' is

central in making reference to those processes of accommodation and conflict which create the space for new forms of organization and negotiation between the actors. Each time the 'interfaces' suggest the existence of discontinuities between actors which involve critical meeting points between "different social fields, domains or lifeworlds", which are based on the confrontation of values, interests, knowledge and power amongst the actors involved (Long, 2001: 177).

This approach centres upon the notion of human agency, since it locates individuals in the specific lifeworlds in which they manage their everyday affairs. It also means recognizing that, within the limits of the information and resources they have and the uncertainties they face, individuals and social groups are 'knowledgeable' and capable; that is they devise ways of solving, or if possible avoiding, 'problematic situations', and thus actively engage in constructing their own social worlds, even if this means being 'active accomplices' to their own subordination (Long, 2001: 24).

I found this approach enlightening with respect to the importance of questioning the passive role with which actors within processes of intervention for development and social change are often approached. Similarly, it was possible for me to identify the importance of the actors' practices in their everyday life in order to illustrate implications and meanings which for them have tended towards what are often called as rural development. According to this perspective, the practices of the actors allow one to go beyond hegemonic visions which do not consider the difference and heterogeneity of situations present in social arenas. The deconstruction of these processes was an assertive tool with which to capture the heterogeneity of development practices, social discontinuities, counter-tendencies and mutations (Arce & Long, 2000, 2007; Long, 2001).

This lead me to reflect upon the societies of the Isthmus in a different manner, not from within a linear, homogeneous and staggered process, as they are often referred to for the justification of an additional intervention process, but as part of more complex processes where the actors organize and reorganize their practices, giving form to new situations and lifeworlds. This approach converges with attempting to avoid all sorts of determinisms or a priori situations, by focussing attention on what is referred to as 'social differentiation'. I thus began to recognize many of these propositions in my work with the actors in the

field, such as the action of the actors, the processes of interface, counter-tendencies, discontinuities and social differentiation.

Another important area of research requiring new analytical insights is that of social differentiation. Unlike much previous work on this topic that concentrates largely on class dimensions, greater attention must be accorded to issues of age, gender, ethnicity and other identity relations (Long, 2001: 236).

Therefore, even though now I was able to articulate and deconstruct women and feminine determinisms, and to relate these to the influence of development intervention projects in the actor's practices, in a certain way, it was clear to me that this line of research would have implied to follow a development project in which women participated. However, it was the actors themselves who impelled me to move away from this objective, since they were usually involved in multiple and interconnected activities, some of which were related to different development projects. It was at this point that searching more deeply into ways of approaching human interactions and actors' action became my priority.

### **Looking at human associations**

Some collaborators of Norman Long have paused to consider aspects related to human agency associated with the multiple and complex processes of which they form part.<sup>50</sup> My readings of such authors drew me closer to what is referred to as 'pragmatic sociology', best known as Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Callon, 1987; Latour, 1999; Law, 1992). This is considered as a coherent paradigm that contributes to a sociology of action on account of the originality of the method used to describe actions, whereby human actions include constructing a theory, applying a category, justifying oneself, denouncing, associating with other human beings, failing to act, and so on (Bénatouil, 1999).

This proposition provided me with the motivation for further reflection upon ways of explaining the social, considering the importance of recognizing complexity, or rather notions such as diversity or heterogeneity, dynamicity, and multiplicity, to which I shall repeatedly return throughout the course of this work. Indeed, one of the elements which most attracted my attention is that as part of this theoretical

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<sup>50</sup> Gerard Verschoor is one of the pioneers in the incorporation of this theory to the propositions of the Actor Oriented Approach in the Netherlands. See (Verschoor, 1997, 2001).

framework there are no definitive perspectives: much of human interaction is often vague, undefined and diffuse (Law, 2004b: 24-25). This coincides with the diversity of situations which I met with in the field, insofar as that in spite of their differences, I was able to appreciate that many of the actors have a number of things in common.

I gradually discovered other methodological and theoretical elements in the ANT which allowed me to make sense of the considerable variety of situations I found. One of the first of these was the existence of currently performed patterns of realities or foregrounds, alongside others which were less so. Here I was able to locate those perspectives on the Isthmus which are often presented in a variety of forms through the discourses, artistic representations and practices of the individuals themselves. Likewise for the relationship between the diversity of individuals, and not only restricted to women: the different ways of life, the projects with which the actors have become involved, will amongst other elements become clear during the course of my reflection.

According to Law, Actor Network Theory offers a new way to see societies where social relations are the effect or product of alliances between heterogeneous elements, including human and non-human entities, as is suggested by his key theoretical writings: “the social is nothing other than patterned networks of heterogeneous materials” (Law, 1992: 381). In this approach, the notion of a network is used as a metaphor in order to make reference to that articulating sense and of movement, of a different magnitude and architecture, which is produced by the actors and from which they are also a result upon interacting in a symbiotic manner (Latour, 2005).

An actor is a patterned network of heterogeneous relations, or an effect produced by such a network (Law, 1992: 384).

It is important to mention that Latour distinguishes the non-human as ‘actants’ in order to differentiate from the human (Latour, 2005). However, it should also be made clear that in this work, this distinction is made on few occasions, due to the fact that actants are considered as an element which influences and transforms the meanings and actions of the human. Moreover, its importance also arises in the production of differences and identifications, as will become clear in the case studies. In other words, even if these do not serve to focus the narrative thread of the cases, this is not to say that they are considered as something passive. Indeed, this form of conceiving of actors, including the actants, allowed me to see the broad spectrum of possibilities which can give rise to the

production of networks in the local, and from then on, I was capable of perceiving gender as one amongst many.

In this school of thought, the agency of the actors and actants are considered as an effect which is referred to as 'translation' (Latour, 2005), generated by the collection of elements which form part of the network (Law, 1992), and not as something inherent which requires some form of detonator or as a quality which can also come to be developed in individuals. The fact that according to ANT, action and agency are produced in everyday practice attracted my attention, and hence the recognition that changes and interventions also take place which give rise to new forms and actors, as well as the series of valuations with which they often associate themselves and transport the elements of a network. This argument is condensed in the following sentence:

Actantially, is not what an actor does but what provides actans with their actions, with their subjectivity, with their intentionality, with their morality (Latour, 1999: 18).

Hence the different notion of agency proposed by ANT became relevant for me, because from this, I was able to question the supposed universal subordination of the women which suggests the existence of dominant structures which favour the masculine. When, from the perspective of ANT, even if the production of orders or architectures are recognized, it is suggested that these are produced through constant action, as opposed to existing in a predetermined manner, precisely on account of the fragile and moving character which also characterizes a network and thus, they are able to affect the disarticulation of networks.

This meant that exploring the nature of character or articulations which appear to be solid, stable and durable, such as those associated with the Isthmus societies becomes an indispensable exercise, above all in light of the recognition of asymmetries and dissimilarities, such as those which have been mentioned before, in spite, and taking into account the presence of the actors and situations which are suggested as dominant.

Domination is never a capital that could be stored in a bank, it must be spread, un-blackboxed, repaired and maintained (Latour, 1986: 126).

I gradually became attracted to the notion of 'enactment' which became fundamental to this work since it helped me to focus on the actions of heterogeneous actors which contribute to the performances of diverse, multiple own characters and whose practicality would vary in line with how this set of practices is connected, overlapping or disrupted (Mol,

2002). That is to say that the existence of a situation is the product of a set of practices, which in turn form part of other practices.

The notions proposed by ANT regarding networks, agency and order provide solid arguments in order to be able to locate the wide range of differences and differentiations which can be produced in the social, whilst indicating an architecture with which to view possible connections between these and their contexts. Consequently, I found this more comprehensive and innovative when approaching the understanding of human relations with their surroundings in a different way. However, above all, it allowed me to connect struggles and settings which previously seemed to me to be partial or fragmented.

Under this new umbrella, the elements set out at the start of this work —the representations, discourses, stereotypes, intervention processes, geography and culture— form part of these associations, or networks, in which it is possible to locate the perceptible motives and drives which lead them to act, as well as various situations of change and semi-stability in different periods of time, critical moments and contexts. Furthermore, this proposition enriched my intention of starting from the dynamic, non-linear, non-deterministic perspective of the actors, recognizing that it is they who, “constantly engaged by others in group formation and destruction, they engaged in providing controversial accounts for their actions as well as for those of others” (Latour, 2005: 47).

Considering the actors as “the moving target” and not the “source of an action” (Latour, 2005: 46) requires attending the complexity of those associations in which they are involved, or rather, the heterogeneous, dynamic and multiple character which is presented by these connections which are constantly sought to be visualized and grasped in order to understand them. This variability of situations is accompanied by a search for answers as to how these associations hold together.

To retrieve multiplicity suggests admitting the idea of simultaneous coexistence at a single moment, the existence of others, which some authors have also identified as alterities (other worlds) or otherness (Mol & Law, 2002: 8).

In particular, the discovery of multiplicity suggests that we are no longer living in the modern world, located within a single episteme. Instead, we discover that we are living in different worlds. These are not worlds —that great trope of modernity— that belong on the one hand to the past and on the other to the present. Instead, we discover that we are living in two or more



neighboring worlds, worlds that overlap and coexist (Mol & Law, 2002: 8).

This approach also forces us to recognize the limits for recording the infinity of possible connections of the human, not only because in this case, this reflection is limited to specific times and moments determined by the fieldwork and the limitations of the researcher carrying it out, but also because, no matter how ambitious, a review cannot capture everything. In line with the approach and the ordering that have been selected, the study contributes to making visible some elements whilst others remain in the background or out of sight altogether (Law, 2004b; Strathern, 2004b).

Consequently, this proposal accepts the degree of relativity involved in the simplification of the complex, since this articulates different levels of comparison (between the micro and the macro) and abstraction (between the individual and the general) in addition to involving different associations and fields which, in general, are intertwined and overlapped upon each other. Thus, these articulations or networks which are not circumscribed to the human produce an entire multiplicity of partial connections. I shall now proceed to present the reflections which led me to reduce this complexity to five themes associated with human sexuality in Tehuantepec.

### **Ordering and justifying reductionisms**

Having found a theoretical framework more closely aligned with my interests and the challenges derived from the fieldwork, I then had to try to order the intersection of the practices of the local actors in relation to the wide repertoires which refer to the Isthmus region as the refuge for the matriarchy of the Zapotec culture and its link to developmental processes for change. For this purpose, I turned to the methodological tools offered by ANT in order to try to avoid falling prey to simplifications which did not favour capturing the intricate connections which take place in everyday life, or which can result in becoming trapped in common spaces. As some of the ANT's thinkers point it out:<sup>51</sup>

Objects of knowledge are presented as always too complex for the science to catch and order. They never really fit within the schemes that are made for them, schemes that are inevitably simplifications (Mol & Law, 2002: 5).

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<sup>51</sup> This debate is recognized by Latour as 'irreductions?'. See (Latour, 1988b).

In this sense, Mol and Law make clear their concern whilst scrutinizing methods for relating and recording “what happens to complexities in practices” (Mol & Law, 2002: 6). For these authors, simplification is not necessarily the opposite of the complex: thus it does not turn into interdependencies, but articulates elements which do not appear to fit well in a broader schema and do not pretend to include the whole, or, that is to say, are related by their difference (Mol & Law, 2002: 7).

Thus by paying attention to the phenomenon, event or characteristic in a somewhat forced manner, they lose sight of other events which occur at the same time and in the same space. Thus, more than a question of focus, it becomes necessary to try to discern the total sum with all of its parts. Accepting, on the one hand that the simple does not necessarily stop being complex and that the micro, in turn, is made up of infinite minute parts, which in their turn do not stop being part of something more macro (Massey, 2005).

The relativising effect of multiple perspectives will make everything seem partial; the recurrence of similar propositions and bits of information will make everything seem connected...Partial connections require images other than those taxonomies or configurations that compel one to look for overarching principles or for core or central features (Strathern, 2004b: XX).

This connectivity must account for the articulations which register both differences and similarities, with the aim of constructing propositions which include parts of the complex social network, located in specific times and places. This is what Mol and Law suggest as looking at the world through different pictures: “Imagine looking at different pictures, one after the other. Each orders and simplifies some part of the world, in one way or another, but what is drawn is always provisional and waits for the next picture, which draws things differently” (Mol & Law, 2002: 7).

It was thanks to this statement that I was able to appreciate, in line with my initial experiences in the field, that development projects would be an important part as selection criteria and as a part of the escenaries, although not the starting point of the exploration of the discourses and practices which are often associated with the local scenario. Above all because in this case I did not set out to involve myself or give continuity to any developmental project in particular, as I have mentioned before.

Instead, I was able to appreciate that this can be achieved through different themes commonly associated with human sexuality, especially, after having covered some of the more common representations of the

region and the women of the Isthmus—as mentioned at the start of this chapter—and what I found in the fieldwork. Beauty, gendered spatiality, sexual life, motherhood and intimate violence were the five themes I selected.

They were chosen partly because the term sexuality seemed to me a more comprehensive manner of capturing the rich range of repertoires and inscriptions regarding the relevance of women in the Isthmus societies, especially since sexuality can be understood as an impulse, whilst at the same time it can be referred to as an act, as a series of practices and behaviours which involve bodies, pleasure and organs, amongst others. Moreover, it can also concern identity and the collection of orientations, positions and desires which imply the existence of specific forms through which actors are differentiated (Butler, 2006; Grosz, 1994).

Thus, where the daily practices of the actors intersected with sexuality, it became viable to consider this in its complexity, or rather in terms of its possible associations with other elements, such as development, culture, the global and the non-human. At the same time it was also possible to explore the resonances or implications of the actors' actions on the production of their societies. Tehuantepec was the focal point around which images of the experiences of the individuals were interweaved. However, it should be noted that this is not the only community discussed in this study, since in their own account, the actors themselves go beyond geographical limits or determined spaces.

## **Methodology**

Amongst the first methodological reflections to which this work makes reference, the criticism of the form in which the variety of studies on women has been carried out is a constant. Here I came up against sources which point out the ample literature arguing for better understanding and competence on the part of the women towards the problems they face, something which Moore has identified as “women studying women” (Moore, H. L., 1988: 4-5). However, as this author skilfully argues, it has also come to unleash polemical perspectives on the matter, since not only does it question the competence and innovation of women in order to carry out studies which could be beyond the exclusivity of gender amongst the various disciplines, but it can also evoke a tendentious attitude towards the identification of problems related somewhat exclusively to women, and thus not particularly extensive towards the rest of the actors which surround them.

It should be noted that I also found this tendency towards the identification of genders in various documents which deal with the Isthmus societies, as the following text from Miano illustrates:

I have sufficient information when it comes to matters concerning women, since in the preceding research, I analysed their role in the construction of ethnic identity and, in fact, I did not find it much work to increase this information and its analysis. On the other hand, with respect to men, I had much more difficulty, since, precisely for questions of gender, I do not have access to the life of men in different social spheres (Miano, 2002: 21) [tras. J. Kelly].

In a certain manner, this reaffirmed my decision to try to view the empirical evidence critically, avoiding considering the woman and the feminine as the only axis, or as a homogeneous group exempt from differentiations within. This was how I set myself the challenge of seeking out the possible connections which encompassed a diversity of individuals—considered Zapotecs or not, be they men, women or homosexuals—*muxes*<sup>52</sup> or *gunangios* in this specific case.

In order to focus on the visualization of different perspectives in relation to the series of themes proposed, I turned to what Law refers to as “method assemblage” (Law, 2004b: 14, 104-118), which refers to the various practices or enactments which can evoke the greatest possible variety of associations of something which appears to be a singularity. This required not only ethnographic work, but also the addition of sources which problemize and in a certain manner destabilize perspectives which, on account of being well known, leave others concealed. This allowed me to link texts, images, discourses, observed practices and experiences which I shared with the actors.

I also became drawn to the theoretical and methodological proposition of ANT because it allowed me to present case studies which do not necessarily seek to represent something extensive, such as a theory or a verification of similarities or differences which are often taken for granted. From the outset, I found this extremely challenging, bearing in mind that, as is mentioned in the introduction, in the Isthmus it is pretty easy to fall into the trap of being left with visions of a totality.

Furthermore, the quantity of material gathered in the field (which included interviews, life stories, direct observations and the revision of an

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<sup>52</sup> It is important to mention that Miano identified different identities among male homosexuality in Juchitán, such as *gay*, *loca*, *puto*, *travesti*. Ver (Miano, 2002).

inexhaustible source of references), meant that I found it difficult to find an order in something which seemed to me so complicated to hold together. In pursuit of this objective, the ANT suggestions provided me with hints as to the construction of the case studies:

*[T]hey may sensitiz[e] the reader to events and situations elsewhere that have not been recognized so far and that may well be improbable. They may seduce the reader into continuing to read, to ask what is going to come next. They may suggest ways of thinking about and talking other specificities, ... They may condense —...- a range of experiences, relations of a variety of different kinds. They may act as an irritant, destabilizing expectations. For instance, they may destabiliz[e] scale relations —... Or they may work allegorically, which means that they are manifestly telling but also about something else, something that may be hard to tell directly (Mol & Law, 2002: 15).*

In reality, I do not consider that I have fulfilled all of the points which have been outlined by this statement. However, I hope that some of these can be reflected, at least partially, in the following five chapters which gather together the field experience of this work.

### **The work of crafting**

During my fieldwork I had the opportunity of sharing my day to day life with several local actors. I have to recognize I enjoyed a privileged situation since, as I have explained earlier, my parents migrated to Mexico City from Tehuantepec and most of my family still lives in this town. When I arrived I even had two houses to stay in. The mere fact that the houses of my maternal grand parents; both the one at El Ocho and the one at the *barrio* of Santa María Reoloteca, where my mother was raised, opened their doors attracted the attention of the neighbors and all those who had been related to them in one way or another.

The visits to my paternal grand parents' house in the *barrio* of Laborío reestablished my relation with close relatives and the other *parentela* spread through out the town, from whom I had remained somehow distant during several years. In turn, they introduced me with other inhabitants of Tehuantepec.

This way of knitting relations, of expanding my network, was perhaps the main help I had that allowed me to build up the case studies of this work. In this sense, I left myself to be tempted by the ANT proposal that demands from the anthropological work to be affected by the actors; as Latour points out:

I don't know how things stand. I know neither who I am nor what I want, but others say they know on my behalf, others who define me, link me up, make me speak, interpret what I say, and enroll me. Whether I am a storm, a rat, a rock, a lake, a lion, a child, a worker, a gene, a slave, the unconscious, or a virus, they whisper to me, they suggest, they impose an interpretation of what I am and what could be (Latour, 1988c: 192).

Certainly, trying to follow the above suggestion has been a difficult task in which I have had to poke around in all my field notes, to search again in my memory for all that details of what I had observed and at a first glance I had been unable to relate them with the research questions and even to put them on paper. The same goes for the taped interviews that after hearing them on several occasions, every time used to provide something I had been unable to grasp before. From time to time I also had to go back and disturb the research questions, and I became conscious that the concepts and theoretical references one becomes accustomed to, tend to turn unfeasible and alien and, at times, as one goes along with the research, one needs to rethink the frameworks and concepts which support the research. To all this I should add my own uncertainties and insecurities that contributed to unsuccessful attempts to show part of the world I came to know from the living experiences of others, that is to say to: "extract the world from nothing every morning" (Latour, 1987: 193).

In spite of all this, I had to try to keep procedures, to observe and ask questions all the time, to register in detail the happenings, to write down ideas that spring out suddenly, to verify the information obtained, to assess its resonances, to imagine, perceive and perform spatially and temporally situated alien realities, that with time somehow became part of my own experiences; "[o]therwise a day's work is lost" (Law, 2004b: 30).

Perhaps the main challenge of the research was to grasp the precarious and the fragile and to convert them into more or less stable traces or traceable associations, in order to reflect concrete networks that were perceived more complex especially in the debate with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. In this sense I do agree with Law when he reflects upon Latour and Wolgar's work (1986): "The findings of their ethnography are neither empirically weird nor theoretically strained" (Law, 2004b: 38). Because, in a sense, my findings are interconnected with all those elements that allowed me to see what was left aside or ignored before me; such as representations, discourses, statements, other findings, as I mentioned before. And also, because I had to deal with the choices I made in order to highlight some issues, and leave others in the background. None the less, realities are enacted.

During the year and a half that I lived in Tehuantepec (between 2006 and 2008) I managed to understand part of the story of how the local actors live, feel, wish, desire, especially in relation to sexuality; once I focused my research on this topic. Everyday I observed what was going on around me, but also I made good use of walking around to ask things; sometimes I even could manage to sustain a long and interesting chat with an unknown and casual informant. I also carried out more than 150 open interviews the majority of which remain registered in my notes; I taped about 50 of them, which came from the key informants. In this respect, I have to point out that I only use informants' testimonies to illustrate a specific argument or comment, or to support the narrative of a given case study. I deliberately abstained to present full interviews as I feared this would become excessive and tedious.

I also should mention that the majority of the actors I came across during the fieldwork were open to contribute the accomplishment of this work. I was even able to return to them on several occasions, either physically or by media, in order to clarify doubts and verify data. Thanks to this solidarity I was also able to gather printed material and to have access to some photographs actors keep at home. Much of this material proved to be relevant in the making of this work.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter summarized the long theoretical and methodological journey that helped me order my fieldwork data, and make sense of actor's practices and the complexity of the world they enact. This journey also guided me to consider actors as active participants, as well as the interfaces they get involved in as the result of their situated interactions. Human sexuality serves here as the point through which actors' practices are assembled into networks. I tried to illustrate this idea through the five themes pointed to above. The first one, which concerns beauty, is object of the following Chapter.







Pg. 64:  
Dancing

Previuos Page:  
Couple

## Enacting beauty: complex images in action

### Abstract

This chapter seeks to articulate common repertoires of beauty in the Isthmus together with the practices of beauty enacted by actors in everyday life. This study reflects upon why beauty in the Isthmus has been considered special or atypical for a long period of time. It also reviews various conceptions of beauty from the Western world, suggesting elements that serve to identify complex notions of it, in contrast to the fixed and homogeneous patterns which appear increasingly imposed upon the lives of individuals. The diverse and multiple conceptions about beauty raises the possibility of how its enactment in the Isthmus serves to assemble a series of images and associations which are dynamic, multiple and heterogeneous. The actors' experiences and practices are focus on this issue using the Actor Network Theory in order to testify to the existence of differentiation, and to the otherness of beauty as a common ground and not only as a minoritarian reduction.

### Introduction

In both the ancient and modern world, a diverse range of theoretical, methodological and practical references have exposed the considerable influence that beauty has had on human life (see Brand, 1999; Colebrook, 2006; Eco, 2007; Perniola, 2007; Synnott, 1992; Tatarkiewicz, 1972). It is currently believed that new technologies, marketing and media, and the arts, disseminate and influence the construction of stereotypes of beauty, suggested as being universal. Moreover, in addition to supporting and promoting specific forms of appearance and conduct, these models seem to emanate from abstract entities, such as the fashion industry, cinema and television, and not from the individuals who embody them.

There is extensive literature surrounding the construction of stereotypes of beauty. Some examples from this body of work include the

influence of the fashion industry on the increase in problems related to eating disorders (Bordo, 2003c), the rise in cosmetic surgery for the transformation of the body and its effect on the development of new technologies (Morgan, 2003), and also the signs which make clear how women have become labeled by the roles and patterns established by a sexist culture which makes them victims of a lucrative industry (Andreoni & Petrie, 2008; Bordo, 1989, 2003c; Butler, 1993; Wolf, 2002) whose influence also extends to factors such as race, class and gender (Casanova, 2004; Eugenia, 2003; Gillespie, 2003).

However, these situations do not appear to affect the discourses and representations of beauty in the Isthmus since these usually evoke the image of the tehuana beauty as an alterity in the contemporary world. From the initial records in the nineteenth century through to the present day, the Zapotec people of the Tehuantepec Isthmus have aroused the imaginations of travellers, artists, writers, ethnographers and film makers as they have passed through this region in the south-east of Mexico. Its clothing, colour, language, music, landscapes and inhabitants have become actors in a rich and variegated literary and artistic repertoire which has emphasized the beauty of its culture. Here it should be pointed out that women have been the centre of attention in many of these representations, as illustrated by Linati in the following paragraph:

Asia proudly cites the beauty of the Circassians, and Europe of the Greeks; however, in the case of Mexico, its Circassia is to be found in the province of Tehuantepec. This Indian race which possesses in almost all parts, features that do not bear much resemblance to our notion of an ideal beauty, appears ennobled in a region which is favoured by nature. The women of Tehuantepec pass for being the most beautiful women in Mexico. Their colour frequently approximates the whiteness of Europeans; however, here roses do not harmonize with the sparkle of the white lily; the characteristic paleness of the Indian people erases those contrasts of colour which inspired the brushstrokes of artists such as Tiziano and Rubens. The totality of their forms, the elegance of the curves of a generally elongated figure, the sparkle of their black eyes, the arched eyebrows which meet at the forehead, all this gives them a character of beauty which is to be shared with other regions and rivals the apple of Paris. If it were possible to affirm that the human race possesses an instinct, it would be that of woman's flirtatiousness. These Indian women are inhabitants of a country which bathes in the sea on both coastlines and they possess this instinct to the highest degree. Nature has taught them how to

value the most seductive of their charms: while a masterfully placed veil may not show more than the expression of their eyes and the graceful lines of their face, a tightly fitting skirt which does not permit them to elongate their step and clings to their hips, allows one to catch a glimpse of a slender figure and well-formed legs. It could be said once more that there is another instinct: that of the malicious gossip which is also associated with the reputation of these beautiful Indian women; but if instinct is blind, why should we not believe it is mistaken? (Linati, 1828); cited by (Mecott, 2005: 16-17) [trans J. Kelly].

The various representations of women in the Isthmus have contributed to making the image of the Tehuana the most common reference point and the most representative icon associated with the region's beauty. In the contemporary world, the woman from Tehuantepec often represents an alterity on account of her apparent resistance to the globalization of aesthetics. Thus, the image of the Tehuana would appear to contradict, or at least counterbalance, universal images and ideals of beauty in which attributes such as being thin, cosmopolitan and modern, together with other specific forms of appearance and conduct, affect contemporary ways of life. This has increased the relevance of certain images from the Isthmus, above all those which reveal actors of an 'exotic' beauty, as is illustrated in the following paragraph from Covarrubias, first published in 1946.

To be slim in Tehuantepec is a sign of poor health, and women complement one another with "how fat and luxuriant" ("*frondosa*," in the sense of a great leafy tree) "you look!" –their equivalent of our "You are looking very well." There is a tendency toward plumpness, and "luxuriance" is indeed the most fitting adjective for the *tehuanas*— monumental, solid, strong flesh. Men like their women substantial, and a woman of normal weight among us would be considered skinny in Tehuantepec (1986 [1946]: 244-245).

Similarly, there are also numerous images in which the stereotype of beauty in the Isthmus is materialized, such as the following examples, taken from the *Artes de México* magazine in a volume dedicated to compiling images showing the recurrence and impact that the Tehuana has had on the discipline (Artes de México, 2000):



Estela Ruiz, Rafael García,  
1937



Muchacha linda. Bernice Kolko,  
1954



Tehuana, Alfonso X. Peña

It should be noted that many of the images evoke the millennial past of the Zapotec people, especially the distinctiveness and exoticness of their everyday life and their uses and customs (Ruy Sánchez, 2000). Thus, the Tehuana would seem to evoke the beautiful, mysterious, proud and rebellious character associated with her people, also considered as an icon for a people which continually stands out on account of the beauty and the centrality of their woman (Zamorano, 2005: 24).

This is not strange, however, above all when one considers that in the context of the Mexican society at the start of the twentieth century, the geographical, economic, political and artistic notoriety of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec contributed to focus on this figure as one of the unavoidable reference points in the construction of the national symbols of the new Mexican State. As Sierra explains, by the start of the 1940s, the Tehuana was already a symbol of urban culture (Sierra, 2000: 25). This symbolic construction placed emphasis on the specificity of the native people: their splendid past and ethnic difference. Even if these two aspects often characterize the otherness of Mexico on a global level, on the micro level, they become, somewhat paradoxically, a simplification which generalizes the various peoples and actors, as Sierra explains:

To emulate the indigenous, to symbolically reinvent it, is outwardly to strive to resist homogeneity, although, inwardly, it works the opposite (2000: 25) [trans. J. Kelly].

This assertion is valid on the local level inasmuch as even the icon of the Tehuana evokes many of the elements which are often associated with the beauty of this culture, such as a tropical paradise, feminine bodies, ancestral customs, physical features from yesteryear, these doubtlessly

serve to label the Tehuana as the stereotype by which the region is represented. Hence, she appears as a single, stable, definitive and pure model whose simplification serves to obscure the various manifestations and articulations of beauty produced by the actors on a daily base in this multicultural region.

This context provides the point of departure from which to explore beauty in the Isthmus using the Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005), starting with a consideration of the fact that beauty also forms part of “those interactions of heterogeneous materials” which constitute the social (Law, 1992). From this perspective, what is most interesting is not to “discover” or try to explain the phenomenon itself, but to enquire into how it is constituted or how it is performed, as well as the multiple connections to the elements it articulates and materializes. One also has to consider that even if many of the elements which form part of these representations have been studied,<sup>53</sup> few, or hardly any of them have been referenced with respect to the actors’ experiences with respect to beauty in their everyday.

The different experiences of actors allow the study to transcend the representations, discourses and stereotypes of Isthmus beauty, focussing on the possible articulations which make beauty a complexity; both in the manner it has been affected by Western notions that tend to homogenize it, and in the collection of dynamic, multiple and heterogeneous associations in which Isthmus beauty is produced and differentiated. ‘Enacting beauty’ shows how beauty in Tehuantepec, more than being a symbol, constitutes a practice in the everyday life, as well as a space for action and room for manoeuvre.

This Chapter presents the situations that called my attention and in which practices of beauty differed from the local stereotype. Subsequently, I delve into the difficulty of approaching the notion of beauty in the Western thought. Following this, I present, through a series of case studies, how differentiation of ‘Isthmus beauty’ is enacted through actors’ practices. The cases are ordered in three sections; respectively: the image of the Tehuana and the different ways in which she is enacted (which includes three case studies: a balseña’s fantasy, embracing another world and performing the Tehuana); the stereotype of being ‘different’

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<sup>53</sup> Some studies have highlighted the problematic of being centred on representations of the Isthmus (Campbell & Green, 1999; Lozano, 1992; Ruiz, 1993), others have advocated searching into the different elements which appear in these representations (see about Zapotec language and outfits: Cajigas, 1976; Hernández-Díaz, 2006; Ríos, 2006).

(that presents two case studies: Vallista' beauty and the vice of fashion), and the scenarios that often pass unnoticed or remain in the background: 'Behind the cameras' (which considers the last two case studies: homosexual and masculine beauties). Finally, I present the conclusions.

### **Blindness in the presence of beauty practices**

One afternoon, as I was interviewing Carmen, a young woman originally from Tehuantepec whose look differs sharply from the stereotypical image of the tehuana beauty —to which I shall refer to further on— something which I had overlooked on a number of occasions became clear to me: the importance of appearance and personal care, alongside the activities which are related to this in the local arena. This realization is encapsulated by the following phrase she expressed to me:

That's me: always looking good! If I take care of my appearance, I feel good, I feel like I look pretty. Well, that's how I am, and I like it (Carmen, October, 2006).

Suddenly I was able to appreciate that an important part of the everyday stories (formal and informal), events and practices that I had shared with the actors is linked to the forms in which they enact beauty in their everyday life. Here I should remark that my appreciation was eclipsed by the vivacity of the most common representation of beauty in the Isthmus, something which contributed to losing sight of the form in which it is produced. However, the more I became immersed in the everyday life of the local actors, the more distant this embodiment of the Isthmus stereotype seemed to become. On all sides, I found myself coming up against irregularities, mutations, similarities and alterations of this stereotype.

When Carmen highlighted this issue, the first thing I noticed was the notorious antagonism embodied by her in relation to the Tehuana insofar as she embodied something which for some is related to the 'modern' (Covarrubias, 1986 [1946]). However, upon further consideration, this situation allowed me to appreciate many other distinctions in which beauty is manifested at local level, in addition to its links to the global. Thirdly, it was precisely this multiplicity of situations related to beauty which gradually revealed itself to be a regularity, awakening my interest in amplifying the Western notion of beauty with which its counterpart in the Isthmus is often compared, as it is explain in the following section. Here it becomes important to mention that Carmen's remark suggested all this to me. Probably without her even



intending to do so, for me her comment opened a Pandora's Box with respect to the issue of beauty, making evident how actors continuously connect to their experiences.

### **Some difficulties in facing notions of beauty**

Upon investigating the disciplines, theories and practices related to beauty in Western thought, it struck me that, in addition to being numerous, they can also be found from ancient Greece to the present day (Eco, 2007; Tatarkiewicz, 1972). Indeed, the phenomenon becomes a point of intersection for ethics, aesthetics, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology, medicine, feminism, and many others, all of which have contributed to the formation of a broad and diverse field for exploration (Brand, 1999). Thus, contrary to my expectations, it was not possible to refer to a single, homogeneous or universal body of literature upon human beauty; instead, I found a multiplicity of repertoires, both in terms of quantity and the wide variety of themes involved by the subject.

In Greek philosophy alone there is a broad spectrum of debate with respect to notions of beauty.<sup>54</sup> The body, the mind, pleasantness, proportionality, symmetry, colour, brilliance, desirability, love, magnificence, complexity, simplicity, melody and symmetry are some of the most common associations (Tatarkiewicz, 1972: 171). Conceptions of beauty as an intrinsic factor date back to the Middle Ages, where what are known as positive and negative simplisms of the aesthetic predominate; in other words, the pure, the pious, the whole, the virtuous and the illuminating, rejecting all that does not concede grace to the divine<sup>55</sup> (Eco, 2007).

The renaissance period is characterized by notions which move away from conceiving beauty as a property. Value judgements, relativity, imagination, experience, the associative and the metaphorical are all

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<sup>54</sup> One of the most common examples of this thought is Plato's exposition in the Symposium: "And the true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is" (Plato, B.C. 384).

<sup>55</sup> For St. Augustine "something is not beautiful because we love it, but rather do we love it, because it is beautiful" (Augustine, 397).

fundamental to these proposals.<sup>56</sup> Some other subtle changes, which are nonetheless important, are presented in the eighteenth century, where subjectivity appears as a distinctive element in the conception of beauty. Philosophers, writers and artists all occupy a central place in recognizing the role of feelings, emotions and the phenomenological, leaving determinisms on regularities and proportions to one side<sup>57</sup> (Livio, 2002).

A decade further on, the notions become more critical as irony, freedom, dynamicity, practicality, functionality and everydayness become central axes. Even the evil, the grotesque, the chaotic, the tragic and the melancholic all find a space within beauty (Eco, 2007).<sup>58</sup> For the last two centuries, ancient conceptions are countered by criticisms and others who seek to be innovative. Here, these visions that link objects in a somewhat superficial manner stand out, and thus beauty becomes something attainable, reproducible, homogeneous and substitutable (Eco, 2007).

Theoretically, beauty can also be conceived of as something which is indefinable, cannot be analyzed or even inexplicable (Tatarkiewicz, 1963, 1972). However, in spite of this assertion, the sources dealing with this issue have multiplied to encompass more topics and disciplines, including ones of a medical and technological nature. One of the most critical positions is to be found in feminist studies which points out beauty as a social construction that contributes to control women's bodies and live<sup>59</sup> (Colebrook, 2006; Wolf, 2002) whilst condemning the existence of a single and universal criteria which constitute patterns or stereotypes

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<sup>56</sup> For example, while Giordano Bruno claims that “[N]othing is absolutely beautiful; if a thing is beautiful it is so in relation to something else”; for Descartes beauty “signifies nothing more than the relation of our judgment to an object” (Tatarkiewicz, 1972: 172).

<sup>57</sup> For Hume: “Beauty is no quality in things themselves. It exists in the mind which contemplates them, and each mind perceives a different beauty” (Hume, 2006: 173-174); Kant dismantles it into that which gives pleasure and is useful, as well as dependent and free (Eco, 2007).

<sup>58</sup> It should not be forgotten that industrial development contributed to the incorporation and materialization of these new elements and thus here the foundations are established on which beauty becomes characterized as an artifice of the commercial (Eco, 2007).

<sup>59</sup> As an example, within feminist thought, it has been argued that: “Beauty is a currency system like the gold stand. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact” (Wolf, 2002: 12).

promoted on a global level (Bordo, 2003c; Wolf, 2002)<sup>60</sup> and which in some sense move beauty beyond the agency of individuals.

Thus it is not strange that beauty continues to be a fertile ground for exploration in the contemporary world. It should however, be pointed out that what is relevant is that these same criteria or reference points have played an important role in the way in which beauty has been interpreted in other cultures. In the Isthmus, for example, these have been translated into the construction of a stereotype (see p. 55) with which many of the conceptions connect, overlap, or distance themselves in a dynamic manner, appearing to be a sort of antagonistic opposite in the face of the dominant stereotypes of beauty presented at a global level.

### **One image, different embodiments**

Although the women of Tehuantepec, with the exception of the Creoles, are the least reserved women to have been observed in America, they do, however, possess sufficient modesty in that they will not present themselves in public places like this [billiards]. I saw only one who mixed with men without the least sign of embarrassment, audaciously challenging them to play pool and playing with incomparable tact and skill. She was a Zapotec Indian with a tanned skin. She was young, slim, elegant and so beautiful that she charmed the hearts of the white men, just as the lover of Cortés had done in another time. I have not been able to find her name in my notes. I have either forgotten it completely or must never have heard it at all. However, I remember that some would call her *Didjazá* in my presence, as a joke which meant “the Zapotec woman” in this language. I also remember, the first time I saw her, that I was incredibly impressed by her air of superiority and pride, as well as by the richness of her indigenous dress which was so similar to how painters represent that of Isis. I thought I was seeing that Egyptian Goddess, or Cleopatra in person. That night, she was wearing a skirt made from a striped fabric, aqua green and simply rolled round her body which was wrapped in its folds from the hips to just slightly above her ankles; a gauze *huipil* of flesh-red silk with golden embroidery. A species of short-sleeved shirt fell from her back, covering her bust, over which hung a large necklace of golden coins, pierced on the border

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<sup>60</sup> Whence the importance of recognizing the influence of the media in contemporary societies (i.e. in situations related to eating disorders) (Bordo, 2003c).

and chained together. Her hair, separated at the front and braided with long blue ribbons, formed two splendid braids which fell upon her neck, and another *huipil*, of pleated white muslin framed her head with exactly the same pleats and in exactly the same way as the Egyptian *calantica*. I repeat, never have I seen a more impressive image of Isis or Cleopatra (Brasseur, 1981 [1859]: 159) [trans. J. Kelly].

This description by Charles Brasseur (1859) is one of the examples most commonly used to describe the Tehuana. Pretty, legendary, fat or thin, enigmatic, proud, magical, extraordinarily natural, sensual, heroines and Amazons, these are just some of the descriptions associated with the beauty of the women of the Isthmus. Their presence continues to live, both in the everyday and during festivals, making her a perennial image in the Isthmus communities, as illustrated by the previous and following examples:

The woman of my town is highly admired, unfortunately only by the outsiders, by those who are passing through, since those who see her on a daily basis have become still in front of her eyes. Industrious and hard-working, that's her, the motor of the family, since it would seem that if she were to take just one day off, we would not be able to survive. It is true that some macho will say otherwise, but never to her face... But it's not all work, there is also love and fun: they know how to enjoy themselves. When there is a party, such as the *mayordomías*, festivals, or family celebrations, they forget all about the house; on these occasions, they look even more beautiful with their flowery dresses and luxurious ornaments and their expensive jewellery... (Chicatti, D., 2006b: 24) [trans. J. Kelly].

This dominant, single and homogeneous image of a Tehuana is, however, enacted in a different manner, depending on the person embodied, as is illustrated by the following experiences:

“Because you have the darkest skin, you always need to buy clothes that make you look pretty in your nice *huipil* and *nagua*”. That's what my father said to me, since I was a little girl (Eladia, May, 2006).

My good friend Hortensia has always been pretty; that's why my *compadre* Ángel married her. But before she wore a skirt [traditional clothing], not a dress [modern clothing] as she does now (Enriqueta, January, 2007).

Sara doesn't like to use the dress [of the Tehuana], even though she has her own. That's why people don't come looking for her to take part in the parades, like Xóchitl and Ulises. She's not like me or Emilia. We like to take our dresses to the festivals, or wherever else we are invited. I say we have to follow the tradition. What's more, the dress is pretty; it's elegant and it makes women stand out (Hermelinda, June, 2006).

These testimonies show that the beauty of the Tehuana is often indisputably linked to her attire. However, on account of the popularity which the Tehuana dresses find among locals and outsiders alike, being considered as beautiful and artistic objects, this is not strange (Artes de México, 2000; Brasseur, 1981 [1859]; Covarrubias, 1986 [1946]; Lozano, 1992; Martínez, 2006). There is a diverse range of studies dealing with different aspects of Tehuana clothing,<sup>61</sup> affirming that the concern for fashion among Tehuanas is the primary motive for obtaining economic resources (Covarrubias, 1986 [1946]). However, on this occasion, I seek to draw attention to how this, at the same time, articulates dynamic, heterogeneous and multiple meanings, as we shall see in each of these three experiences.

#### *A Blaseña's fantasy*

It must have been a month after my arrival, I can't remember exactly, but that afternoon, as it was becoming usual, I went to San Blas Atempa where Na<sup>62</sup> Eladía was born and lives. She was teaching me *Di'dxazaa*, or Zapotec, the language of her parents and grandparents, when she finished her working day at the market. I don't know exactly why, probably because she had become fed up of seeing that I didn't wear anything at all of what I now understand she believed to be indispensable accessories; which I had lost the custom of wearing because of living in Mexico City. She entered the room where she stored her merchandise and took out a plastic bag. From this she extracted a small lump wrapped in pink crepe paper. Upon handing it to me, she exclaimed:

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<sup>61</sup> There are documents which explore the origin, transformation, creation, and also the diversity of the various Tehuana dresses in which attention is often drawn to their continuous innovation (Covarrubias, 1986 [1946]; Hernández-Díaz, 2006; Martínez, 2006; Murphy, 1859).

<sup>62</sup> The Zapotec word used to address older and senior people respectfully.

— Take this; wear at least this pair of earrings. They're silver. Don't imagine they're like the others I sell, I have them in case someone comes to ask".

— But I've got earrings *tía*,<sup>63</sup> thanks; it's just that I didn't bring any. I replied, trying to return the gift.

— That's okay, but in the meantime you ought to use these. It's not good for you to go around with bare ears. Here we always wear earrings, even if they're just cheap ones. It's safe here, in this town, not like in Mexico City. That's why you still see people walking around wearing pure gold. You can see mine, I only change them for fake ones when I go to stock up in Mexico City, but I always wear something.

I was left with no excuse, and so I put on the earrings which were to accompany me throughout the remainder of my fieldwork.

At sixty-nine years old, Eladia likes to take care of her appearance. "I always like to look attractive", she would repeat, each time we went out, and she would spend a few minutes dressing up and fixing her braids—adding a touch of lemon juice and some natural flowers. Eladia likes to wear bright, vibrant colours which accentuate her dark skin, colours which, in her own words: "*alegran la cara*" [brighten up her face]. She always wears a necklace, and without exception her gold earrings. She is a *mujer de falda*, as those who wear the regional dress on a daily basis are locally referred to. In her outfit, it is possible to recognize what she refers to as the *Blaseño* style on account of the details that the women of her town have made to distinguish themselves from other women in the Isthmus. The *Blaseñas* are characterized for wearing a *huipil* with light embroidery which is often trimmed and adjusted at the waist and the neck, as well as their 'half moon' earrings, so called because the shape is to be found in the centre of each red gold earring.

Eladia spent her childhood helping out in the house, due to a fear of attending school.<sup>64</sup> From an early age, she was initiated into the sale of fruit and *totopos* which taught her how to manage accounts. In her adolescence, she learnt how to make *huipiles de costura*<sup>65</sup> and subsequently dedicated herself to hand-embroidering Tehuana dresses. At twenty-two years old, she travelled to Mexico City in order to help support the studies

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<sup>63</sup> The word *tía* or in case of a male *tío*, is usually use to referred respect to the person with whom one is talking.

<sup>64</sup> The fear had its origins in an occasion upon which she passed by the local school and saw a teacher punishing a youngster by administering a series of blows with a ruler to the palms of the child's hand.

<sup>65</sup> The term for *huipils* embroidered using a sewing machine using a chain stitch.

of her older brother, where she earned her living travelling around various plazas of the Mexican Republic selling Isthmus fantasy jewellery. She returned to her homeland after twenty years and currently earns her living selling flowers, jewellery and the occasional *huipil* in the market in Tehuantepec. Thus, in one way or another, she has always been linked to the elements of the image of the Tehuana.

Even when living outside of the region, Eladia has never stopped wearing the Tehuana dress which distinguishes her, although depending on her preferences, the requirements and context, she has incorporated items associated with areas from beyond the town. From an early age, when the use of dyes became popular in the City, she developed a liking for changing the colour of her long black hair: sometimes it became blond, others red, brown, etcetera. On some occasions she decided to wear shoes instead of *huaraches*,<sup>66</sup> depending on the city she was visiting. She would also interchange *rebozos* (shawls) for fashionable sweaters and on certain occasions she opted to wear underwear.<sup>67</sup> She also decorated her front teeth with gold plating, something that was very popular in its time, although the deterioration suffered by the passing of time and her concern for her appearance, have forced her to replace them with a dental bridge. Some years ago, Eladia began to need glasses, which she only uses when she sits down to sew or read religious passages. However, she never wears them outside the house as she associates them with an image which reveals old age.

All these elements have come to form additions to the way in which Eladia distinguishes herself from other *mujeres de falda*. However, on some occasions, she has also come to adopt the image of the Tehuana which is often identified with the women of the Isthmus, above all when she finds herself away from her homeland, as she explains:

“Goodbye, *paisana*.<sup>68</sup>” They would shout at me, wherever they saw me.

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<sup>66</sup> A type of Mexican sandal made from woven leather.

<sup>67</sup> For the women of Tehuantepec, underwear consists of what is known as the *enagua corto* or *refajo*. This is worn underneath the *nagua*, or main skirt, and on some occasions, some also wear the long *refajo*, depending upon the style of outfit and the taste of each woman. Women do not often wear bras or underwear beneath the *huipils* which cover their torsos, and for this reason some of the images by which they are represented often emphasize the total or partial nakedness of their breasts.

<sup>68</sup> Countrywoman.

“Goodbye,” I would reply, because I did the same too. When I saw someone wearing the dress, I would go over and speak to her. That’s how people get to know each other here. You can see it. If you go to the Villa<sup>69</sup> in Mexico City on the first of January, you can see the ones who wear the dress go up to the main atrium. When the mass is over, they take a photograph of all *the paisanas* together and then those who want to continue to where the Isthmus festival is taking place (Eladia, June, 2006).

For each change or introduction of elements, Eladia acknowledges having her own style which forms an extension to that of her town, one which has always changed with time, depending on the context and elements with which she has interacted. This was the discussion we had whilst she sat making *huipils* on a dark blue Singer machine from the 1920s, which she operates with the agility of her feet. There she told me about her favourite colours, the best fabric, the making of *huipils* and skirts, her favourite embroidery design, the jewels to be worn on festival days and for everyday occasions, continuously showing me the elements by which the other women of her family have been distinguished.

My sister is a *mujer de falda*, just like me, but you can see that my niece doesn’t use the dress. My mother only uses the *rabona* and my grandmother wears an *enredo*.<sup>70</sup> Before, women would only wear the *enredo*, that’s how Vale’s [her partner] mother dresses too. The skirts *enredos* were bought from the people of San Mateo, who passed through here on their way to the Centre [Tehuantepec]. Now though, you don’t get skirts like that, hand painted ones. They were red, purple and one was a sort of aqua green. When my grandmother was buried, lots of them were placed in her coffin, even new ones, because before, you used to put all your clothes in your coffin, including the gold. I’ve never worn the *enredo*, but I do wear the *rabona*. I make it myself because I like it to look spongy. I use three metres of cloth for

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<sup>69</sup> Famous sanctuary where is revere the Virgin of Guadalupe.

<sup>70</sup> The petticoats of the *enredo* are considered one of the original pieces of traditional Zapotec clothing. They were made on a loom using natural dyes in colours such as red, purple and blue, which were obtained from the local plant and fauna life (the Cochineal, the sea snail and the indigo, respectively). The local economy was founded upon these from the times of the Spanish colonies until the start of the twentieth century (Coll-Hurtado, 1998; Velasco, 2000). Today the weaving looms are less popular and their decrease in popularity has been attributed to the introduction of industrial fabrics coming from abroad, as well as the changes introduced in the regional dresses (Martínez, 2005).



my *rabona*, in contrast to the ones they sell ready-made. You're lucky if they use a metre and a half. That's why, when I have the time, I go to Juchitán to look for my material, because in the big shops there, you can get long pieces for a good price. That means I don't spend a lot. On normal days, I use the *falda*, because when I'm just going between here and the plaza, the *rabona* gets in the way. But when there's a festival, I have to put it on (Eladía, Junio, 2006).

As I immersed myself in the everyday life of Eladía, and other women from San Blas Atempa, whom I was introduced to thanks to Eladía, I came to appreciate that it is precisely through the introduction of minor or major modifications in their clothing that the women differentiate between themselves. This variability often passes unnoticed, especially for those who are not in constant interaction with this attire and the women who wear it. In my case, I must state that I was able to make out these differences, thanks to *Na* Eladía who pointed them out:

Today we're going to Sra. Gorda's house, who uses *falda de bola grande* [patterned skirts]; Sra. Eloisa, who always wears the *rabona*; *Na* Margarita, who uses glasses and *huaraches* like me; *Na* Petrona who wears flip flops...(Eladía, September, 2006).

This was how I was able to understand the significance of the details of each of the objects the women added to or removed from their attire, and which served to embody a different Tehuana. Furthermore, the differentiation was exacerbated on the days of festivals when the women knew themselves to be, and recognized themselves as, more beautiful than ever before. To wear a garment for the first time, to wear the popular pattern, to show items of jewellery, to make use of make-up, or to add emphasis using powders and perfume; all these details are revealing and are important to the enactment of different beauties —personality, way of life, economic circumstances, etcetera— in the collective environment. Thus, the Tehuana dress which often identifies the people of the Isthmus on the outside, becomes, on the inside a concrete element with which to differentiate a certain group, as well as its individual members. This case makes clear how the apparent homogeneity of the beauty of a Tehuana, is enacted in a differentiated manner from day to day. Attire is one of the components in which women can make continuous innovations, incorporating elements from their context which can be both of a local and global character.

However, there are other interactions which are accompanied by radical changes in the stereotype of Isthmus beauty, as is illustrated in the following case.

*Embracing another world*

Hortensia was born in 1949 in the heart of a Zapotec family from San Blas Atempa, meaning that from her young age, she grew up wearing the traditional attire. In contrast to her older sisters, she experienced the biological changes of adolescence at an early age, and she was only ten years old when her body began to acquire new shapes. Consequently, upon feeling adult, her interests also began to change. As an example, at the age of twelve, she became more interested in learning how to work and earn money than in continuing at school. When she was thirteen, she was working embroidering *huipils*, a common job, owing to the popularity and demand for the Tehuana dresses.<sup>71</sup>

I wanted to learn how to make ceremonial candles with an aunt who made them and lived in front of my house. But when I went with her, the first thing I learnt how to do was to make *huipils de costura* and then my aunt didn't want me to make candles any more. She left me on the [sewing] machine, and that was how I came to forget about school, *mija*.<sup>72</sup> I only made it to second year. Afterwards, she herself [the aunt] said to my mother: you should buy Hortensia her own machine, because she's learning quickly and what she makes is beautiful.

It took me less than a year to master sewing. What more can I say, *mija*? It would take me three days to make a *huipil de tres costuras* [with stitches of three colours]. My aunt admired me for it, she would say: No, I've got Doña Tere, una *pendeja* [a jerk], she has become old working here, but she is still unable to learn properly; on the contrary she [Hortensia] learns quickly. Perhaps it was already a part of me, because my mother also sewed, but she never taught us in the house. I don't think my mother

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<sup>71</sup> It should be noted that the Tehuana attire which is known today is the result of continuous local and external transformations, amongst which the "modernizing innovations" attributed to Juana Catalina Romero stand out. During the Porfiriato period, she was responsible not only for introducing the first changes in clothing by incorporating fabrics, redesigning and adding components to it, but also for the incorporation of technology and mass production (Chassen-López, 2006; Hernández-Díaz, 2006).

<sup>72</sup> Expression commonly uses to refer affection.

believed her, but when they bought me a length of velvet and I made a *huipil* for my sister, they thought it was good and I quickly left my aunt as they put me to work at home. Then, a lady, one of the ones who used to sell [in Tehuantepec] clothing in the market, came to my house and gave me *huipils* to sew. I made them so quickly that afterwards, the woman said to me: Aha! You'll come with me you can make them in my house. Who knows why she took me away, maybe because she wanted me to make more *huipils*. I can't even remember how much these people paid me *mama*,<sup>73</sup> the important thing was that they did, and that was enough for me. I was just a girl. I wasn't interested in money. I gave it all to my mother. I remember that I would leave the house early in the morning and I would come home in the evening. I didn't bother if my body was still *caliente*.<sup>74</sup> It is now that my body hurts all over (Hortensia, October, 2006).

Hortensia spent her adolescence working as a seamstress. At that time, she also discovered that she had a peculiarity which attracted the attention of the young boys who would surround her. She gratefully remembers:

¡Ay *nana*!<sup>75</sup> [Well!] I had a lot of boyfriends. I was really *cuꝛꝛa* [sneaky] *mama* when I was a younger girl, it was a secret to my parents. But when I started to get older, my father knew we had to have boyfriends, because that's how it is. He took us to the festival and he looked after us, but on the way back, he would forget about us because he was drunk. Ha, ha, ha. I remember how I liked dancing, I went to the festival in the morning and then I would go home to rest for a little, tidy myself up, change my *nagua* and *huipil*, and then go out to dance again in the evening. It was beautiful! I had a friend from Juchitán, he was my friend, nothing else, but he already knew that he was my dance partner. It's nice to have male friends, and to have boyfriends, because you can have both (Hortensia, October, 2006).

At the age of nineteen, Hortensia began to go out with Ángel, a Zapotec man who was originally from the Santa María district of Tehuantepec and who worked as offshore fisherman. They married at twenty and from then on, her everyday behaviour underwent a dramatic change. She moved to

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<sup>73</sup> Expression that uses to refer proximity, similar to say daughter.

<sup>74</sup> Expression that refers being sweaty due to the physical force executed while labouring.

<sup>75</sup> Expression that is used to stress surprise or shadow, astonish.

the *barrio* where her husband lived, and upon Ángel's advice, abandoned her job as a seamstress, stopped going to local festivals, and gradually renounced her image as a Tehuana, becoming a *mujer de vestido*, as those who wear Western clothes are referred to. This change was strongly influenced by Ángel and his preference for the 'modern' insofar as he was linked to ports, cities and women in which stereotypes of beauty were different. Hortensia was affected by this preference, she found the change difficult on account of the insecurity it caused her with respect to her image, however due to the complements from her husband she came to accept, as she remembers:

And so Ángel turned me into a *mujer de vestido*. He stopped me wearing the Tehuana dress. I continued to wear the *nagua* for two or three years after marrying him. I brought all the stuff I had in my *ropero* [wardrobe]. Then, a friend who lives here bought my gala dress for her sister –in- law. That was why I recognized it when she went to the *fiesta* [festival]: it was cherry coloured. “Well! Would you believe it? You just never know what will come of things”, I thought. Yet, when I wore a modern dress, then Ángel would tell me: ‘You look beautiful, I told you!’ I think that if he hadn't complemented me, I wouldn't have worn it. But as he would take me shopping, or bring me some from the places he visited, and go around complementing me, that's how it happened. At first I felt strange when he changed me: it was as though I'd been tossed into another world. Imagine: it killed me; he took me out of one world and put me into another. Now that I'm older, I ask myself why I let him do it; perhaps, because one wants to adapt to their way of being. Things would have been otherwise if I had known what I know now! That's why at present I can't use a complete dress. It has to be a two-part one in order for me to feel comfortable. You know that one puts the skirt on first, and then the *huipil*. It had to be just the same with my dress (Hortensia, October, 2006).

This was how Hortensia became a *mujer de vestido*, as those who wear clothes related to the modern world are referred to. This change linked Hortensia to places and activities related to her new image, as she came to frequent places such as department stores and clothes shops, beauty parlours and shoe shops, which were becoming increasingly popular in urban centres such as Tehuantepec, Juchitán and Salina Cruz; like *casa Janette, la moda al día*. However, her new clothing also served to associate her with outsiders, people who were treated differently by the women in

her hometown, above all in the plazas. In this manner, from that point, her mother tongue, *didjazá*, became her most concrete means of identification with the new generation of *paisanas*.

When I go to buy *totopo*, they shout at me “Here! Look woman, *totopo*”. And I answer them: “Ah! Guyóyi, xuba’ hui’ni”, (I’m looking for *totopo* with creolle corn). Then they talk to me in Zapotec: “Hay, *nana, nana*, bini xu’qui gula”, (I’m their *pasiona* then). Because, some people know me but others don’t (Hortensia, October, 2006).

At home, however, she can only practice their native language—which is also considered beautiful from Zapotec culture—with Ángel, because her children refuse not only to learn it, but also to prevent them from speaking *Zapoteco* in public—since it is often associated with indigenous people, which does not fit well with the image of modernization promoted in the Isthmus.<sup>76</sup> For Hortensia, the changes in her family members’ way of thinking confirm the passage from one world to another which on many occasions is accompanied by situations of conflict between its members, as she explains:

Imagine, afterwards when he himself said to me: “Why don’t you put on your *nagua* and your *huipil* and we’ll go to the party?” Well, no! “Not now”, I replied to him full of anger. However, I spoke to a friend of mine and she told me not to be silly, to ask him for money to buy a dress, and so I’ll change my reply next time. When he invites me again, I’ll go and buy myself a dress, ha, ha (Hortensia, October, 2006).

One of the situations which illustrate Hortensia’s testimony is how some of the local actors have found themselves involved in the manufacture and/or sale of Tehuana clothing, creating a somewhat stable livelihood from this activity. The case highlights that it is precisely the transition from one world to another, or the possibility of a change of image, depending on the moment, the situation and the specific context, to which the actors are linked. However, it should also be observed that this

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<sup>76</sup> The best example related with this change of the context is that with the launch of the “Antonio Dovalí Jaime” refinery which began operations in 1978, see (Rodríguez, 2003), the image of “Petrolero” appears and become as a stereotype among the population. It relates to those people that worked at the petrol refinery, and who had better wages, services and working conditions than most of the local population (Interview with Héctor Espinoza, August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2006).

possibility is also intimately connected to the value judgements associated with each image.

For example, at certain times, such as local festivities, it would seem that Tehuana clothing makes the woman look beautiful,<sup>77</sup> whilst in the everyday life of the women of the 'modern' Isthmus' world, it would seem to have the opposite effect. Thus it becomes clear that this image is also accompanied by a series of associations and meanings which are transferred to the person wearing the clothing, above all in relation to the traditional or the indigenous.<sup>78</sup> Accordingly, when Hortensia changes her image, she disassociates herself from those characteristics associated with her attire, whilst acquiring other new ones in line with this change. Hortensia's metaphor of a passage from one world to another clearly reflects the dilemma between the traditional and the modern, changes which evidently cannot be separated from the connections experienced both by the couple and their family in the context of the local and its links with the world beyond. This appreciable criticism of the appearance of the Tehuana in everyday life is rarely visible when festivities take place, when the streets are awash with Tehuanas looking more beautiful than ever, giving evidence of the temporal character of beauty, in the sense that the outfit for a party is considered especial to the one that women use daily.

#### *Performing the Tehuana*

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of June, I made my way to the *barrio* of Portillo San Antonio where Emilia and Hermelinda had invited me to attend the *baile velorio*, the event which marks the start of the festivities in their *barrio*. I arrived at their house around four o'clock in the afternoon as I did not wish to miss the details of the preparations. This was one of the occasions on which the women of the house had the pleasure of dressing using the Tehuana attire worn by their forbearers and which none of the four women who live in the house use on a daily basis. For the occasion, they had informed me that that night they would wear one of the simple forms of the

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<sup>77</sup> Some of the elements of Tehuana attire which often attract the most attention, both amongst locals and foreigners, include gold, embroidery in the form of flowers or geometrical patterns, and headdress of starched, pleated lace which emulates a form of aura. Many of these elements can be associated with Western notions of beauty which have previously been described.

<sup>78</sup> It should be remembered that in Mexico the term indigenous is largely used in the pejorative sense and associated with traits such as backwardness, being left behind and ignorance.

regional dress: the *falda sencilla*, *rabona* or *nagua de olan*,<sup>79</sup> owing to the fact that they would wear the *gala dress* the following day for the larger celebration.

Upon my arrival, I found sixty-three year old Emila already ready. She was the only woman wearing the *nagua de olan* since the rest of us had decided to wear *rabonas*. Emilia explained to me that she had prepared her dress days in advance, saving time by sending her *olan* (frill) to be ironed, even though this would cost her a day's wages. All she had left to do was to complete the finishing touches to her hair: a hairpiece in the form of a plait running around her head, interwoven with a wide ribbon whose colour complemented the rest of her dress, as well as a posy of flowers which varies depending on the age and marital status of each woman: "Married women wear their flowers on the right, the unmarried women, on the left; girls can wear them on both sides", Emilia explained as I helped her to put her hairpiece on.

Xóchitl, fifteen years old, with thick features, is the fourth of the five children which Hermelinda has raised. She was also preparing to attend the dance. Her older sister, Sara, helped with her make-up, as they waited for Hermelinda to brush her hair, since she has long and thick hair which she only allows Hermelinda to fix it. Afterwards, she wore on one of the many outfits which were in the bedroom, pointing out the fact that some of the items belonged to her grandmother.

That evening, Hermelinda arrived home early from work (around six o'clock in the evening) and informed them that she would not have to work for the rest of the week so as to attend the celebrations in her *barrio*. She brushed Xóchitl's hair, then, she took a shower and began to get ready. She put on one of the dresses which the young women had previously prepared, taking out items from the *baúl* (trunk) which once belonged to her grandmother, as well as from her aunt's wardrobe, washing (if necessary) and ironing them for the occasion. She took her jewellery box from its hiding place and handed her daughters items of gold jewellery they would wear that night, ensuring that none of them would be lost. When she was ready, she made the finishing touches to Xóchitl, adjusting her dress.

Sara, who was eighteen years old and with fine features, began to get ready around seven o'clock, pointing out that she was not going to attend the event wearing the Tehuana dress. Instead, she took a pair of

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<sup>79</sup> Gilberto Martínez notes that this skirt has its origin in a time when "the gathered frill made from same material as the foot would be removed from the *rabona* and replaced with a white frill made from another material" (2006: 23).

jeans and a cotton shirt from her wardrobe. She ironed them and asked her brother Ulises, the youngest who was twelve years old, to polish her shoes. Although to me it already seemed late, I was surprised to see that she was ready at around the same time as the other women. Sara's decision regarding her clothing seemed to have passed unnoticed by the rest of the women. However, when I asked her about it, their reproaches and criticisms pre-empted her reply.

— That's how she is, this jerk, she doesn't like to wear the dress, won't wear anything but those clothes; Xochitl points it out.

— Quiet, fatty! You'd love to be able to wear my jeans. It would be better if you hurry up; Sara snapped back. Afterwards she replied to my question. — The truth is that I don't like how I look in a tehuana dress.

— That's how she is, and neither does she like that we wear Tehuana clothes. When she graduated, she told me, she didn't want me to wear the dress. I didn't pay her any attention and I'll wear it even if she doesn't want me to; Hermelinda complained finally.

Following this incident, each managed to finish getting dressed, myself included, since Hermelinda and Emilia pointed out that certain details were missing from my dress, providing me with the brightly coloured *paliacate* (bandana) to be tied round my waist, talcum powder to avoid sweating and the *abanico* (fan) which is used to lessen the heat or mugginess of the night. At around eight o'clock we set off for the celebration, much to the joy of Jesús, the younger brother of Emilia and Hermelinda who has Down Syndrom and has been left in their care. He waited impatiently to go out, having been prepared by Emilia and their father, Roberto, who that night, preferred to stay at home looking after the house.

When I was at the event, I was able to appreciate that embodying a Tehuana is not an easy, or natural task, as one may believe from their representations, especially when the clothing does not form part of one's everyday attire. It requires time, money and dedication, as well as knowledge of how the items are used and combined. I became aware of this in my case and when I observed the women helping each other rectifying omissions or oversights in their dresses, as Emilia explained to me.

You can see yourself. It looked as if we were nearly finished. That's why I tell you that everything has to be prepared



beforehand and that we have to start early, so as not to be running around at the last minute. To go as a Tehuana is no mean feat. You have to pay attention to every detail so that the dress looks as it should, because it's a very elegant dress (June, 2006).

This experience shows how the image of the Tehuana transcends clothing, involving a collection of objects which have been passed down through a number of generations and practical knowledge. There are a vast number of items related to the attire, and the possible combinations also depend on the occasion. In this instance, I was able to perceive that for a woman to attend the five days of *her barrio* festival in Tehuana dress requires at least the same number of dresses. In addition, the women search for a way to make the most of the dresses they have: gold, fans, bandanas, mantillas, floral arrangements, as well as the hairpieces which have replaced the long manes of days gone by, and the *refajos* (under skirts) which help to provide form to the women's voluptuous figure. All these become flexible and malleable materials to be adjusted to the body, personality and style of the individual who wears them.

In this case, it should be observed that a fatty figure, an element associated with the beauty of a Tehuana, do not always enjoy popularity, especially amongst the younger women, who have become attracted to global stereotypes more in line with the current fashion market in Tehuantepec. Even if a fatty figure is considered a symbol of beauty, this affects women in different ways, depending on their age, the context in which they develop, and most certainly, their interaction with the materiality linked with each stereotype. This observation leads us to consider the perception of other images associated with the Isthmus stereotype, based on difference, as is illustrated in the following section.

### **The stereotype of being different**

In every town, however, there is a small aristocracy of citified girls who bob their hair and wear shoes, stockings, and tight-fitting modern dresses, unbecoming in comparison with the stately elegant, and colorful native costume. People in modern dress, symbol of ruling class, have introduced a new type of social snobbery, and the population is now sharply divided between people of *vestido* ("modern dress"), people of *olán* ("wearing ruffle"), and of *enredo* ("wrapped skirt") (Covarrubias, 1986 [1946]: 253).

More than sixty years have passed since Covarrubias registered the change in attire in 1946 which, little by little has become increasingly common amongst the women of the Isthmus. In spite of this, to this day, there are few references to the different local practices which produce images which differ from the stereotype of the Tehuana, images which are recognized as different and which produce a wide range of images which even come to dominate the local setting and which in the majority of cases are often associated with the stereotype of the ‘outsider’.

*‘Vallista’ beauty*

Socorro was born in 1969 in the *colonia El Jordan* Tehuantepec, better known as ‘*El Ocho*’ (The Eighth), from the number of the corresponding irrigation channel from the Benito Juárez dam which runs through the land. Like the majority of the colony’s inhabitants, Socorro is a descendent of people better known as the ‘Vallistos’ who, for a variety of reasons, such as the search for better employment opportunities, emigrated from the Oaxaca valleys in order to settle in the Isthmus. This is one of the reasons why she has never worn the traditional attire of the Tehuana, and also why she does not speak the Zapotec language. Socorro is a women whose body often attracts the attention of the population, especially men, on account of her figure which, to a certain extent, associates her with representations of the body of a Tehuana, as she herself explains:

People who don’t know me say I’m a Tehuana because they say that these women have large buttocks. Can you believe that one time when I was in Salina Cruz, a car even pulled up beside me to ask how much I charged? That’s why I don’t find it strange that men turn round to look at me, but at least Gustavo [her husband] seems aware of that. Recently, when a man came to give us a quote for the windows above the house, Gustavo told me that he just spent the time looking at my buttocks. That’s why he wouldn’t give him the job, even though he was cheaper. He doesn’t say anything to me though, he already knows that if he says something, I’ll answer back immediately, and that’s why he keeps quiet. I’ll threaten him because one of my legs is enough to shut him up. If that’s the way I liked him, now he should stop talking (Socorro, July, 2006).

Socorro is a *mujer de vestido*, the clothing by which she has been characterized since she was young, when she formed part of the immigrant community. However, in contrast to the observations of

Covarrubias, her different clothing is not linked to a situation of snobbishness, but to the custom of the inhabitants of communities which have little or no connection with the local stereotype of Isthmus beauty.

Until she was around thirty years old, Socorro enjoyed wearing miniskirts and tight-fitting clothes, but as she has put on weight, she has begun to wear the clothing often worn by the adult women of her community. She wears two-piece dresses on a daily basis: skirt and blouse, keeping her *trajecitos*, as she refers to the coordinated dresses, for festivals.<sup>80</sup> These latter she acquires from the comfort of her home, and at attractive prices, as she explained to me one afternoon:

You must see her! The lady with the white truck, she's the one who sells the clothes here. She brings a truck packed full of *trajecitos*. She's keen to sell. Just imagine, she brings it to your door. If you like an item and it's not in your size, she'll send it away to be fixed herself and won't charge you any extra. That's why she sells so many. Just a minute ago, I bought three: two for me and one for my mother. All of them cost five hundred pesos and you can pay for them in instalments (Socorro, May, 2006).

Socorro likes wearing light colours and currently enjoys wearing loose skirts and blouses, trying to conceal the parts of her body which have put on weight and which she does not wish to show, such as her hips and her buttocks, whilst allowing her to continue to show other parts of her body which she likes, such as the outline of her legs. On one occasion she told me about an incident related to the appearance of her legs which led her to undergo medical treatment for over a year.

My legs aren't as nice as before. When I realized that I had varicose veins, I asked around until I found somebody who suggested a doctor who would inject them. I ruined myself, because ever since I was injected, sure, the varicose veins have gone, but now I feel an unbearable burning sensation in my legs. That's why I went to Oaxaca for treatment. Now the doctor tells me it is only my nerves, but who knows (Socorro, February, 2006).

On many occasions, the popularity of this type of clothing, sold at prices which made it more accessible than the Tehuana clothing, have been cited

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<sup>80</sup> Outfits with two or three pieces whose style and colours are coordinated and whose components can include different combinations of blouse, skirt, jumper or blazer.

as a danger to the survival of the traditional dress and this type of beauty (Covarrubias, 1986 [1946]; Velasco, 2000). However, with Socorro, I was able to appreciate that there are situations in which the beauty of a *vallista* who can be identified as modern articulates the traditional beauty of the Isthmus, be it in the embodiment of her children as Tehuanas, or in the way she herself incorporates her taste for the local gold jewellery.

Indeed, I accompanied Socorro to look for Tehuana attire on a number of occasions, as she required it for Cinthia and Jesssica, her two adolescent daughters, so as they could participate in local events. Such events are run by schools or cultural centres which, through artistic presentations, recall traditional customs and the spirit of the Zapotec people. They take place in the main plazas of Tehuantepec, as well as in the cultural centre, behind the municipal palace and in the atriums of old churches.

I remember that on one occasion, none of my dresses suited the requirements of Socorro's young children, meaning that she had to seek assistance from a number of her friends from *La Colonia*, something which allowed me to discover that there are women who, on account of interacting with the Zapotec culture in a deeper manner, and who have incorporated the image of the Tehuana into their bodies, be it in a temporary or permanent manner. She shared with me her desire to do likewise, making the following comment:

Would you believe that in spite of being from here, I don't have any kind of Tehuana outfit. I want to buy one, even though I'm a Vallista, as people say, but as I don't go to the festivals, I haven't bought anything. Look at me now, running around in these rags. Let's go to my friend and see if she has one like they need. Even though she is also from La Colonia, when they invite her to the Tehuantepec festivals, she always goes dressed as a Tehuana (Socorro, September, 2006).

One day, tired of the loans and the amount of money required for renting a Tehuana dress and/or the accompanying jewellery, Socorro, whose economic situation has improved from when she was younger, finally decided to invest in a Tehuana dress for each of her daughters. However, upon purchasing the dresses, she discovered the requirements for other objects, such as jewellery, which complement them. When Socorro decided to purchase some gold jewellery, she invited me to go with her, sharing with me her plans to build up a collection of these items, in the same manner as the Zapotec women, since in practice they could also be of use to her for her own appearance.

The last time I ended up paying five hundred pesos for nothing more than stuff they wear on top [jewellery]. So it's better if I buy them bit by bit. My friend says that it's better to order the items than buy them ready made. A jeweller once charged her two thousand pesos for a pair of earrings with three coins. Of course she gave him the coins and a little piece of gold that she had. How do you fancy coming with me to Juchitán to have a look? (Socorro, May, 2007).

The following morning, we set off for Juchitán with the aim of finding gold coins. Before entering the shop which had been recommended to Socorro, we decided to look around a number of businesses selling various gold items, including pawn shops, in order to get an idea of their prices. However, upon returning to the shop, face to face with the jeweller, we both found ourselves with more questions than answers, and ended up receiving a lesson from him on purchasing loose gold:

Coins? Of course. What do you need them for? How many? Five or ten centavos? Look at these [showing the five centavo coins]. These are the ones they use for earrings with gold coins, but if you are going to send off to have them earrings made, I recommend that you buy used coins. These have already been soldered, that's why they're cheaper and that way you can save some money. There's no point in buying new ones, because at any rate, they are going to be soldered.

Following his advice, we decided to go to the market, where the majority of the jewellery stalls are located, in order to compare models and decide how many coins to buy. The variety of gold pieces attracted our attention to such an extent that we both ended up purchasing something, returning to the first shop where Socorro purchased the previously recommended coins. When we shared our experience with women who have more experience in the field, both Socorro and I received a vast range of opinions on how to acquire the famous *prendas* (items of jewellery). Amongst the most common strategies included: the purchase of jewellery being auctioned by the various pawn shops; that directly created by the jewellers; the purchase of new items with bids —as we did in the market—; payment in instalments, and participating in savings schemes which result in the acquisition of a coin or a piece of gold. On account of this, it became clear that the gold market requires a knowledge that is doubtlessly best acquired in practice.

By means of this experience, I was able to appreciate the existence of a large informal supply network of items related to personal

appearance, above all in relation to clothing. Furthermore, I also became aware of the existence of invasive surgical treatments or procedures related to the appearance of the body, those which women such as Socorro turn to, even without knowledge or information regarding the implications these may have on their health. This situation attracted my attention for future research.

Another situation illustrated by this example is that in addition to cases in which women find themselves attracted towards stereotypes of beauty which differ from the Zapotec, there are also others in which women find themselves linked and/or attracted to the stereotype of the Tehuana beauty. These connections show how elements such as clothes and gold, customs which include Zapotec parades and festivals, and individual representations or events which take place in the local environment, all become ductile to the interaction of traditional and modern beauties. Hence the overlapping of images or the ambivalence of stereotypes becomes visible when this difference is enacted by the actors. Yet, there are other cases in which the difference with respect to the local stereotype is often more radical, as we shall see in the following case.

#### *The vice of fashion*

Shortly after my arrival in the *colonia El Jordan* where I lived for six months, the first thing that attracted my attention was the electronic music and the noise of the children and adults coming from the neighbouring land, and so I decided to investigate what the noise was. This was how I came to meet Carmen and her family, who are originally from *La Colonia*. She and Joel, her husband, begin their working day early in the morning, at daybreak, to allow them time to prepare the food and sweets before Carmen sets off, at eight o'clock in the morning, for the only primary school in *El Ocho*, in order to sell her products to the children and teachers during their break.

The various dishes which she prepares —*tortas*,<sup>81</sup> *tostadas*,<sup>82</sup> tacos, chopped fruit, *tlayudas*<sup>83</sup>— require a great deal of physical labour and in general, she will always end with her clothes dirty. This is one of the reasons why she needs to spend time on her appearance before leaving, although the reality is that Carmen enjoys dedicating time to her personal appearance. Every morning, she leaves the house well-dressed, having

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<sup>81</sup> Mexican dish prepared with bread and different kind of meats and vegetables.

<sup>82</sup> Fried tortilla accompanied by fried beans, cheese and lettuce.

<sup>83</sup> A Mexican tortilla dish. See introduction, note 31.

washed, brushed her hair, and put on her make-up, something which attracted my attention in light of the number of tasks she must carry out as part of her morning routine. I should mention that the meticulousness of her appearance is not occasional or temporary, since even when returning from her sales, Carmen alters her appearance in order to go to the centre of Tehuantepec and carry out the purchases required for the following day. She also does so when she has a community or social engagement to attend.

At twenty-four years old and with three children, Carmen is of a medium complexion and has managed to maintain her youthful, slightly flirtatious aspect, which other women have not been able to retain with their transition to motherhood—including those from *La Colonia* and in Tehuantepec who are younger than her. Amongst her favourite items of clothing are strappy tops, miniskirts and jeans, and high heeled shoes, choices which seem strangely at odds with the fact that she must transport her merchandise by a bicycle or tricycle which is suitable for the load. Moreover, it should also be noted that the only paved street in this town only had been completed a few months ago.

As in the previous case, Carmen's image is not related to the stereotypical beauty of Isthmus women, or the famous Tehuana, even though she is originally from Tehuantepec and lives no more than seven kilometres from the town. Yet, even if she does recognize the beauty of Zapotec clothing, as well as its influence on the women of the region, she does not feel any affinity or attraction to it, since it is impractical, alien to her, and conceals the feminine figure. Furthermore, in contrast to the Tehuanas, she does not wear expensive jewellery or pendants, preferring instead to wear light and fashionable accessories which match the colour and style of her outfit, as she explained to me one day:

That sort of clothing is not for me. As I've said, I like it, but only seeing it, because it's pretty. It's pretty, but nothing else. If you could see my sister, she's turned out the same as them, and since she married a Blaseño, she even speaks Zapotec. I don't think you can distinguish her from those people. Maybe this is the only way to change. I think you have to become one of them in order to wear that sort of clothing. But as we don't follow their customs, we follow the ones from here, I couldn't imagine ever wearing those clothes (Carmen, October, 2006).

In addition to other young ladies from *El Ocho*, Carmen is attracted to the stereotypes which come from the large cities of the country, especially those originating in the Northern states of Mexico and the United States,

something which can be explained by the strong link between the members of this community and those who have emigrated to these destinations, be it on a temporary or permanent basis. The presents, the visits of the migrants and even the videos and the photographs, become protagonists of new influences and trends in terms of fashion. Carmen and her family incorporate and mix these trends with the local fashion, since it must be recognized there is a large supply of items related to the global fashion industry in Tehuantepec.

However, the fact that some family members close to the couple are to be settle on *del otro lado* (as The U.S.A is commonly known, referring to the *other side of the border*), has meant that images or stereotypes of Latin America dispersed by the mass media, have become both concrete and imitable. This is reflected when Carmen and the other young women incorporate various external elements into the female image at local level, such as hats, cowboy trousers, belts and boots, and above all, when rodeo events take place. It should also be mentioned that for Carmen, there are different occasions for each appearance and this has meant that she has dedicated long hours to her personal outlook, as she explains:

I never go into town without make-up. When I go to buy things for the business, I wear something light, but when I go out to spend time with Joel, I like to be dressed up... and don't even ask me about when there's a festival! That's when I really take a long time. He doesn't get annoyed, he doesn't even try to stop me, the only thing he says to me is 'hurry up'. Because just as that's how he was when I met him, that he likes to go out and have a few beers, that's how I was when he met me, that I like to get dressed up, because he didn't meet me like a *fodonga*.<sup>84</sup> He's already used to it, it's already normal to him, and I like that (Carmen, October, 2006).

Over the course of the years, Carmen's pleasure has become a passion, and has extended throughout her family, especially when there are celebrations,<sup>85</sup> as she explained to me that afternoon:

I like clothes a lot. So much that I think I have a vice for getting dressed up, especially when there is a festival. I've wanted to

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<sup>84</sup> A careless person in his/her personal outlook.

<sup>85</sup> It should be mentioned that the colonies which have grown to become part of Tehuantepec, such as *la colonia El Jordan*, have also adopted at least one day of festivities for their inhabitants, similar to the ones that take place on the old districts of Tehuantepec.



stop, but I can't, I've been like this since I was a teenager. No, since I was a young girl even. I remember that when the festival came and I didn't have anything to wear, I would throw a tantrum until my mother ended up buying me something. Now I have more reason for getting dressed up, but we all dress up or none of us do. Because, even though I like clothes, my children go first. That's why, as you see, when the festival comes, we all go shopping. We buy them clothes that they like, so that their outfits combine nicely, just the way I like it, all dressed up (Carmen, October, 2006).

Indeed, one of the consequences of this situation is that an important part of the income obtained by Carmen and her partner is spent on what she refers to as her vice:

I spend a lot, but I also enjoy it a lot when we go to buy clothes, when I buy shoes, when I buy my things. Clothes are my weakness. That's why I think it's good to be working, to have your own things to satisfy my pleasures and those of my children, because I can see that they enjoy it too. They are my energy. Joel supports me as well, he respects me and he loves me as I am (Carmen, October, 2006).

With the aim of making the most of her money, Carmen also looks for different ways to economize: for example, she turns to friends and relatives—who know the profession—to have her hair styled, avoiding beauty salons, which can work out more expensive. In a certain way, this contributes to the creation of largely stable links with the actors with whom they are involved, and it is not strange that the pleasure and passion with which Carmen enacts beauty is easily contagious, as has been the case with the members of her family, since she has also turned this into an activity for family entertainment. For example, on a number of occasions, I have found her sharing make-up sessions with her daughters, Fernanda (seven) and Lupita (four), painting their nails and carrying out other activities related to personal appearance.

Carmen shows these other ways in which beauty is enacted and reenacted in Tehuantepec. It is a different beauty which encompasses a range of actors: some of them visible, such as members of her family and the clothing, others less so, such as the local immigrant community in the American Union, magazines, videos, etcetera. It is a beauty which requires imagination and creativity in order to assemble elements which are derived from external stereotypes. It is a plastic beauty, but not in the sense of falsity or superficiality, but in the sense of adaptability and

contagion in the local environment. It is a beauty which makes her act, both in order to obtain resources and to make the most of them.

In this manner, the case of Carmen serves to illustrate not only the existence of other beauties, but also those other scenarios which often pass unnoticed, such as global migration, and which dismantle the Isthmus' image as the 'modern' and 'industrialized' pole which attracts a variety of resources. Hence, in the local, this beauty enacts settings which are different to the traditional festivals, the Isthmus festivals and the commemorative acts of the Zapotec culture in Tehuantepec. However, I should mention that thanks to Carmen and Joel, I was able to perceive the presence of another beauty at a disco event, and thus little by little I became aware of the existence of these many other beauties which often take place in the shadows of the dazzle of the famous Tehuana.

### **Behind the cameras**

Announced by the rhythm of *cumbia* music and drums, the beauties enter the stage in swim suits. Owing to a staging error, the lights were pointing towards the public, rendering the faces of the participants invisible. Only their silhouettes were to be seen: breasts, buttocks and legs, their way of walking standing out. Some walk rigidly, others gracelessly, others exaggeratedly swaying their hips, the skinny one walked on, like a half dead lamb. As I suspected, Manuela won the applause of all on account of her, extremely professional, model-like feminine stride. From then on, it was clear who would be the winner (Miano, 2002: 153) [tras. J. Kelly].

This paragraph, written by Miano, describes a frequent stage in all beauty pageants. Although in this case, the writer is describing a gay ceremony, *Señorita Huatulco*, which took place in this port in 1995 and which the author attended whilst carrying out fieldwork on the Juchitán *muxe*' community of the Tehuantepec Isthmus. The reference serves to introduce the other beauties which are produced in the local, as well as images which are not associated with a single, clear, defined or pure stereotype, as would seem to be the case with the beauty of the Tehuana.

### *Homosexual beauty*

It was around nine o'clock at night when we arrived at the *Salón Imperio*, located on the edge of town, at the side of the Trans-Isthmus highway. Before we reached the ticket office, a young man of around eighteen years

old, dressed as a women, with a long and brilliant black night dress, wig and make-up, came out to greet us, offering tickets for the dance that night. For a moment, we doubted if the tickets were genuine, but he lost no time in explaining that he had not had time to sell them in advance and, as he was part of the organizing committee, and he had to cover its cost. Without any further we purchased the tickets and he himself entered with our group, which must have numbered around eight people.

Upon entering, the place was almost empty, but it began to fill as the night went on. The DJ that night was one of the most famous in the port of Salina Cruz, and whilst the mix of disco, electronic and reggaeton music was deafening, the adolescent audience enjoyed every track. Some parents, accompanying the younger women, tried to place themselves outside of the range of the speakers. At eleven o'clock, the music ceased and after the third call by the announcer, the night's show began.

One by one, feminine figures dressed up as popular Spanish speaking singers began to appear. The voice of the announcer served as a guide for the figure to perform movements and gestures, and show off their dress which closely approximated the original performers. The shouts and whistling varied with every appearance, in line with the popularity and actions of the person who was on the stage. That was when the following conversation took place between Carmen and myself:

— That one is really pretty. They look better than us, don't you think? Carmen commented to me in the midst of the show.

— Of course, that's what they do. I replied. To which she replied:

— You still haven't realized! They're all men, look carefully. She insisted.

I remained unconvinced: the figure, the movements, the features, the gestures, the outfits present before me on the stage, left no room for doubt. For me, some of the participants were women. However, at the end of the show, everything became clear. The announcer thanked the audience, mentioning the performing names of all of the participants, as well as the gay community for organizing the event. Afterwards, they began to dance once more, and we returned to our places, although not before Carmen had commented to me:

Now you see, I told you they were all men. They come here to do a show when there is a disco night. The people already know them. That's why they clap for their favourite (Carmen, November, 2006).

When the show finished, the rest of the gay community, which until that moment had been looking after the entrance, serving at the bar, or helping out backstage, joined in the dance. All wore attractive and expensive dresses and had taken care with the slightest details of their appearance: their nails, wigs, make-up, stockings, shoes and accessories, all of which give the feminine figure its form. At that point, even in women's clothing, some of the physiques seemed familiar to me: some of them were part of a group of young *muxe's* who met each afternoon at the park in San Blas, and I had often seen the others in Tehuantepec, in the central plaza or the streets.

Following the event, I was able to confirm that their feminine characters do not form part of the everyday lives of these young people. Moreover, it should be noted that this contrasts with records of the feminine embodiment of the *muxe's* in the neighbouring town of Juchitán, where this practice has achieved outstanding social, political and cultural relevance (Islas, 2006; Miano, 2002). In Tehuantepec, however, the practice would seem to be limited to certain spaces and special occasions, such as the shows which take place at disco nights. The difference is often attributed to the conservative character of the town's inhabitants, which is characterized as being more traditional than that of Juchitán, as the following account illustrates:

There are few men who dress as women here in San Blas, but they do exist. I only know two who wear *falda* [skirts]. You can also see them in Tehuantepec, although only sometimes. It's not like in Juchitán, where they even have a *vela*. That's why people here say that when God made the world, he filled a bag with *muxe's*, and left a few in each town. But when he reached Juchitán, he dropped the bag. That's why there are so many there (Eladia, April, 2006).

This allowed me to appreciate that in everyday life, it is the small details which often differentiate *muxes'* from the other men. Some wear tight-fitting dresses, others let their hair grow long; there are those who wear a little make-up, those who wear earrings, those who only look after their eyelashes; and in certain cases, there are those who do not make their sexual preferences evident through their image. This latter option was the case of David (see Chapter 6), who made the following comment to me:

Here, in my business [a *centro cervecero*] and in the street, nobody sees me behaving like a pearl, or going around showing off. On the other hand, when I close my business and I'm with my friends, then I go wild (David, June, 2006).

When there's a festival, everything changes. Just like other inhabitants of the town, *muxe's* like to show off their best dresses, and this is when a number of them decide to show their feminine image in public. In addition to disco events, traditional festivals or *velas*, are other scenarios in which this becomes possible. For example, when I attended the main festival of the *barrio* of *Santa María Ren*, one of the most popular in Tehuantepec, a number of *muxes'* attended wearing Tehuana attire. I remember one in particular who stood out from the crowd on account of his attire. He was a man who was approximately forty-five years old who was wearing trousers, a shirt and a sweater that afternoon. What caught my attention, however, was that the items of his outfit were made of black velvet with large, hand-embroidered flowers in a similar fashion to a Tehuana dress. He also wore make-up and large items of jewellery; his entire appearance captivated those around him.

Dressing as male or female, the appearance of homosexuals is something which often attracts attention, and they are even sometimes considered as the first to exhibit new trends in fashion and personal appearance. Indeed, it is common for them to open beauty parlours, and they are famous for the manufacture of Tehuana dresses, especially those with patterned designs. This is why they attract more attention when one of them fails to take due care of their appearance, something I discovered in the case of Luis, who lives in the *colonia El Jordan*, and for whom the decline in his appearance has been attributed to his alcoholism, as Elsa explained to me one afternoon:

If you could imagine, this boy looked really good before; he was really handsome. He helped me here in the house and he did the housework really well. He always said to me that he had been like that since he was a little boy. Once, he disappeared from here and when he came back, he told me that he had gone to Matías Romero, but he returned a changed man. He himself told me about how drunk he would get. He was already dying there, until his brothers brought him home. From then on, he's just been dirty and drunk. When he goes to work, you can see he washes and looks after his appearance, but it doesn't last, as soon as he gets paid, he's back to be the same (Elsa, May, 2006).

The diversity and innovation present in the *muxe'* image stands in strong contrast to the image of the *gunangios* or *marimachas*, as homosexual women are locally referred to. On the majority of occasions, their appearance is characterized by their lack of personal care and cleanliness, and they are certainly not associated in the least with beauty, although according to my

own observations, in a few cases their feminine appearance is modified or tends to exhibit masculine characteristics. This is shown by the following testimonies:

My cousins are *marimachas*. They lived together from an early age, perhaps that's why they both go around the same. They dress in large shirts which means it's impossible to make out who is the woman and who is the man (Sofia, November, 2006).

The women who go around selling chickens are *marimachas*. One of them did herself up when she was a promoter for Progresas,<sup>86</sup> you could always see her in high-heels. But since she lost her job, you can see the way her appearance has changed: black, black, black. And she became worse when her 'man' left her. Imagine, when the woman abandoned her, she went around all filthy. I wouldn't buy anything from her (Elsa, Marzo, 2006).

These observations allowed me to appreciate that in a world in which beauty commonly produces discourses and stereotypes based on a dualist sexual difference, homosexual beauty can articulate both images (female and male); but also more, based on the elements they assembled to look sexy, traditional, modern, etcetera. That is to say that beauty is malleable and temporal in such a manner that actor's can mould it according to their specific contexts and settings. As an example, some will find themselves attracted to the feminine ideals associated with a voluptuous figure, being slim and young, managing to create spaces in which to perform these, as is the case with the disco nights. On the other hand, others will find themselves attracted by the stereotype of the beauty of the Tehuana, incorporating this into their daily life on a temporary or permanent basis. Finally, there will also be those who, using largely subtle details will create the elements which differentiate them. It is here where the objects by which each image is enacted find appears again, as in the case of women, pointing out their importance, since the outfits, accessories, hairpieces, and other items, become indisputable elements in the change and innovation of the images produced and represented in each scenario, but more important, making them different.

The richness of the images which can be produced by the actors turns visible when one takes into account the wide range of possible articulations and overlappings that can take place. Indeed, in practice the

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<sup>86</sup> Programa de Educación, Salud y Alimentación (Progresas) is a government social assistance program in Mexico created in 1997, which nowadays becomes Oportunidades, founded in 2002.

actors perform complex images which reveal the traditional, the modern, the natural, the cultural and the artificial. It is precisely the fluidity between the feminine and the masculine and intermediate points, which gives rise to the proliferation of hybrid, heterogeneous and dynamic images. We shall now see some masculine experiences in order to introduce some of the other images which do not often enter into the picture.

### *Masculine beauty*

Men are taller than women despite the popular belief to the contrary, induced no doubt by the grandiose character of the women costume and by the comparatively rachitic appearance of men (Covarrubias, 1986 [1946]: 244).

In contrast to the representation of Zapotec women, little research has been carried out on the image of men in the Isthmus. There is a general idea that outside of festival days, men's appearance is related to their economic activities; moreover, men are almost always represented in simple clothing, made from *tela de manta*, a type of coarse cloth common in Mexico. The image would appear to be attached to the stereotypical figure of the 'indigenous people' who adopted the clothing introduced by evangelizers following the Conquest, a type of clothing which forced the natives to "cover their shame", and which was subsequently legally imposed by landowners and municipal authorities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, thus generalizing the use of this type of fabrics and cloths which were previously exclusive to ancient leaders and Mesoamerican priests (Velasco, 2002).

On account of the representations of men, it would seem that they are not concerned with their appearance, and much less still are they associated with being exposed to the stereotypes and influences related to the beauty or fashion industry.<sup>87</sup> However, this would appear somewhat strange in a world in which celebrations and care for one's appearance seem to assume such importance, and hence my interest in discovering masculine opinions on the matter.

One of the first men who attracted my attention in this respect was Roberto, who at eighty-two years old, spends a considerable amount of time dressing in the afternoon before he goes out to see his niece,

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<sup>87</sup> This situation seems strange when in the global context it has been acknowledged that men are also involved in the fashion industry and concerned with their appearance. See (Bordo, 2003b).

Beatriz, who lives only a few blocks from his house in the district of El Portillo San Antonio. His behaviour has attracted comments from his children and grandchildren.

Look, there he is getting ready to go out. How conceited the old man is. He's just waiting for the sunset so he can go out for a drink (Emilia, April, 2006).

Nowadays, before he goes out, Roberto only swaps the shirt or T-shirt he is wearing in the house for a more formal one, freshly washed and ironed. He adjusts his belt, brushes his hair and puts on his felt hat. He refuses to make use of a walking stick because of his vanity, in spite of the fact that his feet have become increasingly clumsy with the passing of time. His appearance bears little resemblance to that of his youth, when he wore the clothes that were in fashion in the thirties: *chompas* (thick shirts) for working time and smart pleated trousers and formal shirt outside work, a time when some men used to carry arms and travel around on horseback in Tehuantepec, as Roberto remembers:

When I started working for the police, I became used to be on horseback and to carry my gun. When I didn't like a horse, I would sell it and buy another one, but I always had good horses and I liked to dress well, that's why my brother Amado envied me (Roberto, August, 2006).

His tanned skin and black hair accentuate his brown eyes which attest to the Spanish heritage of his family. He has gold plating on his teeth, something that is now largely worn only by the town's elder inhabitants. He currently makes use of dentures, acknowledging a certain air of vanity. From an early age, he became accustomed to the fact that appearance was an extremely important aspect of his life in the pursuit of opportunities, as he explained one afternoon:

From a young age, my sisters taught me how to dress well. My older brother, Nicolás, sent me cloth and money so that I could have my trousers made, because he had well established connections in Coatzacoalcos and wanted me to get a good job as an assistant in the Municipal Palace, like my other brothers. That's why, when I began to work, I already dressed myself. I've always used a felt hat, because straw hats are for people from the countryside. My trousers have always been made by the Peto family, who are traditional tailors and stylists, located in the *barrio* of Jalisco. I had another tailor, from the Cartas family, but I didn't like him because he never measured me. He just said: "I can already see your body, come on such and such a day". But



when you came to measure them, they didn't fit. The trousers were *bomba bomba* [too big]. I only wear pure *casimir* (wool), no denim or *manta* (coarse cotton); that's for the peasants. Although I did wear demin trousers when I worked in the railroad, where they use a lot of oil, but at that time, we called them *chompas*. Sometimes, my brother Nicolás would bring catalogues from the *Palacio* and *Liverpool*,<sup>88</sup> and we would send off for waterproofs for the rain, and hats as well, like those worn by telegraph workers. When I married, I also bought clothes for my wife, because I would spend my entire bonus on her and our children (Roberto, August, 2006).

Roberto has become accustomed to his grey hair, but he battled for many years to conceal its appearance, pulling out the hairs as soon as he noticed them, until there were so many of them that he was left with no choice but to resign himself to their presence. Now he concentrates on ensuring his hair is neatly brushed and smart, because "that's how a man should wear his hair", as he explained to me when commenting on the haircuts which are currently in fashion with young people, who at present like to bleach their hair or use highlights.

Roberto's image and the way he takes care of his appearance make it clear that beauty is also an everyday matter for men, and in many cases, an element of change which is related to the age, context and way of life of each individual. Roberto's conception of beauty suggests how the distinction has always served to highlight the difference when it comes to the pursuit of opportunities in life.

Yet, this beauty is quite different to that of Ángel, who was born in Tehuantepec in 1941, who spent his childhood in the fishing community of La Ventosa in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, his father being a local fisherman. When he was twelve years old, he returned to Tehuantepec and at the age of fourteen, he managed to find work as a free worker with the "*Progresista Istmeña*" as the Isthmus Progressive Fish Production Cooperative Society, S.C.L. was known, the largest social enterprise in this area, which survived in the Isthmus since the 40's until the end of the 1980s (Bozada, 2008).

Dark skinned, with a robust complexion and ruddy features, it is hard to guess Ángel's age, since at sixty-seven years old, he still looks strong and brave, as well as dyeing his hair regularly in order to maintain its dark colour. His image is modest but carefully chosen and he exudes a

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<sup>88</sup> Roberto is here referring to two department stores which were located in Mexico City at the time: El Palacio de Hierro and El Puerto de Liverpool.

confident air of being sure of himself. For Ángel, in contrast to Roberto, comfort and not smartness have always been his priority, since his clothing became part of his body and his daily practices lately in his life, as he explains:

When I was young, I would go around without shoes. I didn't wear them because we didn't even know about them. If you were lucky, you would wear shorts, some underpants and a shirt everyday, but the majority of people at the beach went around without clothes. When I tell my grandchildren, they don't believe me, but when I was twelve years old, we all went to school naked, imagine that. And it wasn't just the children, it was the adults too, because in those days we didn't have clothes. I still remember that an American called Pepe would visit *La Ventosa* every six months. He came and gave away clothes. He held a party and he made a *piñata* with sweets and everything. He gave me a T-shirt with a stick and the word *pajarraco* (ugly bird). So after a while, everyone called me *Pajarraco*, because I was always wearing that T-shirt. We didn't wear clothes like they do now. I also remember that they bought my first pair of shoes to go to my first party, but by the time I arrived, I already had them hanging from my shoulder, because my feet hurt from wearing them; as I was used to go around barefoot at the time. And that was how everyone was in *La Ventosa*. Clothes were only for festivals and then you put them away until the next year. That's why when you tried to wear them out again, they didn't fit you (Ángel, October, 2006).

Ángel's appearance has gradually changed, incorporating an increasing number of items. A new home and new activities have contributed to this, especially when he went from being a free worker to being a member of the cooperative and then shortly after, joined the directive board. Shoes, smart shirts, a large watch, gold chains and bracelets, as well as cars, all made up inseparable parts of his new image. Now he mixed with a large variety of actors, including high-ranking members of the public administration. His new image incorporated elements of jewellery, attire and cars, which accompanied his new responsibilities and the way of life of a sailor at the time. These same elements soon began to attract attention, above all, to women.

I would wear my gold chain and bracelet, and every year I would have a new car. It all came from the cooperative, because over there we were responsible for millions of pesos. Then when I was a functionary, I had relations with everyone, bankers,

people from the treasury, the finance ministers from Oaxaca, the Fisheries Minister in Mexico City, Paullada, I think his name was. And as I went to all of the ports, I also had many girlfriends. I was extremely popular, but most of all in Mazatlán, the people still really like me there (Ángel, October, 2006).

Ángel's associations with new elements related to his appearance were not only limited to his own image, but extended to that of his family—as we have seen in the case of Hortensia, his wife—and other members of his community with whom he often shared the objects he acquired on his numerous voyages, especially technological goods which were inaccessible to the general population. His attitude won him a reputation for being generous and good person.

I was the first person to have a television here, and likewise, for any innovation. We were always the first to have things: bikes, the console, the fridge, the television, I brought it all, always the best and the biggest. People couldn't believe it, they only could admire it. I'm telling the truth, I would put the television here outside and a crowd of kids would gather round, and some adults too. That annoyed my wife though. She said that when I went away, I would leave her with all these kids running around. I brought everything from the North. When I arrived in Mazatlán, I would go to Baja California, to Durango, and Guaymas, and then I would send back the cooperative truck well stocked up. At that time, I remember that I loved my car, I decorated it well, I put small toy cars inside them, I kept them well cleaned and looked after. Now though, I do it through necessity (Ángel, October, 2006).

Amongst other things, for Ángel, beauty is associated with, the magnificence which can be enacted by a humble person, which in the 1980s embodied success and, in a certain respect, the Isthmus dream of wellbeing and development. Today however, the shine of his image has gradually begun to fade, in part because the collapse of the local fishermen's cooperatives has meant that these actors are no longer involved in what was one of the most important aspects of the region<sup>89</sup> and, in part because the growth of regional urban centres has meant that goods which were previously only available to a few are now more accessible. As part of this change, Ángel has relinquished his flashy and affluent, largely due to the wave of kidnappings and violence which has

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<sup>89</sup> Following to the collapse of the region's cooperative societies, the private company *Ocean Garden* has replaced the shrimp fishing float in Salina Cruz.

reached the region, but also because his pace of life and tastes have changed with his age. However, Ángel's beauty shows that wealthy, materialized in autos, jewels, clothes, is an important element linked to beauty.

However, there are also others who have not been attracted to affluence, such as Joel. At first sight, Joel appears a robust and sturdy man, but as one gets to know him, his features begin to soften. At thirty-four years old, he has a solid complexion, largely due to his work as a farmer. He walks upright and always looking ahead, something which gives him a slightly haughty air, even when he is driving his John Deere tractor on his farmland. Joel however, admits that he saves the best of his appearance for when he is accompanied by his wife Carmen and their three children.

I like to be well-dressed when I go out with my family, to match her. But in addition, I also tell all my sons that they must look forward, meeting the eyes of people coming towards them. If you have nothing to be ashamed of, why go around looking at the ground (Joel, October, 2006).

It must be recognized that his appearance and attitude differ from the majority of images which exist with respect to the masculinity of the Tehuantepec Isthmus peasant, commonly regarded as being humble and shy. For Joel, the clothing in which peasants are often represented is not something with which he identifies. Indeed, he cannot remember a man in his family who has ever worn it.

His work clothes are made up of light trousers, loose T-shirts, a hat, leather *huaraches* with rubber soles, and also rubber boots, something which varies with the weather and the productive activities related to sorghum, his main crop. However, even if this working outfit suggests that he does not take care of his appearance, this is not to say that men in general are not concerned about this. Indeed, during the time I spent with Joel and other farm workers, they stressed that their appearance at those times was not of their liking, and was not like the clothes they wore outside of their work. Some of them even washed and changed their clothes at the end of a day working the land, before going home.

Joel, for example, is characterized by wearing an outfit which is suited to each occasion: he dresses informally within the house and in *La Colonia*, he dresses casually when he comes to the Centre and attends musical events, and he dresses formally for special occasions. When Joel feels more cosy, he likes sharing the satisfaction he derives from his

appearance and that of his son especially when going through the family's treasured photograph albums.

Look, here I am with Carmen. Here I am on my best form. At that time, I was a stunner. Here I am with my partner, just as good looking as me. This is my son. Here is Angel [the son] again when he was the page at a wedding. He even looked like a rich kid (Joel, October, 2006).

For Joel, just as for his wife Carmen, beauty is a collective activity in which all the members of the family participate, giving opinions on their appearances to others, which, in a certain way, creates an environment in which fashion becomes a subject that is frequently discussed at home. It should be pointed out that in the case of Carmen, to a certain extent, the image of the entail family is associated more clearly with the images from the states in the centre and the north of Mexico, than with indigenous stereotypes. Joel links his style with that related to modern music—which in Tehuantepec is a mixture of reggaeton and techno.

Finally, to conclude this section, let us consider the beauty of the *xuana*, one of the principal authorities within the *sistema de cargos* which is still present in Tehuantepec. One afternoon, in the month of October, Israel invited me to attend the Xuana Day celebration in the *barrio el Cerrito*. Like all of those who have exercised this traditional *cargo*, he has a moral duty to accompany the person who continues this ancient Zapotec social organization. On this occasion, in contrast to the past, a woman, or *xelaxuana*—the feminine Zapotec word of *xuana*—, was chosen and host of the celebration. She was undoubtedly the centre of attraction that day, although it was the comments made by Israel which directed my attention to the men.

Throughout the Eucharist celebration, the men would wear what was locally known as a 'gala outfit', currently composed of black trousers and shoes, a white loose-fitting shirt and a bright red *paliacate* (typical Mexican scarf) tied round their neck, which on this occasion was added for the event. This attire is used on special occasions such as solemn parades and festivals. I saw one example of it when Hermelinda invited me to see the coronation of the Queen of Tehuantepec, we were watching from behind a large barrier erected by the municipal authorities, during

the *Vela Sandunga*,<sup>90</sup> where this dress was an indispensable requirement in order for men to be admitted.

On a number of occasions, I saw Israel participate in various events related to the Zapotec tradition. Once, he even wore the famous *charro 24*, which is often worn to make the Tehuano gala outfit more elegant. The formality and importance which accompanies the dress is also related to that bestowed to this *cargo* by the community.

To be Xuana is an honour, because it is a form of respect which people have for one another, because that's how looking after the tradition and caring for the customs is acknowledged (Israel, June, 2006).

This *cargo* acknowledges involvement and commitment to Zapotec customs and traditions by the people who are elected, and as a result, confers upon them responsibility for safeguarding them. *The cargo* is held for one year although the title is conserved for life, and in spite of not being hereditary, Israel has been preceded by his grandparents, Mercedes and David, and his parents, Florina and Israel.

A Xuana or Xelaxuana has the duty of attending the events at which their presence is requested, especially throughout the year of their tenure. Their presence legitimises an occasion, be it a wedding, a commitment, a death, a family conflict, etcetera, and as such, their image in the community is of vital importance.

Israel is around thirty years old and has a thick complexion. As befits his post, he participates willingly in all the celebrations and for each of these, his masculine appearance is impeccable. Not in vain, his older sister spends time ironing his clothing, and he himself cares for the other details, such as preparing his hat, polishing his shoes, clipping his nails, shaving, brushing his hair, applying cologne, and selecting accessories: his *paliacate* and watch, and jewellery such as rings, a bracelet and a chain.

It's important to be smartly dressed in order to set an example for the younger generation so they may continue with the tradition. For example, even though I am young, people see that I respect the custom and that's why they invite me to a lot of festivals, to which I must go (Israel, June, 2006).

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<sup>90</sup> This celebration takes place on the last Saturday in May. It is organized by the municipal authorities as part of the celebration of Santo Patrón de Santo Domingo de Guzmán and is where the coronation of the queen of Tehuantepec takes place, see (Ortega, 2006: 93).

In this case, it is particularly evident that for Israel, beauty is linked to the Zapotec culture, to its customs and traditions, all the elements which are considered beautiful and are highly valued in Tehuantepec. Thus, in spite of being considered lesser or more simple than that of a Tehuana —its immediate comparative image— masculine beauty also reflects its various connections with the global, especially when it is considered that this type of clothing, and that of the Tehuana has been the result of various transformations in which the inhabitants have been immersed over the course of the years. As an example, the *charro 24* was introduced by Juana Catalina Romero, the woman that is considered that ‘modernised’ Tehuantepec, and sought to bring notoriety to the masculine presence in the 1920s, looking for a similar impact that the popular charro hat has had since then (Chassen-López, 2006; Hernández-Díaz, 2006).

All these cases illustrate that in spite of not being commonly referred to, the various images associated with homosexuality and the masculine are linked to themes like beauty. Indeed, homosexual and masculine beauties reaffirm the existence of multiple images which are presented and overlapped in the same village. The accounts which have been discussed in this section serve to illustrate how homosexual and masculine experiences with respect to image and taking care of one’s appearance are just as heterogeneous and multiple as the other more notorious expressions of beauty in the Isthmus, specifically that of the Tehuana women.

Both homosexual and masculine images articulate different logics, aesthetics, lifeworlds and livelihoods which correspond to specific times and contexts, and whose variability contributes to the unexpected becoming a constant. That is to say that the apparent ‘simplicity’ of the common references and representations of men’s beauty hides the innumerable connections and associations which are articulated find their forms among in the diverse homosexual and the masculine beauties, in such a way that avoiding taking them into account also tends to hide the different processes that affect, influence and change the ways in which these actors enact beauty. These experiences confirm the material objects as mediators and intermediaries<sup>91</sup> in the production of several beauties, since they induce changes in attitudes and the way in which actors

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<sup>91</sup> Actor Network Theory proposes both concepts in order to illustrate the performative character of the associations. “An intermediary, is what transports meaning or force without transformation... Mediators, on the other hand, cannot be counted as just one; they might count for one, for nothing, for several, for infinity”. See (Latour, 2005: 39).

conceive and perceive themselves in the local; they appear as a constant element which contributes to the production of actors' differentiation.

### **Conclusions: beauty enacted**

The articulations of local experiences and repertoires of beauty in the Isthmus, reveal the diversity of beauty images. In each of the cases that has been considered, the Tehuana, which initially appears as its most representative symbol, and whose form would appear to be the most stable, pure and homogeneous, is revealed to be malleable, temporary, reproducible and even distant. This serves to support one of Mol's arguments about multiplicity identified as "creating different objects", insofar as there is the possibility "that different practices are in fact producing different objects rather than conflicting versions of the same object" (Law, 2004b: 60-61). It becomes clear that in any of its expressions, beauty is an issue which carries meanings in Tehuantepec. This coincides with one of the central tenets of Actor Network Theory: the power of 'mediation' of objects and of 'translation' of "the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (Latour, 2005: 39).

It is important to mention that the set of different images produced by the actors at local level are exposed to the problem of homogenization, since there are the product of constant interactions. Even though it does not mean that the production of differences, or what the ANT referred as different objects, pass unnoticed among the actors that gave them form. This reflexion could be also referred as the collection of racial, ethnic, cultural and gender differences, amongst others, forming a spectrum of diverse images, including when the stereotype of beauty can come to be considered "exotic" in different contexts, and especially when faced with other stereotypes which have a greater degree of generalization.

Another of the elements which can be recognized in the various practices which give form to beauty in the Isthmus, concerns the collection of objects or materialities which contribute to the production of different images that emphasize difference. The resulting heterogeneity forms a map with which it is possible to trace some of the possible connections of beauty in the Isthmus with the external world. It is precisely at this point when the global interferes with the local, shifting and redefining notions and associations of beauty in the Tehuantepec.

This dynamic makes it possible for the beauty of the Tehuana to become more visible on certain occasions, whilst on others, the Western or the modern, the homosexual and the masculine often stand out. In the



words of John Law: “the enactment of presence, manifest absence and absence as Otherness” (Law, 2004c). Here it is important to recognize that none of these forms are homogeneous, but are produced thanks to the articulation of various elements present in the local context, and are thus diverse, hybrid and complex. These affect the conceptions, the semiotic representations —of insiders and outsiders— and the images which are repeatedly produced and enacted by the actors in their everyday lives in a different manner

These situations suggest the importance of the associations to which the various images are connected. For example, in the case of images which approximate the production of global ideas of beauty, “tall, thin, white, and blond, a face without pores, asymmetry, or flaws, someone wholly “perfect”...” (Wolf, 2002: 1, author's emphasis), these can be identified as an additional way of controlling the body (Bordo, 1989; Butler, 1993), whilst everything related to ethnic images will approximate their alter ego.

The multiplicity of beauty in Tehuantepec is expressed in the festivals of each *barrio* and colony, cultural events, *velas*, ceremonial events —such as the Xuana day—, parades, the Tehuanas, disco nights, in the plazas, in productive activities, and even events which take place outside of the region, such as the Virgen de Guadalupe chapel in La Villa, Mexico City. These practices which the local actors articulate on different scales and are even overlapping one upon the other, reveal how the form in which each individual assembles and performs beauty becomes original and unrepeatable. Thus, performativity is one of the unavoidable stages in understanding beauty in Tehuantepec, in the sense that beauty is defined in practice.

Here, when the apparent unity of beauty in the Isthmus is dismantled into different expressions, the notion of enactments becomes of fundamental importance, insofar as these “don't just present something that has already been made, but also have powerful productive consequences. They (help to) make realities in-here and out-there” (Law, 2004b: 56). This has been identified by Deleuze as a multiplicity when it refers to “a unity that is multiple in itself” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2000: 8), and in the words of Law, “what it is to be more than one and less than many” (Law & Mol, 2002: 11).

The heterogeneity of beauty in the Isthmus is recognized precisely through the production of these differences. This contrasts with those arguments which tend to sustain the homogenization of the Isthmus, or its Zapotecization, to which reference was made at the start of this work.

In its place, heterogeneity invites recognition of “the differences that reside in connection and disconnection, or, more precisely, it is about the ambivalent distributions entailed in dis/connection (Law & Mol, 2002: 122)”.

Now I invite the reader to have a look at those assumptions related to gendered spatiality in the Isthmus.





Pg. 114:  
Party in Sta. María

Previous page:  
Father and son

## **Entangled boundaries: encountering space and gender**

### **Abstract**

The broad participation of the women from the Isthmus, in commerce and in household management, has been the cornerstone on which rests the age old debate over the dominion of women in the public arena and the existence of a matriarchy in the Zapotec communities in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. This chapter makes reference to this debate, touching on the controversial division of public and private domains according to gender-based determinisms, often discussed in both Social Anthropology and Women's Studies. This gendered determinism of space is challenged by the very actions of the participants who have made themselves a way of life in Tehuantepec, actions which make it difficult to establish clear-cut boundaries between spatiality and their corresponding gender associations. With this in mind, we propose that the association between spatiality and gender is neither exclusive nor predetermined but changeable and fluid being more in accord with the multiple, heterogeneous and dynamic processes in which the participants act out their day to day lives. That is to say, these analytic categories intertwine and overlap over and over again in unexpected ways with no clear or predefined boundaries; entangle and disentangle themselves confusingly and even messily.

### **Introduction**

Whether the men go to the fields or work in town, from dawn till sunset Tehuantepec becomes a woman's world. Everywhere there are busy women moving about, carrying heavy loads on their heads to and from the market, buying, selling, gossiping. All activity flows toward the market, and a simple glance at the

products displayed affords a vivid picture of the economy of Tehuantepec (Covarrubias, 1986 [1946]: 274).

The preceding quote, taken from Miguel Covarrubias' book *México South*, originally published in 1943, shows the presence of women in Tehuantepec in one of the spheres usually considered under their domain, trade.

The leading role played by women in Zapotec society in the Isthmus is so important that it is commonly considered an atypical or exotic, where women exercise power and control in their communities, in marked contrast to other contexts where women are usually allotted a subordinate role in the face of social practices of a patriarchal style.

With the exception of military heroes and certain other celebrities, the Isthmus men are generally referred to as being diminished in relation to their women. There have been interpretations that have gone even farther to suggest a supposed biological inferiority as can be seen in the following quote from the anthropologist Frank Starr, who measured 100 men and 100 women early in the twentieth century.<sup>92</sup>

The women of Tehuantepec are certainly the heads of their houses; the men occupy but an inferior position. Possibly, they are really larger than their husbands, but, whether that be true or not, they give that impression to the spectator (Starr, 1908: 162).

The search for an explanation for this 'exoticism' has consolidated a kind of local model in relation to culture, spatiality, and gender. In this model it is suggested that the principal, if not the only field of action ascribed to women has been linked with the public (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1997a; Dalton, 2000; Miano, 2002). Men's fields of action, on the other hand, in spite of been usually associated with the public arena, are often relegated to the sceneries where they develop productive activities which later on become realized in the market by their women; as well as to other spheres where either the participation of women is inconceivable or to those which are of no interest to them, such as is usually the case of politics and arts (Miano, 2002; Newbold, 1975; Velázquez, 2007).

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<sup>92</sup> Starr's account emphasizes the various strategies needed to carry out this piece of research in order to measure the reluctant women, in addition to the court order from the Municipal Council President at the time, he needed the presence of a *regidor* (municipal authority) and four policemen, who brought them from the market to the place they were to be measured. The men on the other hand presented no such difficulties (Starr, 1908: Chapter XII).

This ascription by gender includes even the *muxe's* and the *gunanguios* or *marimachas* —as male and female homosexuals respectively are known locally— given that they are commonly associated with the specific spatialities and activities,<sup>93</sup> corresponding to heterosexual distribution of roles (Miano, 2002: 56; Müller, 1997: 267). All these assumptions have been commonly associated to cultural traditionalism (Miano, 2002; Newbold, 1975).

No matter their differences, the generalized idea alludes to the existence of a gendered spatiality, product of a social organization that has managed to avoid some of the effects of civilization and the modernization of the contemporary world, especially, those effects that concern male domination. To such a degree that it would seem that the Zapotec Isthmus culture possesses the 'peculiarity' of maintaining traditional forms of social organizations which, in a more or less clear and unique way, lead to a gendered distribution of spaces and activities, which have been recorded on various occasions (Covarrubias, 1986 [1946]; Islas, 2006; Miano, 2002; Miano & Gómez, 2006; Müller, 1997; Newbold, 1975; Poniatowska, 1994; Reina, 1995).

The foregoing characterization can not be freed from concepts and assumptions typical of nineteenth century Western social categorizations and values such as kinship, family, household and sexual mores, used in an attempt to comprehend the social organization of the non-occidental; assumptions which would later contribute to the beginnings of anthropology and influencing feminist thinking to this day (Moore, H. L., 1988: 12). I refer here to those assumptions which link sex differences to suggested universal and antagonistic determinisms. That is to say, that underlying the various arguments, there persist(s) the idea of the existence of social, cultural, or biological norms which define the possibilities and spheres of action of men and women.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> For example, Miano mentions *cantinas*, some street crossings and nightclubs as some of the spaces that have been associated with the *muxe's* (Miano, 2002).

<sup>94</sup> The anthropological study of women has been one of the schools of thought that has led to various debates based on this assumption. For example, among the earliest proposals, there developed various points of view that see a more direct link between women and the natural world and between men and culture (Ortner, 1974: 77). Some attribute this bifurcation of spheres of endeavour to forms of social organization rather than to the natural order of things (Rosaldo, 1974, 1980), still others identify it as part of the historical social transformation (Leacock, 1981).

This ontological division between the natural world and the social world has taken for granted that women are intrinsically linked to the reproductive role, which in turn leads to a *de facto* relegation to the 'domestic' realm or to a retreat into the 'private' space.<sup>95</sup> Men on the other hand are granted greater freedom to carry out other activities not circumscribed by nature, such as: production, politics, finance, culture, and so, all of which tend to be associated with the public space. The foregoing can be summarized in what is known as the private versus public model.

The private versus public model has generated copious academic writings and is a source of much debate in Feminist thought, (Butler, 2006; Mitchell *et al.*, 1986; Moore, H. L., 1988; Rosaldo, 1974; Strathern, 1987b), as well as supporting arguments to explain the subordinate position of women in society (Moore, H. L., 1988; Ortner, 1974). From this model arises statements concerning, the human body, the family, power, nature, culture, rights, values, and division of labour among other topics, making them seem unequivocal and universal.

This conceptual oversimplification has led to the identification of the Zapotec communities of the Isthmus as atypical cases representing a kind of counter to the universal model.

In contrast to other communities where women have a clear place, on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, particularly in Juchitán, women play the protagonists; because of their participation in trade and in the carrying out of social activities they have taken over the public arena... On the other hand, it is important to note that among the Zapotec women in Juchitán, there is no concept of the housewife, that is to say, women do not limit themselves to the home or the family unit; housework is shared with the other family members (Velázquez, 2007: 9) [trans. D. Jenkins].

It is precisely this uniqueness, this holdout, this difference, or however it may be called, which, as a background, guides the deconstruction of this sort of gendered spatiality. It is with this purpose that I rely on the Actor Network Theory which offers a radically different way of understanding spatialities deriving from a concern to provide arguments to move beyond

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<sup>95</sup> It should be mentioned that one of the concepts that has had the greatest impact has been the concept of 'family' which links those activities concerned with the care and raising of children to fixed places, specifically the home besides suggesting a clear cut identification of such tasks with women, the mother-child unit. See (Lévi-Strauss, 1976; Malinowski, 1963; Radcliffe-Brown, 1941).



backgrounds, or ways to resolve those difficulties which may occur when associating a stable, predefined, static form to a network. In the words of John Law: "...In this looser locution it is *relationality* that becomes important—the possibility of thinking in terms of (broadened) forms of connection— rather than the network metaphor which links an appreciation of relationality to a specific image of connectivity. More complicated visions of spatiality are required. The challenge, then, is to inquire into the possibility of other, non-Euclidean, non-network, spatialities" (Law & Mol, 2001: 614).

Notions such as 'region', 'networks', 'fluid space', 'fire space' and 'spatialities of globality' are some of the possibilities considered in this model in which 'region' refers to the local, regional and non-universal character of the gathering of empirical and theoretical evidence; 'networks' reveals the concern with those configurations which even while shifting maintain their form and hold together;<sup>96</sup> 'fluid space' alludes to those connections which gradually and incrementally change their configuration; 'fire space' is the metaphor used to cover the continuity of the configuration as an effect of discontinuity, in which destruction signifies change and renovation; and 'spatialities of globality' signals the importance of taking into account those elements which, being global but not universal, depend on fluidity and which take form in and adapt to the situation (Law & Mol, 2001).

These ideas not only question determinist ideas and rhetoric but also promote a way of looking at the link between spatiality and gender from a new perspective; from that of those who, through their everyday lives, have, in one way or another, made manifest the uniqueness of this region. The concept of 'entangled boundaries' comes to mind as a promising answer to explain the possible intersections, overlaps, connections, and cross-overs that crop up constantly in the everyday life.

The case study of Roberto's network in this chapter illustrates the spatiality in which the actors of Tehuantepec have interacted. It brings out controversial issues in relation to the existence of a sexual spatiality in the Isthmus. First, the paradigmatic situations found in the fieldwork are presented. These become materialized in relation to the inheritance of a house. Then, the chapter presents what is identified as the constitution of networks and the breakdown of myths. After that, the text highlights the

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<sup>96</sup> The notion of space proposed by Bruno Latour, on the other hand, implies a certain immobility and instability in the network; both being incorporated in the notion 'actant-rhizomes'; see 'immutable mobiles' and 'immutable immobiles' (Latour, 1999; Law & Mol, 2001).

production of interferences, as well as resonances. Finally, the fluidity and ambiguity of the acting of the actors and the probable relation between spatiality and gender in Tehuantepec, that it is identified as ‘entangled boundaries’ is reflected upon.

### **Face to face with the common link**

Two of my sons, Santiago and Antonio go around saying that I don’t have any right to say that the house is for my daughter Hermilinda. They come in and aren’t even decent to you, but then, you’ve seen them, they don’t talk; don’t even say hello. They come and grab whatever they want and take it. Sometimes they show up to kick up a fuss. They say they’re going to come in whenever they want because this is their Mama’s house, that she was the one who bought it and that I don’t have a say. But they’re wrong they didn’t see where the money to buy it came from (Roberto, August, 2008).

In one summer afternoon in 2008, this is the way, Roberto, aged 89, told me about his main worry, the future of the people who live with him in this house in conflict. A little over six years ago his lifelong companion, Sebastiana died leaving as her only will the oral wish to look after him and their youngest son Jesús, then thirty-five years of age and born with Down’s syndrome. On the Isthmus such a charge would be accompanied by implicit rights of inheritance. Those charged with the care of those with diminished capacities acquire priority in matters of inheritance which is usually respected even in the absence of a written will. Respect for final wishes, if not a rule, is a frequently followed practice and according to my observations and those of others (Miano, 2002: 71) more common than the one that circulates *vox pópuli*, that the woman inherits the house and the man inherits the land.

In this case, it was Emilia and Hermilinda the first and the sixth of the couple’s children that Sebastiana asked to assume this responsibility, given that they were the ones who lived with them and took care of them including their younger brother. It is also worth mentioning that it was Hermelinda who had assumed the living costs for nearly ten years. In spite of being Sebastiana’s last wish, the fact that she hadn’t left it in writing or specified which of her nine children would inherit the property she had decided to buy almost fifty years ago, has amplified the conflict between those living in the house and those who have been excluded from it and who question the legitimacy of Emilia, Hermelinda and Roberto in matters concerning it.

During my visits and shared experiences with this family, there were various occasions that I found myself witnessing scenes that evoked a strong, domineering Sebastiana and a dependent and ignored Roberto. This seemed to me a good illustration of the implication of living in a society ruled by Tehuana matrons, whose absence seemed to bring forth an uncertain fate for those formerly under their wing.

At first, Sebastiana and Roberto personified what then seemed to conform to the local model of life under a gendered spatiality; nevertheless, as I got further into the daily lives of this family, I came to discover other stories which were at odds with this assumption. The counterplot to this story stems from Roberto's experience and is enriched by other voices giving a masculine point of view of life commonly assumed as 'subordinated' to the women of Tehuantepec.

### **Building networks and breaking down myths**

Roberto was born in a time of change in 1919, in the middle of the post-revolutionary period.<sup>97</sup> *Tehuano*, he was born on the edge of the former *barrio* of Laborío now known as the *barrio* of Portillo de San Antonio.<sup>98</sup> He was the youngest and is presently the only living child of nine children born to a middle income Zapotec family better known as the *Bullo*.<sup>99</sup> Like many Tehuanos, Roberto identifies himself as a Zapotec and shares their cultural patterns, although he will often proudly recognize the mixed

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<sup>97</sup> The Mexican Revolution lasted from 1910 to 1917. The post-revolutionary period was characterized by extreme and rapid change in economic and social policy a product of creation of a new Revolutionary State, as well as by the contradiction between institutionalization and meeting the principal demands of the population. See (Gilly, 1971).

<sup>98</sup> Roberto commented to me that the Portillo de San Antonio district didn't exist in 1919 so he still considers himself a Laborío district native. The *barrio* of *Laborío* was formerly divided into Laborío Bajo which went from downtown to the base of San Antonio Hill and Laborío Alto, the current Portillo San Antonio, which began at the base of the hill and bordered on the former Tehuano de San Blas Atempa district, now an independent township.

<sup>99</sup> Zapotec term for rooster. Roberto's father was known locally by this name for his supposed fame as a womanizer, and also for being an addict to cock fighting. On the Isthmus it is common that a nickname becomes identified with the whole family until another takes its place. In this case the strength of the association with the nickname *Bullo* is so powerful that it is still used to identify the majority of descendents of these nine children.

blood nature of his family on his Spanish paternal grandfather's side, better known as *Tin meshu*<sup>100</sup>.

Roberto was raised by his father and older sisters as his mother had died giving birth to him. He had finished the third year of primary school when he left school at the age of fourteen, disobeying the wishes of his older brothers and sisters who supported him economically so that he could go to school. To him, learning to read and write and basic arithmetic were enough to make his way in life; which, in fact was a distinct advantage in the rural indigenous environment in 1933. At that time, Roberto entered the workplace, picking up various skills, knowledge and earning power with which he satisfied his tastes and desires such as dressing well, owning his own horse, and in later years buying their own drinks.

When he was twenty, Roberto met Sebastiana, a fourteen year old girl from the neighbouring town of San Blas Atempa, long considered a bastion of the pure Zapotec.<sup>101</sup> Motherless, she and her only brother passed their childhoods under the supervision of their aunts and uncles and grandparents until she was placed as a domestic servant in Tehuantepec. She never went to school despite which she learned to keep accounts very well owing to the fact that among her duties was the *totopo* business.

The couple began their married life three years after they met, settling in Roberto's parents' house. At this time Roberto tried to earn enough to meet his new responsibilities, given that Sebastiana had quit her job to dedicate herself to keep their new home, a time which Roberto recalls like this:

Phew!... I worked at anything! I was never lazy like I see others being, like this kid [referring to his son Santiago] who goes around leaving kids everywhere and not knowing if they have

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<sup>100</sup> Agustín the blond.

<sup>101</sup> The inhabitants of San Blas Atempa usually mark their differences from the people in Tehuantepec in their dress, the generalized use of the Zapotec language, their life forms and lifeworlds, among other differences. This interethnic division is usually attributed to discrepancies arising between the inhabitants of the former San Blas Atempa district and the European inhabitants when Tehuantepec was an administrative, military, economic, political and religious centre during the Colonial period, becoming irreconcilable under the Juarez administration which rescinded the administrative division between the District of Tehuantepec and the State of Oaxaca which led to its political demise in 1868. See (Barrios & López, 1987: 62-63).

enough to eat or wear. When we got together, she left her job and dedicated herself to the house because at that time I gave her the housekeeping money. And as for game, I brought my late wife fine deer, rabbits, doves, wild pigs; because, for my part, since I was a boy, I really liked to hunt. My dad took me around here but I was gutsier and went further off; when I was a ranch foreman I used to go out hunting with my *compadre* [buddy], Sanson Hernández, who's dead now. In those days, there were all kinds of animals, especially in completely wild places (Roberto, August, 2006).

In this anecdote, Roberto reveals situations and contexts that are unknown and almost alien to the majority of those who now share his everyday life.

### *Forming networks*

From the time when Roberto visited the Mexican Railroad roundhouse in Matías Romero<sup>102</sup> around 1930, his interest in entering the workplace was piqued.

I was around ten years old when my sister and her husband, who lived in Minatitlán, took me to see the workshops in Matías. There were different departments there for each kind of job: loading, smithing, mechanics, foundries, there were piles of *talleres* (workshops) and lots of people working. When I got back I didn't like school anymore until I finally dropped out and went to learn blacksmithing instead (Roberto, August, 2006).

Roberto dedicated himself to learn a trade;<sup>103</sup> he was taught ironwork and founding by the local master smith. He learned to be an automotive and general electrician in Tuxtepec, Oaxaca, where he was forced to live for a time after one of his brothers abandoned him there where two other siblings lived.

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<sup>102</sup> In the early years of the twentieth Century during the years of Porfirio Díaz and amid much controversy, the trans-Isthmus railroad was completed linking the two ports on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Coatzacoalcos and Salina Cruz. The English company, which was the last to hold the concession, built their roundhouse in Matías Romero because it was halfway between the two ports (H. Ayuntamiento de Matías Romero, 2009).

<sup>103</sup> According to Roberto, at that time, when a young man was interested in a trade, all it needed was that he or his parents approach a master craftsman, generally from the same *barrio*, who would accept him as an apprentice, later earning some pay according to the ability and endeavour he showed.

I was about eighteen when Amado and I took the train to Mexico City. We went looking for a General who had been passing through here and, as I had done him the favour of getting down some coconuts for him and his wife, he gave me a letter of recommendation and told me to look him up if I wanted work there. When we got to Tuxtepec, my brother told me: "Here's where you're staying", and took the letter and put me off the train. All alone, asking and asking, I managed to find my sister, Natalia, and my brother, Nicolas, who lived there in those years because he worked for the township. A guy there named Luis taught me how to fix car batteries. I changed the positive and negative plates and soldered them down; I also made the posts where the cables for the current go. He taught me all this, that man who is now dead. May he rest in peace. I also learned about electrical connections which is why all the electrical connections in the old house are mine. Yeah, I know about all that; just now I changed the light at the altar and sat down a bit and now it's fixed; if I hadn't Sebastiana wouldn't have had any light (Roberto, August, 2006).

Back in Tehuantepec one year later, Roberto decided to look for work at the local station of *Ferrocarriles de México* (the Mexican Railroad) which would be his first job for the company; the largest employer on the Isthmus until the 1940's. Despite his youth and the number of workers looking for jobs at the company, Roberto got a job replacing wooden beams, and bit by bit worked his way up to become machinery supervisor.

One day I went to the railroad station here in Tehuantepec; in those days, it was full of people looking for work. "Excuse me", I said, "Excuse me, Sir. Do you have a job for me?" I was young, only seventeen but I mustered the courage to go on my own. That's when I started working for Mr. Antonio García, who taught me my job and took care of me like a father. In those days they paid badly. On the railroad I earned ten pesos every six days but just look at those bills all so crisp, so crisp; they even crackled when you grabbed them.<sup>104</sup> When the job ended, there was no more money; even the administrative office just beyond Tehuantepec station closed. A ton of people who worked there were out of work (Roberto, August, 2006).

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<sup>104</sup> It is worth noting that in 1936 this salary was considered low given that it is known that some workers such as miners were earning a daily wage of between four and five pesos in 1938 (Tapia, 2010).

At twenty-four, Roberto lost his job due to the imminent collapse of the railway system. At that time he and Sebastiana had just one child, a girl. Roberto then went to work in highway construction which was where the government was then directing its attention and resources to stimulate development on the Isthmus. This situation changed the dynamics for the couple as Roberto was away from the region while Sebastiana made do with what he left to live on until his return, straining the relationship and emotional bond between them.<sup>105</sup>

Working on the highway I went from here to up around Rio Hondo [a township located in the mountains on the border between Oaxaca and Puebla, [see map 3, annex]. My brother-in-law and I quit there because it was freezing cold and besides they didn't pay us much, and look how far away we were and I was leaving Sebastiana alone a lot. One time she followed me and we almost had a tragedy. It was in Tequisistlán [a township 50 kilometres from Tehuantepec]. I was working as a carpenter's assistant and this guy Máximo, a Mixtec he was, was the one who handed out the dynamite. We had just finished our shift and as I was just reaching the camp she told me that she has to wash some clothes for our daughter. I said okay and we headed for the river —about 100 meters from the camp. When we were almost there we could hear an explosion, and right away all the rocks shot out like crazy. She fell down and grabbed on to me and I grabbed the baby and the three of us curled up in a ball and we were showered with stones. Afterwards, they said that some low life had set off some unexploded dynamite but who knows who they were. When we got up she was white as a sheet. Then, I told her: "You see. Why do you want to come and follow me; leave me alone. I'm working. When I'm done, I'll come home. You see how dangerous it is around here" (Roberto, August, 2006).

After leaving this job, Roberto found other options for employment locally. At this time, the couple found themselves moving into a house belonging to one of Roberto's sisters who offered them the house on loan because of a fight about the inheritance with their older brother Amado. They were to remain in this house for over fifteen years.

As a local policeman for the township, Roberto remembers a different Tehuantepec, where facing extreme violence was not common as it is at present days.

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<sup>105</sup> It appears from various interviews, the fluctuation and mobility of the workforce figures as one of the most frequent causes of separation for couples.

We didn't have cars, motorcycles or pickups, we went on foot, but the town was well looked after, there wasn't so much wrongdoing as nowadays. Sometimes I would come home at all hours of the night on my horse. But I was armed, because you never knew who you were going to meet up with, especially around the Santa Maria bridge, that's always been dangerous, even more so now. I'd get home around one, knock on the door and my late wife would say, "Why do you take the risk, you'd be better off staying at the headquarters". It's okay I'd tell her. Once I took the *Ciudadano*,<sup>106</sup> Don Alejandro, home. It was about eight o'clock and he came into the headquarters and asked the captain, "Captain Tulio, who's going to take me home?" "There's Beto here", answered the captain. We set out at around nine and got to Tehuantepec around two thirty, three in the morning. At the Laborío park he told me "Beto, give me your gun", because in those days not just anybody had a gun. "Sure thing, here it is, *Ciudadano*", I answered. The next day, bright and early, he handed back the gun and that's how we got acquainted (Roberto, August, 2006).

He left his job as a local policeman when he had the chance to go back to work for the state railway company but this time within the drinking water delivery system where he worked as a *bombero*<sup>107</sup> for over fifteen years. In later years this system was administered by the Puertos Libres de Salina Cruz, a public enterprise company. *La Bomba* —as the system which supplied this precious liquid to the growing population of the port of Salina Cruz was known locally— allowed Roberto to put into practice diverse skills and abilities he had learned throughout his working life:

First I worked as an apprentice until my boss found me a place as a boiler man. At *La Bomba*, we worked the boilers that produced the steam to drive the machines that sent the water to Salina Cruz. We had four boilers for three pumps. We never cut the services, night and day we had to feed the boilers with that *topo negro* [black coke] that they used for the trains too. Around here, *La Bomba* was famous for its whistle; it was a loud whistle so you could hear it when we released the steam from the boilers at six in the morning, at eight, at twelve, at one, at four in

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<sup>106</sup> At this time, the term *Ciudadano* was used for those who held the post of what is now known as President of the Municipal Council.

<sup>107</sup> Roberto uses the word *bombero* as a local term used to identify employees of the drinking water system named *La Bomba*, rather than in the current meaning of fireman.



the afternoon and at nine at night. That was the last one. Just not so long ago, I heard César Rojas [a local announcer] on the radio saying that people used to go and stay inside their homes when they heard the last whistle around the *barrio* of Lieza. But what I also liked to do was to make knife and machete handles, that if you saw them you'd swear even the factories couldn't match. They were made of cow horn. I worked them on the forge and with a big winch we had at work. Every man in Lieza wanted one, so at night I set myself to straighten horn and two days later there was the machete. If my wife were alive she could tell you; she used to sell them at the market (Roberto, August, 2006).

Holding down all these jobs allowed Roberto to widen his links to the community and enhance his social visibility as well as giving him skills and means to support his family. The networks articulated made it easier for him to get work which in turn afforded him both material and personal satisfactions, such as a regular salary, social security, payment in kind, union membership, paid vacations and days off. With these, Roberto met the needs and occasional luxuries of his growing family, allowing him to consider himself a proud and successful man.

Every day I would come and go on horseback so I was always buying a new horse and hat because I was earning good money. We got paid on the twentieth, we got bonuses and they paid us extra for the night shift and overtime. I fed my children well and spent my Christmas bonus on them too. Every payday all the guys would go out for a drink in Salina Cruz or here in Tehuantepec. When Puertos Libres took over *La Bomba* we had a company store in Salina Cruz where they sold all sorts of groceries; rice, beans, bath soap, laundry soap, milk. You could get everything and they deducted it from your wages (Roberto, August, 2006).

"I used to do all these things then. I'm nobody's fool, no matter what they say!", says Roberto. And as his story progresses the image I had created of Roberto and Sebastiana's case began to blur and become less defined: Was not this a family lead by a Tehuana matron? Did not men's spheres of action in Tehuantepec centre around women just like it seemed at the beginning?

*Changing the stereotype*

The activities and spheres of action that might be associated with Roberto's employment career could well be identified with the public domain; Sebastiana's life space until this moment, as related by Roberto, could be linked to the home and the raising of children, or the private domain. This would show a closer bond to the natural determinants than to the supposed existence of a peculiar culture.

Nevertheless, it is in Roberto's own narrative that one can discern that a biological determinism in which being born a man or woman or in a particular culture are not unique or categorical elements in the relation between spatiality and gender.

My argument is that through these stories, Roberto gives us other associations that manifest a wide diversity of actors, practices, scenes and processes that he expresses at specific moments and in specific contexts. Over and over again, the material and the subjective sides—in jobs, places, tastes, individuals, objects, entities, emotions, knowledge among other elements—come into play and give a glimpse of how ways of life are intertwined into local intervention processes which are in connection to the global and in so doing also affect the practices usually associated with the gendered spatiality link on the Isthmus.

As it can be argued, these associations among heterogeneous, dynamic, and multiple elements are far too wide reaching and complex to derive from deterministic assumptions of any kind. For example, each of Roberto's activities, as dissimilar as they seem and the little or no apparent relation they have among themselves together form part of the picture of the demands required by the diaspora due to the processes of government intervention which was looking to boost the Isthmus as a driving force for development and modernization at a national level.

**Producing interferences**

Until now we have identified the presence of spatialities or specific locations in connection to the global; however, the greatest dissonance which might correspond to a local model for gendered spatiality come to light when we explore the 'parallel' project that Roberto and Sebastiana set in motion.

*Interweaving livelihoods, actions and spaces*

When Robert began working at *La Bomba*, the family's economic requirements had begun to increase. He and Sebastiana had six dependents, five children and Antonia, Roberto's older sister who had joined them after separating from her husband. It was at this time that Sebastiana suggested to Roberto that she go to the market from time to time to sell something; following the footsteps of her maternal grandmother who had trained her until she started working as a domestic servant. So the two began what they referred to as the *beneficio de los cerdos* (pig business),<sup>108</sup> an activity that Roberto had known since childhood as this was his father's occupation. In their case, they concentrated on the preparation of '*relleno de puerco*'<sup>109</sup> which Sebastiana sold at the main market in Tehuantepec located at that time behind the Municipal Palace.<sup>110</sup>

The experiences of both of them contributed to the establishment and mastery of the pig business, with the added income —earned by Sebastiana— the economic circumstances of the family improved substantially and they could even afford some luxuries for the times. Some of them that Robert still remembers are: being able to send their eldest daughter, Emilia, to the only private school in town and indeed in the region, the Juana C. Romero School, and spending time with family members in Ixtepec or Juchitán, where they spent the extra income on clothes, shoes, traditional confections and the occasional clay toy, known as *tanguyu*.<sup>111</sup> The most notable sign of the family's new economic circumstances occurred in 1954 when the couple hosted the

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<sup>108</sup> Roberto refers to this activity as *beneficio de cerdos*, or the pig business, although in reality this expression acquires a totally different meaning from the normal one which refers to the buying, selling and raising of pigs; here he refers to the preparation of cracklings, *chorizos* (sausages), lard, and the local speciality known as '*relleno*'.

<sup>109</sup> Roast pork, or *relleno* is usually sold on Sundays or holidays. The dish is made from seasoned pork or chicken cooked in the oven and served with mashed potatoes and *mole* sauce.

<sup>110</sup> When Sebastiana began her independent business, the market was still located behind the Tehuantepec Municipal Palace and the stalls consisted of tables or just blankets where the women placed their products (interview Beatriz Espinoza, Jun 2006).

<sup>111</sup> The clay figures called *tanguyu*, showed scenes of the old everyday life, men on horseback, carts with yokes of oxen, women carrying baskets on their heads, etcetera.

neighbourhood Saint's Day festivities, taking charge of the *mayordomía* (sponsorship) on the very day Sebastiana gave birth to their fifth child.

This situation lasted for over a decade; however, around 1963, as the family kept growing and Roberto started frittering away his income, their extra income was no longer enough, as we hear in the words of Roberto's daughter, Antonia:

The one who was earning off my dad was that *Señora* Pancha, who had her cantina in San Sebastián. He'd get there with a wallet full of banknotes and leave with next to nothing (February, 2007).

So it came to the moment when Sebastiana announced to Roberto that she was going to sell food everyday. In a short time she became famous for selling *chiles rellenos*,<sup>112</sup> or stuffed peppers, as well as the traditional *relleno*, or roast pork. Roberto wasn't happy with this decision but he had to go along with it to cover the needs of eight children and three adults.

First she [Sebastiana] told me that she wanted to go to the market every so often. But when she saw that there were more and more of us, she told me she was going to go every day. What for? I would ask her, because at that time I was still going to the trade union store. I came back from there shouldering a big box of stuff and the milk for the children. My daughter Emilia saw all this because I took her with me to help with the accounts. But she wouldn't change her mind (Roberto, August, 2006).

It was 1964 when the eight employees of *La Bomba* were told that it was closing due to the fact that public utility Puertos Libres—which had acquired *La Bomba* one year before—was declaring bankruptcy. Today *La Bomba* is still remembered by those who matched their daily lives to its sounds—time for school, time for lunch, time to go home, to rest for the day.

What they gave out at that time was that there were a lot of expenses and that people didn't pay for the water. But this had been going on since the time when *La Bomba* was under *Ferrocarriles de México*. They said it was too expensive to maintain the service because of the fuel for the boilers; that *tepuchate negro* [black coke] was so expensive. So *Puertos Libres* said the same thing (Roberto, August, 2006).

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<sup>112</sup> A *chile relleno* seller was a person who sold a stuffed pepper, rice and sometimes refried beans as a midday meal.

For a time, Roberto, then 43 years old, took comfort in the apparent economic security his severance bonus afforded him. He was confident that the twenty thousand pesos of 1964 would be enough to support his family for the rest of his life. His overconfidence, however, and his taste for liquor contributed to his frittering away the greater part of the money, which Sebastiana saw disappearing in living expenses and in the rounds Roberto shared with his friends.

This very year, when Sebastiana became aware of their immanent financial collapse, she took what was left of the money and went to a neighbour woman who was offering a property for sale. They reached an agreement with the condition that Roberto presented himself to seal the deal. The deal was sealed but not without various allegations between the couple as to Sebastiana's actions. They did not take occupancy of the property immediately but only when the family circumstances revolving around their occupancy of their current dwelling drove them to it.<sup>113</sup> It was only then that the couple took over their own property and they made the necessary arrangements to make it habitable, with the financial help of their oldest daughter, Emilia, who reluctantly undertook this duty as a sort of penance for having made a marriage that her parents had never approved of (see, chapter 5).

The purchase of the house arranged and with no more than the savings invested in her food business, Sebastiana intensified her selling activities in the market which she took to like a duck to water. Roberto tried to get rehired in another branch of the same enterprise *Puertos Libres* as well as in other companies nearby, finding a place in the water delivery system of Tehuantepec where he was employed as a plumber. In this job, Roberto contributed to bring running water to homes in Tehuantepec that had previously been served only by *aguadores* (water vendors) and or by the users themselves. Nevertheless his income shrank significantly and his working conditions never went near to those he had enjoyed at *La Bomba*.

I worked at plumbing a good bit. There were two of us. We were known in all of Tehuantepec. They knew us because we installed the water pipes. Before, only one of us would go out on a job, but now a crowd comes. Just a while ago, five of them came to hook up a new connection for Ana María [his niece and neighbour]. I just look at them, they find the old pipe and, to put it back in service, all they had to do was to install a coupler and a main faucet and then hook it up to the meter, but, instead

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<sup>113</sup> Due to the fact that one of Roberto's nephews had acquired the property and the couple had to move to a place of their own.

they made a mess of things and ended up changing everything up to the water main (Roberto, August, 2006).

In 1968, Roberto was out of work again. This time, unlike previous occasions, the job choices he tried for had age and educational level restrictions, and were of less income than previous jobs, and, at the same time, these were beyond the influence of those networks that Roberto formed part of. Several times he was offered jobs that implied moving from the region. At this time, the family had ten living children of the twelve born to the couple,<sup>114</sup> and three adults; so having to move out of the region was the principal obstacle. In fact, his reluctance to move out of the region, added to the gauntlet of institutional bureaucracy, contributed to his decision for not completing the papers for his pension. As he relates in his own words:

When it was all over they gave us good severance pay, but nobody got retirement. Afterwards, I got a few offers, but I was a fool. A guy I knew when I was working in highway construction offered me a job in *Petróleos* [the national petroleum company], up around *Mina* [Minatitlán]; his name was Sergio Martínez. He first got to be a leader at *Petróleos* and from there went into government. “Go on, Go on”, my late wife would say. “Go on, give it a try and then you can come back”, but working away wasn’t in the cards for me; look at how long I could have been getting money from *Petróleos*. I even didn’t want to go after my old boss Jesús Carranza, from when I was working at *La Bomba* for *Ferrocarriles*. Who knows? Maybe he would have got me another job. That’s why my late wife would say sometimes: “You see? You should have gone to ask him, and now you’d have a decent pension”, Because, I couldn’t arrange my pension either. I went to Mexico City, but to tell the truth, I gave it up because it was so far and they never resolved anything; they just keep you coming and going. I ended up losing all my papers there because I didn’t keep following up the paperwork. Then my nephew Hector offered me a job as a watchman in one of his business or assistant on one of those bus lines, but I wouldn’t work like that (Roberto, August, 2006).

After various attempts at landing a job, Roberto decided to concentrate on the pig business, contributing to the expansion of the business by

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<sup>114</sup> In Tehuantepec it is usual to refer to the total number of offspring; and then differentiate among miscarriages, children who died in infancy, those who reached adulthood, and those adult children who died before their parents.

extending his service as a slaughterer as well as adding to the variety of animals they kept in the backyard, allowing Sebastiana to diversify the kind of foods she could offer.

Even though I was out of work my late wife never went hungry. I'd told myself: "Why should I move? We're better off here in the pig business", She helped me a lot to get ahead because she was very smart. Look, she didn't know how to read or write because she never went to school, nobody sent her to school and she had to work from a very young age to get ahead. That's why she learned a little of everything. She lived through a lot and that made her clever. She was so good at keeping the books that she could out do the girls [their daughters] on the accounts (Roberto, August, 2006).

With each memory a sense of nostalgia came over Roberto for a daily life that was linked to a way of being and to an intense visibility within his family, his friends and his own community. Sponsoring a local Saint's festival, local trips, going shopping, hunting, wearing fine clothes, owning a horse, paying for rounds of drinks, having a large family and supplying for their needs and upbringing became elements that lent him distinction. Creating these memories came from performances that were highly prized on the Isthmus.

*Between the public and the private, a middle ground*

Trying to adjust spaces to gender identity evoked by Roberto about himself and his wife, becomes even more complex in that neither actors' behaviour can be placed within a single spatiality, nor can their practices be adjusted to conform with conventional gender ascriptions.

Sebastiana, for example was economically productive both at home and in the market place while Roberto too participated in ways of life that fed into various spatialities. At home and outside what seems evident is that both are of influence in different places or spatialities that can as easily be associated with the public as with the home or the private.

From an Actor Network (ANT) perspective such spatial interlocking begins to make sense, considering the proposition in relation to the constitution of networks and their spatial character, as well as the configuration of the facts and contexts which contribute to maintain certain stability over a specific period of time.

The pictures of Roberto and Sebastiana we have presented so far coincide with the establishment, expansion, and contraction of networks. These in turn form associations or complex networks among

heterogeneous, dynamic and multiple elements that take shape upon the stage of action. Roberto and Sebastiana constitute a network in which both incorporate requirements and expectancies specific to their lifeworlds and livelihoods. It is important to bring out that as much as they may incorporate others or become incorporated by other actors in certain networks they in turn can disconnect from them or be disconnected from them as it has been show on various occasions.

The 'pig business' could be considered a good illustration of this. In this activity they both incorporate different elements, both human and non-human, familiar and novel, everyday and unusual, all of which contribute to Roberto and Sebastiana enacting different interrelated actions or practices in the performing spaces, where everything is connected and the modification of one element has resonances within all of the others.

In Roberto's narratives there is another element that illustrates the dynamic and somewhat ephemeral character of the networks. This can be seen in the different jobs he held and in the difficulties he faced trying to reincorporate himself into the job market. Thus we can see that establishing a network does not necessarily imply that it will remain intact over time, but on the contrary, it shows, rather, the temporary, vulnerable and relative character of networks as Callon describes them when he states:

The actor network can thus be distinguished from the traditional actors of sociology... But the actor network should not, on the other hand, be confused with a network linking in some predictable fashion elements that are perfectly well defined and stable, for the entities it is composed of, whether natural or social, could at any moment redefined their identity and mutual relations in some new way and bring new elements into the network (1987: 93).

This assertion invites to see the dynamism and multiplicity of the elements that become entangled in a scenario, those that are conceived in the global sphere and influence the local sphere, be it at an individual or a collective level. This has been the case for many of the development projects carried out on the Isthmus such as the reactivation of the trans-Isthmus railway, the highway construction, the introduction of basic services such as the drinking water and irrigation systems, which have had diverse interferences on the life experiences of the local inhabitants.

Roberto, for example, was not involved in any sort of farm work projects but rather he linked to unstable work networks, which were fluid,



and implied many temporary projects and great geographical mobility. This situation led him to a greater vulnerability in relation to the changes in his networks and the compatibility with his own interests. For Sebastiana, on the other hand, these projects led her to a certain geographic stability thanks to the more or less captive market generated for her food products in context with a high migration flow through the region.

At this stage it is possible to identify various disruptive situations (such as, the increase in the number of family members, job losses, the squandering of the severance pay, moving house) in the 'fire space', which cause action, renovation and movement. They all, without a doubt, contributed to bring a certain constancy to the 'pig business', and, as a consequence to the continuity of this particular network.

These changes affected not only Roberto and Sebastiana's activities and their spaces but also their network. It is useful to remember that each change affects not only the elements within a particular network and their interrelations, but also those other networks of which it is also part off and so on (Callon, 1987: 96), as we can see as in the following section.

### **Reversals and resonances; dynamics at home**

"That was no life for me!", Roberto answered when I asked him to tell me more about his work in the business that Sebastiana had set up and at which he worked for more than twenty years, as this was the couple's principal activity after losing his last job as well as being the most stable and certain source of income for him and his family.

Since Roberto had begun working principally in the 'pig business', performed by Sebastiana, it became the driving force in the couple's livelihood, and the most visible. The couple began at dawn so she could sell her food in the market. In the area it was already common knowledge that, after 7:30 in the morning, the neighbours could come to the couple's house for the dishes Sebastiana offered six days a week: stuffed chili peppers<sup>115</sup> refried beans, and red rice; they came to be sure to get their share or simply to save themselves a trip downtown.

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<sup>115</sup> A woman known as a '*vendedora de chiles rellenos*', in reality sells a variety of products among which the most prominent are stuffed chillies commonly accompanied by rice and beans. It is up to the seller's taste and ingenuity to add other items such as grilled onions, fish, or shrimp cakes.

From Monday to Saturday, at about eight o'clock in the morning, Sebastiana would set off to the market carrying on her head a cloth covered basket where she carried the heaviest part of her load; in one hand she carried the lighter foodstuffs and in the other she carried a bag with serving utensils (spoons, paper, etcetera).

On Saturdays she would come home at midday to prepare the *relleno* that she sold on Sunday. On that day, unlike the rest, she took only the bag of serving utensils because Don Benito, her life-long porter, carried the rest of the load with the aid of his *mecapal*.<sup>116</sup>

Sebastiana could be seen coming home from the market at around four o'clock, bring with her the utensils and the raw ingredients and groceries necessary for household use and for the business. Sebastiana's comings and goings repeated themselves every day producing scenes typical of the women on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec; the control of buying and selling (Dalton, 2000; Eisenstein, 2006 [1930-1931]; Reina, 1995).

For scenes such as these to take place, others had to occur at home. From Monday to Friday Roberto had to chop the ingredients: the meat and onions that would be turned into the stew by Sebastiana's hand. He also had to beat the egg white of two *cartones de huevos*<sup>117</sup>, to make the batter to cover the various foods. Sebastiana, meanwhile, would make the rice, mash and fry the beans prepared the day before, and, of course, put everything together to cook the *chiles rellenos*.

On Saturdays, Sebastiana came home early from the market to what was in reality the busiest day for the members of this family. They all had to get up early to do their chores and help with the preparation of the traditional *relleno*. Roberto, with the help of his sons, was in charge of slaughtering the pig, collecting the blood, butchering the animal, preparing the skin for cracklings, cleaning the intestines and all the other tasks that allowed them to make other dishes from the skin and offal such as *chorizos*, *moronga* (black pudding) and *chicharrón* (cracklings). Meanwhile, Sebastiana and her daughters chopped up and cooked the other ingredients that make up this dish. The pressure lifted when the men carried the *palanganas*<sup>118</sup> with the dish ready to roast on their shoulders and took it around to Roberto's baker sister, Apolonia's house. The work

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<sup>116</sup> A Nahuatl word used to describe a leather strap used by errand boys and *stevedores* to carry loads on their backs; the strap was placed around the forehead and two ropes passed under the load.

<sup>117</sup> In Mexico a *carton de huevos* is a box containing 30 eggs.

<sup>118</sup> As the large clay roasting pans are called.

wasn't over, however; Roberto would watch until the dish was cooked, making sure that it was ready for the following day.<sup>119</sup> The daughters cleaned the cooking utensils and Sebastiana put together all the necessities and utensils for selling at the market the next day when, in the words of her daughter, Hermelinda: "She spent all day at the market".

And so each day when she got back from her stall, Sebastiana would put down her baskets and set out the food to share with the members of her family, only then she would lie in the hammock to rest after her exhausting day's work. While she took a short nap, the young people emptied, cleaned and hung the baskets and began preparations for the next day; cleaning and cooking the chillies, the beans, the rice, etcetera. When Sebastiana got up she would take over these chores, and her day's work would be over just as she sat down in front of the television set to watch her favourite soap opera.

From the time Sebastiana became the principal source of income she took over the managing the household and ministering to all the family's needs. It was she, too, who took over the burden of their *compromisos comunitarios*,<sup>120</sup> or social obligations, even though she, Roberto, or another member of their family might be the one attending.<sup>121</sup> With "working full time", Sebastiana gave up some of the tasks that she had formerly carried out, such as the laundry and ironing, preparing meals, cleaning the house, among many others. The adjustments in the couple's activities led to a reconfiguration of the activities of all the members of the family.

When Sebastiana went off to the market, Roberto took care of the garbage, cleaning the living room, the distributing of water that had been gathered; as well as paying the bills and making repairs on the house, as he mentioned before. It was he who was supposed to take care of domestic concerns such as taking care of the pigs, goats, chickens and turkeys in the back yard that served as food for the family or for the business. He was

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<sup>119</sup> According to Roberto, this task was totally unpredictable, given that the cooking time depended on the characteristics of the animal in question as much as on the factors affecting the oven.

<sup>120</sup> People in Tehuantepec commonly refer to all festivals, burials, private gatherings or community celebrations as *compromisos comunitarios*, or community obligations.

<sup>121</sup> In community compromises cooperation tables are usually installed, one for men and another for women. That is where the registry of all the people that contribute towards the event takes place. This registry is considered in a reciprocal way in future events.

also responsible for finding the best animals at proper prices, so it was not uncommon to find him on the streets of San Blas Atempa looking for deals of this sort. Little by little, Roberto won back his predecessors' reputation as a slaughterer and tanner, offering his services to interested customers in addition to performing these tasks in the family business thus earning an income that he could manage on his own account. As long and as hard as his working day was, he usually managed to spend some time with his friends and relatives swapping tales in front of the Municipal Palace, or having a drink in one of the cantinas in Tehuantepec.

The rest of family performed other tasks. For a long time, Antonia was helped by the couple's adult children, some did the cooking, others the shopping, other did the cleaning, or carried water. In reality adults and children carried out diverse duties; for example, each one was responsible for picking up the hammocks and cots on which they had spent the night before. Some got themselves ready for school in the morning, while others waited until the afternoon to do so, according to their year in school or the school they attended. Before or after going to school they all took part in the household activities, as well as those involved in their personal care, as Emilia tells:

My jobs were sweeping, cleaning, watching the children, and washing diapers because there were always little ones around. I did embroidery but I never did any heavy work. I didn't like being sent on errands or going out to sell things; I always stayed at home. When I went out to study dressmaking my mama hired a lady to do the laundry for all of us. Between my mama and my Aunt Antonia they did the cooking. Afterwards, as we grew up we all learned how to wash and iron our own clothes. My brothers, Aníbal, Armando and Alejandro did housework too, they fetched water from the river, bought wood, swept and washed their clothes. I remember when they put a water pipe near the house and my dad had them make cans to carry the water. They painted the house too and cleaned up after the animals; they, being the boys, did the heavy stuff (June, 2006).

On some occasions the likes and interests of each child are easy to discern, especially when they use strategies to evade chores and responsibilities that they didn't like, that now, as adults, they recall in anecdotes. It was Antonia, the third child, who used to get out of going to school and stay at home on the excuse of helping with her younger brothers and sisters. Hermelinda, the sixth child, used to get out of doing the dishes by convincing Natividad, the ninth, to do them by promising to take her on an outing.

You could always catch my sister, Toña, lying in the hammock putting the little ones to sleep or carrying them around. She always tried to get out of going to school and my dad convinced my mother to let her stay at home. He gave in to her really because she didn't like school and preferred taking care of the children (Hermelinda, July, 2006).

As can be notice, childcare was shared out among various family members. The case of the last member of the family is a good example of this. Jesus, born in 1968, suffers from Down's Syndrome and has required special care from birth and various family members have shared in his care and upbringing: it was Natividad who, with great patience and prayers to our Lord of Laborío managed to teach him to walk at four years of age; it was his aunt Antonia who cared for him as a newborn, it was Antonio, the eighth child who carried him until he learned to walk; it has been Roberto, his father, who has been in charge of his personal care from the time he was three and still is to the present day;<sup>122</sup> it was Sebastiana who would take him with her to community events and social occasions and who took him to the special education school in Salina Cruz.

As the children grew, so did the expenses and with only one source of income the family felt the pinch and this situation lead to taking decisions that favoured some over others. As an example, the secondary schools were located in Salina Cruz, about a half an hour driving from Tehuantepec which implied paying for the transportation and other incidental expenses of each child attending these schools. This is the situation as told by Emilia, one of the children who could not continue her studies:

When I finished studying dressmaking my mama told me I couldn't keep going; that the ones who could keep studying were my brothers. Because they were boys, they were going to help us out when the completed their studies and got jobs. I had to work hard and help her in help them stay in school because I was the oldest. The first was my brother Aníbal. When he went to work he helped the other three so they could go with him.

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<sup>122</sup> Roberto bathes, shaves, and dresses Jesus and combs his hair and puts on his shoes everyday. He gets him ready to go out to play every afternoon and waits on his return; he also is in charge of putting him to bed at night despite the fact that Jesus is capable of doing all this by himself. Nowadays it is Emilia who sometimes takes him to community events and social occasions and cares for him when he is ill.

That's how we could keep a little of what we earned because she was working and so was I. We sometimes sent something to the ones who were still studying too. Maybe it wasn't thousands of pesos but it was what helped them to stay in school at that time. That's why my mama would say that someday they would give us some of what they had so I stayed behind; I couldn't study what I liked (Emilia, June, 2006).

Many of the decisions like this one that were once Roberto's to make or were joint decisions seemed to have passed entirely to Sebastiana, especially those involving money issues. At the same time, Roberto had to assume chores that Sebastiana had done before, like taking care of the house and the children. From that point onward they were perceived differently by the family and by the community. Sebastiana was perceived as the authoritarian, the provider, the strong one, the unmoving, the harsh, the violent. Roberto, on the other hand, was associated with patience, approachability, caring and affection as can be seen in some of the experiences retold by three of the couple's daughters:

It wasn't that my dad had no authority, but that he withdrew more and more. If you went up to him and asked him for money for something like when he was working, he would just say: "go see your mama about that". And she would always say that we couldn't afford it. Although he always took care of the house, the money belonged to my mama (Antonia, February, 2007).

I was the only girl among four boys and I took advantage of it. When we played marbles and they won, I'd go crying to my dad and he'd come out and defend me. He'd tell them: "give back my daughter's marbles" and they had to do it because I was a real crybaby, the same if we played with spinning tops. My mama, on the other hand almost never got involved when we were playing, she was of tougher character. She was the boss and we really believed her when she said she would hit us or punish us. My dad, because he was at home all the time was easy on us and if he hit us he would usually be sorry for us right away, I think he only hit me twice and that was because when I was a grown up, I yelled at him really badly. But my mama, she really hit us; maybe because she didn't know any better, or that's the way she was raised (Hermelinda, July, 2006).

Before I used to think she was hard, or I didn't understand her, but now I understand her better. I remember one Christmas

when I asked my mama for a doll; one of those bald headed ones that were all the rage. When she didn't buy me one I kept on asking her all the time, "Come on Mommy, I want one of those bald headed dolls and, come on Mommy get me one of those bald headed ones". And one day when we were at the stall, I started up again; and she goes "Why do you want a bald doll? Grab that bald kid in front of you". It was a lady's son, who trade as us in the market'. The boy turned bright red and so did I. I never asked her for anything again. I thought she didn't love me because she was always like that when you asked for anything. That's why when we were older we always fought with her; but now I understand that it was because she wasn't able to buy it for me, even if she had wanted to, she couldn't afford it (Natividad, December, 2006).

From the time the older boys moved to Mexico City, the family redistributed its activity. The older children were setting up new families and the ones left behind took over from those who were leaving. The household tasks were constantly being redistributed. If indeed there were assignments based on gender, the preferences and circumstances of each individual child gave rise to different practices. For example, Hermelinda's desire to study was supported by both her parents and she managed aided by the food she herself prepared and that a friend sold around the schools, by various bits of help from her older brothers and sisters and from her parents. Others helped more around the house, like Natividad; others swelled the number of members, like Santiago who married and had children while living at home for a long period of time. Others had to be involved in other ways like Antonio who after doing his chores took off on any excuse and Jesus who covered for missing members running all sorts of errands, cleaning and caring for the new babies.

In every case, both those who stayed and those who left,<sup>123</sup> contributed in different ways to the continuity of the network and to maintain the ownership of the property, because it was not unheard of for Sebastiana, in times of need, to resort to loans offering the deed to the house as security. The various 'helping hands' from the adults and the children produced many occasions for change. At times, the family had

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<sup>123</sup> It is worth mentioning that of those who left home, only Emilia has returned to the house. The others, although they still maintain a sense of belonging, spread out to form and add to other family networks and, of course, formed new links and associations.

members with higher incomes who gave economic support and gifts;<sup>124</sup> however none of the other projects prospered as well for the couple as the pig businesses.

While some of the family migrated to the big cities, others stayed to increase the numbers of the members of the network at home. Santiago and his wife, Mary had five children who, little by little and up to Mary's death, were left to Hermelinda's care. Hermelinda left her parent's house for short periods of time on two occasions; once when she went to study and the second when she moved to Ixtepec to be closer to her place of employment. It is important to note that since her assuming responsibility for the household it has taken a radically different dynamic and spatiality. Emilia rejoined the family ten years ago after a long absence due to her marriage. Some come and others go, like Natividad who was living in Mexico City and has returned on various occasions for a time. Others have left home, as is the case of Santiago's three older children; Aníbal, Nora, and Sara, the daughter who left home during this field study. Some have attempted to return after having been thrown out on Sebastiana's death, as is the case of Antonio. Others, like Santiago, show up on a day to day basis to cover their needs and ask after the children. In 2010, Roberto, Jesús, Emilia, Hermelinda, and the teenagers, Xóchitl and Ulises live in the house and carry on the network begun by Roberto and Sebastiana, although the network is not the same, the house still seems to be an element of stability, or 'mutable immobile'.

The confusion about the inheritance of the house was cleared up, at least partially, towards the end of my field work. After several meetings and telephone calls it was decided among the children —Santiago and Antonio having been excluded from these negotiations— that the house, without specifying shares, would go to the four daughters, one of the brothers having died and the other two having renounced their rights in it. It must be mentioned that this decision was influenced by the clear intent to restrict the room for manoeuvre of the brothers who were trying to move back in or who wanted a share in the house.

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<sup>124</sup> For example, Emilia, in addition to making home improvements, encouraged her parents to get involved in other businesses like a soda fountain. This business, however, never covered their needs and was abandoned, as were other businesses.



## **Entangled boundaries**

At various points in this study the stories seem to be tied to the public versus private model both in the universal and local senses (pointed at the introduction). Nevertheless, at various times in the scenes evoked by the various actors it becomes evident that this division of space and gender is not axiomatic and things become more complex. That is to say that at times the link appears flexible, ambiguous, disconnected and malleable, at others cyclic, and at times even inflexible and implacable.

The discussion of the first image captured at the beginning of this study, which referred to the implications of a society ruled by Tehuana matrons, made possible, for the same space, the reconstruction of different scenarios whose common denominator came out to be constant change and adaptation and where the interaction of the actors with elements of a heterogeneous and multiple character produced different situations and everyday problems to which the actors responded according to their goals, abilities, knowledge, expectations, lifeworlds and livelihoods.

Rather than illustrating a dichotomy, the scenarios overlap with each other over and over again in freeform, dynamic, and intangible ways where the private sphere may, or may not be public and the public may or may not reconfigure itself into the private sphere. As we can see in the case of Roberto and Sebastiana, what began as two life courses in this network, one outside and one within the home, ended by joining all the members who have formed part of the network in diverse activities in which the association between spatiality and gender is at times commonplace and unexpected at others; in short, unpredictable, given the situations of constant adaptation and change.

In this case there are times when Roberto and Sebastiana's story approximates the Isthmus stereotype; especially when his work and that of the entire network is translated into Sebastiana's selling at the market. Nevertheless, though it may seem that the allocation of tasks is clearly established by gender, this was not presented to me as the only criterion; age, disposability, skills and even preferences were also taken into account. That is why men's participation in activities considered domestic were not rare, and for what I could state they were more common than what has been recognized in the stereotype view. Furthermore, in this narrative, what is commonly associated to the domestic involves activities that can be associated to the public or the private space. For example, carrying water and the heavy clay roasting trays, as well as waiting on customers at the house drew Roberto and his sons into public view;

whereas other activities, such as, beating eggs, chopping meat, sweeping, and doing the laundry are largely invisible to those who are not involved in the activities carried out at home.

Given this complex scheme of activities in which both men and women are associated, the members of this network referred to me that they do not feel that they have suffered an imbalance in the distribution of tasks or responsibilities among them, aside from recognizing the extreme efforts of both parents: if not the same, just different and not less important.

Rather than to attempt to merely characterize this particular case, it is important to recognize the way in which the actors move from one scenario to another, depending on their contexts, strategies and individual networks positions. That is why I proposed the notion of 'entangled boundaries' as appropriate here, because it recognizes those moments of unexpected or unstable changes, of adapting, of decision making, of diversification, of overlapping, of crosscutting boundaries, of discontinuity and rearticulation of elements; which produces new assemblages that transform and get a different meaning to the enactments that take place in the everyday life.

Take for example the case of Sebastiana, who, on deciding to work in the marketplace, in addition to recognize space for action, devised a strategy for selling a product that engaged with her resources and needs and also matched the preferences of her customers, innovating everyday until she became one of the best known practitioners of her trade. Or Roberto's case where he adapted the skills he had learned on the job to the home business, finding there a place to fulfil his economic needs while taking care of having an outside space, such as the buying and selling of pigs, slaughtering, skinning them, and offering their tanned skins for sale. This is not to dodge the visibility that provides this case, about the contraction of spaces for manoeuvring and the networks that contributed to many conflictive situations as well as discontinuities between the diverse, heterogeneous and multiple actors that affect Roberto's networks and to Roberto himself.

These examples suggest a certain tension and plasticity of the spaces where experiences, knowledge, and needs lead to a dynamic refunctionalization of the actors and to the spaces in which they are immersed producing new scenarios. Thus we refer to practices that are interconnected in dynamic processes whose meanings and relations are linked to particular moments and contexts as well as to different scale of spatialities. In this light it could be said that the prepared food business

could have articulated to the local level and thus generated alliances between the members of the network in a more or less stable way. In this case elements of heterogeneous, diverse and multiple character such as; animals, cooking utensils, set of human tasks, the alliances building, the emotional links, among other elements, all together translate their meanings and associations to the house.

In this way the house becomes the common reference point to each human member of this network and at the same time the contingency point where each individual, present or absent, or even as an outsider demands or eludes his own visibility in making decisions. Here it is worth considering the materialization of the 'fire space' brought about by inheritance of the house, of itself a disruptive situation, as was the death of Sebastiana. It manifested the diverse agencies and interactions between the different actors that try to assemble networks that can legitimize their past, present, and future actions in relation to this 'mutable immobile'.

Considering Roberto's life experience opens doors for deconstructing some common images of Isthmus society, especially those which suggest the existence of a gendered spatiality. A clear division of spheres of action and association assigned by gender is commonly ascribed to any particular culture and the one ascribed to Zapotec culture has been seen as central. It turns out to be an inadequate tool to reconstruct the practices, critical events, and contexts to which these actors evoked.

If indeed, relationships between gender and spatiality could be identified in the practices here described in some effort to make them fit into this mental straitjacket, or as Law puts it: "distorted into clarity" (Law, 2004a: 2), such links between spatiality and gender would reflect the result of a set of elements that are produced in times and contexts specific to each network and are, as such, susceptible to change and to unexpected circumstances. Following this line of reductionism would oblige us to try to conjure up a weight to assign to the preponderance of one sphere over another in order to explain the differentiation and force that each one manifests. Everything would be reduced to be able to place oneself into the correct or higher valued space. This research approach would minimize and disentangle the ample resonance of all these elements: gender, spatiality, differentiation and culture.

One need only look at the example of Roberto's domestic network where it is almost impossible to discern a clear cut male-female dichotomy, as both the universal and local model suggests. Instead, we

see within the same network that we have a mesh of meanings to what it has meant to be a man or a woman for each of them. Thus, different gender identifications are enacted by the different actors according to the occasion and the problem they are facing, and not simply because they live in a world dominated by women. Being a man or a woman in this network has meant something different for each individual. Sometimes one or the other appears as subordinate, other times excluded, and yet other times as dominant.

In other cases, such as schooling for Emilia, being female denied her the right to an education, while for Hermelinda this was no obstacle, and for Antonia it wasn't an issue; so, in each case, the fact of being male or female has had different implications in both the public and private arenas. For this reason, when we talk about gender, we cannot rely on preconceived and generalized circumstances.<sup>125</sup>

Once again, we need to refer to the specificity of each case and to the other elements which produce it. This invites us to consider the various space associations in which the actors arrange and rearrange their interests and actions in relation to each other. In this sense, spaces and gender are in a constant, more or less symbiotic relationship—which is not, however, predetermined—in which they define and redefine each other. Much in the same way as other circumstances, cultural practices, personal and collective needs and requirements, contribute to different spatial and gender enactments. Thus the assessment of each domain depends, on the actions and experiences of each individual in relation to other actors.

Without a pattern which definitively explains the link between spatiality and gender as a whole and is applicable to all sorts of situations, how can we give meaning to these dynamic, ephemeral and elusive actions that, at times, are so different and at the same time so alike for realities like those encountered on the Isthmus?

What we have seen so far suggests a complex relationship among the distinct categories that have been used to discuss what goes on in a group of humans. Spatiality and gender are not elements that can be clearly and precisely detached from the rest but rather are the part of the process of production of multiple connections which entangle and disentangle themselves in confusing and messy ways.

Another point that has come out of the deconstruction of determinisms about spatiality and gender through this study, is the importance of rethinking the way we construct explanations of the social.

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<sup>125</sup> Judith Butler has made similar arguments in her work. See (Butler, 2006).

As Law recognizes when he asserts that even if there are things that can be made clear and well defined, much in the world remains “vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, elusive” (Law, 2004a).

For this reason, it is essential to try to find other ways of approaching and describing these realities in which their constitution, their dynamics and their specificity can be expressed or reveal themselves. That is why it is important to take a new look and to turn our eyes to the actors’ experiences, practices and agencies that they produce in their everyday life.

I invite the reader to examine another of the most common assumptions about communities on the Isthmus: the sexual life of the Isthmus people.







Pg. 149:  
Family at the Ventosa beach

Pg. 150:  
A birthday party

Previous page:  
The *mediu shiga*



## **Intertwining customs and practices: sexual bodies in action**

### **Abstract**

This chapter explores connections between Isthmus customs and practices of local actors regarding sexuality. Seemingly, Zapotec cultural legacy regulates this human practice in Tehuantepec, hence, it would be indicative of a certain kind of constitutive and deterministic character of this culture that apparently rules and defines life locally. Nevertheless, the experiences presented below expose aspects suggesting that sexual life is part of a larger and more complex intertwining, in which the actors are agents for change who transform, renew or disarticulate sexual norms or customs. The term ‘sexual bodies’ in the title portrays multiple and dynamic connections in which biological, ethnic, cultural and social aspects are not ultimately ubiquitous or exclusive fields when actors enact and re-enact sexual life in Tehuantepec.

### **Introduction**

The sexual life of the Isthmus [people] is as simple as their general mode of life and as direct as their character. The relations between genders are natural and uninhibited, free of the puritanical outlook on sex of the Indians of the highlands, and of the Spanish feudal concept of the inferior position of women, so characteristic of other parts of Mexico... In general terms, the sexual life of the Isthmus, however intense, is simple and unsophisticated. Lurid refinements are unknown, relationships are far from platonic, and attachments are tempestuous and impermanent. Courtship is a mixture of romantic serenading and fleeting meetings on the way to the market and at the river, or self-conscious conversation at dances, tug and pull-games, and more direct action if the girl permits (Covarrubias, 1986 [1946]: 338-340).

This fragment was extracted from one of the most famous narratives about the Zapotec from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec: *Mexico South: the Isthmus of Tehuantepec*, presented by Miguel Covarrubias first appearing in 1946. It illustrates how sexual uses and customs from the Isthmus usually occupy a significant part of the repertoires that allude to this culture. About this, two main perspectives can be found: while some researchers argue the existence of a supposed ‘sexual looseness’ within the region, others question such argument evoking the ancestral character of Zapotec sexual norms, as they scrupulously safeguard the sexual life on which honour and decency of a family rely. This last assertion is not based upon presumed superficial observations attributed to those stating the first argument. This debate can be found in the following examples:

The women are delicately made, mercurial, voluptuous, and full of vivacity. They are particularly remarkable for the exquisite grace of their carriage, the winning softness of their manner of expression, and their love of gay costumes. In morals they are loose, and full of intrigue (Murphy, 1859: 177).

Often one hears foreigners who visited the Isthmus of Tehuantepec say that there is sexual promiscuity, free union, and price on female virginity there... The most unusual comment is the affirmation of the existence of “double bathhouses”. This assertion is not supported by reality. In the entire Isthmus there is not one public bathhouse. There are many rivers, and there are artesian wells in most houses. Women do bathe nude in the rivers but not because of a lack of modesty. Either a man should not pass by when a woman is bathing, or he can go by but cannot stay to watch. Only the tourist —because they travel through in a hurry— or superficial men like them can make such claims as mentioned above because they are ignorant of the fact that all Isthmus life, or more strictly that of Juchitán, obeys customs rooted in ancient tradition. There is no sexual looseness of any kind, nor can there be in a town that scrupulously follows ancestral customs. I am talking about a form of being and a form of conduct (Henestrosa, 1993: 129).

The particularity of feminine behaviour, such as playful mischief, body language, public freedom, flirting, and even ethnic mixture, could sufficiently sustain the allegations of sexual looseness in this community (Cajigas, Alberto 1961a; Covarrubias, 1986 [1946]; Eisenstein, 2006 [1930-1931]; Linati, 1828). The arguments of the first perspective frequently

associate sexual behaviour with the geographical characteristics and history of the region. In this view such looseness would correspond to the predominance of human instinct, favoured by the climatic conditions of a semi-dry tropic, the primitiveness of this culture and past events such as the Conquest. From an ontological point of view, the aforesaid statement refers to a 'natural' type of explanation.

From the other position, the arguments tend to invoke Isthmus customs, specifically the norms concerning Zapotec courtship and marriage, as the foundation that regulates local sexuality (Campbell & Green, 1999; Henestrosa, 1993). This approach however is not free from debates, for example around the existence of a rigorous cultural normativity that preserves forms of masculine domination over the female body (as is the case in rituals around virginity), or the supposed marital union for life, as some authors have remarked (Meneses, 1997; Miano, 2002; Newbold, 1975; Ruiz, 1993).

Both perspectives would seem controversial or to be irreconcilable, in addition to undermining each other, as they lead the debate towards an antagonism between freedom of the natural world, and the restrictive character of the social. Sexual manifestations in Tehuantepec, nevertheless, more than a matter circumscribed to nature or to a peculiar culture, seem to be the product of a diversity of situations that can be produced locally, where the sexual aspect results in a point of convergence for distinct elements of a heterogeneous character such as one's own body, economic activities, external intervention processes, media, climate, culture, among others. Thus, in studying individuals' experiences locally, it appears that the discourses concerning sexuality in the Isthmus form part of wide and complex associations, which actors articulate in their daily life. Therefore, instead of conceiving sexual life as static or as determined behaviour, we prefer to see it as a set of enacted practices.

This chapter, then, intends to approach this controversy mentioned above from the perspective of those who have incorporated, experienced, or embodied it. To do so, I first provide evidence about the existence of this dichotomy: between sexual looseness and rigorous cultural norms, while at the same time I present elements about how customs supposed to be and are discursively represented. Then, the way actors experience and enact such customs is exposed. To this end I provide eight case studies that illustrate the complexity of sexuality in Tehuantepec. Finally, the conclusions of this chapter are presented.

### Sexual looseness and Isthmus customs

From early childhood up to adult age, Isthmus inhabitants usually evoke the sexual in their daily life. Terms such as: *verga* (cock); *jala tu bueno* (go pull your balls); *¿lavaste tu mano?* (did you wash your hands?) *o así como agarraste tu concha andas vendiendo* (you just grabbed your cunt and now you are selling?), can be used mischievously, recklessly or slanderously in Tehuantepec. Women traders are usually known for using sentences with double meaning, in order to attract probable buyers, or to cheer their spirit. Turns-of-phrase, smiles, recklessness in front of flirtatious behaviour, and nudity, among other aspects, have contributed to the images that highlight the sexual character of the Zapotec people (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1997a; Eisenstein, 2006 [1930-1931]; Henestrosa, 1993; Müller, 1997; Poniatowska, 1994). The quote below amply illustrates this:

Zapotec women have always been openly erotic and live their sexuality on the surface of their skin. Sex is their clay toy, they take it in their hands, they shape it at their leisure, they move it down here and down there, they mix it with the corn they make their *totopos* with. Everything reminds them of it, the zooming of the golden *zanate*, the flight of the butterfly, the colour of the red snapper (Poniatowska, 1994: 84) [trans. G. Barajas].

Throughout my fieldwork I was able to record many of these situations. I recall one in particular, perhaps because of the sudden and unexpected way it happened, while I was helping Eladia sell flowers right by the railroad area towards which the central market of Tehuantepec<sup>126</sup> had expanded. That day Eladia had not been able to set up her booth at the place where she usually did, so we set up close to one of the *tecas*<sup>127</sup> who was selling fish and dry shrimp. Close to six o'clock, by the end of the working day, an adult man approached Valeriano, Eladia's mate, to chat with him. He had arrived only a few minutes earlier to help her carry the stall back home. It was then that some men, who apparently worked in the fields, arrived at the market looking for dried fish or shrimp. After a fleeting look at some of the men, our visitor commented:

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<sup>126</sup> Tehuantepec market harbors hundreds of merchants. However, the physical space designed for that purpose has been snowed under due to the increasing population wishing to offer their products there. As a result, numerous vendors set up their booths in all four sides surrounding the market, even occupying a tract of the old railroad.

<sup>127</sup> *Tecas*, name given to the women from Juchitán.

That's the way a *campesino* is. He looks skinny and knackered, because his work is hard and he does not make much money. All he eats is this little dry fish. Perhaps he adds some cheese, or some hot tortillas, but it's all he eats for lunch. Oh! But as soon as he gets home, he takes his woman, and oops; immediately, he makes a child. Because, that's the way a *campesino* is: strong in his blood.

This comment sparked off laughter from all the people present. Once the distraction died out, activities went back to track. Paradoxically, the everyday ease with which the sexual is evoked usually disappears when discussing topics related to sexual customs in the Isthmus, which are referred to as the ones that order local sexual life, as the Isthmus inhabitants themselves recognize. Courtship and marriage are among the most celebrated events in this respect (Cajigas, Alberto 1961a; Henestrosa, 1993). According to the literature representations, the marriage of a couple is one of the most meaningful events within the local family, as well as within the community in general. The *rapto* (abduction) and asking for the girl's hand are the specific practices related to this event. Some explanations about these norms are briefly presented below.

The *rapto* is commonly referred as a generalised practice among the ancient Zapotec. However, today it is also considered that this practice can be a serious fault in the formalization of a relationship. *El rapto* involves fleeing with a young girl by a young male;<sup>128</sup> usually, it is previously arranged by the couple. When a *rapto* takes place, this is usually accompanied by a series of negotiations that will either lead to a formal marriage or to a monetary settlement between families in case the marriage does not come about. In a *rapto* situation in which sexual intercourse does not occur, the decision about accepting or rejecting an engagement petition is up to the abducted woman. When a *rapto* involves sexual consummation, this decision is taken by the abductor and his parents, taking into account the material evidence, or *balaana*,<sup>129</sup> that proves that the woman (often a young girl) was a virgin previous to the abduction. In this case, a delegation composed of friends and relatives will act as representatives of the groom-to-be in front of the young girl's parents to manifest what happened, and to try to set terms and the date for the wedding ceremony. These terms may include the monetary

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<sup>128</sup> This practice has also been observed among homosexual women (Müller, 1997: 264).

<sup>129</sup> Zapotec name given to the bloodstain, or ripping of the hymen, that may occur when having sexual intercourse for the first time.

amount or payment in kind that the raptor must deliver to the bride's family—whether the marriage proposal is accepted or not. In case evidence of virginity cannot be provided the raptor is free to choose whether to stay with the young girl or send her back to her parents—all under an atmosphere of humiliation to both the family and the young girl—who could henceforward be sexually assaulted by other community men and is often at risk of being expelled from the family home as her misstep is considered to dishonour the whole family (Cajigas, Alberto 1961a; Henestrosa, 1993).

The asking of the hand refers to a local practice that syncretises Zapotec rituals and the catholic religion. It consists of a request to get married, directly or indirectly,<sup>130</sup> that a male makes to the parents of the girl he seeks. The asking for the hand is held in a festive atmosphere and involves the participation of the bride's and the groom's close friends and relatives, or delegation, and who will be in charge of making concrete agreements such as the convenience of this marriage, the wedding date, the rituals or ceremony that will be held during the wedding, as well as the financial arrangements for expenses incurred during the event. According to custom, when a marriage is agreed to through the 'asking for the hand', *Biaani* (delivery of light) and *Baíl* (chest) ceremonies must be conducted before the civil and/or religious wedding celebrations take place. *Biaani* involves a contribution in cash and in kind that the groom will send to his fiancée's home, whether he collected it personally or with the help of close friends and relatives. Usually the contribution includes hens, *tortas* (bread), chocolate, and a monetary contribution for the bride's parents. The delivery of the contribution is marked by loud celebration in the streets. The members of the delegation hold huge, lighted candles which is why this ceremony is also known by its Spanish name: *El Envío de la Luz*, (the delivery of light). The *Baíl* is also a festive ceremony, it consist in sending inside a chest or a wardrobe all the goods that are collected by the members of the bride's social network, which usually include presents for the groom's parents, as well as articles that may be useful for the newly married couple. The latter generally consist of household items, in addition to objects for personal care for the young girl, such as regional costumes and jewellery. The chest or wardrobe is carried by the delegation that represents the young girl to the groom's home; that is why

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<sup>130</sup> According to tradition, when the male is very young or has not been introduced to the young girl's family, he can approach the *Xuanas* or *Principals* (local authorities), to ask for assistance to carry out the asking for the hand. See (Cajigas, Alberto 1961a; Chicatti, D., 2006a).

this ritual carries the name of *Baúl* (chest) (Cajigas, Alberto 1961a; Orozco, 1993). Once both rituals are carried out, the wedding ceremony can take place.

The first ceremony is the civic wedding, and is usually the bride's parents who are in charge of this event. Soon after, a religious ceremony will be celebrated; it is usually the responsibility of the groom's parents to take care of the arrangements hereto. This second event is considered the most important one, since from this moment on the couple will be able to stay in the same household. During the religious wedding party, distinct rituals take place, accompanied by specific *sones*<sup>131</sup> that have been widely registered (see, Cajigas, Alberto 1961a). Among the rituals, the *balaana* or *deflowering* is the most appealing event to both locals and outsiders, since its objective is to make public the evidence of the girl's virtue. When the wedding feast ends, the newly married couple retires to a room specially prepared for the occasion, while a small and exclusive delegation waits for the blood stain on the sheet or handkerchief, which materializes the virginity of the bride. If negative, they may act according to what was explained in case of the *raptó*. If positive, a new celebration known as *Lunes de Boda* (Wedding Monday), takes place.

Wedding Monday is the last event that marks the end of the marriage celebrations. It involves a series of rituals accompanied by music, parades, and particular costumes in order to commemorate the young girl's virtue, and, indeed, the family's honourability. In the future, the deflowering will be associated to the bride's respectability in the community. However, some admit the practice of *La Prueba* (the proof) has lost some of its relevance. In the words of the local historian César Rojas' words:

All I know concerning virginity is that people used to care a lot about it over here in Tehuantepec and throughout the region. That a woman would still be virgin the day of her marriage was something special. However, that way of being and doing things, as well as the way of thinking has been changing. Currently the norm isn't as demanded. Formerly, our demands were so primitive concerning marriages, that when a man got married, the woman had to satisfy him showing that she was actually virgin. And they had to spend a whole night in a bedroom, in the main room or in the main chamber of the house, and everything happened at the godparents' house. The godparents would be standing at the door, putting pressure: "are

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<sup>131</sup> Traditional music. See Introduction: *The Convite de Flores*.

you done, or not yet'. The parents, especially the bride's parents, were also waiting frightened for the results. All that was really brutal (November, 2006).

### **Experiencing the custom**

During my fieldwork in Tehuantepec I had the opportunity to attend numerous weddings. Some of them were only civic, and some others also included religious ceremonies. I was able to witness *La Prueba* only in one of them. All of them motivated my interest to get a deeper understanding of how sexual life is enacted in Tehuantepec. My first thought about why it is not common to witness such practices led me to guess that this was due to cultural changes, sexual education, or economic crisis. Nevertheless, even though the local inhabitants were aware of the fact that things have changed, it was also common to hear young people point to the relevance of keeping the tradition.

Zapotec practices concerning sexual customs are passed on from generation to generation, through family experiences, religious convictions, academic and cultural forums as theatre plays, and other repertoires that take place in Tehuantepec. It is also known, nevertheless, that throughout the years, local people have produced a large number of strategies that break or reinforce the supposed established order, resulting in a wide range of possible forms for complying with, or avoiding social scrutiny. As Cesar Rojas also acknowledges:

Sometimes, when there was a strong affection between the broom and the bride, and the *balaana's* results were negative, they said the opposite, and anyhow there were ways to justify what needed to be justified. I think this practice changed with the arrival of the railroad, the airport, the Salina Cruz seaport, the beer stands. For example some started to get married and then to go on their honeymoon, and a telegram was expected to arrive saying: "Everything went well, Mrs. So-and-so was virgin" and the party went on (November, 2006).

Diverse local actors' practices related to sexuality are presented below. They offer evidence of how new meaning is given to these practices by the actors themselves —sometimes to enact and re-enact traditions (or to avoid compliance with them), some other times to adopt innovative aspects, all of them contribute to complexify how sexual life is enacted in Tehuantepec. In total I present eight case studies to illustrate these practices. The two first cases refer to the enactment of the 'traditional' custom; the next two touch upon the conflicting situations that arise when



people are caught up between 'the way it must be' and personal preferences; two more cases illustrate disruptive situations, or scandals; finally, the last two show contemporary practices and how these are entangle with the continuity of the custom.

*The ripto of Beatriz*

One evening Beatriz and I were chatting while sharing a cup of coffee at her house, which is located at the *barrio* of the Portillo San Antonio. Among the topics we discussed, were her love life experiences.

As a young girl, I was very flirtatious, as you may not even imagine. As soon as I got out of the house, I was nothing but ha, ha, ha, [laughing]. I would even clap every time I spoke to make people noticed me, and I spent a lot of time laughing with the boys. I dated all the guys from around here, even if my father would beat me for it. But, wait let me tell you how I did it (Beatriz, October, 2006).

Beatriz is a Zapotec woman, born in 1936 in the *barrio* of El Portillo San Antonio of Tehuantepec, where she still resides. She is a bread maker (baker), mother of two children whom she had to bring up on her own. From early age onwards Beatriz was in charge of her seven younger siblings, as well as of a variety of chores around the house. She did so because her mother and father worked full time to support the family. In contrast to the rest of her siblings, she never went to school, which is the reason why she was not able to read or write during most of her life. When she turned fifteen years old, her parents decided to set up a stall at the corner next to their house, where Beatriz sold coffee, brown sugarloaf, natural fruit refreshments, and beer. That was the first place where Beatriz started interacting with young males who showed interest in her, and where her first romance started.

My first boyfriend was a young guy that came to the stall. He was very handsome and young; he was a postman, and had curly hair. When he started talking to me, I had no clue of what having a boyfriend was about. My mother told me over and over not to say 'yes' to any man's proposal; because in case that man had made up his mind, he would abduct me any time. Therefore, at the beginning, I always said no to this guy, because I wasn't going to contradict my mom. But one day he got me by surprise, and I said yes to him. What for! Right away he started by holding my hand; he started kissing me; he wrote little messages to me. That day he didn't even go deliver the mail.

When he finally left, I sat and cried under the counter. The older kids noticed, and then they started making fun of me: “What an asshole. Now you’re done. Now that one is your boyfriend, ha, ha, ha [laughing]”, they said (Beatriz, October, 2006).

When Beatriz’ parents became aware of the situation, both of them took measures to quickly and definitively stop that romance. One evening, by dinner time, one of her brothers went to the shop without the meals her mother usually sent every day, and asked her to go eat at the house. Beatriz refused to comply with this request since this was the time she usually spent with her beloved. A little later though she had to give in when her father himself called her in. After receiving a beating, Beatriz’s family constantly kept an eye on her, which she considered to be the reason for her first romantic relationship to end.

I was starting to enjoy spending time with the boyfriend. That’s why I told my brother that I wasn’t going to eat. But as soon as my father whistled, from the house, I went in a hurry. As I entered the house, “za”, “za”, he beat me with his belt... That was the very first time my father beat me. I became so ill that I spent three days in bed. I think I got a fever since I was so frightened but also because of being beaten with the belt. For three days the boy was looking for me. He wanted to see me, because he found out that I’d been beaten. But he couldn’t find me since I wasn’t allowed to go out alone any more. Whenever I had to do an errand, my mother came along. As soon as I had a chance, I told the young man to go away, because this wasn’t a life, and that’s how he left (Beatriz, October, 2006).

After this frustrating experience, Beatriz had to figure out diverse ways to establish new love relationships again, —relationships in which her parents would not interfere. Thus she learned how to take advantage of some elements in her context, such as remaining anonymous, finding meeting places away from her home, or take on relationships with young men who did not permanently reside in her locality. Through different strategies, she kept not only one but a more relationships at the same time, without her suitors noticing it.

I learned. I didn’t know, but I learned. After a while I was a *cabrona* [bitch]. At the beginning I used to hide, but when I turned eighteen I didn’t care about what my mother said. Yet, at the age of twenty-five, she still beat me, because she found out that I was going out with another young man. Despite the beating, I took a fancy and didn’t want to let him go. I kept him for four or five years, but still, I didn’t run away with him. He

begged me to get away with him, but I never agreed, because I felt bad leaving my mom with the whole burden. Thus I spent all the time having boyfriends. Imagine: three months before getting married, I still had three different boyfriends at the same time! (Beatriz, October, 2006).

During her romantic relationships, Beatriz had to find ways to remain anonymous, or to run away from her parents' punishments. In order to save her and family's honour (as she was the eldest daughter), Beatriz thus continuously had to get around situations that could jeopardize her virtue, such as: get round sexual relationships, avoiding involuntary abductions, and making sure to stay away from people's gossiping.

One of my boyfriends worked as a janitor at a business, located 270 kilometres away in Puertos Libres de Coatzacoalcos. He would only come on June 13, to the *barrio* feast. I would go dancing with him that day. But when he invited me to get in his car I didn't go, because I wasn't stupid. For sure if I went he would abduct me or he would screw me right there. So I went back home with all kinds of excuses. The second boyfriend was the one I married. That one, I really liked. I waited for him for six months when he went to Oaxaca to do his military service. When I realized that he didn't come back and he didn't write to me, I started dating another young man, the third one. He was from the *barrio* Guichivere, but since he was a peasant he couldn't go dancing with me. I forgave him not going to the Santa Maria festival, May 9th; on June 13 there was also another dancing party and he said: "I can't go" and I forgave him again. On July 25, the San Blas festival, he said he had to go to water the field. It was then that I told him: "if you're not coming, I'm done with you", and since he didn't come, that was it. No matter how much he cried, he kicked, he did all kinds of stuff, I didn't get back with him. But the truth is that my other boyfriend was back, my sons' father. That's why I said before I got married I had many boyfriends: Roberto, Francisco, Jesus, Miguel, Donaldo, and a few others (Beatriz, October, 2006).

To Beatriz, local festivals became the appropriate scenario for love relationships. At times her parents would drop the guard and she would obtain more freedom. Besides, she found safety and remained somehow anonymous among the festival's crowd, at the same time that she was able to find certain intimacy with her lovers.<sup>132</sup> In due time though Beatriz

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<sup>132</sup> It is interesting to note down that an increase in the number of *raptos* during the festive days has been recorded (Cajigas, Alberto 1961a; Chicatti, D., 2006b).

could no longer refuse the petition of her boyfriend, and the event locally known as the *raptó* took place. In her opinion, this was not an unexpected decision. It was appropriate for the moment, and it was not unpleasant either, as she had thought it would be after her mother's warnings. In fact, she had given her consent knowing that her parents would not agree easily to their marriage.

After the abduction—in order to avoid her parent's unfavourable reaction—the couple sent a delegation to make the arrangements for the marriage, sending along the evidence (the blood stain) that proved Beatriz' honour. In this case there was no monetary contribution at all, and no rituals took place prior to the wedding as the financial condition of both families did not allow for this.

In the end I fled. I took off with him because there's a time for everything. I was twenty-six, almost twenty-seven years old. I thought: I've already danced, I had a good time. According to me, it was time. I said: I like this *burro* [donkey], and I'll ride him. Eventually we married. But it wasn't a marriage according to tradition. I had a modest wedding. My mother didn't have any stuff or jewellery to put on me, or a proper dress for me for that day. But, she was happy for me until the last hour of her life because I had been good at taking care of myself. Afterwards, I had the bad luck of my husband leaving me. But it was all right because I kept my two children, and in the end I did it my way (Beatriz, October, 2006).

Beatriz' marriage lasted ten years only (the reasons for breaking up are discussed in Chapter 6). This is not uncommon, for like Beatriz, many Zapotec marriages do not necessarily endure for the rest of the couple's lives, as it is frequently claimed (cf. Ruiz, 1993). After breaking up, Beatriz was not interested in engaging in new love affairs, as she feared that a new partner would try to sexually abuse her daughter.<sup>133</sup>

For sure, from the moment I was left alone, I never turned my head around to look at any other man. At that time I thought: "now I know what marriage is like", as the grown up people say. I already had children. If I'd go and look for another man, who

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<sup>133</sup> This fear is widely spread among the local population, and especially among mothers with female infants. The absence of a biological connection, or so it is feared, opens the possibility that a man, not controlling his 'sexual instinct' might sexually assault his partner's female children. This fear propels a series of practices such as: when some of these mothers start a new relationship, other women take the responsibility of bringing up their children, especially girls.

knows if he'd try to [sexually] abuse my daughter (Beatriz, October, 2006).

Beatriz' case illustrates that adolescence is one of the periods when a woman's life is most watched over in Tehuantepec. Discourses about sexual norms become key tools in trying to prevent young girls in starting an early sexual life. There is no doubt that, in the case of Beatriz, warnings, punishments, or her parents' watchful eyes influenced her sexual life. Yet it was Beatriz herself who, after all, decided on what to do—and what not to—as concerns her body and sexual life. Beatriz' experience also shows how it is possible, within the norms, to find room for manoeuvre. In fact, in her case the *raptó* results from a chain of actions involving a variety of elements including Beatriz' body language, her coquetry, the stall, young people from the *barrio*, local sexual stories, her parents' norms, her position within the family and her contribution to the household, as well as the local festivities. These were among the elements that helped Beatriz to reach her objectives.

At this point, it is important to remark that achieving agreements, according to the expectancies of both families (such as the marriage celebration without the mediation of rituals), enabled the production of intermediate points in relation to the local sexual customs. In other words, there is an ample room for manoeuvre in the ways in which 'tradition' may (or may not) be complied with. In Beatriz' case, the material proof of virginity and mediation by the delegation through which the couple sought conciliation and Beatriz' parents' consent, contributed to the enactment of 'tradition'. In contrast, other aspects of the tradition itself, such as the rituals related to the interchange of material and economic goods among relatives are usually inaccessible for low income households, such as is the case with this poor couple's families.

Discontinuity with the 'rules' however may take different forms, and can be more or less evident. This may also be the case when a wedding is agreed upon according to the *asking for the hand*, as the following case shows.

#### *Ángel and Hortensia's wedding*

Ángel was twenty-four years old when he started winning Hortensia's heart, who was then sixteen. Both are Zapotec: Ángel from Tehuantepec, Hortensia from the neighbouring village of San Blas Atempa. Ángel's occupation was offshore fishing and Hortensia, besides being a seamstress, worked at an orange booth. They met at San Blas, where

Ángel used to go out with a group of friends where he started a relationship with one of Hortensia's older sisters. As a result of his long absences, the young lady gave up on the relationship, but soon enough Ángel decided to date Hortensia. As he recalls:

We met in San Blas, I was a sailor, even though I wasn't a member of the cooperative, and since I had recently had an appendectomy I was very skinny. But I used to go frequently to San Blas. I saw her over there, selling oranges at a stall, in front of her house; I carried her chair [of the stall]. Later on I won her heart and we dated for three or four years, until now (Ángel, October, 2006).

Ángel had to sort out a few things, such as keeping away the man that at the time was dating Hortensia, as well as winning over her family, for whom he gave as a present part of the sea products that he got as in kind payment. More importantly, he had to make Hortensia take him as boyfriend, which he succeeded in doing only when he agreed to ask for her parents' authorization of the relationship. As Hortensia mentions:

The man who was my boyfriend at that time didn't show up at my younger sister's wedding. When I asked for him, Ángel told me he wasn't going to come anymore because he feared the village. It was then that he asked me to dance and started winning my heart. "Stop, stop, stop. I feel very ashamed because you were my sister's boyfriend", I said. "What do you fear?" he asked; "my father will scold me, because he's aware you were my sister's boyfriend", I answered. "Don't worry, I am going to talk to him" he reassured me. At first I thought that he wasn't going to go, but he did go, and talked to my father. My father spoke up to him, and he said: "Look, first I am going to talk with my other daughter, because I'm aware that you dated her". Ángel then explained to him that she had broken up with him, but still my father told him he was going to discuss it with both of us (Hortensia, October, 2006).

The whole family got together to discuss the issue. After all the arguments were presented, Hortensia's father agreed to the relationship on the condition that Ángel would give his word to commit to a serious relationship (meaning that he intended to marry her). With this condition, the girls' father tried to prevent Hortensia becoming a victim of revenge in case Ángel intended to retaliate for the other daughter's rejection. As Hortensia mentions below:

I did like him, and besides, he was a good worker they said, which I could see because of the large amount of fish he brought to the house. Although I was embarrassed about what people would say. Since my sister had rejected him, I said to myself: “Perhaps she didn’t care about him, but I will”. The second time he went to our house to get my father’s answer, my father asked him: “So what are you going to do with about her? Do you only want to be a boyfriend and leave her afterwards, like the other one did to you” “No, not like that”, Ángel said. To which my father responded: “If you come to talk to me, it is because you are going to marry her, because you aren’t a kid anymore. And remember: you are not going to play games with me”. Ah! My father was a rough man, *mama*, he carried two guns at that time. That’s where Ángel got screwed, he couldn’t back off! (Hortensia, October, 2006).

Despite all promises, the couple did not marry right away. “First we separated, but then we ended up getting married”, Ángel commented, to explain why after three years in a romantic relationship he temporarily left Hortensia. According to Hortensia, they split up because she refused to have premarital relations with Ángel. The separation however did not last for long because Hortensia’s father intervened, demanding that Ángel to keep his word. Ángel found the perfect grounds to go back to talk with Hortensia, and formally ask her to get married. As Hortensia remembers:

They [Ángel and her father] had their own little story going. After breaking up my father went looking for him. I don’t know whether he saw him with some other girl or realized we had fought; the story is that he went to the seaport to talk to him. After we got married, Ángel told me my father had gone up to him to tell him: “I heard you’re back [from a fishing trip], but you haven’t stopped by the house. No, you are not going to make a laughingstock out of me. If you try to marry any other girl, I’ll be there and I’ll kill you”. That’s the way people of San Blas are. You make a deal, you better keep your word. He who was always fishing ended up being fished, although he was the one who provided the net (October, 2006).

The engagement was held according to tradition. Ángel arrived at Hortensia’s house accompanied by a group of relatives, and in a festive atmosphere the agreements for the wedding were made such as the rituals to be celebrated, date and place for the ceremony, and so on. In this case, her parents did not hesitate in consenting to the wedding; as Hortensia and Ángel recall:

I went to ask for her hand along with around fifteen people. I took all my uncles with me, and also lots of beer. We spoke to her father, and since they consented immediately, we agreed to get married within three months (Ángel, October, 2006).

Oh, that was wild! He brought lots of beer to the house that night. They spent the whole time telling all kind of dirty jokes until they all got drunk, and then they left (Hortensia, October, 2006).

The festivities started with the *delivery of light*, the ceremony being conducted by Ángel's brothers. Later on, Hortensia's mother led a delegation that performed the *handling of the chest* at Ángel's house. The civic ceremony was held on a Saturday, as is the tradition, at Hortensia's house. The next week the religious ceremony took place. It was only then that Hortensia left her parents' home.

During the celebrations the traditional rituals were followed, along with the interpretation of traditional *sones* such as the *cantarito* and the *mediu shiga* (six cents) (see Cajigas, Alberto 1961a). However, before the ceremony ended, the couple left —thus avoiding the celebration of the *balaana*, or *defloramiento* (deflowering). As Ángel recalls:

The feast was at Santa María, in the patio of my brother Héctor. It was crowded with a lot of people. There was almost no room to dance. Food was served, and lots of beer was offered. After that, we went on our honeymoon to Veracruz, and we got back the next month (October, 2006).

This had been the agreement made during the *asking of the hand*, due to Ángel's refusal to partake in the *balaana*. Ángel's determination surprised Hortensia since, to her, at that time complying with the ritual was a rule, more than an exception. In her words:

Virginity was important to me, because it was the custom at that time, but he was the one who didn't want. When we talked about it, he would tell me: "what the hell they need to know". So, when the asking of my hand my mother asked him: who is going to bring *La Prueba*? He immediately replied "no way, mother-in-law, I am not going to send anything, I am going to my honeymoon with her. I don't have a reason to inform the people". Thus, we left it like that (October, 2006).

The honeymoon —suggested by Ángel— started to become a part of modern marriage practices adopted by a few couples, especially those with enough economic resources to go on a trip in addition to pay the



expenses related to the wedding.

In order to comply with the *wedding Monday*, Hortensia's parents made the couple promise to inform about Hortensia's virginity, even though the couple did not perform the *balaana* ritual. Through a telegram, Ángel and Hortensia had to communicate the news the next morning, although they were in the neighbouring community of Juchitán, only 26 kilometres away, where they stopped before they went on their way to Catemaco, Veracruz. As Hortensia recalls:

At that time, Ángel did not have a car, which was the reason why we took the bus to Veracruz. When we got to Juchitán he said: "Here we are", and we got off. Then I asked him: "How come, are we going to stay here?" "Right, because I can't wait anymore. Look, for how long I've been asking you to give it to me, and you don't want to", he replied. Then we started laughing. The next day we went on our trip, but only after we sent the telegram (October, 2006).

When they got back, Hortensia showed her mother the virginal evidence, and the debate whether to show it to Ángel's family began once again. This second time, Ángel's refusal was definitive, and put an end to the discussion. However, Hortensia says that whenever Ángel turns jealous and an argument ensues, she always evokes her virtue as proof of her honorability so he has nothing to reproach her. This couple has been together for around fifty years, and has raised three children, of whom none has followed the wedding rituals that their parents did for their marriages, even though they got married locally.

Ángel and Hortensia's show how actors also construct their own room for manoeuvre, even though following the general Isthmus marriage tradition. This room is made up of heterogeneous elements such as fish presents, Ángel's reputation, the father's authority and authorization. All are connected with each other in a way that enables action (Latour, 2005: 106-108).

In Ángel and Hortensia's as well as Beatriz' cases, continuity of the local sexual costum is enacted; but in each experience, this costum is being constantly reinvented. This means that, in practice, actors assemble elements they take from their surroundings, according to their interests. Therefore, if order exists, as well as the possibilities for enacting and re-enacting it over and over again, it takes place in multiple ways, where the agency of the diverse elements can expand or contract the possible connections in which the actors may participate. Both cases Beatriz' *raptó* and the wedding, illustrate that it is not possible to posit that there is a

dualism between looseness and an unalterable sexual custom. In fact, the actors in the above cases continuously introduce new elements, as was the case with the condonation of penalties in Beatriz's *raptó*, and other times the elements introduced tend to become regular, as Ángel and Hortensia's honeymoon and their telegram that substituted what in other cases can be considered as irreplaceable or unthinkable. However, there are other cases in which such order concerning sexual mores is experienced in other ways, as the following cases illustrate.

*Culturally embodied inscriptions*

Carmen is a Zapotec woman from the village of San Blas Atempa, where she was born in 1963, and where she currently resides. When I met her in 2006 she was a fantasy jewel trader at the market of Tehuantepec, where, in addition, she also used to sell some products coming from her father's orchard. At the age of forty-three, Carmen seemed to me a very attractive woman, with a young look, as well as a joyful and young attitude. Because of this, it seemed strange that she had remained single, and even more so because it is commonly known that women from San Blas usually get married at an early age.

After knowing her for a few months, I had the opportunity to have long and deeply conversations with her after she went through surgery and was recovering at her house. It was over a year that Carmen experienced frequent and strong monthly bleedings instead of her regular period; in addition, she felt generally weak. A general physician referred her to a gynaecologist (obstetric specialist). This was the first time she ever visited a gynaecologist. After a few tests, the specialist recommended that she have her uterus removed because of the presence of fibroid cysts. The news took Carmen by surprise, but after consultation with a diversity of adult women, this surgery seemed to be the best solution to her health problems. This meant that it would be physically impossible for her to bear children. "I never imagined I would remain single, and least without having children", Carmen told me while looking back at her past, figuring out where her path had diverged from that of other women who, like her mother, got married and raised children. The surgery procedure changed Carmen's perception of her body, and particularly of what up to that moment constituted the strongest referent for Carmen to find a partner: the evidence of her virtue. It was because of this situation that we discussed dilemmas about sexual desire, virginity, and couples' relationships.

Carmen is the eldest (and only daughter) of the five children her parents had. Like many women of the Isthmus, she got involved in selling from a young age onwards. Every morning, very early, she went to the San Blas plaza to sell *pozol*.<sup>134</sup> In the afternoon, after going to school, she was in charge of selling *comiscalito*.<sup>135</sup> Both products were made by her mother, but occasionally she offered products harvested by her father. She managed to complete her elementary education at the age of fifteen. She had to redo a few grades though, and this was the reason she left school. From aged fifteen onwards, selling and the household chores became her main tasks.

At young age, Carmen's mother instructed her on how to care for her body —especially how to protect her virtue. In accordance with her mother's teachings, Carmen associated a woman's (as well as her family's) honour to virginity. In line with this, during adolescence Carmen's activities were scrupulously watched over by the members of her family. This made her assume that nothing could happen to her without it passing unnoticed by her parents:

As a young girl I was very shy. Since my parents didn't let me go out, what did I know about life? Well, I used to go out, but only over here, at the village, not outside; even if I wanted to. I remember that as I was growing up, and since I liked to go shopping, I used to ask my mother to let me go sell things with my friends in Juchitán, Salina Cruz or Tehuantepec; but I was never allowed. My mother would always tell me: "Ask your father", but that man was very strict and I always got "no" for an answer. He didn't even allow me to go to the parties over here, but then my mother helped me out with those (Carmen, April, 2006).

Carmen turned twenty without having any love affairs. In part because of the difficulties in interacting with the young men from the village, and in part because of the fear of being reprimanded (which she thought she deserved in case her parents found out). Another reason she mentioned was to avoid local rumours and gossiping that, according to her, sooner or

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<sup>134</sup> *Pozol*, from the Nahuatl *pozōlli*, is a Mesoamerican beverage of heavy texture, made of corn, to which cacao may be added. It is currently widely consumed, and is very popular in southern Mexico.

<sup>135</sup> *Comiscalito*, and *totopo*, a certain type of handmade corn *tortilla*, covered with perforations made with a stick to accelerate the cooking process. Its name derives from a clay pot (called *comiscal*) that is buried underground and serves as an oven where this food is cooked.

later affected a young woman's reputation. "Take care dear"; "look: if he screws you, you will not get married"; "if you get pregnant, who knows where you will end up?" These were some of the sentences that Carmen frequently heard during her youth.

What I see among my people is that over here, when you are a kid, they want to know everything: whether or not you were abducted by a man and, if so, by whom and how; or whether or not you are virgin and all of that. And that is exactly what I don't like about my people (April, 2006).

An unexpected turning point in Carmen's life came about when her parents decided that she had to go to Mexico City together with her younger brother. The idea was that, this way, she could contribute (through work) in financing her brother's professional education. Practically, from one day to the next, all care and surveillance disappeared. Thus she acquired responsibilities and freedoms she had never experienced before, and turned from a young and inexperienced vendor into an extrovert fantasy jewel trader who adventured into any type of scenarios. In a relatively short time span, Carmen's success surpassed her parents' wildest expectations. Soon, she not only completely supported her younger brother but all her siblings, she was able to buy a house in Mexico City, and she improved her parents' property back home.

When I left I was afraid of everything, even going across the street. When I got lost, all I did was cry. That's when I regretted that I had quit school. But on the other hand, when I left: Freedom! Just imagine that I was like a little animal one lets go away, there was nothing that could stop me. I used to sell, I cooked and I took care of the expenses. What I liked is that all my siblings responded and completed their education. I used to go back to San Blas twice a year, in July and in December. I was travelling all the time. I called my parents from wherever I was, and I told them: "I'm in Cuautla, in Queretaro, in León, in Guanajuato, in Izúcar de Matamoros, in Ixtapa Zihuatanejo, in Veracruz, in Jalisco, in Huajuapán, around Guatemala, around Chiapas, around Tapachula". They didn't even know where all those places I visited where. That's when I found out that girls don't have to tell everything, as they do over here (Carmen, April, 2006).

Carmen thus got to know economic success and family gratitude. However, her love life remained secondary, even though she met diverse young men who were interested in her during her trips and leisure

activities. To Carmen, the fact that she was no longer under her parents' strict supervision demanded that she be more cautious in establishing a romantic relationship, because she assumed that this would sooner or later lead to a sexual intercourse. This situation always put her in the dilemma of whether to satisfy her desires or be able to establish a family "the way it should be":

Every time I visited the village people would ask me: "why don't you get married?" To which I only replied: "I just don't have the time, I have to do this or that". Because I always had something to worry about: to buy materials for the house, to supply merchandise, to pay for books, and so on. Until a girl friend from Juchitán who is also single told me: "How come there is no time, Carmen? What happens is that we didn't want to get married". After that, I thought about it, and I believe what happened was that I was afraid about what my parents were going to say, and about what people were going to say. After my parents trusted me by letting me go, I couldn't end up with a stupidity [getting pregnant]. Perhaps it is that I never liked to be irresponsible, I was always thinking: "if I compromise myself, then how will I get out of it"; because it is not easy at all to have a child on your own (Carmen, April, 2006).

Carmen's fear seemed justified every time she reflected upon the relationships the women who shared their daily life with her outside her hometown had. They usually had frugal love stories with no other purpose than sexual satisfaction. Thus, should she start a romantic relationship, she would have had to suppress any desire as she assumed, in some way, that the objective of premarital sex entailed the avoidance of a serious engagement:

I never liked to go out just like that, because I certainly had friends who left with men. They asked me to watch after their merchandise and took off to the hotel, and later came back as cool as a cucumber. But that way, for only a short time... I don't know, it never appealed to me. Well, of course I was curious, because you are alive, you've got to feel, but how can I say? I always expecting a formal, responsible someone; that was my foolish idea, or I don't know what I was thinking (Carmen, April, 2006).

In this context Carmen became more open to engage in love affairs. She had few boyfriends without her family figured it out, but in each of these attempts Carmen drifted from the sparkling love crush to disappointment, and to the imminent breaking up, when her loved one suggested having

sexual intercourse. That situation deteriorated even more when she experienced her first love disappointment:

As I say, there was that individual. But he left the same way he came. He took distance, he followed his path and I followed mine. Afterwards there were some others, but I didn't feel the same with them; it was like tasteless food. I thought all they wanted was to make fun of me, because I never trusted men. I tried, because a friend advised me, but I was never able to have a sexual relation (Carmen, April, 2006).

After twenty years away from her hometown, Carmen went back to San Blas upon finding out that her mother was ill. Once back, she again had to confront the sexual mores of her community. This time around, however, it was not her chastity that was the focus of attention. Now, as an adult woman, it was precisely her unmarried condition that stirred the curiosity of her community and her family. So now on many occasions Carmen has been labelled a spinster (as women who have remained single throughout their entire life are pejoratively called).

“Why didn't you get married?”; “why didn't you at least have one child?”; “that is why you don't care whether you sell or not, as you do not have responsibilities (in relation of not having anyone to care for). These are some of the questions and assertions Carmen has had to deal with every time she has to justify her unmarried status.

Over here, if you didn't get married, like me, people gossip. “Look at that spinster”, they say. I still remember when I responded to a woman: “Let's see, let's see, I'm glad you tell me in my face. Now tell me: What's your married experience? Are you happy with your husband? Does he spend Saturday or Sunday with you? Does he hug you? Does he love you? Does he take you out? Does he tell you: I'm home, my love? Does he kiss you? Answer me! That's what I don't get about you. You are always complaining about a lazy husband, and about all the problems that you have with your children. I believe you get married just to be married, to have children, not thinking about your future. And it is OK that you have children, that you have a husband, and all of that. But you have to look at everything: your happiness, your responsibility, your peace of heart. It is not just a matter of daring. Even though I don't have experience in married life, and I don't have the experience about how a relationship ought to be, I expect more”. When I talk to them this way, they end up by saying I am right to be single (Carmen, April, 2006).

Since her return to San Blas, finding a partner in her hometown did not seem an option for Carmen, especially because she considered that men were not going to take her seriously and to try to establish a formal relation with her. From the moment surgery was suggested, the first thing she thought about was the concrete fact of never being able to be a biological mother. Nevertheless, with the surgery, something she did not expect, or did not even have in mind happened. As part of the surgical procedure, a vaginal invasion was conducted in order to introduce a drain duct to her bladder. She became aware of this situation immediately, while she was recovering from the anaesthetic. To Carmen this meant the loss of her 'virginity':

As soon as I woke up, the physician asked me to push and to breathe; then they took the catheter out. I had a severe pain at that moment, but the first thing I thought was: "This time they fucked me, after taking so much care of it". Twenty days later I returned for a check up, but I didn't keep silence about my suspicion. I told the doctor: "You bitch! You owe me an explanation for something very bad". But she replied: "I know what you're going to ask me; but that's a little old fashioned concern, Carmen". It may seem old fashioned to her, but not to me. Although, what can I do now, if it's all gone? (Carmen, April, 2006).

The supposed loss of her 'virginity' made Carmen think about ways to possibly have sexual relationships outside marriage. In fact, two months later, what seemed a tragedy at the beginning now seemed an open door to new possibilities—even though she is still afraid that people may find out about the loss of her 'virtue'.

This case shows that, as Carmen changes and moves between different scenarios, she discovers that there are other ways to live sexually. At the same time, her absence from the local setting made her learn to deal with the two different sides of the normative coin. That is, if during her youth virginity used to be the focus of attention, as an adult person marriage and reproduction became more relevant and therefore her unmarried status became her Achilles heel.

It is important to remark that during her trips, Carmen was exposed to larger sexual repertoires. Her frame of reference became more complex, not only because it became more diverse, but also because of the infinite range of possible connections that could now be made between all sorts of (external) elements and the norms she had embodied and performed from early childhood on. In this way, Carmen kept part of

the ‘traditional’ norms related, among others, to notions of trust, responsibility, love, respect, or chastity, making room for other ideas related to women’s value and respectability, and even sexual life in the Isthmus.

This case shows how different normative repertoires can coexist within one body. These repertoires may be put to use according to the situation. To Carmen, chastity, sexual aspects, and marriage are not only linked to sexual intercourse and human reproduction, but also to experiences acquired in different cultural settings.

### *Marital experience*

Gustavo and Socorro met in their childhood at the *colonia* El Jordan elementary school. Years later, when they met again at middle school they started dating. Their romance lasted for a few years, during which they generated a strong bond of trust and affection. This allowed them, among other things, to face the bullying of some of El Jordan’s men towards outsiders who, like Gustavo, dared win the hearts of young girls from the locality. As Socorro recalls:

Although we were dating, we didn’t go for walks around here. They couldn’t see us together because Gustavo is from Tehuantepec and men could beat him. Over here all the women were watched over. Even married men paid attention to those strangers who went out with local women. According to them, we all had to marry people from the *Colonia*. It wasn’t allowed to have an affair with outsiders; that is why I went to see him in Tehuantepec. Over there, at the park, between each trip that he made, when he was helping in Lolo’s bus [public transport], we got to see each other. Afterwards, when he moved to the *Colonia*, we saw each other more frequently, but still in hiding, under a small bridge by my house (Socorro, December, 2006).

At a given time and while still at high school, Gustavo and Socorro started having sexual intercourse —regardless of the local repertoires on sexual mores, or of family recommendations. This is not to say that Socorro did not bear in mind sexual education received at school, or her mother’s warnings issued at her and her sisters: “Beware, don’t let men touch you. Because a woman who gets mixed up with one, does not get married anymore; and after that, nobody picks her up”. On his side, Gustavo does not remember having received such warnings from his father, with whom he lived until he was five years old. In fact, he had only overheard friends’ conversations about sexual issues by the time he started having a sexual



life with Socorro. Both of them recognize having woken up to their sexuality together, in an instinctive way, with very little information about it, and without using any contraceptive methods. In Socorro's words:

It happened between the two of us, because when you are in a relationship attraction starts waking up your sexual appetite. I was around eighteen, and he was seventeen years old. I was not scared, and I didn't tell anybody. We always secretly saw each other. That story about virginity didn't even cross my mind, because I felt secure with him, and knew I was going to stay with him (December, 2006).

According to Gustavo:

I didn't have prior experiences, so she was my first woman. Since I was an orphan, I never had time to go hang out with buddies around the corner, go to bars, or to the prostitutes. No, because since I was eight I had to go find what to eat, what to dress, and where to live. I didn't have any other girlfriends, she was the only one, and hence, just like that, as we were engaged, we started having a relationship (December, 2006).

The secret encounters of the couple lasted for about one year, until the first pregnancy took place, which is why they decided to get married as soon as possible —before her pregnancy became obvious. Civic and religious ceremonies were held in 1984, at the *colonia* El Jordan, without mediation of any ritual associated to virginity in the celebrations, as Gustavo explains: “When we got married certainly people talked about Zapotec customs, and more than anything about virginity, but we got married without any ritual because that tradition is not followed over here”.

Contrary to their first sexual encounters, during the first five years of marriage their sexual life diminished significantly, in part as a result of Socorro's discomfort during pregnancy, which made it impossible for her to have sexual contact of any kind. On the other hand, the lack of use of a contraceptive method reduced their sexual life to short periods between the two other pregnancies that followed. Also, the daily routine and their shame reduced their sex life. Socorro constantly battled with the need to comply with what 'has to be', reaching her own personal satisfaction, and getting pregnant again:

It isn't that I felt bad or dirty when I made love; as it happened to my sister, who kept in her mind everything our mother used to say. In my opinion, sex was something that had to happen in a couple, the more so when you are already married. It was like

an obligation. Although I wanted to be with him, I did not seek him, neither did I come out from what is considered as normal sexual behaviour. Look, even when I was with my husband, I was shy. Besides, it seemed like as soon as he touched me, I ended up pregnant (Socorro, December, 2006).

It was only after her third labour, when Socorro went through a salpingectomy,<sup>136</sup> that the couple retrieved their sexual life. Surprisingly, for both the result was different, changing routine in unexpected, but pleasant ways:

Only when I was done with my pregnancies I started to feel what an orgasm is; but that happened only after being married for four or five years —perhaps because I didn't give myself fully in the relationship. That is why at times I think that because of a lack of knowledge or for not daring, I could well have missed my husband's best years. But then I think that at least it happened to me and not like many women I have talked to, who don't even know what an orgasm is (Socorro, December, 2006).

Since then the couple has had a more open attitude about discovering themselves, and even talking about sex with other members of their family and friends. For Gustavo and Socorro sex is no longer a taboo, nor just a marital obligation or a part of the experience that must be kept hidden and should not be communicated about. Thus both started talking about their doubts and concerns, as Socorro tells:

When that beautiful feeling gets to you, you even go look for it, or you try to have it. Nowadays I don't think the same way I used to think in the past. For example, whenever he asked for a different position to me that was like if he were completely nuts. Even in case I just overheard someone talking about sex, I blushed. In the past, all of that was hidden. But nowadays everything can be seen on TV or in magazines. It seems to me that there is a more open sexuality. Sometimes I even feel like my children are teaching me, particularly when they talk about what one has to do to take care of oneself. In their opinion, with all the different items that are out there it is rare that someone could get pregnant, like in my case (Socorro, December, 2006).

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<sup>136</sup> Salpingectomy refers to the surgical removal of a Fallopian tube. A bilateral salpingectomy implies the removal of both Fallopian tubes and it leads to sterility.

Socorro and Gustavo's case offers a good example of the cultural differentiation existing throughout the region, and which generates diverse practices around sexual mores. What to do, how to do it, and how pleasant a couple's sexual life is supposed to be, are part of the queries evoked when norms about sexuality and their multiple manifestations find themselves in constant dialogue with actors' experiences. Trial and error mark the possible connections between sexual regulation, personal experience, knowledge, bodily involvement, and affective and emotional responses. These and other elements make sexuality a specific yet malleable experience. This last argument is stressed in cases where scandal has been one of their characteristics, as the following section shows.

### **Embodying scandal**

#### *Canonical love*

Emilia is a sixty-six year old woman, the oldest of ten children in a Zapotec family living in one of the traditional *barrios* of Tehuantepec. During childhood she was raised under strict religious principles, not only because she attended the only private school (run by nuns) in Tehuantepec but, in addition, because she got actively involved in the activities of the local Catholic Church, participating in the choir and attending spiritual retreats.

For Emilia, the physical change of her body and the arrival of menstruation marked her transition to womanhood, and with it came the responsibilities related to the care of her body and her behaviour. As Emilia remembers:

I was twelve. I had gone deliver goat meat to my mother at the market, but as soon as I got there I felt sick. My mother immediately saw that my skirt had a stain so she folded it right away and sent me back home. She told me that my aunt would explain to me. When I got home, my aunt told me that this was going to happen to me every month and that she was going to give me some pieces of fabric, since at that time feminine towels didn't exist. She also told me that I should be very careful with my clothes. My mother also talked to me afterwards, as she always demanded from us not do anything wrong, and behave well while outside. She was a very strict woman. She said that since they had sent me to a good school, I shouldn't be a bad example to my siblings. She warned me not to get pregnant, or doing anything improper because there were always girls who

ended up pregnant as soon as they graduated from elementary school (June, 2006).

Following her mother's warnings, Emilia was not interested in getting involved in sentimental relationships at all. This remained so until she turned fifteen and started going to Tehuantepec's central park every evening; the place to be for young people. There, women walked around the kiosk in one direction and the men in another. If a couple was interested in one another, at every turn they would let this be known by nodding or looking into each other's eyes at every turn of the circle. This way, friendship or romantic relations eventually developed. According to Emilia, public scrutiny was the best safeguard to keep romantic encounters from having a 'tragic' ending, such as loss of virginity or, worse, pregnancy. As Emilia pointed it out:

In the old days it was difficult because all the time you had to be careful. You couldn't be showing off on the street. No way could they see a young man kissing you or hugging you, or taking you to a dark corner. No, everything had to be clear. If you went out, you had to go with a brother or a sister. So I would never go out by myself. If you had a boyfriend, he could walk you close to your house, but you couldn't take him home. Nothing like that was allowed, all he could do was hold your hand (June, 2006).

From the point of view of Emilia's parents however the norms around sexuality were not necessarily honoured by young men who came from elsewhere seeking a job in the Isthmus. The lack of trust towards these men who were potentially noncompliant with local sexual mores always generated tensions between parents and children. As Emilia calls to mind:

There was a time when I had a boyfriend. He was an engineer from Chiapas. I met him at a ball, and we started dating. But what happened with that young man was awful. I remember I was with him and my little sister at the park, when suddenly my mother showed up and started beating me in front of all. The engineer had to hold her hand and tell her: "Stop beating her, we aren't doing anything wrong". "But it's time for her to be home", she replied. Thus, at the end I had to break up with that boyfriend, only because my parents didn't like him as he wasn't from around here. Later on I had another boyfriend who wasn't from here either. My cousins told my parents he was a married man, so as much as the poor guy denied it, my parents didn't believe him and forbid me going out with him (June, 2006).

When Emilia turned thirty she started a relationship with a local young man. He had talked about marriage proposal to her but could not do so soon because he was still studying in Mexico City. Two years into the relationship, Emilia felt that marrying him was ever a more distant possibility since by then he was only half way through his college education, but especially because he had planned to financially compensate his family for the support offered to him before getting married. All these reasons made Emilia believe that a local proverb, so popular at that time, would take effect: “*novia de estudiante, jamás esposa de profesionista*” (“a student’s sweetheart will never be a professional’s wife”).

Under these circumstances, one evening when Emilia was visiting friends at Laborio Park, all present noticed that an ‘outsider’ was hanging out in his car, driving around the park. After a few days the stranger started greeting the group of friends every time he saw them at the park. None responded the greetings, but all openly speculated who he was trying to go out with. Finally, when Emilia and a girlfriend from that group were at *el Popo* —a snack bar located downtown in Tehuantepec— the foreigner approached them, and in a direct and straight way he openly expressed his interest for Emilia.

Using diverse courtship strategies and tenacity, the man managed to convince Emilia to start dating him —which inevitably meant the end of her relation with the student. Unlike her former relationships, this one was moving fast. Her new suitor introduced himself to her parents to ask for their permission and formalize the relationship —all with the intention to get married. Emilia’s parents did not agree to the relation and prohibited their daughter to contact him again, arguing he was an ‘outsider’ but also that there was a significant age difference between them. In spite of her parents’ refusal, this time Emilia secretly continued her romance:

When my parents refused to give permission, I told myself: “It is now or never. I would rather decide on my own, no matter what my parents say. They can go to hell. I have already worked enough”. What happened is that I was already old, and I was self-sufficient since I had a job. Besides, I desired to have a man, because up to then I had never had intimacy with anyone. Hence I decided to keep him —but also because he persisted for so long! (Emilia, June, 2006).

Soon after they started dating Emilia’s boyfriend revealed that he was a priest, and that he was in Tehuantepec because he served in San Blas Atempa, a neighbouring village. Emilia did not like the idea of dating a

priest, and for that reason the couple broke up —only to get back together again when he promised to give up his priesthood so that he could marry her. Emilia was aware that her parents would never accept such situation, and so she decided to run away with her fiancé and get married elsewhere. And so it was that a civic marriage ceremony was arranged for in Mexico City —without any friends or relatives attending the event, and before the spouse actually gave up priesthood. The couple also arranged for religious ceremony in a Catholic sanctuary in the same city. On this occasion some close relatives (whom Emilia had informed beforehand) attended.

Although I ran away, we had a proper wedding. He was the man with whom I had my first sexual relationship with, but this was after we already were married in the civic ceremony. That is why we went to Mexico City. My younger brother was over there, and when he found me and found out what had happened there was a huge scandal back home. So after that we got married in church. The location, the party, my dress, everything was beautiful. My family joined us then, but everything had to be done in Mexico City. As I told you, he wasn't a free man, since he was already married to God. When we got back to Tehuantepec, we also got married here but only in a civic ceremony. People never found out about this as there was no party or anything (Emilia, June, 2006).

The couple's marriage was the first step to try to formalise the relationship in front of Emilia's family and her networks. In fact, even when the wedding was not public and not held in Tehuantepec they materialized the partial fulfilment of the local norms and the desires of the actors themselves. This, in a certain way, contributed to minimize Emilia's worries about the possible consequences of breaking with the mores and customs of her people.

However, the marriage fulfillment did not seem to have been enough to consolidate the spouses' commitment to each other. Family pressure and the supposedly clandestine character of the union, among other elements, contributed to the definitive separation of the couple two years later. It was time for Emilia to stop insisting that her husband abandon priesthood, since he had not made any effort in that sense. This was the biggest problem according to her, since it prevented their union to be validated before her family, her community, and her Church itself. As a result, she had a hard time living in a situation that was seen as 'irregular' to many of the community members. Emilia reflects on that:

Now, at times, I think: “what was it really that got us together?” Sometimes I even hate the moment I met that man.<sup>137</sup> However, at the same time, I also see that he loved me very much, in a way that is difficult to imagine. I had everything: trips, money, jewellery, assistance for my family —I mean everything. He was never hiding because of me. He would take me everywhere and he would even take me out shopping to the market in front of everybody. We were living in Juchitán, and he also took me to meet his family. But I ended up getting ill, maybe because of the stress, or because of what my relatives used to tell me; so I finally took off for Mexico City. There, little by little, I broke away from all of that —because he never quit his job (June, 2006).

The relationship ended without any paperwork, as Emilia decided to find refuge in the anonymity of Mexico City. There she found a job and, in time, she developed other relations with men. Twenty years later, and without a partner, she decided to go back to Tehuantepec, where the scandal seemed to have died out through time.

This case shows some of the possible discontinuities between local sexual norms and actors’ daily life practices. The existence of rigid elements, such as ways of behaviour, caring for the body, and flirting rituals, among others, usually evoke a strong and firm morality in which public scrutiny seems to have an enormous influence. The case also shows how actors’ actions give plasticity to general norms concerning sexual life, particularly those referring two different and apparently irreconcilable normativities. In this case, Zapotec as well as catholic norms have been evoked by the diverse actors involved —each in turn trying to find justifications for their performances, such as Emilia’s abduction, or the resistance of Emilia’s parents to articulate otherness as in the case of the ‘outsiders’.

From this case it is also possible to affirm that, in practice, sexual life becomes more complex, depending on the different connections the involved actors can articulate. In this sense, Emilia and the priest were able to trigger a dynamic process in which it was possible to find a ‘room for manoeuvre’; in other words, a discontinuity in which a marriage between a Zapotec woman and a catholic priest could fit, at least temporarily. Such a marriage, in theory ‘impossible’, could only be

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<sup>137</sup> Here it is important to mention that besides Emilia told me her husband’s name, during her interview she always referred to him as “*ese hombre*” (that man). That’s the reason I kept her expression.

possible through constant changes, as it is the case of taking distance from Emilia's father's residence as well as from the priest's workplace, and secrecy, among others. In the above case, then, assumed unity falls apart, purity becomes heterogeneous, and continuity turns into discontinuity. Below, I delve some further into the discontinuities or heterogeneity of Zapotec sexual norms.

*Everybody's talking about it; romance in the public eye*

Eladia is a sixty-four year old woman who was born in San Blas Atempa. In the 1980s, at age fifty, she was the centre of a scandal in her hometown when she asked a peasant who was working for her to become her partner. However, that was not the first time Eladia's actions had provoked people's gossip in her village: she had been with a number of different partners, had never married according to custom, and had a daughter born out of wedlock.

Eladia began her first romance with a young man from her locality at a young age. Some years later her boyfriend moved away in order to continue his education and, in spite of regular visits, he slowly drifted apart from her, until eventually he stopped seeing her altogether, without formally breaking off the relationship. The man eventually went on to marry another woman. In Eladia's words:

It was like my heart closed up from the disappointment. He had been my boyfriend since we were kids but when he moved to Puebla he began to stop coming. At first I was told he had been seen with a woman from over there, but later I found out that he had married a woman from Santa Maria [a barrio of Tehuantepec]. When he divorced her he came over here to see me, but I rejected him. I still remember an older woman at the market who kept asking me: "What are you waiting for? Look for someone. Even if you don't love him, act as if you did. If he kisses you, just close your eyes and open your mouth". Perhaps she said this because I was getting older (Eladia, September, 2006).

Upon turning twenty-eight, Eladia, together with her younger sister, began selling fantasy jewellery, an enterprise which meant extensive travel throughout the whole of Mexico. The two were required to relocate to Mexico City and following the abduction of her sister by her boyfriend, Eladia was left alone to run the business. On one of her sales trips she began an affair with a non-Zapotec man with whom she had a daughter



(who subsequently died a few months later). After this unfortunate event the couple parted ways, and she grew accustomed to being on her own.

Some twenty years later, when her mother took ill, Eladia returned to her hometown. It was there that she decided to start a new relationship with a local salesman. However, her new partner did not approve of her being away from home for long periods of time, regardless of the fact that she too was a trader and enjoyed honouring the commitments of her social life. As a result of this, following their first argument, she asked him to leave her house, as she explains:

The salesman lived over here, with me. It was him who had the gate renewed so that he could park his truck. He brought a TV set, a wardrobe, a bed... he brought everything, I mean. But when he tried to start yelling and giving orders in my house, that was when I sent him away with all his belongings. Since I was still strong then, I picked up all his stuff and put it on the street. He left that very day. He tried to come back the next day but I didn't want him anymore. Only the gate remained (September, 2006).

Eladia attracted the attention of those around her as she would allow young migrants travelling to or coming from the United States who were in need of some help on their way to lodge in her house. She offered them food and a safe place to stay so they could continue their journey later on, once, at least physically, they had recovered. In exchange, she asked them to work for her at her orchard.

I've taken lots of people into my home. That's why the locals are surprised. At times, people even ask me if I am not scared of accepting strangers into my house. However, those poor guys come from far away, and it's easy to see which ones are in need. They approach me asking for money but I tell them that I don't have any money, although I have got work and a place to stay if they want. I've already had two Guatemalans, a Honduran couple, a Colombian, and many others from who knows where else. After a while I tell them: "Here's your money, now you've got something to be on your way home" (Eladia, September, 2006).

Perhaps it was because of this reputation that Valeriano ventured to ask Eladia for work; indeed, he is from the same town and had worked for her father years before. His reputation for drinking made it hard for him to find a job locally and nor could he choose to be self employed, since he had no possessions other than the adobe house he had inherited from his

mother. Eladia did not hesitate to give him an opportunity, offering him exactly the same treatment she would offer any other migrant in exchange for some help at the banana plantation she had inherited from her parents. Valeriano accepted the conditions, although she also made him promise not to come home drunk.

Valeriano soon showed himself to be a good worker. At sixty years of age, he managed to increase the productivity of Eladia's plantation, and abstained from drinking on a daily basis, something which helped him to win her trust. Valeriano had remained unmarried his whole life, and perhaps it was for this reason that he had no objection to moving into Eladia's house and accepting the meals with which she provided him. Since then he has occupied a small part of the hallway.

I met him when he was young, he worked for my father, but he was never known to flirt with the girls. No one knew if he had a wife, or children, or anything. When he arrived here, he was already an old man, but he didn't have anything, only a little morralito [rucksack] with a change of clothes and a machete, that was all he had. He spent all his money on drink (Eladia, September, 2006).

When Eladia began to grow accustomed to Valeriano's company, he told her one evening after going to the plaza that his old employer had been looking for him in order to offer him a job working the land in Veracruz. He told her that he was thinking about taking the offer. Eladia became upset and told him that it was up to him. She then left her merchandise on the floor and went to a friend's house to tell her the news.

It was during their conversation that her friend suggested to her: "If you are already used to the man, don't let him go, you must talk to him". Upon returning home, Eladia was meditative, since although she had had numerous romantic partners, it had never fallen to her to propose a relationship. She spent the whole night thinking about the matter, and the following morning, when Valeriano was gathering together his belongings and preparing to leave, she barred his way and asked him not to leave.

Vale's not a man who knows how to talk to a woman. I had to tell him to stay. I told him: "Over my dead body you'll leave this place". And that's how it was, that's how he came to stay. However, he also set a condition: he made me agree to buy a piece of land so that he could become a peasant again, working the land to earn a living (Eladia, September, 2006).

From then on, Valeriano and Eladia began their romantic relationship, and the rumours and gossip did not long follow. Eladia's relatives were first to react to the scandal: they could bear to see a reputation such as Valeriano's —first her father's labourer and now Eladia's— become part of the family. Yet regardless of these arguments, both had made their decision, and it was then that she began making their relationship public, attending events in his company and introducing him as her husband, to ensure there would be no doubt among her friends. The formal recognition of the couple's relationship was marked by a huge celebration on the day Eladia celebrated her fiftieth birthday.

When I had my fiftieth birthday party, he had already been with me for a year. I invited all my friends, and we also had a band. I bought him his trousers, shirt and shoes; you've no idea how handsome he looked that day. He stayed with me during the whole party, even though he felt embarrassed around all the people (Eladia, September, 2006).

Eladia and Valeriano's relationship has lasted for over twenty years, during which time both the bond between them and their heritage in the form of the land she bought, as she had promised to do for her partner, have grown stronger. They are currently one of the most stable couples in their locality, something which has meant that the rumours in the village have gradually died out, as Eladia explains, in between Valeriano's smiles.

That's how it is over here, at the start, everybody's gossiping about you, but after a while, they begin to get used to it (Eladia, December, 2006).

It is not possible to separate many of the scandalous situations suffered by Eladia from the series of existing interactions in the local context, especially those related to human mobility, which affected the way in which she experienced her relationships and motherhood. In a certain way, in spite of the scandal, Eladia was able to find room for manoeuvre in order to accommodate her different interests, supported by the networks of which she formed a part.

### **Contemporary practices**

In the past, people used to think about the honeymoon, nowadays that's not so: today people get married and continue living their day-to-day lives. Nobody asks if the woman was still a virgin or not. It seems that times are changing (Cesar Rojas, November, 2006).

In a similar way to Cesar Rojas, former director of the Tehuantepec Cultural Centre, whose concerns are quoted above, I was able to perceive that sexual practices in Tehuantepec have been changing. Throughout my fieldwork in 2006, I had the opportunity to attend numerous wedding ceremonies, in spite of the fact that, that very year, a drop of up to 50 percent in weddings was recorded throughout various locations in the region, largely as a result of the economic crisis (Tirado, 2006).

### *Attending weddings*

Among the weddings I attended during my fieldwork, there were a number which attracted my attention. One such celebration took place in Mixtequilla, a community of Mixteco<sup>138</sup> origin, where the bridegroom, who was from Tehuantepec, and the bride, from Santa Maria Mixtequilla, decided to have their civil and religious weddings according to local custom, despite the fact that the bride was obviously in an advanced stage of pregnancy. Although this was remarked upon by some of those attending, I noticed that expressions of satisfaction far outweighed those of disapproval, even though this meant that some of the traditional rituals were required to be omitted from the ceremony, as the mother of the bridegroom explained to me:

I asked the Virgin of Mixtequilla to find somebody for my son, because he is already a grown man and I could not see him getting married. Nevertheless, look! it's scarcely been a year and he ended up right here, as a reward now even have a grandson (July, 2006).

In a different case, the marriage between a young *Vallisto* and a Tehuana girl brought together a large number of participants at the El Jordan colony. It was a massive festivity whose celebrations and rituals continued for days. They included: the *baúl* (chest ceremony), the civil and religious weddings, and the main festivity, in which the traditional wedding *sones* were interpreted. These celebrations were accompanied by other social events associated with the preferences of the *Vallistos*, such as: hiring a famous band to play Duranguense-style music for the closing of the event, as well as combining their visit with a Mexican rodeo-dance scheduled for the following day. During the festivities, the atmosphere

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<sup>138</sup> Mixtequilla is a territory granted to the Mixtec people by the Zapotecs after reaching an alliance with them in order to fight against the Aztec army (see Introduction).

was charged with competition and rivalry among the *Vallistos* and the *Tebuanos*; not only due to the spatial and scenographic division between both groups, but also because of the veiled demonstrations of power manifested at different moments. One such demonstration occurred during the performance of the *mediu shiga*, a ritual in which it is custom for the people attending the ceremony to make a monetary donation to the new couple, each group taking advantage of the situation to obtain the victory of their represented relative. Finally, when the amounts collected are announced, these are awarded to the bridegroom and a noisy celebration ensues among his supporters. This symbolizes the couple moving beyond the poverty which has traditionally characterized the *Vallistos*.

Shortly after the celebration of this event, I attended the wedding of a man from El Jordan, who had lived in the United States for the last eight years. Like many young men from his district, he had left in search of opportunity and a better life when he was twenty-two years old. From then, he promised his girlfriend, who came from the same locality, to put aside some money for them to marry upon his return. Five years later, when he came home to keep his promise, he had to face the reality that his fiancée had married another man and squandered the money he had been sending home in anticipation of his arrival in order to marry her. As the man was determined to get married, he decided to look for a girl who would be willing to do so and almost immediately, a sixteen year-old adolescent agreed to become his wife. At the civil ceremony she was required to present written approval from her mother, her only custodial parent, since she was a minor. It was impossible to convince the priest to officiate the religious ceremony, although this did not prevent the wedding from taking place, and one month later, the couple set off for 'the other side' (the USA).

In each one of the weddings I attended, I was able to observe that a wide variety of practices and complex situations exist, making each wedding a unique experience.

It was possible to perceive the influence of practices and customs from other places in the local wedding celebrations, such as the case of a young Zapotec couple who met outside the region when studying for their university degrees, and who decided upon a civil marriage ceremony, without any kind of ritual aspect, taking place in the *barrio* of Santa Maria, Tehuantepec. Also of particular relevance was the first public celebration

of a gay marriage between a *muxe'* and an outsider, which took place in San Blas Atempa.<sup>139</sup>

Cases such as these provide evidence of complex processes of change, in which the global intertwines with the local, giving rise to new and very different expressions of sexual life. Even during premarital sexual life, the performance of actors such as the *Vallistos*, who are supposed to be marginal minorities, and the processes of international and national migration, among others, seem to exist in discontinuity to the repertoires of the sexual norms of the Isthmus. They are at once connected and disconnected from the local discourses and representations as a consequence of complex associations that take place in everyday life. The following case is closely related to the contemporary expression of Zapotec sexual norms in Tehuantepec.

### *A Wedding Monday*

Sara and Francisco met in their second year of high school when, having been close friends for a while, they began a romantic relationship. Initially, the couple kept their relationship within the school grounds, although the change gradually became more apparent in the presence of their relatives: the length of the phone calls, weekend walks, doing homework together and sharing many of their daily activities. This situation was influenced by the fact that both had families which, due to their composition and functionality, allowed for certain flexibility with respect to local conventions. Francisco is the second and only male son of his divorced parents, and Sara, along with her two siblings, had to care for herself, since her aunt, her only tutor, was required to travel extensively due to the nature of her job.

When I met the couple in 2006, both were in their final year of high school, and their romantic encounters occurred outside Sara's home, where they often spent time after their afternoon classes. Some months later, Sara's aunt allowed them to meet inside the house, to avoid the comments and rumours of passersby. It was at this point that the couple began to spend more time together. Francisco would arrive just after midday and would leave after taking Sara home. This continued for over

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<sup>139</sup> When this event took place, by 2008, the law for same sex couples had recently been approved by the local legislature of Mexico City. Although it did not extend to the whole of Mexico, the new law allowed same sex couples who wished to marry to travel to Mexico City, allowing them to celebrate their union in their homeland, as was the case in question.

half a year but, as Sara explained to me, the situation came to a head when people began to gossip about their increasingly close relationship and her aunt felt herself obliged to forbid Francisco from entering the house.

Upon finishing high school, both had to make decisions about their future. A few months earlier, Sara had taken a test to enter university; Francisco, on the other hand, had decided to stop his education, citing his interest in finding employment. Although the couple's relatives began to realize their interest in getting married, this seemed unlikely to happen, since both had to act in line with their apparent interests: she in pursuit of her studies, and he in the search for a job. That Sara did not get good grades in high school and was not accepted at the university, resulted in an unwelcome development in their relationship: Francisco's visits were suspended, and Sara's family life became increasingly stressful as the couple planned how to deal with the situation.

One morning I received a call from Hermelinda, Sara's aunt and tutor, inviting me to her home to be part of Sara's delegation, since the formal marriage proposal was due to take place that day. I arrived at Sara's house slightly earlier than agreed to find a large group of people already gathered: her paternal grandfather, her father, three aunts, among them Hermelinda, two of her father's brothers, her younger siblings Xóchitl and Ulises, and myself. In contrast to this entourage, Francisco was only accompanied by his mother and father, and his maternal grandmother, who after the formal introductions had taken place, addressed the audience.

All listened attentively to the voice of the elderly lady, who communicated her grandson's wishes to marry, as well as the couple's future plans, their place of residence, and how they would make a living. It was a solemn occasion. In response, Hermelinda spoke and approved the decision of the young couple. The wedding agreements immediately followed, one of which being to host only one feast for which both families would cover the expenses, and not to hold rituals of any kind, especially those related to *La Prueba*, as per the wishes of the couple. When the moment of the celebration arrived, the relatives began by offering food to all the participants and the gathering was enjoyed by all those who attended.

When the delegation left, some members of Sara's family shared their views about what brought on this event.

She informed me only yesterday that they were going to come to ask for her hand. I discussed the reasons why with her: whether

she still wished to pursue her education or anything else. I wanted to hear if she was pregnant. But all she said was that she wanted to get married (Hermelinda, August, 2006).

I already told you, Hermelinda. She is already at an age where she wants a man. Why should we lie, we both went through the same. Now, if they are trying to do it correctly, there is no reason why we should oppose (Emilia, August, 2006).

The wedding took place three months later, at the end of 2006, having overcome the bureaucratic and financial obstacles which had to be confronted by the couple. At the end of the wedding party the couple went to the house where Francisco lived with his mother, where some relatives who were also at the wedding stayed.

In spite of knowing that there would not be a commission to verify Sara's virginity, as had been agreed as part of the marriage proposal, Hermelinda decided to have a small celebration the day after the wedding, a gathering in the tradition of *Wedding Monday*, without the famous 'chastity evidence' interrupting their desire to maintain the traditions of their community. However, early that morning and somewhat unexpectedly, Francisco's mother appeared at the house of Sara's relatives, requesting to see Hermelinda, to inform her family of the existence of evidence of her virginity, as Hermelinda told me later on:

My *comadre* showed up early that morning and told me: "Look *comadre*, we didn't ask for anything, but Sarita wanted me to bring this to you. In truth, we weren't watching them: they had their own bedroom and slept there by themselves". Then Francisco's mother gave me a piece of the sheet, and left. That's when I called my father and my sister Emilia to my mother's altar, where I showed the proof of her virtue to them and we left it with her; because everybody has been responsible for her. That goes to show that people were just talking, because they respected the trust we gave them (December, 2006).

During the *Wedding Monday* there was no announcement about Sara's virginity; nonetheless, this was the news which circulated among relatives and close friends of the bride's family. The couple arrived in the middle of the party, Sara wearing a red dress which served to inform the public that she had offered evidence of her virtue. This case confirmed what historian Cesar Rojas had explained to me few months earlier:

There are some people who still follow the tradition, and it is fortunate when a bride follows that ritual. We feel happy when



it happens, we feel surprised, because it hasn't happened in a long time (November, 2006).

I must recognize that Sara's *balaana* took me by surprise, not just because of the fact itself. Hermelinda explained to me that the action was not only intended to follow a tradition or to honour Francisco or his family, but also as a means of showing that, although they had lived their relationship differently, they had also acted responsibly, in line with the expectations of their families.

Sara and Francisco's case is evidence of how actors give continuity to local custom—which itself is not regular and fixed. The case also confirms the active role actors play in this.

### **Conclusions**

At the beginning of the chapter, two positions concerning sexual practices in the Tehuantepec Isthmus were identified: one suggesting that Zapotecs have been able to maintain sexual norms based on their ancestral customs, and the other portraying a certain sexual looseness. One of the points arising from the cases is how sexual life tends to be defined by an order, something which has been widely recognized within feminist thought: "The category of 'sex' is, from the start, normative" (Butler, 1993: 1, author's quotation mark). However in addition, my approach has allowed me to highlight the diverse and ample range of orderings of sexual practices produced as the result of the actions of the actors.

Even though sexual life is normally associated with the existence of a certain norm, the various accounts presented in this chapter show how repertoires which tend to normalize sexual life have an influence on the actors, even though they do not necessarily carry it out or enact it. As a matter of fact, in practice it is the actors themselves who, in their daily interaction, assemble diverse elements within their context, including local and global discourses and performances, giving shape and meaning to their sexual practices. The enactments of the actors show that they are responsible for producing the changes required to best accommodate their own interests, as well as their livelihoods and life worlds. In that sense, it is possible to argue that the actors become a product of and are producers of diverse orders; such as normatives and moralities concerning sexual life. Haraway argues: "The *body*, the object of biological discourse, becomes a most engaging being. Claims of biological determinism can never be the same again... The biological female peopling current biological behavioural accounts has almost no passive properties left. She

is structuring and active in every respect; the “body” is an agent, not a resource” (Haraway, 1988: 594, autor's quotation mark).

This is how the sexual aspect appears more as an element of change and constant transformation within the complex network of connections found in interaction with the human, and not only as an effective element to control the lives of those who perform it, an argument commonly associated with an aspect for controlling women's bodies and lives (Weitz, 2003: 65). The sexual does not become the unique goal of a natural or biological act, nor is it reduced to reproduction of cultural meaning.

As these accounts have illustrated, sexual life is not an uncontrolled force which is able to overcome natural constraints, nor is it a controlled practice which remains relatively constant amongst all individuals throughout time. Instead, what these cases reveal, both in terms of the past and the present, are fragmented or partial processes which are dynamic, mobile, plastic, mutable, irreducible and connected. In this sense, a variety of processes can endow continuity, discontinuity, or both, to the discourses and repertoires related to local sexual norms. This is related to the importance of registering the possible connections of the actors themselves, who, as Strathern explains: “in turn presented a concrete image of integration existing **outside the body** of the observer” (Strathern, 2004a: 26, autor's emphasis).

I have explored a range of examples of these processes in this chapter: Beatriz performing the *raptó* practice, but not the related economic arrangements; Ángel and Hortensia's propensity to follow tradition, despite not carrying out the deflowering rite; Carmen's embodiment of chastity and honour while refraining from articulating expectations for her to conform to the stereotypes of the local woman and family; Socorro and Gustavo's compliance with the social regulation of starting a family by getting married, while disagreeing with the rituals associated with the sexual Zapotec custom, such as courtship and premarital relationships, exploring the other possibilities for assembling their bodies and their ways of life; Emilia's search for ways of complying with the local norms regarding falling in love and marriage, and by doing so breaking other regularities which are part of local norms; Eladia's refusal to adjust to the norms, but nonetheless finding a way to accommodate her practices with her performance in such a way that it seems that everything becomes normal with time. Indeed, this list could be further extended to include other cases which have previously been discussed.

In their continuity or discontinuity, all these cases contribute to providing meaning to a series of practices, desirable objects, collective imaginaries, and associations with reference to processes of inclusion and the production of differences. Even though these experiences have some similarities and confluences, they are multiple and diverse; indeed, differentiation is one of the regularities, since this occurs in relation to the body, extending further through interactions. Among the elements which exhibit the heterogeneous and multiple character are the care given, age, gender characteristics, economic possibilities, moral support, the prerogatives offered, cultural belonging, performed activities, education level, surgical interventions, and contraceptive methods.

Sexuality in Tehuantepec cannot be understood only as the convergence of two antagonistic poles, such as control and permissiveness: we must instead see it as a multitude of intermediary points in which honour finds its sense in bleeding, singularity in the hymen, coitus in pleasure, sin in union, and scandal in normality. This reflection serves to draw the reader's attention to the issue of motherhood, explored in the next chapter.







Pg. 195:  
Party at El Jordan

Pg. 196:  
Young Tehuana

Previuos page:  
The little mermaid at El Jordan

## **Battlefields of human reproduction: the shifting contexts of motherhood**

### **Abstract**

In the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, maternity is considered an activity which bestows a great deal of power and prestige upon women, instead of being a cause of subjugation. Indeed, this is often one of the arguments used to justify the existence of female domination in Zapotec societies. As in other contexts, maternity in the Isthmus is often intimately related to the woman, and a series of physiological determinisms associated with her, such as her supposed naturalness for procreation and raising children, for love and protection towards her offspring, and the preservation of cultural patterns. Thus it would seem that in the Isthmus, motherhood has remained linked to matters of nature in a somewhat romantic and categorical manner. It is precisely here where ethnography emerges in order to distinguish differentiated situations and actors in contemporary Isthmus societies, to allow us, to a certain extent, to leave these common grounds related to the concept of motherhood, to one side. This chapter deals precisely with how human reproduction is enacted in Tehuantepec. The cases it explores show how this is a battlefield on which a wide range of interactions between elements of more than one ontological character take place, where motherhood forms part of wider and more complex networks, or rather, how it becomes both product and producer in a variety of interconnected situations and contexts.

### **Introduction**

Where I come from, woman is passionate about life, she doesn't let herself be defeated, for her there is no rest, there is no night, since it is invaded by love, struggle, dedication to her children, to her own; she is a giver, she does not expect anything in return, simply to give, since she is predisposed to suffering,

without worrying about the damage it may cause them, seeing that the pain it causes them is frequent: what does it matter if her child is an alcoholic; what does it matter if they are thrown out into the street, she will come to their aid; what does it matter if they almost hit her, anyhow, nobody will see and nobody need to know; what does it matter if her child commits a crime, she will defend them even though they are guilty, even though she may be aware of the great guilt they suffer; that is just how she is, that is how they are, making them the most valuable treasure of all where I come from (Chicatti, E., 2006: 24) [trans. J. Kelly].

In this paragraph, the Tehuantepec writer Ernesto Chicatti captures many of the popular impressions surrounding the mother figure in Tehuantepec. Here, like in other communities of the Isthmus, motherhood is another of the particular features for which its women are often distinguished on account of the apparent autonomy with which this activity is carried out and the social prestige it confers them within society.

By studying the available records, it is possible to find three recurring affirmations: the broad power which a mother yields over her children, even when married; the greater responsibility of the female in raising children with respect to the male; and the increased social prestige as she procures the marriage and the economic support of her children (Meneses, 1997: 121; Miano, 2002: 68; Newbold, 1975: 134-138).

In certain cases, it would even seem that in the Isthmus, motherhood is not only one of women's most valued attributes, but her principal function, as well as being an activity that is often carried out naturally and free from inhibitions. To be a mother in the Isthmus is to be important to the extent that it is often said that "the sterility of a female is a true tragedy" (Miano, 2002: 68; Newbold, 1975: 133), not only because such a condition is generally attributed to her, but because a family with no descendents can often be stigmatized by the community.

More than being one of the most valued attributes or aims of Isthmus women, motherhood has contributed to support the argument of their apparent Amazon characteristic:

Even if it is true that to raise and marry one's children is something done by women throughout the world, not all can do so in such an independent manner and in one which also bestows upon them their own form of social prestige, as is the case in Juchitán. Moreover, the networks of solidarity and reciprocity and the division of labour amongst women, allows the mother to bring up her children at the same time as



dedicating herself to her business or job and attending festivals and ceremonies (Meneses, 1997: 120) [trans. J. Kelly].

Images of women who are apparently capable of doing everything: strong, dominant, independent, and who stand together amongst themselves, in addition to other attributes, allow us to infer the presence of female domination in the family and the wider society, variously identified as both matrifocal and matriarchal (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1997a: 54, 2005; Newbold, 1975).

This strong tendency to associate women with the maternal figure has been debated within feminist thought and women's studies, as Moore illustrates by questioning the determinisms related to social cohesion based on motherhood, when she affirms that "the biological facts of motherhood do not produce a universal and immutable mother-child relationship or unit" (Moore, H. L., 1988: 26). Similarly, there are other types of arguments which debate other conditionals related to the body, the bond of conjugality, or of living together, the roles in bringing up children, the emotional, amongst many others, which determine or subsume women to a reproductive function or as mere incubators (Birke, 1999; Bordo, 2003a; Sawicki, 1999).

The possibility that a woman has a capable uterus, where, up to the present, human gestation may take place, has been a fundament to attribute this function to the life purpose of all women (see, Young, 2003: 157-161). Thus, those women who do not succeed in metaphorically personifying Mother Nature, often attract attributes of incompleteness, inability or being against nature.

If we consider that human reproduction extends considerably beyond having children and raising them, we can agree that a broader, or even different, notion of reproduction is required, as suggested by Roberts, who proposes the following:

Reproduction encompasses a range of events and conditions from the ability to bear children, to conception, to carrying a foetus, to abortion, to delivering a baby, to caring for a child (Roberts, 2003: 284).

This change of the functional to the situational shifts the focus to those articulations produced in each and every one of these events, especially those manifested as intermediates. This is the case in issues such as the sexual pleasure, contraception, adoption, reproductive technology and health services.

It is possible to perceive the broad spectrum which leads to see motherhood as a situation where dimensions, settings and actors are

connected, mutually affecting and overlapping with each other. From this argument, in particular, it can be inferred why human reproduction has been a fertile issue for debate within fields of what are usually known as scientific, academic, empirical and technological research; in addition to the political, economic, cultural, environmental and media potential it holds, as is illustrated by the defence of human and reproductive rights on a global scale (Espinosa, 2000; SIPAM, 2009; Torres, 2009).

It is important to mention that in the Isthmus, women are commonly linked to the notion of naturalness towards reproduction. However, the enactment of motherhood in this region is somehow paradigmatic since it suggests a society in which human reproduction does not subjugate women, on the contrary. How is this possible? What are the concomitant implications for the lives and bodies of those who perform it? In sum: How is motherhood enacted?

A gap exists in the previously described literature on motherhood in the Isthmus with respect to how this has been experienced by local actors. This work aims to contribute to illustrate, in the voices of the actors, some of the dilemmas and implications they have confronted in their every day life in Tehuantepec society.

I shall begin by considering two cases of how human reproduction has been experienced, with specific consideration given to conception, pregnancy and giving birth as I seek to identify the tensions and conflicts produced in a variety of forms of entering the world. In the second section of this chapter I shall consider the struggles that must be fought in areas where maternity is not viable or possible. In the last section I shall illustrate the struggles surrounding the constitution of maternal networks for bringing up children when the biological link with the mother is broken.

### **Becoming a mother**

The birth of a *criatura*, as a newborn child is often locally referred to, is one of the most significant elements of motherhood in the everyday life of the Isthmus. Throughout the course of my fieldwork in Tehuantepec, I was able to perceive that the form in which pregnancy and birth are experienced and attended to, differs significantly between traditional obstetric and modern medical practices, generating interfaces between both. In line with the findings of my fieldwork and the statistics consulted, home births, attended by traditional midwives and other women, used to be common in Tehuantepec, although today the official figure has declined to 12% (INEGI, 2009).

In contrast to the past, at present both pregnancy and birth are increasingly considered as medical events, or even as a pathological problem, something more in line with global trends (Kohler, 2003). The following section aims to visualize some of the changes that have taken place, alongside the impact these have had on how maternity is experienced in Tehuantepec.

*The traditional, doing and learning*

In 1971, Cirenia and Luciano settled in the *El Ocho* (The Eight), coming from the Oaxaca Valley. Although they had been together for approximately one year, they still lived in the house of one of Luciano's aunts. Cirenia was eighteen and Luciano twenty-one, when the couple detected an irregularity in Cirenia's menstrual period. The couple let the time pass without paying to it too much attention until, as she explains, a miscarriage occurred.

That morning, Luciano's aunt had been roasting a strip of meat for her daughter-in-law who had recently recovered from a delivery. I asked her for a piece of the meat, but she didn't want to give it to me, and that was that. It started around eleven o'clock with a trickle of blood. Around two o'clock in the afternoon, Luciano arrived home from work and I told him I was bleeding.

"Why?", he asked me. "You know", I said.

"It's already been two months since it last arrived, perhaps it's been delayed and it's happening now".

"Mmm, maybe", I replied.

In the evening we went for a walk by the canal; it was pretty full of water and we went in for a swim, what were we to know! However, by the time we got there, it was no longer a trickle of blood, it was a lot. So there we were, waiting for it to pass. But it didn't. It was now flowing quite quickly and so we decided it was better to go back to the house and speak to his aunt. "It's as if you were pregnant", she told me and sent Luciano in search of the midwife. He didn't even know where the lady lived, but his aunt told him where to go. When they returned, I immediately felt something larger coming. The midwife attended me and since it all came out, she injected me herself and she gave me some pills, and she told me I should be cared for as if I had a delivery. It was then that she asked me if I had done any heavy work; but when I told her about my craving, she said: "That's what it was". (Cirenia, June, 2006).

It was only after this experience that the couple learnt to perceive the symptoms and signs of pregnancy. One year later, when the absence of Cirenia's menstrual cycle returned, she went immediately to be assessed by the local midwife, who monitored her pregnancy using empirical knowledge and skills, such as giving her massages, and providing her vitamins, dietary suggestions and medication. All the knowledge and care techniques administered by the midwife contributed to ensuring that this, as well as Cirenia's subsequent pregnancies and births, had a good outcome.

The other times I was pregnant, I kept on taking pure medicine, because after the abortion my body remained in a delicate state. During the first months of being pregnant, I felt my stomach hurt. That was when the midwife used to come and just by giving me injections and massages, she managed to deliver all of my children (Cirenia, June, 2006).

For the birth of their first child, the couple had planned to return temporarily to their hometown, in order to have better support networks during the birth and postnatal period; however, on the day before the journey, Cirenia began to show symptoms of giving birth and the couple had to deal with the situation making recourse to the local midwife, as she explains:

When I started to feel bad, we didn't go to the town. It began at night and the following day in the afternoon I went to see the midwife, but I didn't give birth. I spent another night and it wasn't until the day after that my daughter was born. No way, I saw the devil right there in front of me, but what could I do? Even though I had wanted to run away, there I was. "Wake up, because here it comes", the midwife said to me; and that was how it was, with her telling me what to do until it came out. And so I learnt by doing. I now knew what would happen for all the others (Cirenia, June, 2006).

According to Cirenia, Luciano's presence while giving birth was of vital importance, since he helped her through her depression, giving her the care and attention which she and her baby needed at that time. Here the indubitable emotional link often associated with maternity becomes clear. However, as it is shown in this case, the link does not exclusively involve the mother and the child. Uncertainty, anguish, love, disorientation affect a large number of the members of the network of which they form a part.

As soon as she was born, my little baby cried. But I was drained of all my energy; I was left weak, without emotions. Perhaps I

was so dispirited because of what had happened with the first pregnancy, or perhaps at that moment, I remembered how my mother had cursed me when I ran away with Luciano: “You’ll pay for all this when your children are born”, she told me; how could I help but feel dispirited? The good thing is that he always paid attention to me. If I told him I felt bad, we would immediately go to see the midwife. He was there the first time, until he saw that his child had been born; but only him, and also my father-in-law. The two went back to the house when they confirmed I was fine, because Luciano left me with the lady so that she could look after me for three weeks (Cirenia, June, 2006).

When she became pregnant for the second time, the couple had managed to become more independent, although the ranch on which they lived, on which Luciano had managed to find work as a labourer for a Tehuano landlord with whom he shared the benefits, was far away from The Eight settlement. This was why, when both had set off towards the midwife’s house, she only made it half way, seeking refuge in the house of one of the founding families of the *colonia El Jordan*, where she gave birth to a second daughter with the help of the elderly lady who lived there. The whole family stayed for almost a month in that place, due to the custom of observing the puerperium, establishing a very close link with their hosts.

For a while, thanks to the *Viejo Celestino* (the host), Luciano got a job with a more regular income, in the *Cuenca*<sup>140</sup>, (as it was known the milk enterprise located at El Ocho). The couple subsequently decided to purchase a property close to the settlement, beside the elderly people who had assisted in the birth of their child. However, they had to move to high and somewhat solitary ground, shortly after the death of the couple’s third child, a boy of eight months, caused by pneumonia. At that time, those who lived in the *colonia* were suffering the frequent flooding which occurred on account of it being situated on the bank of one of the irrigation channels. This meant it became impossible to reach even the medical services located at the centre of Tehuantepec when the floods occurred.

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<sup>140</sup> Linked to the irrigation system # 19 (see Introduction) the *Cuenca* was one of the first milk social enterprises developed by Banrural, the Governmental Bank that was the main support for agriculture until the end of 1980’s, when it abruptly diminished its activity.

On the four subsequent occasions on which the couple successfully conceived, they managed to reach an agreement with the midwife that she would travel to their house to ensure that the distance would not affect care in the prenatal, labour and postnatal periods once again, thus ensuring that Cirenía would continue to receive the care to which she was accustomed.

I never stood up until after fifteen days, and only to make tortillas, nothing heavy. When I was with the old people [hosts] they looked after me there for three or four weeks. Lina, the old lady, looked after my daughter, and Luciano after me. On other occasions, Luciano would sort out the *nixtamal* and grind it with a small hand mill, because he didn't go to the community mill. He washed our babies' clothes, as well as ours, and also fed the animals and everything. When my daughters had grown up, they helped him, but he always took charge of everything. He's a good husband, he never left me on my own, he never let me get up and even when the midwife had left, he would cook the food and the *tortillas*, because there wasn't anybody close to where we lived (Cirenía, June, 2006).

As one could imagine, for Cirenía and Luciano each pregnancy implied an important economic cost since they had to make payments for care and medication, as well as contracting the services of the midwife for the postnatal period. However, the flexibility with which they were able to reach agreements with the midwife, regarding payment for her services, allowed these payments to be connected to times and forms suited to their economic circumstances and governed by the cyclical income of agricultural families in México. These arrangements included payment in kind, monetary payment and even agreements to make payments in the future, as Cirenía explained to me:

For the first birth, we paid so the midwife would take care of me in her house for around three weeks. The second time we saved money, as I didn't give birth with her, we only paid for the pregnancy. With the others, the midwife came to the house and between the two of them they cared for me for the forty days; this meant we had to pay her and also provide her with food. Because of this, as soon as we realized I was pregnant, we started to save money. The last time, we couldn't manage, we only had fifteen days after the birth because at that time, the midwife would bring her grandchildren and to provide food for all of them was just too difficult; so Luciano took over again

because my daughters grew up and had already gone (Cirenía, June, 2006).

Over a period of twenty-two years, Cirenía and Luciano were pregnant seven times in total, including the miscarriage, largely due to the fact that the couple never made use of contraceptives because of lack of knowledge, which result paradoxical, considering that the couple's reproductive health was in charge of the midwife. In this manner, their reproductive life was marked by the supposed naturalness of their conjugal relationship. However, once the couple's oldest children began to receive sexual education at school, Cirenía became interested in the subject and from then on, it has been a recurring theme with her children.

The experience of Cirenía and Luciano illustrates how traditional birth practices were important for Isthmus families, especially for those who were less affluent, or who find themselves isolated from governmental and/or private health services, as is the case for the majority of peasant families in the Isthmus. The assistance of midwives contributes to mother and child health care in a number of ways, since in addition to perinatal care, they also mediate emotional and physical bonds of the couple and other members of the family at the moment of birth and in the postnatal period.

Also, this case shows that the health practitioners provide continuity to traditional practices centred on maternal care during the birth of a baby. It should also be noted that these traditional practices also incorporate knowledge and other elements from modern and biomedicine. Thus, it does not seem strange to be able to connect with those arguments which seek to capture the magnitude and impact this form of action can have on obstetric attention (Kohler, 2003; Pelcastre *et al.*, 2005).

Similarly, the apparent naturalness of motherhood is affected by the permanent performance of various actors in the face of a diverse economic, contextual and emotional factors which contribute to shape each of their experiences: a miscarriage which causes them to detect a pregnancy early and seek assistance from a midwife to monitor future pregnancies, the birth and the postnatal period; the location of their home, as well as the critical events they suffered, leading them to seek solutions, including moving house and the suitability of finding, on a number of occasions; a place where they received attention; and finally, intersecting their livelihoods with the economic solutions required to procure the desired attention. All these actions are examples of how solutions to various problematic situations materialize in a specific time

frame, allowing us to conclude that naturalness is an arena with a high propensity for intervention.

*Modern ways of doing*

In 1989, Socorro and Gustavo decided to marry after having confirmed Socorro's suspected pregnancy with a health professional. The decision was influenced by Gustavo's experience, having lost his mother in his infancy when she was giving birth to her fifth child, attended by a midwife.

When I told Gustavo that my period hadn't arrived, he wanted us to go to the doctor that same day. It was there that they confirmed that I was pregnant. He was really pleased; it was only me who was worried (Socorro, June, 2006).

The situation took them by surprise, in spite of having had sexual relations for more than a year without using contraceptives, despite of having received sex education throughout their high school education; something which suggests a paradoxical gap between information about sex and the practices of the actors. Lack of awareness, confidence and even interest can mean that contraceptive technologies assume a low level of priority for individuals, as the pair explains:

She was twenty years old and I was nineteen when we started our relationship, just like that, without using anything, and that's why she ended up pregnant. Even though they had explained to us in school that women menstruate, how they get pregnant, and all that stuff, in practice, we didn't know how to take care of ourselves. We never knew where to find information, and we never saw a doctor, not until she was already pregnant (Gustavo, October, 2006).

At that time [the nineteen eighties], it wasn't like nowadays, where the kids know how to avoid getting pregnant. Now my daughters say that only the stupid girls get pregnant, after all the stuff there is just now. But before, what were we to know, and neither could we go and ask our mothers, or anyone else because one used to feel ashamed (Socorro, June, 2006).

This event caused great changes in the life of the couple as they were required to overcome a variety of struggles, such as obtaining consent for the wedding and securing the required economic resources, sorting out where to live, and above all, remaining discrete about the pregnancy. This



final requirement was due to the fact that a pregnancy outside of marriage still often caused controversy in Tehuantepec (see Chapter 5). Pregnancy is providing evidence that marriage is one of the most common associations related to human reproduction, and thus it would seem to be the logical consequence of the sexual life of a couple. However, Socorro could not hide her secret from her mother and nor could she do so at her work, whilst Gustavo had to turn to his father for support, in spite of not having been brought up by him since he was five years old, when his mother died. Gustavo remembers:

When the doctor said she was pregnant, I was happy at first; but then I was struck by fear. I was frightened because I didn't know how to go to her house, but above all, what I was going to say. When I met my father in Tehuantepec, I took the opportunity to ask him: "I need your support, my girlfriend is pregnant and I want to get married, but I need someone to introduce me to her father". We went together one afternoon to her house, although she had already told her mother in advance and she would support us in the event that her father opposed. My father said that we were going to get married. As the man [Socorro's father] had already seen me, he wasn't surprised; but we didn't tell him that she was pregnant. We agreed on the date for the wedding and from then on I began saving money (October, 2006).

Shortly before the wedding, Socorro decided to break the news of her pregnancy to her father: "He didn't say anything; he didn't even shout at me, or hit me. My mother told me off, but she didn't hit me, she had realized herself I had lost my period and I had to tell her". Socorro expressed to me, reflecting upon the replies she received from her parents. Soon after the wedding, Socorro's belly showed that she was six months pregnant, making public what until that moment both had tried to keep secret.

I don't understand how there are women who get hungry and look prettier when they get pregnant. To my case I looked horrible; I was like a stick, because I threw everything up. I wasn't hiding for the first months, I hid my entire pregnancy. For my first child I said that it was something I had eaten in the street, but I always had a really bad time. The good thing is that for me, you didn't really notice my belly until the day that I got married. Imagine that one day I was getting married and the next my belly was up to here. That's why people here say that I was only pregnant for three months, because they didn't even

realize. But we were already married by the time everyone began to talk (Socorro. June, 2006).

At that time, Socorro was working for a beer wholesaler in the city of Juchitán and Gustavo for a private enterprise that worked for PEMEX in the port of Salina Cruz. This meant that from the outset of the pregnancy, both decided to turn to the medical attention provided by the social security, also because this allowed Socorro to obtain three months of maternity leave. Attending the clinic each month, following medical prescriptions, undergoing checkups, and also carrying out technological studies related to the prenatal health care of the baby and Socorro, the couple discovered procedures that were new and alien to them, not only because this was their first pregnancy, but also because it was the first time that a woman in either of their families had received this type of attention.

When Socorro's mother detected the first signs of labour, they went to the hospital of the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS), located at the port of Salina Cruz, 30 kilometres from where they lived. Following a check-up, Socorro was admitted to the hospital to give birth whilst Gustavo was informed that he should present himself the following morning. After a number of labour hours, Socorro was informed that they would have to carry out a caesarean surgery, and it was by means of this procedure that she gave birth to a baby boy. Following this event, Socorro was put off from breastfeeding her son since he was refusing her breasts, something which resulted in her being instructed by the clinic staff on how to prepare and supply formula milk to her baby. From then on, she made use of bottles, in contrast to the form of neonatal feeding commonly carried out by the women of her community.

For his part, Gustavo found out about the events the following morning, when he was able to attend the hospital. After completing the required bureaucracy, he was able to visit Socorro and his son for a few hours, only to leave in order to fulfil the needs required in order to leave the clinic. Twenty-four hours after having given birth, Socorro received approval and returned home, taking with her the milk which had been provided by the hospital.

A few days after having left the hospital, Socorro began to suffer from a high temperature and her breasts had swollen excessively. She went to the current clinic that she had been attended regularly, where they recommended that she had to make use of a milk extractor. She was given some brief training and sent home where she repeatedly tried to extract the milk from her breasts but was only successful in obtaining a bloody

mixture which did nothing to relieve her situation. Her health rapidly began to deteriorate, showing her that this model of mother and child care intervention is not without its complications.

It was then that her mother decided to call the local midwife, who tried to relieve the discomfort by applying hot towels to both breasts, hoping to obtain the milky fluid, which eventually works, since it appears through the sides of her breasts instead of her nipples. For Socorro, the remedy achieved a result, because that same night, the fever and the pain began to die down, although this discomfort influenced her insofar as she did not even try to breastfeed her son. In this situation, the traditional and modern therapies overlapped to achieve the desired objective.

No more mishaps occurred throughout the puerperium period, in spite of the fact that she recognizes that she did not undertake any postnatal care. She returned to work only to realise some weeks later that she was pregnant again on account of the fact that she had not received any instructions for the use of contraceptives. This situation made her resign from her work. With the funds obtained from her severance pay, she set up a small grocery store in a house near to her parents, where she lived with her husband.

Her second pregnancy passed with few changes in the family environment. The welfare benefits provided to Gustavo allowed the couple to continue receiving medical attention. The procedures of the first birth were repeated for a second time. In a second procedure, again involving surgery, Socorro gave birth to a baby girl, who was also fed using a bottle. Shortly after the birth of their second child, the couple managed to acquire a property where they moved to and were successful in building a small house. However, the couple's male child stayed with his maternal grandmother who helped Socorro bring him up.

The couple became pregnant once again. Two years after her second operation, Socorro had to undergo her third caesarean giving birth to another daughter. On this occasion, the doctors suggested she undergo a salpingectomy since in the space of four years, she had reached the recommended number of caesarean sections.

I didn't decide to have the operation myself, neither did he [my husband]; it was the doctors (Socorro, June, 2006).

Socorro dedicated herself to look after her children whilst at the same time attending the business she ran from her house to help with the costs of running the family. For four years, she bore practically all the costs related to supporting the family. This situation affected Socorro's perception of motherhood, as she explains herself:

I think I was a bad mother. I wasn't caring with my children. I should have taken them to bed, as I see some other mothers doing. They are caressing, kissing and loving them all the time. Contrary to them, the next day after the delivery I used to come out of the hospital with my belly all sown up. I think I was very harsh, very ... I don't know. Right after giving birth I was walking at home all the time, carrying heavy things because I had to attend the shop. I remember that people used to say to me: "Go to bed woman, sit down and cover your head". When they talked to me, then I sat down for a while in the hammock with the baby, and rocking, rocking, I would coax the child, so that I would be able to go back to work. As I didn't breastfeed them, I only held them when I gave them the bottle and when it was over, they went back to the hammock, because they weren't cry-babies. Now I feel it was worth it, because my children are already grown up, I was able to look after them and I didn't lose any (Socorro, June, 2006).

The occupations of the couple contributed to the fact that their oldest son remained in the care of his grandmother; what began as a temporary measure lasted for six years. The incorporation of the child into the home of his parents was an exhausting task and one which caused considerable tensions amongst its members. The child finally went to live with his own parents and sisters, but even when I was in field in 2007, he took part in both networks present throughout his upbringing, as he explains: "I feel as if I'm from my grandparent's home, even though I know this is my family house and it's mine". This last point recognizes the existence of networks with a greater coverage and some times even more influential than the parents with respect to bring up a child.

In Socorro's case, medical intervention seems to co-opt the process of pregnancy and delivery, although it is also possible to make out some elements which contribute to produce changes in the actor's practices and the way they give meaning to human reproduction. In the case of this couple certain practices become stable and regular, whilst others were redefined or even eclipsed. As an example, the fact that both found themselves inserted into a labour market, connected with access to health services and other benefits related to pregnancy and delivery care, contributed to the couple's acceptance of medicalization in relation to their experience of motherhood. In the same manner the participation of other members of their network, specifically Socorro's mother, contributed to the reconfiguration of medical procedures in the battle against the breastfeeding obstruction. Amongst the factors which were

greyed out were postnatal cares, the relevance of the mother in feeding and the subjective link of being a mother. This makes clear some conceptual and practical alterations with respect to motherhood in Tehuantepec.

Socorro's experience exposes an approach which considers pregnancy and birth as a medical matter, and pathological to a certain extent, where scientific and technical knowledge has to intervene. Much of this change in approach has contributed to the standardization of processes and techniques which are now applied as routine,<sup>141</sup> as well as the fact that this form of intervention often focuses on the mother-child binary pair, as if this were an isolated unit. This would suggest the existence of an institutional notion of mothers as passive subjects, not of actors who forge their own experience.

This situation cannot be viewed in isolation from developments in the global context which include the technification of the medical system, current legal frameworks linking the service to the establishment of guarantees and legal rights to future mothers, alongside governmental intervention for the provision of this service.<sup>142</sup> My purpose is not to diminish the importance of these global efforts that envisage the improvement of women's health, still here I tend to agree with those approaches which point out how the supposed naturalness of procreation is substituted with biomedical justifications which apparently coincide with public policy issues linked to the achievement of demographic objectives (Kohler, 2003: 51; Sawicki, 1999: 192).

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<sup>141</sup> In the State of Oaxaca, the number of births exceeds the infrastructure and capacities for medical attention; as such, the generation of this trend for the standardization of processes would hardly seem strange. Amongst the evidence to support this argument, it is often stressed that it remains one of the states with the highest rates of infant mortality, in spite of the fact that more women are attended in clinics and hospitals (INEGI, 2009: 2). Moreover, in just the last twenty years (1989–2009), the incidence of caesarean surgeries in Mexico has increased alarmingly from 12.4% to 36.9%, when the health system recommends limiting this number between 15% and 20%. The State of Oaxaca is no exception, in spite of being one of the states which often has the highest figures for natural births in the country; in 2004 the Isthmus registered 39.24% of births by caesarean section. (Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca, 2005: 10; INEGI, 2009: 2).

<sup>142</sup> The linking of different State social programmes to population policies is a phenomenon which has already been identified in other cases for the State of Oaxaca and throughout the country in general (Casas, 2000).

Some of the changes related to motherhood are not necessarily related to the resolution of problems affixed to conventions, as the following cases seek to illustrate.

### **Acting against nature**

In the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, there are also other situations in which becoming a mother is inconvenient or is in opposition to the interests of those involved. Such is the case of the women who work in *cantinas* or those who wander between personal or emotional wellbeing and the reproductive desire. Even if some references to the former do exist—to those who work in *cantinas* or women who work selling beer, known as *taberneras* (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1997b: 181-196; Miano, 2002: 121-122)—there is nonetheless a gap in the literature with respect to the problems faced by these women and their links with motherhood.

...the *cantina* is a masculine intra-gender social space, to which the *muxe'* has access with a significant role (in virtue of his "masculinity"). The *muxe'* may be the owner of the *cantina*, in which case, he is an adult, or, in the case of younger *muxe's*, he may be a waiter, a chef, or a sex worker. Women who work as waiters in *cantinas* may also be sex workers. As it is not viewed well for a woman to be serving in a bar or a *cantina*, the majority of the women who carry out these activities are from Central America or come from other communities (Miano, 2002: 121) [tras. J. Kelly].

### ***Daily life in the cantina***

David did not like any other activity but selling beer. At the beginning, he helped a *tabenera* women in the *barrio* in which he lived, although later on, he decided to establish his own *centro cervecero* in Tehuantepec, a common activity in the region (see Introduction).

*Cantinas* and *centros cerveceros* are considered spaces for male entertainment, although many of these are run by women or *muxe's*. There are also women who often come to these places for entertainment, in spite of this still being considered inappropriate. According to the narratives gathered in the fieldwork, in the past *cantinas* were not as popular, in number and frequency, as they have become in the last thirty years. Nowadays they can be found practically everywhere, partly owing to the creation of a captive market on the part of the beer companies which were established in the Isthmus, as well as the politico-administrative

provisions for their establishment, and the economic stability they signify for those who operate them.

According to the experience of David, who had more than thirty years in the business, these spaces can be taken advantage of in order to propitiate sexual encounters, as he explained to me one afternoon when deciding where he was going to move his business, because of lack of space to fit a private room for his customers:

Where I am just now is tiny, there's no room for anything. Look, the *cantina* could go here, and with an upstairs, it would give enough space for some private rooms, for any couple that needs it. That's what's always missing, *manita* (David, May, 2006).

The success of David's *cantina* has improved on a number of occasions upon contracting female sex workers, and this is why he has been involved with a number of pregnancies while managing his *cantina*.

Here, even though you tell them to take care of themselves, that they are going to get sick, that they'll come out pregnant, many of them don't give a dam, and they don't use a condom. There are others who come with their partners and as they are in love, they go with the man, confident that he'll respond, but when it comes down to it, where they're already pregnant, he disappears, or goes around saying that it's not his child. That's when they come to me for help (David, June, 2006).

On many such occasions, David's intervention was limited to give advice to the pregnant women about the decisions they have to take. On other occasions, his support was reduced to testify the amorous encounters that took place between the couple in his *cantina*, especially when the local girls need to turn to the support of their family to assert the parental responsibility of their partners. In other cases, he has provided economic resources in the form of loans or the provision of employment.

A lot of them come because they have worked for me before or because we know each other. Other times, they are actually working here and don't have anywhere to go. They come because I give them a hand, and sometimes they stay until they have their child and then go. Others get rid of them [have abortions] and some give them away (David, June, 2006).

When David passed forty years old, he began to worry about becoming a father. He believed that taking on the upbringing of an unwanted child would be a good option for him, since, on account of him being a *muñe*,

biological fatherhood was unfeasible. He hoped that the good reputation of the *muje's* as responsible individuals when it comes to caring for families (Miano, 2002: 163), as well as for being hard working and respectful, maintaining a distance from scandal or criminal behaviour, would stand him in good stead. It should be mentioned that the fact that he ran a *cantina* did not awaken concerns about being unable to raise a child, since in the Isthmus it is commonly assumed that women who work as *taberneras* or *cantineras* can balance this activity with motherhood without having to face significant social criticism (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1997b: 182).

On one occasion, when one of the women who worked in his *cantina* became pregnant, David saw the possibility of materializing his desire of fatherhood and he proposed to the young girl that he could take care of her baby in order to avoid the abortion she was planning to carry out. Ultimately, however, she decided to have an abortion on the grounds that she would have been unable to hand over the child after its birth. This situation was repeated on a number of other occasions and in almost all of them, David met with a similar reply.

However, when he least expected it, one of his best friends, who had found herself with an unwanted pregnancy, decided to accept his proposal. She moved in with him to live on the premises and gave up her work while David dedicated himself to provide for the care required by the mother to-be, including visits to the private doctor who would be attending her when she gave birth. When the pregnancy reached eight months, the situation changed dramatically for David, when, acting upon the advice of other women in the town who had expressed their concern about a homosexual caring for the baby, his friend decided to give the child to another family, one that she did not know.

That time, I was really taken in by it all. I really thought I was going to have him, but it was just the same as before. First, they used to say yes to me, but then as they chatted to people, very soon they would advise them that it was better just to get rid of it, or to find someone else to give it to. As the baby was almost about to be born, what they suggested to her was to give it away to someone she didn't even know. She told me they had advised her to give it away because it was certain that I would abuse it, that I would sell it, or that I would bring it up the same as me [*muje*]. This hurt me, because I was just getting used to the idea, making plans, and then suddenly, everything disappeared. That really brought me down. Now I don't get involved, it's best if they find solutions to their own problems (David, June, 2006).



David's experience illustrates how motherhood can constitute a controversial situation, especially when not associated with conventional notions of family and motherhood (Moore, H. L., 1988), and where situations such as prostitution lead to other situations in which women can become alien from the maternal link. From David's narratives, I was able to find out that unplanned pregnancies are common in Tehuantepec and in some of these situations the solution is often found in the form of an induced abortion. However, this practice is not considered a socially and culturally acceptable alternative, as well as being illegal according to state legislation. According to my experience in the field, the knowledge of induced abortions is also kept within a small network or is simply minimized as part of a rumour, or mere speculation.

This case reveals some other possible connections related to motherhood, such as making decisions regarding the body and the search for alternatives when dealing with unplanned or unwanted pregnancies, which include seeking recognition from the father, adoption, and abortion. These situations which have been poorly covered or are not generally associated with commonplace practice in Tehuantepec, allow us to clearly perceive scenes of transformation and change which have taken place, such as the inflow and demand of women owing to the growth of the entertainment industry in the Isthmus, the discontinuities in natal control and sexual practices of individuals, as well as sex outside of marriage.

Other situations which can be derived from this narrative suggest the problems related to the adoption by homosexuals. It is clear that this issue involves the confrontation of moralities which restrict the activities of those who fail to adjust to the norm, or to that established by nature. Moreover, this is true in spite of recognizing that there is an unusual integration of homosexuality within society in general in the Isthmus, and that its association with the female world is being dealt with discursively (Miano, 2002: 149-150,163), as is illustrated by Miano:

In a traditional family, a *mixe*' child is greatly appreciated since it is considered that, as Macario Matus explains, "he has the mind of a man and the emotions and capacity for hard-work of a women" (1978). The *mixe*' child resolves many things in the daily life of a family... he is the one who occupies himself caring for small children and the elderly... they also contribute their earnings in order to support the family (2002: 162-163) [trans. J. Kelly].

According to this text and my own observations, it would seem that the care of children by homosexuals is common practice, but always when the child is kept under the responsibility and scrutiny of wider family networks. This situation would seem to influence the reason why the possibilities of an independent person such as David are limited for bringing up a child. This issue, then, undoubtedly requires further exploration insofar as it carries with it the questioning of notions such as fatherhood, motherhood, or how these practices can be conceived.

Yet whilst it is also important to reflect upon situations and scenarios in which pregnancy can become a problem to be resolved, it is also important to acknowledge that there exist other scenarios in which having a child becomes a priority for individuals, as is illustrated in the following case.

*A question of luck*

When I introduced my child Valeria to Emilia, a Zapotec woman from the *barrio* of the Portillo San Antonio (see Chapter 3) for the first time, she exclaimed, clearly moved: “It’s great that you’ve been able to do what I couldn’t”. Her confession left me speechless, insofar as Emilia is often identified as a person who has little affection for children. Sometime later, I had the opportunity to discover her experiences of motherhood.

Emilia married when she was thirty-three. At that age, the warnings of her mother and the aunt who had brought her up about taking care of her virginity constituted the only information she had received about sexual and reproductive activities. For that reason, when her sexual life began, she placed her trust in mother nature to conceive her children, since it was only natural that, being married, she would become pregnant, above all because she had not made use of traditional medicines or contraceptive methods. However, throughout the two years of her marriage to the priest of a neighbouring town (see Chapter 5), Emilia never understood why she did not become pregnant.

I never became pregnant with him, even though we didn’t take precautions; well, at least I didn’t, although perhaps he did. Imagine that in spite of marrying when I was old at that time, I didn’t know anything about sexual relations, and so I didn’t notice if he was taking precautions. I got to know that there are men who do so when I was in Mexico, that’s why now I think that perhaps he didn’t want to have children, because it didn’t suit him, but we never talked about that (Emilia, June, 2006).

Accompanied by her aunt who had raised her, Emilia moved to Mexico City, leaving her failed marriage behind her in Tehuantepec. In the context of the Mexico of the seventies —when the city's economic explosion and growth attracted large flows of rural migrants— she succeeded in finding a job without problems, although her level of education and knowledge of dressmaking only allowed her to find work as a seamstress and then as a worker in a steelworks. In spite of the low wages she was earning, Emilia achieved newfound independence:

It was a good time for me. I had a good job. Well, it was good because I had holidays, a bonus and I was never without money in my pocket, or without food or anything else. I was a woman who could pay her rent, without needing the help of another person. I could buy my own things, without waiting for anyone to give it to me or to tell me what to do. This was quite something for me, because, as a single woman I had managed to do what many others don't (Emilia, June, 2006).

Having achieved a certain degree of economic stability, Emilia sought to rediscover her sentimental life, because for her, forming a family was fundamental. She entered into a relationship for the second time and, at thirty-six years of age, she became pregnant for the first time. However, her pregnancy did not progress beyond the first three months of its course and she had her first miscarriage. A year later, she became pregnant again, despite the fact that her relationship was becoming unstable; on this second occasion, her pregnancy also failed to terminate correctly, in spite of her following all the medical recommendations. The occurrence of a second miscarriage led her to separate definitively from the man who had up to that moment been her partner. Emilia kept each of these unsuccessful experiences of motherhood to herself as she wished to remain discrete with her family and relatives.

During this period, each time she returned to Tehuantepec for her holidays to visit her parents, she was questioned about why she had no children. To which she simply replied that it wasn't for her, she already had enough with her brothers' children.

At thirty eight years old, Emilia began another relationship, recovering the energy required to become pregnant once again. When she was nearly forty years old, Emilia finally succeeded in passing beyond the first three months of her third pregnancy. For the first time, she really felt as if she could be a mother and she took great care to ensure that the pregnancy came to a successful termination, as well as beginning the preparations befitting someone awaiting a child.

On this occasion I really was excited, I thought that I was finally going to have a child. At that time, my aunt had died and I wasn't living with my partner, and so I was on my own, but I was happy. Each time I went to work, I would chat to him and sing to him, and I even started to buy him things and everything (Emilia, June, 2006).

At twenty-eight weeks, Emilia visited the IMSS clinic where she was attended routinely. That afternoon, she was accompanied by one of her younger sisters, and after the doctor had carried out the check-up, she was informed that everything was as expected, and the decision was made to prescribe her with a medicine it was believed would help her and her baby. Without doubting the doctor's knowledge, or receiving any more information on the matter, Emilia accepted that the nurses at the clinic inject the solution, and she returned home to her house. Hours later, she began to experience an intense pain in her stomach and she decided to return to the clinic. When she arrived, she was also bleeding. She was admitted to the emergency department and her sister contacted another member of her family since Emilia was to undergo a high risk surgical procedure. When she awoke, Emilia knew that she had lost the child for which she had yearned so badly and she was devastated. In addition to this, a queue of doctors and hospital staff were waiting for her to inform her that she must sign a letter absolving medical staff from responsibility. When she refused and asked to speak with the doctor who had attended her during the consultancy, her request was refused and she was obliged to sign the documents they asked for under pressure.

That was the worst of it. The more I asked to speak to him, the more they hid the doctor from me, I never saw him again, even in general consultations. Only my brother Armando told me we could fight, but what use would it be, if I no longer had my baby. After what had happened, I felt myself becoming depressed, because I knew I would never be able to try again, and so, as much as my brother tried to raise my spirits, saying that his children were also mine, for me, it was one of the most difficult things (Emilia, June, 2006).

This was the last time Emilia tried to have a baby, and from then on, the topic of motherhood has profoundly affected her. Especially, when someone in Tehuantepec, where she returned to live years later in her parents' house, asks her about the matter, or labelled her as an 'incomplete women'.

All the miscarriages I had were the worst in my life, the hardest. And although I was constantly surrounded by children, I could never have a child myself. Perhaps, because when I became interested, it was already too late. Because, first I was concerned of reaching a good economic position, and then to have children, so as not to suffer with them (Emilia, June, 2006).

Emilia's experience illustrates how maternity in Tehuantepec can be experienced as a pressure, above all when a woman's biological period grows shorter and her life in a relationship appears to be fruitless. The problems of infertility would seem to be something of which a couple should be ashamed, above all, the woman, even when in practice she does not try to verify the cause or reason of this. This is especially true at the time when problems conceiving were practically unheard of for a woman like Emilia, who was dependent on public health services.<sup>143</sup>

In the scenario of Emilia, this became a situation which was all too tragic, not only on account of the emotional expenditure that accompanies infertility, but also because she was affected by the high value assigned to motherhood in her culture and society. One additional element which should be mentioned is the processes of interface between the actors and the health institutions in which the latter seem to dominate with the standardization of procedures and forms of attention and above all, assuming control of the female body; highlighting that human reproduction is not always as natural as it supposed to be, in biological, cultural, technological, or personal terms.

### **The duty of care**

The Isthmus is recognized as a society in which women are responsible mothers (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1997a; Newbold de Chiñas, 1975). The mother-child relationship seems to be the fundamental association in Zapotec society.

Babies and small children are, above all, the responsibility of the mother and whilst other women or girls in the house may help for a short period, it is uncommon for them to be left

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<sup>143</sup> It should be mentioned that in Mexico, public health institutions have been characterized, until recently, for leaving fertility problems in the background (Espinosa, 2000: 154). This however, is not so much strange as it is controversial, insofar as there are signs which suggest the creation of an industry of globalized procreation which excludes those with limited resources (Sawicki, 1999: 193).

completely under the responsibility of grandparents or older sisters. If the child dies in its early period of infancy, it is the mother's fault. The women of the town whisper behind her back that she did not feed the baby the way she should have done it or that she did not protect it from the terrible *mal de ojo*, or the *aires*... As the father is out of the house all day, the mother is responsible for educating the child (Newbold, 1975: 133-135) [trans. J. Kelly].

However, throughout my fieldwork, I encountered struggles bringing up children due to the fact that the responsibility for motherhood did not always fall to the biological mother, as is illustrated by the following examples:

#### *Maternal networks*

Hermelinda always wanted her life to be different to that of her parents, above all, to that of her mother, who worked long days cooking and selling food in the central market in Tehuantepec in order to contribute to the maintenance of her ten children (see Chapter 4). It was this which motivated her to dedicate all of her effort to achieving a degree-level profession. Upon finishing high school, she had to move to Mexico City in order to continue studying, owing to the fact that there were no provisions for studies of that level in the place where she was born. The different struggles she faced in the city meant that she was only able to complete an administrative degree to a technical level.

Hermelinda returned to Tehuantepec and began her working life as part of the actually defunct Conasupo<sup>144</sup> —today Liconsa and Diconsa<sup>145</sup>— where throughout the years she was able to further her

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<sup>144</sup> Conasupo: *Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares* (The National Company of Popular Subsistence). The company was formed in 1965 and played a highly significant role in the food provisions system and the food security policy in Mexico, especially in agricultural and the food sales and consumption policies. However, the introduction of a free market policy influenced by the neoliberal policies adopted by the Mexican State from 1982, included the dismantlement of this system in 1999. See (Yunez-Naude, 2003).

<sup>145</sup> LICONSA, a milk rehydration company, formed together with Conasupo, was constituted in 1972 together with DICONSA, the company responsible for rural provisions. These companies have survived from the old Conasupo system and both are responsible for food provision programmes directed towards the parts of the population with limited resources and are overseen by the social development ministry. See (Yunez-Naude, 2003).

career in a highly competitive environment in positions which were considered as only fit for a man,<sup>146</sup> due to the physical labour involved, the situations of conflict and above all, for the frequency of travel that would keep her away from home for long periods of time. The fact that Hermelinda was single afforded her flexibility in the face of the various restructuring processes which resulted from the sale of the Governmental parastatal company Conasupo, as well as allowing her to meet the targets she was set. At least these were the reasons recognized by Hermelinda for having focused her priorities on work, leaving her sentimental life at a side, as she explains:

It has been a great struggle to be able to hold down my job and improve my quality of life. Although I didn't manage to achieve a professional qualification, I have worked in posts which require a professional degree. It's thanks to my performance that they have given me the opportunity to continue to develop. How can I imagine! I began as a secretary and now I'm the regional supervisor. I have succeeded in becoming what I wanted to become, but this has had also a cost for me, because I didn't show any interest in getting married, in having children, in forming a family. Although the opportunities were there, I didn't consider it important in my life. For me, the important thing is to be a woman with an executive-level job, and this is what makes me feel good, I am happy with what I have achieved (Hermelinda, July, 2006).

In spite of the fact that Hermelinda had apparently moved the conventional aspect of being a woman to the background, it was not long before she had to assume the responsibility of being a mother. Since she moved back to Tehuantepec, Hermelinda has lived in her parents' house. As she acquired greater economic benefits she began to take on the responsibilities that were in charge of her parents, such as contributing towards the maintenance of the members of the family who lived in the house, other than her parents and her older brother, who was born with Down syndrome, including Santiago's children. This was the case for the first three children of her brother Santiago and her sister-in-law María, as

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<sup>146</sup> Hermelinda began with a secretarial role before moving on to a number of posts related to the administration of the provisions programme. When this research was carried out, she was working as regional supervisor of the stores which now operate under the LICONSA and DICONSA social programme (see, footnote 4). She currently holds the post of coordinator for the supervisors of these companies.

well as her older sister Emilia, who, although living in different areas of the house, shared their meals.

Little by little, Hermelinda began to acquire greater responsibilities towards her brother's three children, covering the costs of their schooling, and as such, they became her responsibility. This situation was possible, partly due to the economic instability of her brother, who, having worked as a welder in PEMEX's Salina Cruz refinery, accepted voluntary redundancy and from then on, had worked only on a temporary basis. It also forced the children's mother, María, to obtain some income through the sale of food, just as her mother-in-law, Sebastiana, used to do. But, this time, with less success, due to the increase of this kind of traders. It is also fair to mention that the children won Hermelinda's affection.

This situation deteriorated when María's congenital cardiac suffering worsened shortly after the couple had their fifth child in 1996. Due to problems in their relationship, María's cardiac condition had grown worse and so her family decided to support her with a medical treatment which meant she would have to leave her five children, the youngest of which was only eight months old, in Santiago's family home where they lived. This circumstance meant that Hermelinda became completely responsible for all the children.

At first they were not my direct responsibility, I only contributed with the cost of food, but that wasn't anything unusual since the children were brought up here. The first ones at first lived with their mother, they had their own room, but as soon as they got up, they saw straight away that my mother would attend them. The youngest was already completely in my care because his mother was ill, and that was how all of them came to stay with me. Although I never said they were my children, I love them all as if they were. Imagine, I've had Ulises, the youngest, since he was eight months old (Hermelinda, July, 2006).

The mother of the children never returned to the house. For a short time, she joined her family again when Santiago acquired a property and took all the children to live there, in spite of some reluctance on the part of Hermelinda. However, María's health deteriorated once more and after a year, she underwent surgery in an attempt to improve her condition. She died a few days before the operation. Prior to her death, the five children had returned to their grandparents' home; since then Hermelinda assumed the responsibility for their care and other personal responsibilities entirely.



I also felt satisfied because the work I had done was not easy. Imagine, looking after five children and all the others, because there were moments in which I was responsible for eleven people. Sometimes I thought that if I hadn't adopted them, perhaps I would have more things, or things that were at least my own, because it has always been like that since I came back to my parent's house. But I don't have any regrets because everything is well invested there (Hermelinda, July, 2006).

In this manner, Hermelinda has managed to give continuity to the family network which, years before, her parents began with the care of these five children. At the time of this research, only three of them were still living under Hermelinda's guardianship, since the oldest had left the house to look for opportunities and had married. At the end of my first stay in the field in 2006, the third had also married and thus the dynamic at home had been characterized by constant change.

The dynamism of networks has been a characteristic which has allowed Hermelinda to manage to preserve her job while exercising motherhood. As an example, given that she must spend long periods of time travelling both inside and outside the region, other actors have become intimately involved with the three younger children, although I was able to perceive that the oldest had the greatest responsibility with respect to the household activities. Throughout the time I was in contact with the family, I observed how one of Hermelinda's sisters, her father and her brother with Down Syndrome—all of whom living in the same house with the children—watched over the three younger children, as well as their biological father, who was also present on a regular basis. To this chain of people, another series of unstable actors could be added who directly or indirectly affect the order of the family, such as a domestic maid, Hermelinda's other brothers and sisters who regularly visited the house, the neighbours and parents close to the family, as well as Hermelinda's own adopted children who are already independent. All of these can demand support as well as contribute to the livelihood of the family network.

The expansion or contraction of the networks has also involved a range of human and non-human actors which have allowed the children access to social benefits related to Hermelinda's workplace rights. For example, to gain access to health services, she had to win the support of various institutional actors in her place of employment as well as paying illicit economic compensation, or kickbacks, in order to legalize her dependants in the eyes of various institutions, as she explains herself:

Don't kid yourself, it hasn't been easy. Just to be able to get them to access social security, I had to register them as my dependants, but it was a mess, because I never adopted them formally. As well as speaking to my boss at the time and explaining the situation, I also had to pay money in order to have the economic dependency papers sorted out, but I managed in the end (July, 2006).

According to my observations made during the fieldwork, the adoption of children is not uncommon in the Isthmus. However, in Hermelinda's experience and that of the children themselves, this practice is controversial for those around them, especially when it involves a woman who has not given birth to her own children, as was Hermelinda's case. It meant that her efforts as a mother were often attributed to the desire of every woman to play this taken for granted role in life.

Many people have said that I stayed with them because I couldn't have my own children. Perhaps, but the truth is that things were heading in that direction. Even their own father has come to tell me that I was not their mother, that I had no right to tell them what to do, and that they had no reason to obey me; but I replied by telling him that they were there, nobody had taken them from him, that he could take them away if he wanted. In the end though, nothing more was said of it, because he never said to me: "I'm going to take them" and less still now that they are grown up, because I've spoken to all of them and none of them would want to go with him. There have also been people who have asked me why I bother making the effort for children that aren't my own, if they're not going to thank me for it in the end, precisely because they are not my children (Hermelinda, September, 2006).

The association with the natural has also had implications in the upbringing of children, creating moments of tension and conflict between the various members who make up part of the domestic network constituted by these actors. The most common is in relation to the material assets of Hermelinda and the legitimacy of the attribution of each of the adults to the children, as she explains:

My brother thought that I would turn his children against him, but I've never told them to disobey him. What happens, and the reason why we fight, is that he comes and disposes of them as if he were in charge: he wants from them to wash his clothes to prepare his meals, to iron his clothes; but he has never shown interest to chat with his children or to find out what he could do

for them. A number of times, he has been committed to give them what they ask for, only to disappear at the time. On the other hand, the other problem is that at home, everyone wants to boss them about or tell them off for the slightest thing: if they are watching the television, if the radio is too loud, if they get home late, if Sara's boyfriend comes into the house. That's why I decided to separate everything: the kitchen, the bathroom, the television, the bedrooms, the electricity, the water; so that each has their own things. But, even still, there's always some problem because here everyone wants to get involved in how to educate them (September, 2006).

It is this complex entanglement of relationships which produces more stable situations than others and it is precisely this form of ambivalence which has produced the dynamic changes and the constant processes of reassemblage of the diverse actors that are linked together. This case serves to illustrate the network, or the possible connections which have created the possibility for a Zapotec woman who by choice never had children to enact motherhood.

This experience also allows to observe that bringing up children is influenced by complex processes that have been affected by different events, such as the economic and emotional semi-stability of the network of Hermelinda's parents (see Chapter 4) and of her brother's, and the stability that she herself had managed to form, all of which were indispensable for providing continuity to the care of children who found themselves disconnected, or disarticulated from the network of their biological parents. All of this leads us to question the apparent disconnection of the male in bringing up children, something which leads me to present the following case.

### ***A needle in a haystack***

Nearly sixty years old, Carlos was born in Tehuantepec. Like many of the men in the region, he has worked for the government institutions established there, although for a number of years, he has worked as a master bricklayer on a self-employed basis, something which has allowed him to bring up his two daughters.

Carlos married a young girl when he himself was young, after meeting her and abducting her (see Chapter 4) during the festivities in the *barrio* of Santa María. The couple had two daughters, but after few years the relation ended abruptly when his wife told Carlos she had found another partner. Carlos left the house of his wife's parents, where he was

living, and from then on he has not had any further contact with the people who, until then, made up his family, in spite of living in the same area.

Of the two daughters I had with my wife: I know them, I know about them, but it is as if we were strangers. The older doesn't speak to me, even if she passes by me, she knows that I'm her father, but it's as if she didn't know me. The youngest says hello to me, but nothing more. The oldest is a nurse and the other is still studying (Carlos, October, 2006).

Carlos avoided assuming responsibility for the young children, even when his father-in-law warned him that his wife would seek a support payment. He preferred to give up his job as site master at the refinery in the port of Salina Cruz rather than allow his wife to claim any kind of payment.

During the time Carlos worked in this job, he had also enjoyed going out for a drink with his workmates in the port's bars and *cantinas*, above all, in those establishments which were famous for the beauty of the women who worked there. That was how he came to know a young lady from Honduras to whom he fathered two children and who became his most stable partner following his separation, although they never lived together.

One afternoon after work, Carlos was surprised to see the owner of the *cantina* where his current partner worked waiting for him. She informed him that the mother of his children had left the house to go back to her country and had left the two young girls behind her. Carlos decided to take responsibility for the two girls and had to quickly re-configure his practices in order to be able to satisfy their needs. The situation became more complicated since one of his small daughters required special care, as he explains:

From the start, it was difficult, because I had nothing, and what's more, they were really young: the youngest was two years old, and the oldest, four. I had to pay for someone to take care of them while I was at work. What's more, the youngest was born with heart and mental problems because her mother and I drank a lot when she was pregnant. This meant I had to rush her to the doctor all the time, right up until now. Now she is fifteen years old. She is the one that has given me more problems to raise her. She has already been really bad three times and that's why I decided to work by myself, to be able to attend to her quickly if she gets ill (April, 2006).

With his severance pay, Carlos acquired some land in the vicinity of Tehuantepec, establishing his new home there. Amongst the women who helped Carlos to care for his daughters was Margarita, a young single mother who quickly became his new partner. He was 28 years older than her, and together they established a home, and she gave birth to a young boy from their relationship.

In order to meet the requirements of their family, both parents have had to work: Carlos as a master bricklayer and Margarita attending a florist stall in the port of Salina Cruz. In this way, the upbringing of the children has been distributed between two adults, although there is a strong tendency for each parent to take responsibility for the care of their own children in order to avoid situations of conflict between the various members of the family in the day to day life they share together.

As an example, since they were adolescents, Carlos' daughters have lived on the second floor of the house, whilst Margarita, Carlos and their new son live on the ground floor, where Margarita's daughter also lived before she moved when she got married. In this manner, all of the children have had a different upbringing.

My partner gets annoyed because she says I spoil my daughters a lot because they don't obey her. But the arguments are over the household tasks, because my younger daughter who is ill takes responsibility for the cleaning but nothing else, because each of them should also be able to do their own things, shouldn't they. It's not right that my daughters have all that responsibility. I do spoil them, because I know that if one day Mago leaves, my daughters will be the ones that look after me, no one else. Because she's young and at any time, she could look for another husband, on the other hand, as far as my children are concerned, I'll always be their father, don't you think? (Carlos, October, 2006).

The care his daughters receive from Carlos does not only involve their wellbeing inside the house, but also outside. On a number of occasions I found him waiting for his oldest daughter at a bus stop at around ten o'clock at night, to arrive back from her job working at a department store at the centre of Tehuantepec. He is also strict regarding their love life and in taking care of their bodies.

You can't imagine, it's hell taking care of girls, because they also get annoyed with me if I don't let them go out or go to the parties. I tell the oldest one that it's up to her if she has a boyfriend, but that she must take care of herself. That we, men, are bastards and we take advantage of women. But it's the

youngest that worries me the most, because she stays alone in the house a lot, so I worry that a bastard might take advantage of the situation and do something to her; because she's not well. But I also see that the more I talk to her, the more excited she gets about boys (Carlos, October, 2006).

The situation which has probably caused the most conflict between Carlos and his partner has been the creation of assets for his daughters. I found out about the situation just when Margarita discovered that Carlos had kept secret the acquisition of a plot of land in the name of his oldest daughter, upon which he was now building a new house for them to live in the future.

I'm building the new house so that when I'm not here, my daughters won't have to suffer. What Margarita doesn't understand is that the oldest will need to take responsibility for her sister, because she can't look after herself. Now she wants I put our house under her name, but although my reluctance to do it might mean a break up in our relation (*que valga madres*). I'm not going to do it. That would be stupid. She could even kick us out (Carlos, October, 2006).

This situation provoked the anger of his partner, since after living together for twelve years she had no security regarding the future of the house she shares with Carlos. After a number of weeks of conflict, the pair resolved the problem by registering the house in which the family lived under the name of the couple's only child.

At last we got it sorted. We went to have the paperwork arranged so that the house in which we live could be in my son's name, so that she would feel secure too (Carlos, October, 2006).

This case shows how there have been situations in the region in which the children are often the most vulnerable in cases of broken homes, such as when faced with the complex processes of migration. Additionally, it also exposes the role of the males in bringing up the children, but not as actors who are isolated or circumscribed to a gender determinism, like in the case of David, but as active actors capable of holding together and building associations into networks commonly assumed of motherhood; that is to say, the upbringing, care and emotional support, often exclusively associated with women.

The family once again appears as a complex entity since it case evokes the production of hybrids which in the case of the dissimilarities between raising and upbringing children and the biological links and the material heritage, among others, become more evident. This

differentiation contributes also to the constitution, continuity and struggles of the family and to the performances of being mother or father in a different manner in relation to the assumptions associated to the local context.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a number of forms and associations in which motherhood is experienced in Tehuantepec. Each of the cases presented reflects the fact that human reproduction is a complexity where elements of multiple, dynamic and heterogeneous character intertwine. It is for this reason that I agree with Moore's perspective, cited in the introduction to this chapter, which points out that motherhood cannot be viewed as something reducible to a biological phenomenon produced in a linear, unique and universal manner, in which the mother and child occupy a privileged position on account of being considered as a form of nucleus or basic unit.

As the cases show, there exist multiple factors that plead against determinisms producing the many different experiences of motherhood in which the biological, the cultural, the economic, the political, the technological, the material, and the symbolic are all elements which are continuously assembled, overlapping, or disarticulating. This chapter serves as an affirmation that motherhood produces and forms part of highly active networks that are being transformed, stabilized or avoided in relation to the diverse and heterogeneous elements and the different contexts in which the actors are situated. It also shows that the interaction between local knowledge, educational processes, livelihoods, lifeworlds, access to health, medical practices, and discourses concerning motherhood influence the various forms in which it is enacted as part of everyday life.

This chapter also relates to situations of motherhood which have not been covered in depth or are not commonly associated with the region. Unwanted pregnancies and adoptions urge recognition as they represent other scenarios in which motherhood makes visible what might be considered as disruptive or outside of the normal order, but which are nonetheless a product of and produced by everyday situations in Tehuantepec. This serves to reinforce arguments about the existence of abortion as a widely used practice amongst women, midwives, and doctors throughout the course of time (Mohr, 1978), an activity which is

often characterized as profitable, especially when it is morally or legally prohibited (Jarquín, 2007).<sup>147</sup>

Procreation itself, however, is often a highly nuanced matter, as is illustrated by the battle to conceive and ensure that the pregnancy would develop and have a good term, a concern presented in several cases in this chapter. In the local Zapotec environment, conventional associations of human reproduction affect how the body is viewed, perceived and performed above all those for females whose value is intimately linked with becoming a mother. Emilia's experience shows how becoming a mother also meets with a number of discontinuities and interfaces, both personal and collective, such as the materialization of personal and emotional wellbeing; the desire of becoming a mother and the opportunities for procreation determined by her own body, as well as the battle with institutional failure and the management of frustration and loss.

Although the networks of motherhood are discontinuous, they are full of connections that provide them with continuity, solidarity and alliances. The malleability of motherhood is clearly exposed precisely when the mother-child articulation is switched around, as is illustrated by the last two cases in which the family network moves beyond conceptions such as the nuclear family or the family as a homogeneous unit, in order to permit the assembly of hybrid connections involving a collective of actors.

This encourages to view statements suggesting the almost exclusive responsibility of women in upbringing, socialization and cultural reproduction as relative (Greer, 1984) since in the cases examined it becomes clear that there are also other actors involved, including grandparents, aunts and uncles, godparents, employers, domestic helpers, and even the siblings themselves, all of whom play an active role. This is especially true of contexts in which those in charge of bringing up the children are also involved in spaces and activities which take place outside the house, like the cases in this chapter have shown. These cases then, highlight the complexity of the networks related to motherhood, making clear that the mother figure, without seeking to diminish her significance, is just one link in the networks which constitute the context of which they are a part. It is precisely the alteration of any of these constituent elements which trigger changes and are responsible for the dynamicity of each of

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<sup>147</sup> Since 2007 until 2009 based on United Nations data, the profits for abortion in México reached one thousand and one hundred million of Mexican pesos per year. See (Becerra-Acosta, 2009; Olivares Alonso, 2007).



these networks, including the relevant contribution of these elements to the stabilization and viability, both temporary and long-term, of these networks.

This reflection does not point to the deconstruction of a myth of motherhood in Tehuantepec or the Zapotec societies that make up the Oaxaca Isthmus; instead, it shows the many ways in which motherhood is enacted in these communities. It illustrates that this complex process involves not only women and their bodies, but also results from scenarios, architectures and actors interconnected with processes of development, implementation and regulation related to the transformation of the events involved in human reproduction.

This is to say, it does not try to depict romantic notions of ideal situations that seek to standardize processes, and nor does it condemn the emergence of elements whose intervention has come to be stabilizing, such as the incorporation of new reproductive technologies. The challenge lies in differentiating the struggles from the situations which confront the actors in their everyday life, in order to identify other possible connections which have not previously been identified, but which, nonetheless, influence motherhood and shed light on some signs of its strengths and challenges in the local environment.

Let us now, in a last series of cases, turn to another controversial theme which shocked me even more; that of intimate violence.







Pg. 236:  
Farmers family at *El Ocho*

Pg. 237:  
Old tehuana

Previous page:  
Cemetery, *barrio El Centro*

## Counteracting intimate violence

### Abstract

There are numerous references to situations of intimate violence which take place in the communities of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and principally affect women. The situation seems to agree with approaches urging the exposure of forms of feminine subordination in a masculine world, and challenge the notion of patriarchy by which the Zapotec Isthmus societies have been characterized. The title of this chapter argues for a broader conception of intimate violence as a complex network, instead of a series of isolated events, in order to focus on the actor's agency which contributes to articulate other networks that counteract intimate violence. Based on feminist studies and Actor-Network Theory, this chapter explores from a different perspective those actor's practices in order to disarticulate networks of intimate violence. The ethnographic work carried out in Tehuantepec contributes to highlight the connections which take place in everyday life. The articulation of possibilities is something which the actors intertwined by intimate violence must undertake as part of a situation in which failure may result in death.

### Inscriptions of violence: an introduction

#### A few words on my father

"Hail Mary, full of grace, our Lord is with thee..."

I had a dream last night *mamita*. And the images were the same as when I was five, seven, twelve and fifteen years old, then I left home... but I have returned. I have returned to be welcomed by the same series of images now that I am twenty-six.

Yes mother, I have dreamt of you with those dark glasses...

I have dreamt of you mother, with your broken arm, sat on the bedstead, and we're there by your side as you hug and kiss us, telling us that he has gone...

What made you believe him when he promised you that it was the last time, and weeping, he begged your forgiveness?

I have dreamt of you mom, and also of him, once again as we tie up his hands and feet, as foam comes out from his mouth, twisting what he really is...

I dreamt of you last night mother, and I also dreamt of the man who caused me to keep watch in the early morning hours, peeking through the mesh of the hammock to watch him pass through the coconut stalk door. Running out afterwards to call the grandparents who would arrive with my aunts to shout at you: It's your fault! You've ruined him! Now you'll have to stand him!

*Xhúunca*, they arrived to judge you, absolving the agitator of the nights which passed with my sobs held tightly in.

*Mamita*, I dreamt of you last night and also of the man who snatched your virginity at fifteen years old, and brought you to give birth at sixteen, of the man who tried to strangle my sister by standing on her neck, the same man who lifted a machete behind your back as you remained at the mortar and pestle preparing the tortillas for lunch, the man who pulled your hair and bit your right cheek, yes mother, of him, of he who you remember each time you leave the house as you attempt to hide the scar. But... but today he'll tell you that he doesn't remember anything, to forgive him, to tell you that it won't happen again. Thirty-two years have passed with him saying the same every morning.

Today there are items strewn all over the room, some of them broken, and the tone of your skin is different to your earthy colour. A favour! When you go to sleep, lock yourself in, put the bar on the door and tie the dog to the bedstead by one leg.

With love, your son. (Génico, 2006: 21) [trans. J. Kelly]

This text, taken from the local magazine *Ciudad Principal*, is a good example illustrating the scenes of intimate violence which, in spite of not being commonly visible, all too often form part of the everyday life of the actors. In this account, the author does not specify whether his account is based on a personal experience or whether it refers to stories which often circulate around the town as *secreto a voces*, (a form of gossip known to everybody).

The existence of such violence is also confirmed by newspaper stories, above all when these report on cases involving a murder. Sometimes they provide information about centres for supporting the

victims and denouncing violence, especially when there are commemorative dates for women, as illustrated by the following stories:

TEHUANTEPEC, OAX. As part of the International Women's Day celebrations, Education Councillor, Sonia Martínez Juan, claimed: "The human rights of women continue to be violated as it is impossible to detect aggression within homes, of a domestic, sexual, economic and psychological kind, which systematically damages the majority of women"... She [the councillor] summarized that "machismo" continues to dominate in no fewer than nine municipal agencies, women must live under the man's orders... She also emphasized that in the space of the last two years, a dozen women have mysteriously been killed, and that to the present day, the cases have not been solved nor the perpetrators of the acts detained (López, 2006) [trans. J. Kelly].

According to data from the Deputy Attorney General for Municipal Integral Family Development, on average at least three women come to request help on a daily basis, be it legal or psychological, for continuous mistreatment suffered by them at their homes. Although women represent a fundamental axis of the family, this does not mean that they have an absolute power at home, González Luis acknowledged. The director of the Centre for Help and Attention for Isthmus Women (CAAMI) also pointed out that in this institution, 60% of the total of the women attended throughout the year are from indigenous communities while the remaining 40% live in urban centres (Rasgado, 2009) [trans. J. Kelly].

There are also stories which make reference to personal experiences, highlighting the scope of intimate violence within the family, such as the following text by Ruiz:

At an early age I realized that Zapotec women suffer from the temperament of their demanding, scolding, abusive, and drunken husbands. Isthmus men frequently beat their wives and children. Without intending to disturb the memory of my two grandmothers, I recall that they suffered a great deal from mistreatment by their adulterous husbands until the days of their deaths. Additionally, my siblings and I know what it is like to kneel on the ground in the sun holding rocks on our heads and in our hands until collapsing from exhaustion. This punishment was my father's favorite. He also commonly punished us with a rain of *cinturonazos* or *cuerazos* (blows from a

rough waxed piece of leather used to tie the bulls to the oxcart)  
on our backs (Ruiz, 1993: 140-141).

These texts, like many other stories seem to repeatedly corroborate the same story. Women —strong, hard working and Amazons— would appear to be the central victims of their husbands' alcohol abuse and frustration. It is for this reason that some authors (Campbell & Green, 1999; Enríquez, 2005; Génico, 2006; Ruiz, 1993) stress the importance to reveal the experiences of women in order to scrutinize the existence of forms of feminine subordination in a masculine world. This argument would seem to question, or at least place in doubt, the seasoned polemic on whether a matriarchal society can be said to exist in the communities of the Isthmus (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2005).

It suffices then, to ask to what extent both arguments hold: the matriarchal society and feminine subordination are the two extremes of a much more complex continuum, precisely because images of strong and independent women with a large influence in the community overlap with others in which these same women appear as victims of their own husbands and of a 'system' in which violence perpetuates forms by which they are dominated and controlled.

This second argument has been identified by a number of feminists (Gelles, 1993; Johnson, M. P., 1995; Rose, 1993; Yllo, 1993), as well as having served as a banner for various actors and organisations on diverse fields and levels. In Mexico, in spite of the scarcity of this type of information, efforts have been made to estimate the magnitude of intimate violence.<sup>148</sup> In this respect, according to reports at a national level, violence against women is one of the most common forms (INEGI, 2006); indeed, the problem has become so relevant that it has forced the State to sign corresponding agreements to make improvements to prevent and stop it from happening in the first place.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> In Mexico a number of institutions have made attempts to estimate the phenomenon through the use of surveys: the Domestic Organization Survey carried out by CIESAS in 1994; the survey by Mexico College in 1998; the Metropolitan Survey on Intra-family Violence carried out by INEGI in 1999; and the National Survey in 2003. See (Caballero, 2008).

<sup>149</sup> Amongst these, the Mexican State has signed agreements with the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In line with this, from 2003 all the articles of the Current Penal Code on Intra-familial Violence were reviewed and updated, and in 2007 the General Law for Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence was passed (Caballero, 2008; Grupo Interagencial de Género, 2009).



However, the previous point notwithstanding, many of the experiences that were shared by the actors in the field do not seem to correspond completely to perspectives of the victimization of women as submissive and passive, and much less to a problem which is in the process of being eradicated. For this reason it is important to shift focus in order to make visible situations of intimate violence actors have been confronted with, in order to be able to recognize the actions performed that contribute to their disarticulation. That is to say how intimate violence is counteracted in everyday life.

The chapter starts summarizing some of the research findings on the topic, including the identification, possible causes and risk factors of intimate violence, whilst discussing the debate on this problem. Then, it offers the ethnographic evidence, through five case studies, which serves to illustrate the two fundamental arguments pointed above: the constitution of networks of intimate violence, and of other networks in order to disarticulate them.

### **Intimate violence, a complex phenomenon**

Intimate violence has attracted the attention of researchers and practitioners who, from various disciplines, theoretical and methodological approaches, have contributed to the creation of a wide spectrum of studies, resulting in a number of definitions of this problem.<sup>150</sup> It is common for intimate violence to be associated with the use of force, in the majority of cases inflicted by men and suffered by women. It is important to note that over the course of various decades, feminist thought has influenced this perspective, exposing the close link between violence and gender in a series of biological, psychological and

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<sup>150</sup> For Anderson, “Violence is an ultimate resource used to derive power within relationships and a culturally appropriate means for men to exert dominance and control” (Anderson, 1997: 657-658). For the World Health Organization “Intimate partner violence refers to any behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in the relationship. Such behaviour includes: (a) Acts of physical aggression —such as slapping, hitting, kicking and beating. Psychological abuse —such as intimidation, constant belittling and humiliating. (b) Forced intercourse and other forms of sexual coercion. (c) Various controlling behaviours—such as isolating a person from their family and friends, monitoring their movements, and restricting their access to information or assistance. When abuse occurs repeatedly in the same relationship, the phenomenon is often referred to as ‘battering’” (World Health Organization, 2002: 89).

above all, cultural determinisms which reaffirm the order and even identity of the masculine world.

Gender theory proposes that violence is a resource for constructing masculinity, and thus the use of violence will have different meanings for women and men. Additionally, gender theory proposes that domestic violence will be affected by social processes that support men's societal dominance, such as cultural support for couplings in which men have greater resources than their female partners (Anderson, 1997: 658).

The victimization of women in intimate violence has been one of the factors which have prompted the global concern for the development of policies and agreements aimed at its detection, intervention, prevention and reduction. The argument has found strong support from studies which provide quantifiable indicators seeking to identify patterns or regularities which shed light on the causes of intimate violence, as is the case with what have been referred to as risk factors.<sup>151</sup>

However, there are also different type of evidence in contemporary literature which argues that there is a certain narrowness to the identification of quantifiable indicators,<sup>152</sup> above all when the dynamicity and multiplicity of situations presented by cases of intimate violence is observed, making it extremely difficult to locate the characteristics of its possible causes (Alsarondo *et al.*, 2002; Jewkes, 2002; Moreno *et al.*, 2002).<sup>153</sup> In this line of thinking some studies show that the woman also commit acts of violence (Flynn, 1990)<sup>154</sup> and there are also studies which highlight cases in which both partners have become caught up in comparable violent situations (Brush, 1990; Morse, 1995). Furthermore, there are also those which have shown that by the common

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<sup>151</sup> The following groups have been identified as the most vulnerable according to risk factors: women, children, the single, divorced, separated, poor and indigenous, those with a low level of education, addiction to drugs and alcohol, as well as being in contact with those who abuse these substances. See (Johnson, H. & Hotton, 2001; Ranking *et al.*, 2000; Sorenson *et al.*, 1996).

<sup>152</sup> It has come to be considered that many of these indicators are not always present in all cases of intimate violence, and that they are not always determining factors in such cases.

<sup>153</sup> As an example, consider situations in which various types of intimate violence can be, and often are, presented as part of the same case (e.g. psychological, economical, sexual, alongside other combinations).

<sup>154</sup> The author points out that many of these actions form part of a reaction on the part of the female in the face of her aggressor or attacker (Flynn, 1990).

association of being a 'private' event, or rather a hidden one, violence may go unreported, meaning that many of its causes, victims and implications often pass unnoticed, above all in surveys carried out in hospitals and legal agencies in which cases of physical violence tend to dominate (Archer, 2000; Fiebert, 1997).

Other stances prefer to focus on identifying and specifying the various types of intimate violence, arguing that this contributes to a better explanation and better forms of intervention with respect to this problem (Johnson, M. P., 2006: 1006). In this manner, there have been a number of approaches which broaden the scope of definitions of intimate violence,<sup>155</sup> including notions such as intimate terrorism<sup>156</sup> and abuse.<sup>157</sup>

The spectrum of positions and arguments on the theme is of such diversity that, as Michalski (2005) explains, it could be considered by many that a consistent body of research has not been generated. However, I would argue that such a situation makes clear the requirement of producing theoretical approaches and methodologies that are innovative, but above all, which are not reductionist or deterministic, and which allow for recognition of the dynamic and variable character of intimate violence, as well as the obstacles which prevent its identification and exposure, especially when female victimization would appear to be nothing more than the only response.

From the review of the literature, but mostly through my personal experience in the field, I was able to see how violence within the home is often not just an anomaly but a possibility of everyday life, and a problem which many of the actors have to confront. It is for this reason that,

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<sup>155</sup> Some approaches consider four types of intimate violence, such as physical, psychological, sexual and coercive, as previously mentioned (World Health Organization, 2002). However there are approaches which go beyond this, being based on specific forms of behaviour, as it is the case in concepts such as *situational couple violence*, *violent resistance*, *intimate terrorism* and *mutual violent control*, identified by Johnson (2006).

<sup>156</sup> Johnson considers intimate terrorism as a pattern in which "one can be violent and controlling and in a relationship with a partner who is either nonviolent or violent and noncontrolling", he also mentions that this violence tends to be less common, more often male-initiated, asymmetrical, and often (but not always) involving serious injuries and other forms of abuse that form a general pattern of violent control (2006: 1006).

<sup>157</sup> This seeks to capture the variability of situations related to violence which can often be presented as part of the intimate. These "include physical, psychological, economic, sexual, verbal, emotional, or spiritual abuse" (Dekeseredy & Schawartz, 1998: 200).

instead of attempting to characterize this phenomenon in Tehuantepec, I was interested in the violent events and situations experienced by the local actors, paying attention to how they produce room for manoeuvre in the face of events of conflict and violence; that is to say, how action is taken to counteract intimate violence.

The following sections bear titles taken from common narratives in Tehuantepec; they: all aim to invite reflection upon the articulation of networks of violence alongside the potentiality of other networks in attempts to confront such violence and avoid a tragic outcome.

### **She wins, even when she runs away**

When I met Cirenía and Luciano, I knew that like many of the others who founded the *colonia* El Jordan in Tehuantepec, they came from the Oaxaca Valleys. The *Colonia* has a reputation for being an area where ‘bad people’ took shelter, since the rough conditions and the lack of basic services, made these lands the perfect place for those evading the law, or escaping from some other problematic situation in their hometown. In this respect, I never imagined the reasons which brought this couple to make the *Colonia* their home.

Both came from the community of San Luis Amatlán, located in what is nowadays known as the Southern Sierra Region of Oaxaca, 114 km from the capital of this state, and which can currently only be reached by means of a rough dirt track (see map 3, annex). Cirenía went to school for four years whilst helping with household chores such as transporting water, gathering wood and making tortillas; she also learnt how to knit *tanates*,<sup>158</sup> the craft of those who come from her town. Luciano learnt the skills he needed for working the land, the same ones he continues to practice to this day.

When Cirenía turned seventeen years old, Luciano and his parents presented themselves at her house, asking for permission to marry her, much to the surprise of Cirenía since, although she had spoken to Luciano, she had never guessed his intention to win her heart, and less still that of marrying her. This meant that Cirenía postponed her reply on three occasions. But an unexpected event, related to the cancellation of the marriage of Cirenía’s older sister meant that her father would not accept another engagement; as she explains:

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<sup>158</sup> Decorative baskets created using natural fibres obtained from the heart of the palm trees which grow in the highlands of the Oaxaca Mountains.

It was already around five o'clock in the morning on the day after the *entrego*, as the engagement celebration is called there. People were dancing and suddenly the man who was going to marry my sister keeled over as if he were dead. As the house was full of people, it was scary. Everyone ran out, forgetting the dancing. My sister ran to the kitchen to call the man's mother and the woman told her that it had happened because he suffered from heart problems. And because of that, my sister decided she didn't want to marry, and she had to go to Mexico to find a job in order to pay back the costs of the *entrego*. At that point, my father began with me: "that damned daughter of your bloody mother. They've already come to ask you for your hand as well, just go to hell, I'm sick of these women. If you're going to go with him, do it, because it's a disgrace when there's a commitment and then the marriage doesn't happen". That's why he didn't want Luciano to come back for the reply (Cirenia, June, 2006).

From that night, Agustín, one of Cirenia's older brothers, began to attack her violently. Every time he arrived home and found Cirenia, he would hit her or lash out at her, without an excuse or reason for doing so. The first attacks passed without their parents getting involved and led Cirenia to try to find a way to run away from home. First she tried to get them to let her go out to look for a job in the city on the pretext of helping the family, however her father's negative reply was final and she had to continue living under the same roof as her attacker. Cirenia's strategy then became focused on trying to avoid being left alone with her brother. However, he began to beat her, even in the presence of their parents, justifying his actions through alcohol abuse.

I once asked my mother why my brother beat me, but she just replied: "who knows, you can see that he comes home drunk, there's nothing we can say to him" (Cirenia, June, 2006).

One afternoon she came home from taking the donkeys to graze and gathering wood to find the house empty. Agustín arrived shortly after and Cirenia offered him something to eat. She began to heat up the tortillas when suddenly her muscles stiffened as she felt her brother's blows as he hit her with a firearm.

I didn't even realize he was on top of me, I went to turn the *comal* and there he was, beating me with a gun; I remember that he cocked the gun, but who knows why he didn't pull the trigger. Look, I still have a mark from the barrel here to remind me. I didn't even have time to breath, that's how bad the

beating he was giving me was, and even though I tried to defend myself, he held me by the hands and tugged at my hair. I don't know how, but in one of the moments when he let go of me to hit me, I was able to escape; just like that, despite hardly being able to breath, and I ran away to my grandmother's house who came to my aid (Cirenia, June, 2006).

After the escape, Cirenia returned home, accompanied by her grandmother, but her brother had disappeared. When her parents arrived home, her grandmother told them what had happened, but their reaction left Cirenia completely taken aback since all they did was to confiscate the firearm with which she was beaten, without any punishment at all. On the other hand, on one occasion they went to the local authorities when a young man tried to embrace her sister while she was collecting water in the river. Cirenia's unease and fear grew until, worried that she would be killed in a fresh attack by her brother, she decided to turn to an aunt in the hope that she would help her leave the town. Her aunt was also trapped by fear of possible reprisals she would have to face if she were to help Cirenia escape, leading her to suggest that Cirenia sought support from the young man who had previously asked for her hand in marriage.

It was my aunt who said to me: "What are you waiting for! If he's already come to ask for your hand, just go with him. Or are you going to stay here and wait? If he doesn't kill you this time, he'll do it the next my child, or is that what you're waiting for?" I just replied to her: "but how can I go with him! If he isn't even saying we should go, how can I get him to offer me that? It was then that she said to me: "Tell him what's been happening to you and see what he says. If he says no, then you'll have to work out where the hell you're going to go, but you'll go". I asked her why she didn't want to take me to Oaxaca herself. She replied: "No, your father would be very annoyed, and besides, where am I to take you? He'll say that I took you to a hotel, a brothel for prostitutes. No, he might even kill me!" What option did I have left then, if my aunt was giving me the opportunity? And so it was that I had to speak to Luciano (Cirenia, June, 2006).

It was then that Luciano and Cirenia agreed to escape together. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of October, when Cirenia was left on her own again, she ran to the agreed meeting place and together they decided to hide in the mountains. At nightfall, Luciano returned to his house to pick up some money and clothes and then both started out on the journey which would lead them to the *colonia* El Jordan in Tehuantepec.

It was around midnight or one o'clock in the morning when we began to walk, and walk. It was pitch black and we walked through the mountains and the fields, so that they wouldn't find us on the road. We arrived in Miahuatlán around five or six o'clock in the morning where we started on the road to Oaxaca. It was around four or five in the afternoon when we caught the bus which brought us here, and around this time [nine o'clock at night] that we arrived at his aunt's. My mother-in-law told me that that night my brother went and walked about outside their house to see if we would come out, or if he could see us, because he was threatening to kill us both (Cirenia, June, 2006).

It was only eight months later that Cirenia and Luciano were able to take advantage of the fact that Agustín was away to return and marry in their hometown, although Cirenia was taken aback when both were violently received by their parents. Her mother was the first to try and hit her, with a whip, but she was stopped, thanks to the intervention of Luciano, while her father was unhappy with both for running away. Following the altercation, both parents agreed to present themselves to witness the wedding.

My mother was really bad. Why would I tell you she was good? She even called me names I didn't deserve. She cursed me, saying: "You whore, you bitch, you'll meet a bad end. You'll pay for this with your children". That's why even though there was a wedding, there was no celebration. They were all really annoyed and my father only came to sign the documents at the civil registry, it was my mother who accompanied us to church. When the ceremony was over, everyone returned to their home (Cirenia, June, 2006).

The fact that they had been married did not imply that they would find safety in their hometown and days later, when both found themselves in the fields of Luciano's father, Cirenia saw her brother Agustín riding towards them. Anguish gripped them once more and they ran away, seeking refuge in the house of Luciano's parents. The following morning, they decided to return to the *colonia*, where they settled permanently.

To this day Cirenia recognizes that the violence exercised by her brother marked an important event in her life, forcing her to find an alternative in order to save her life.

At first, when I just fled with him I regretted it immediately, because our life has been difficult and sometimes I think: "What if I were to leave this man, *y me voy a la chingada* (I'd be ruined)"; because at the end of the day, it wasn't my choice. Because I

didn't marry like young people do now, where both decide who they want to marry or be with. When I think about it, I regret it immediately, and I'm grateful for what I've got, because it's thanks to Luciano that I'm alive. What's more, from the very start, he has never laid a hand on me. Of course he comes home drunk, but he never hits me, he just comes home and falls asleep. So if he hadn't helped me get out of the town, the likelihood is that I'd probably be dead (Cirenia, June, 2006).

That afternoon, as Cirenia shared her story with me, I realized that intimate violence is not confined to the assaults which take place between partners, to which reference is commonly made. As is clear from this case, violence can, and is, exercised by one or various members of the family, in which a series of victims and victimizers take place. In this case, Cirenia and Luciano can be included amongst the former, whilst Cirenia's brother can be included as part of the latter group. However, there are other actors whose involvement becomes harder to capture, as in the case of Cirenia's parents, who appeared as victims on some occasions, whereas on others their complacency contributed to making them victimizers, allowing the attacks on their daughter to continue. This situation helps to understand that violence and counteracting violence networks form part of a more extended violence network where, at times victims might become victimizers and vice-versa.

It is likely that for this very reason there are approaches which stress the relevance of clarifying the multiplicity which can surround intimate violence. The violence perpetrated by Agustín corresponds not only to an individual act but to a series of interrelated elements and situations which are enacted daily by a set of heterogeneous actors. Some of these include alcohol abuse, physical force, the failure of parents to intervene, and free access to arms, all of which contribute to create the conditions under which Cirenia would be vulnerable to attack.

To recognize that intimate violence constitutes a network which, at the same time is connected to other networks, suggests that recognition of how these other networks are produced is essential in disarticulating or avoiding the former, as is clear from Cirenia's experience. It is because of the mobility and reconstruction of her networks that she succeeded in putting in motion the agencies of the diverse actors surrounding her in order to escape from that by which she was threatened. The exhortations of her aunt, the romantic interest of Luciano, his connections beyond the community, all constitute part of their associations that contributed to enacting her escape.



However, the reason for her escape is also related to the reconfiguration of her room for manoeuvre to the extent that her home—including her hometown—lost its association as a space of refuge and safety. The avoidance of violent situations<sup>159</sup> becomes a priority, or one of the more concrete possibilities in the face of a danger which is no longer found outside those places that used to be safe, and conversely got inside them, and affected other scenarios and actors which are not conducive to the disentangling of networks of intimate violence. This case illustrates where the expansion of the network of violence affecting Cirenica reaches members of Luciano's network, thus amplified its resonances or effects. We shall now see what other scenarios have arisen in the local and have caused an impact on the actors actions.

### A story with no end

Hail Mary  
Full of grace  
Our Lord is with thee...

The Lord's Prayer and Hail Mary were the prayers which Antonia, Emilia's aunt, recommended that she and her three younger brothers chant repeatedly under the household altar, each time their father Roberto came home drunk and sought to inflict violence on Sebastiana, their mother (see Chapter 4). On some occasions, in order that they remained unaware of the violence their father would inflict upon their mother, the woman would send them to the house of relatives and they would return home after the storm had died down.

Sebastiana tried to separate from Roberto on a number of occasions, seeking refuge in the houses of family members, however the abuse perpetrated by Roberto towards them, the constant promises that he made to Sebastiana that his attitude would change, and her concern for keeping her family together meant that she would repeatedly come back, as Roberto explains:

It's true that sometimes I would hit her when I came home drunk, but when she went away with her family afterwards, I regretted it and went to look for her. I would look for a way to speak to her and I would convince her, because I loved her, and she loved me too (Roberto, August, 2006).

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<sup>159</sup> There are some studies that focus on change of residency motivated by intimate violence in homes. Regarding London case studies, see (Warrington, 2001).

For various years, Roberto's behaviour became routine in the family, affecting its members in different ways, as his daughter Emilia explains:

He would scare us all when he came home drunk. He never went as far as to hit us, but he would frighten us and we would run in fear, my mother too. I don't know if it was out of ignorance, or who knows what, but she would tell us to hide: "go! get away!" she would say, "don't stay here!" If we didn't get out of the house, then we would go to the room where my aunt Antonia kept the religious icons, the Saints, and my brother and I would pray when there were just the two of us, and then we were three, and so, so... I would run with them. We would pray to *Santo Niño de Atocha* because my aunt would say that he was the saint of drunkards. My aunt would stay and she would take care of my mother, to make sure nothing happened to her. This was a matter for adults, not children. That's why we would run away, they wouldn't explain to us, they would only tell us to go to one of my uncle's houses; and if it was raining, then we would go into the room and they would tell us to be quiet, not to make a sound, just to pray, to make sure he didn't find out we were there (Emilia, June, 2006).

When her children were older and she managed the household income (see Chapter 3), there came a day when Sebastiana summoned the strength and determination required to respond to the violence when Roberto sought to repeat scenes from his youth. On some occasions, Roberto's behaviour would reach a point at which if she or her children didn't manage to stop him, she would turn to the authorities to have him locked up while he calmed down, as his daughter Hermelinda explained to me:

I had to see him get drunk and cause a scandal, everyone found out that he was drunk but I never had to see anything really bad, like my older brothers. I had to see the times when my mother would tie him up or hit him when he would tire her out, once she even split his head open. That time, my sister Emilia, who is rowdy, shouted to mother that she had killed him, because she had made a gash, but we took him to the health centre and they attended to him there (Hermelinda, July, 2006).

Roberto's attacks on his family or Sebastiana's relations are pale in comparison to the intimate violence enacted by Antonio, the eighth of the couple's ten children. Antonio became involved in the use of drugs at the age of twelve and he has performed various violent events in his parent's home.

The first occasions on which Antonio got into trouble were for being involved in minor disorders or participating in petty-thefts. At that time, those affected would go directly to his family to report the events and they assumed the responsibility of meeting the economic cost of the damage in order to allow the young boy and the family to escape from the problems, as Eladia, one of Sebastiana's nieces, explains:

My aunt never tired of looking out for the boy. If someone would come to complain, she would come running to ask for a loan, or would see how she could sort it out, but she would pay them immediately so that he wasn't sent to jail (Eladia, May, 2006).

Indeed, there were a number of occasions on which his mother had to pawn the deeds of the house or sell off something in order to pay for damages only to subsequently seek to recover the costs by means of various contributions from her older sons and daughters. On other occasions he was sent to Mexico City where he would stay with his older brothers in order to try and keep him out of contact with drugs. However, after a number of conflicts and dubious situations, fear led the siblings who had taken responsibility for him to decide to send him back to Tehuantepec.

When the new Bahías de Huatulco tourist resort was being built—one of the largest interventionist projects developed in the region—Antonio moved there and he found a job in the construction industry. For a number of years, the problems he caused seemed to disappear. However, upon his return, after the intervention project had finished, he moved back into his parents' house and it was not long before the difficulties started again. Repeatedly stealing from his mother, spying on his sisters, and his usual unruliness led his mother to ask him to leave the house and he was sent to live on a plot of land acquired by one of his older brothers. Subsequently, he joined a gang of local outlaws who carried out extortion and stole livestock. It was then that he perpetrated one of the most violent attacks on his family, as his sister Emilia remembers:

That afternoon he came home acting strange. He had arrived home drunk before, but that afternoon he seemed particularly off the rails. People had seen him enter and as it was known that he was here, they called the police who at the time were looking for him. When he realized that the police had surrounded the house, he took out a gun and fired a shot through the window. It was then I saw that he had injured one of the officers in the

arm. Then the police opened fire. The children just cried, and my mother tried to calm him down, but imagine, he was like a demon. First he said that he was going to kill my father, but as I put myself in between, he grabbed me and held the gun against my head, dragging me out to the back wall. When the police realized that he was threatening us, they stopped shooting and he took advantage of the situation to hop over the fence and disappear (June, 2006).

Following this event, Antonio managed to remain hidden for a period of time and the family sought to take out a restriction order against their child for their own protection. However, following an altercation with the other members of his gang, Antonio lost his right arm from a shotgun wound. He returned to his parents' home where he was looked after during the period of his recovery, as he explains:

I was asleep when I felt something and I had hardly opened my eyes when I saw my friend with the shotgun. I moved but he managed to shoot me in the arm. I started to run and I didn't stop until I reached San Blas. I asked for help there, but the people sent me to jail. I spent three days there, bleeding and with fever, because nobody would look at me. A neighbour passed by and I asked him to inform my family. That was how they found me and took me to the hospital in Salina Cruz where they amputated my gangrenous arm (Antonio, June, 2006).

Following his hospitalization, Antonio remained free as nobody pressed charges against him. That was when his sister Hermelinda suggested he check into a rehabilitation centre. He refused and the family decided he would not come back to live in his parents' house, instead conceding that he could live in his brother's property again. Antonio ceased to participate in and perpetrate acts of violence until the death of his mother, although he was subsequently imprisoned for theft. After four years without sentence, he was freed from the local prison under the benefits of the Human Rights Commission for the liberation of indigenous prisoners without trial, as Antonio explains:

I was arrested for stealing a gas canister from a food stall, and as nobody wanted to pay what the lady demanded, they sent me to jail. Because first of all she said it was the tank, but then she said that I had also stolen things she had inside the stall. But as she never came to confirm her statement, they just left me there, and nobody worried at home, until Human Rights came to the prison (June, 2006).

Following his release, Antonio was supported by his cousin Eladia, who is seventy-four years old and who employed him and provided him with a place to live for approximately one year. However, upon feeling threatened by his behaviour, above all his spying, she decided to look for a place where he could work. At the time of this research (2006), Antonio, who was then forty-six years old, is working for a family in Juchitán who retrained him in farming and cattle. When they found out about Antonio's past, they decided to offer him an opportunity to change his life.

It should also be mentioned that during my contact with Antonio, he always had an agreeable attitude and whenever someone from his family required help, he always provided it willingly, something which contrasts starkly with the acts of violence he has performed in the past. It also explains why many members of the network he has formed part of are continuously looking for ways to help him.

In this case, it is possible to see a number of intimate violence networks, from those articulated by Roberto, passing through those of Sebastiana, to those of greater amplitude and impact enacted by Antonio. All of them different, in the sense that they are performed by different actors, although they are at the same time interconnected, assembling a set of elements which at times give continuity to intimate violence and at other times produce its break up.

Unruly behaviour, theft, consumption of toxic substances, criminal networks and access to arms, all indicate how violence enacted at a wider scale is translated to the intimate one. Owing to the fact that in Tehuantepec it is more common to receive help from family members than from the authorities when faced with a claim for the payment of damages, if the offended party wishes to deal with it in this way. Moreover, it is clear that the resonances are widespread, passing from humans to humans —from fathers to brothers— and from non-humans to humans, such as arms, the stolen objects, houses used as security for loans, amongst others. It is a long series of translations of one actor to another in a multiple manner.

Similarly this example indicates how certain networks of violence are enacted, and also brings to light the continuous activity in which various actors find themselves involved in order to deactivate these networks, be it in procuring payment or the evasion of responsibility for damages, the disconnection of local networks, making reports, imprisonment, changes of residence, the extension of support, and the establishment of new networks which move actors away from these connections, offering them an alternative. All this activity forms part of

the complex assemblages which are produced or emerge when actors attempt to exorcise and expell themselves from intimate violence networks.

### **Firm, but going nowhere**<sup>160</sup>

Now there are hardly any women who are beaten like in the past; now it is stupid to leave your man. Because, if you do go to the palace and talk, they put your husband in the cells. I was never beaten, *mama*, but my husband humiliated me a number of times (Beatriz, October, 2006).

That is how Beatriz began her account of the problems she has encountered with her husband throughout the course of her life. Originally from the *barrio* of Portillo San Antonio in Tehuantepec, Beatriz was the first of eight children. She was seventy-four years old in 2006 and twenty-seven when she decided to run away with Jesús, her boyfriend, whom she subsequently married (see Chapter 5) and who had come to the Isthmus during the construction of the Benito Juárez dam in Jalapa del Marqués. The couple conceived five times, although only two of the pregnancies resulted in a successful termination. When the dam works where Jesús was working as a site master were completed, their economic situation changed dramatically. Throughout the course of the years which followed, Jesús worked as a labourer alongside his father-in-law, a master bricklayer. However, the physical demand and the variability of work opportunities led him to join a contractor in search of something more in line with his experience and the networks he had created. This was how he came to work for the construction company Méndez, which required him to relocate to the state of Tabasco where the enterprise was involved in the construction of the Malpaso dam.<sup>161</sup> This was the point of inflection at which this family broke up, a situation which is all too commonly heard about in the Isthmus.

At the beginning, the separation could be justified on account of the lack of economic resources required to relocate the complete family

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<sup>160</sup> Remark related to the Mexican soldiers that stay straight, not moving at all, when they march in a parade. The Spanish saying of Beatriz was: *firme, aunque no marchó*.

<sup>161</sup> The construction of the Nezahualcóyotl dam of Malpaso took place between 1958 and 1966 and was the first and most important series of hydroelectric projects carried out in the basin of the Grijalva River as part of the development of south-east Mexico.

from Tehuantepec to Tabasco. However, time, distance and a lack of interest towards Beatriz and their children on the part of Jesús finished with her attempts to reunite the family. After ten years, the couple's period of cohabitation ended definitively.

Shortly after he left, I travelled all the way there to find him, because I loved him and I didn't want to lose him. I remember when I went: he gave me a place to stay, he gave me food, he took out money on loan and he gave it to me, but only while I was there. Afterwards, I realized that he had stopped looking after us, and that was when I went and talked to him. I said: "Don't forget about your children, don't lose them, because tomorrow or the next day, they won't recognize you". But at that time, what did all that mean to him. He was running wild, he was young and he would sleep around with other women. According to him, he didn't even have enough to pay the rent and that's why he said it was best if I stayed here with my mother. And when I went back, he forgot about us completely. He didn't send any money for food, for school, not even for the health of his children, for nothing. I went there ten or fifteen times, but when I worked it out, I realized that I wasn't going to waste any more money I didn't have, because I had to pay for the cost of the journey. "Enough is enough", I said. I didn't go back, and neither did he come looking for me, and so over time, I got used to it (Beatriz, October, 2006).

Beatriz' decision caused great changes in her life. She had always been used to work since she helped her mother raise her seven younger brothers, something which meant that she had worked in a number of jobs before getting married. And so her first reaction upon seeing her self abandoned was to try to find a job. Her best option was to return to work as a cook in one of the local restaurants, where she had previously worked, but her mother, a baker by trade, made her a more favourable offer: to support her making bread.

Even if Beatriz did not suffer from physical violence, the economic and emotional abandonment suffered by the family were also forms of intimate violence which Beatriz had to confront when she was just thirty-seven years old. With the help of her parents, she managed to find somewhere to live and a source of employment which she could carry out while looking after her children. Throughout the first years, as she was only helping her mother with her business by baking bread which her mother would distribute to the local vendors, she received the cost of food and clothes to send her children to school.

It wasn't until she was forty years old when her mother, who was by then quite old, left her in charge of running the business in its entirety. However, that meant that since then, in addition to the business, she has had to take responsibility for the entire family: herself, her two children and both parents. In contrast to her mother she decided to try selling her own bread directly to the public, and she set up a stall in the old plaza, behind the Municipal Palace of Tehuantepec, becoming one of the first people to be given a stall upon completion of what is now the central market. With her work, she has managed not only to support the entire family, but also to finance the university studies of her son and daughter, as well as making improvements to the house, which her parents left her together with the business.

I threw myself in with all my heart. Imagine: making the bread, putting wood in the oven, cleaning the sheets, cooking the food, going to the market to sell, and still having time to come and see my children. Everything came from my work. I would bring three or four litres of cow's milk each day for my children to drink, oranges and papayas from the mountains, eggs, cheese, meat and tomatoes. If there was a special offer, I would snap it up, and if in passing I was offered any instalments, I would buy a pretty dress for my daughter, tennis shoes, everything to clothe them (Beatriz, October, 2006).

The stall at the market, the festivals and the Isthmus customs, the expansion of her contacts, all these elements were assembled for the growth of Beatriz' business, allowing her to achieve great benefits, both material and subjective, as she explains herself:

They saw that I worked like a donkey. Day and night I worked. Sometimes people would order bread for their commitments and I had to make a thousand *tortas* bread, or cook an animal. I made money from everything. For example, I spent a week making bread for the All Saints celebrations, that's right, I was shattered by the end of it, but I had the money. I paid what investment was needed and I had enough left for my obligations. I love my job and that's why I can't complain, because it has allowed my daughter to study, and my son too, and that's not something to be taken lightly. That's for sure, nothing as a favour. Every day I had to go to work, and if I stopped selling in order to attend an invitation, I would take out instalments for my clothes, my *huipil*, my *rabona*, everything. Life is there in the market *mama*, commerce is beautiful. That why I haven't sold my stall and I still have all my stuff to make bread.



It's all there. In a way, that was my husband, *mama*. More than that, because that's what gave me food to eat and that's what kept me going each time (October, 2006).

That was how Beatriz managed to overcome her economic situation, but not the absence and abandonment of her husband towards their children, something which years later would give rise to an unexpected situation for her. During the adolescence and maturity of her son, she had to suffer pressure from him to meet and speak to his father about the reasons for their separation. Beatriz had to turn to various members of her networks in order to re-establish connections with the man who was still her husband, since she had never filed for a divorce or been made aware that he had done so. Taking advantage of the fact that many merchant women travel towards Chiapas and Tabasco, she seized the opportunity to send him a number of messages, as she explains:

Once I sent him a message with a friend of mine. She went to his house and gave him the letter I had sent, but he told her he wouldn't come, because he was sure that it was money we wanted. I just remember that it made me so angry when the woman told me; I thought that at any moment I'd go there and find him myself. That's how it was (October, 2006).

Before she was able to meet with her husband, all the responses she met with were negative, regardless of the medium she tried. On a number of occasions, she also tried to contact him through his family, but also without success, until one day Jesús' sister invited him to attend the Tequisistlan festival, a town located about an hour from Tehuantepec where he came from, and where she had visited him a number of times in the past. That was when Beatriz finally managed to meet him and was able to talk to him about his son's request.

I put up with everything, but when he refused to see his son, I couldn't take that; because here, my poor child would cry and get drunk, and so I had to be quite strict with him. When he got like that, I would stay there in his room with him to make sure he didn't do anything stupid, I thought, because the only thing he would say to me was that he wanted to speak to his father. That was why I had sent him so many letters and nothing in return. But I always go to the festival in his town and he sometimes comes too. And on that occasion, he came. I asked his sister to tell him that I wanted to speak to him. Then he sent her to me to tell me that I would have to go to his table, and although I didn't like that, I went. He felt brave because he was with his wife and another man.

“Good afternoon”, I said to him, because even though I may be illiterate, I treat people with manners. “Why don’t you agree to meet your son?” I asked him. “What I want to tell you is that from what you didn’t give him, he has become an accountant. So your money’s useless, all he wants is to talk to you”, I said to him.

“No, come on, how can you think that, I’ll talk to him, I’d like to meet him too”, he replied to me (Beatriz, October, 2006).

After a series of negotiations by telephone, Beatriz and her son agreed to go to his father’s house in Tabasco, since Jesús decided there was no other way for the meeting to take place. The meeting did not leave Beatriz completely satisfied, since, in addition to the long journey, the conversation did not clear up anyone’s doubts, and having only put faces to names, then they returned to their daily life. Jesús’ disinterest in the life of his children was the final snub suffered by Beatriz and for the first time, the idea occurred to her of taking revenge.

We had to go all the way to his house to meet him, because even for that, he wouldn’t come here. But it wasn’t until after they had already spoken that the penny dropped. In spite of all that had happened, he had dedicated so little time to my son, and that’s why I thought, now you’ll pay for this (Beatriz, October, 2006).

The justifications, the rejection and public humiliation finally drove Beatriz to seek legal advice in order to claim economic compensation from her husband, a recourse she had never considered in more than twenty years. In reality, she did not have a clear idea of what she could do and so she was considerably surprised when she was informed that her legal situation entitled her to part of her husband’s salary, in addition to other welfare benefits. In this manner, she did not stop until she had obtained what she considered fair.

When we returned, I looked for a lawyer who told me that if my marriage certificate was still valid, I could still do something. I gave him all of the papers and he prepared the claim immediately. It was a setback for my husband, because he never thought I would do something like that. Then I found out that he had gone to his town to fight with his sister saying that she had advised me to do it (Beatriz, October, 2006).

These circumstances led Beatriz to face new struggles, including confronting the father of her children, as well as the long series of legal procedures which she was not accustomed to deal with, since she had

never been to school. However, thanks to her determination and the security she had built up during her years as a merchant, as well as the support of her children, Beatriz successfully overcame all of these challenges.

That was the only way he came to look for me. When he came to my house he stayed outside. Would you believe it, he was reluctant to come in. That was when I said: "I know that you went to fight with your sister, but don't you dare go around laying the blame on anybody. Do you know why I did it? Because you didn't stop to speak to me, when I asked you to do so that time at the festival. You did more for your woman than for me. But I'm not your jerk, I'm your wife. Your first wife. And what I'm fighting for just now is nothing compared to what I've already done". He came to ask me to give up my claim to medical services since, because according to him, his wife was very ill. "What do I care if she dies! As if you'll care when I go!" I replied. And so even though he pleaded and stamped his feet, I didn't budge an inch. First of all I got fifteen percent, because that's what the law says here, but as it's forty percent where he lives, we managed to agree on twenty percent with the lawyers. I didn't want to fight any more. My legs are tired and I would have had to go to the court in Oaxaca and do lots of things. That was enough. Now on the twelfth of each month, my payment arrives; in May I get profits and in December part of his bonus. I went after him, I pleaded with him, I fought, and that's why now I say: "Here I am. *Firme, aunque no marche*" [Firm, but going nowhere] (Beatriz, October, 2006).

In this case, it is important to note that although Beatriz suffered a situation of abandonment which associated her with a situation of abuse, this did not paralyze her, nor did she permit the continuity of situations of instability with her husband; on the contrary. Her insertion in networks where women can improve their possibilities for action led her to make the most of these opportunities. The moral support and semi-stability of her parents (including a place to live and the family business), her business, the many festivals, the stall at the market, these all meant that Beatriz was able to exercise the potency of her agency, and the agency of others, in order to resolve her economic and other diverse requirements.

Moreover, Beatriz did not remain immobile in the face of the emotional conflict of her son, when she was presented with a situation which involved triggering networks which situated her in vulnerable situations. Psychological mistreatment became a point of inflection which

motivated her to counteract the series of abuses, or networks of violence, which affected both her and other members of her family.

It should be recognized that her action allowed her to ameliorate the effects of this type of violence whilst assembling networks which allowed her to mobilize other actors in her favour in order to disassemble the network of violence. Such was the case when she linked herself to trade in a region in which this activity has had considerable impact for women, and also her accessing a lawyer with the marriage certificate which allowed her access to rights—as a result of a global phenomenon—that enabled her to counteract disadvantageous situations for women, as is the case with the right to economic support for her.

In this case there are moments in which the man could be considered the victimizer, but he may also be cast as the victim of a situation which, through lack of care, lack of interest and omission, favours the disintegration of the family, leaving those members who form part of his network without shelter, even those who are part of his new family as his actual partner. Without trying to draw a parallel between the situations of Beatriz and her husband, my argument is to draw attention to the fact that the lack of employment opportunities in the local area would seem to form part of networks of violence whose impact, or resonances, is largely unseen since they affect and involve, directly or indirectly, a potentially other network. Yet, the following cases show that there are also other ways to counteract violence and adversity.

### **The Monday meetings**

Each Monday when I accompanied Eladia to the Monday meetings (see inset), where the Catholic women of San Blas Atempa meet and reflect upon biblical passages and everyday life, I was able to perceive that the most frequent concerns of these women include obtaining economic resources and dealing with violence in their homes.

*The Monday meetings*

Every Monday catholic women from San Blas Atempa met in the house of a woman who is in charge at that time to take care of the *crucecita*. The *crucecita* figure emulates the holy cross on which Jesus was crucified and it is around thirty centimetres high. At each Monday meeting it was placed beforehand on a table covered by a white tablecloth in the largest room of the house. It was accompanied with candles and a small wooden box into which the alms of those who attend are deposited. Upon arrival, many of the women also placed *guiecha'chi*<sup>162</sup> flowers threaded in the form of a necklace around the small cross, and having crossed themselves in front of the icon, they proceeded to greet those present. The first women arrived between six and seven o'clock in the evening at the house of the person who had offered to host the weekly *crucecita*.

Shortly after, the two or three coordinators of the meeting arrived and, following a brief greeting, the prayers began. First, there was a general welcome and the distribution of the notes for the service took place, then the Rosary began. Every ten Hail Mary's the guide read from passages of the bible provided by the priest of the Dominican homily beforehand. Then, two other guides would also interpret the passages in line with their previous experiences or those from during the week. Following these interventions, the floor was opened to those attending to allow them to recount their own impressions and experiences. Following this, individual and general interest requests were heard. Finally, there was time to spend together in order to share the food and exchange recent news before returning home.

It was during these ceremonies I listened to a number of testimonies of and recommendations for confronting violent situations experienced by the members of the group. Among the first accounts to be presented were those of the two organizers themselves, such as Rosa, who also sells food and sweets outside a primary school.

I tell them that his word is good, because look! Since I discovered God, my life has changed. At first there were the problems with my husband, because since he started sleeping with another woman, he would look for the slightest pretext with which to start a fight: where was I, why was I not here to look after him and my daughters. But I would reply that I had to work at my stall even just to make enough to pay for food. What could I do? Then my sister Margarita invited me along and I began to go to the church to avoid fighting with him. But

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<sup>162</sup> The flowers are often yellow with white, strong pink with white rays, and pale pink. They are also used to make collars for greeting people and religious icons.

things got worse, because now we come and spend time here, we arrive home late. That was when he began to insult me. He would lock the door of the house and stop my daughters from opening it, and so I had to jump over one side of the wall. The last times, he even raised his hand to me, but as my daughters got involved and complained to him about these things, he ended up going to live with the other woman. Nearly a year has gone by, but with the help of God I'm going step by step. Of course, sometimes I feel bad. I want to know if he'll come back. But just by coming here and talking about the word of God, it soothes my heart. (Rosa, May, 2006).

I also heard from Petrona, a *totopo* trader. One day she arrived late because she had been fighting with her husband, as she herself explained to those present.

Well, let's see if you'll believe my word! Since I have been with Christ, the results are clear to me. I get up at five in the morning and immediately go to pray at my altar. I thank Jesus for another day. After that I go to see what we'll have for breakfast, even if it's just a *tortilla* and a cup of coffee. That's when the temptation comes. Because I hear my husband mouthing off; *que bonita la tiene* [ironic remark related to his aggressive way of talking [How beautiful he has it]]. Then I start to feel bad and we start to fight. That's how it was every day. Now though, I ask Jesus to give me peace. When he starts to talk, I sometimes ask the Lord to give me the strength of Samson, not so I can speak to my husband, but so I can stand up to him and give him one [she makes a punching gesture], so that he shuts up. Peace enters into my heart and I let him speak, and I just do this [she makes an insulting gesture] to him. Now I've arrived here annoyed because I stopped talking to that man [my husband], but when I hear the word of God, peace is with me. That's why I don't miss it for nothing, because many ask me why I waste my time here, if all these prayers are good for nothing. But I see the results (Petrona, July, 2006).

On other occasions, the women have expressed concern at this type of situation affecting their loved ones, above all their daughters, such as the case of *Na Eloisa*.

I also have a *marido aparato* [lacy and irresponsible husband], but I'm not going to go around telling people in order to ashamed him. I know myself the type of husband I've got and I try not to talk about it so as the people won't talk either. But the good thing he has is that he likes I come here, when he speaks to me

it gives me peace, just as when I'm here, as you were saying just now. Because I have a daughter whose husband beats her and one time I couldn't bear to see her and her children in that situation any longer. That was when I said to my husband that I would go and sort the man out myself, even if I went to jail. I told him not to come and visit me, because I would pay for what I was going to do. I told him to forget me, to leave me there. That's when he had a word and told me not to put myself in danger, that they would sort it out. But I swear to God, I'm fed up with it all (Eloisa, September, 2006).

In many cases it would seem that the women exhibit passive behaviour in the face of intimate violence, on account of not reporting incidents, for trying to appease or tolerate their aggressor, for resisting, or for not resorting to self defence. However, on many occasions, their actions will be dependent on the viable or possible networks they manage to materialize in each case, since it should not be forgotten that counteracting intimate violence tends to be limited by other actions as multiple and diverse as the ones that lead to the violence taking place.

However, it should also be pointed out that the mere act of sharing experiences constitutes acknowledgement of an undesirable situation which should be denounced. Indeed, at no point did I detect these situations to be a cause of shame or pain for the women; instead they provoked courage and indignation and, as in the case of Petrona, a certain spirit with which to physically challenge her aggressor. Thus it would seem that women do not necessarily have a propensity to become victims, in spite of the fact that they try to avoid physical confrontations.

Here words are revealed as another of the many ways in which intimate violence is manifested; as a force that bestows meaning and significance upon actions, as recognized by Latour: "Are words forces? Are they capable of fighting, revolving, betraying, playing, or killing? Yes indeed, like all materials, they may resist or given away" (Latour, 1988c: 155). Words can be an extremely powerful weapon both in the articulation of networks of violence and in the endeavours to disassociate them, even though on many occasions they often pass into the background.

The scope of the testimonies also shows how intimate violence is doubtlessly a possibility of everyday life in Tehuantepec. Yet whilst recognizing the existence of violence does not necessarily imply any visible action against it, I believe that by exposing oneself and connecting with other women, an openness to listen coupled with a willingness to provide evidence of the phenomenon, contributes to the identification of situations which are often shared with other women and which are not

necessarily perceived as acts of violence, precisely on account of its diversity. Moreover, the meetings contribute to the establishment of networks which, depending on the situation and morality in question, contribute to counteracting these networks of violence. In other words, they provide clarification and an opportunity to share events on the doorstep with their neighbour, in the neighbourhood, in the town.

In this respect, it seems important to reiterate that intimate violence does not form part of isolated events. Nor is it an antagonistic condition which contravenes the existence of a matriarchy; instead it forms a part of a network which involves various actors and specific contexts in the face of which the supposed matriarchy and intimate violence become extreme points in a much more complex continuum. But what happens when certain forms of counteracting fail?

### **Failed acts**

One afternoon at the beginning of November in 2008, when I had already completed my fieldwork and I was writing the thesis draft in the Netherlands, I received news from Tehuantepec informing me that David (Chapter 6) had been killed. Clearly, I was surprised. Only two months before, we had been chatting in his new *cantina* where I also met his partner. At the beginning of February of 2009 I had to return to Tehuantepec, for my grandfather's burial, and it was then when I got properly informed about David's murder.

The couple had met each other four years ago when David employed this thirty-four year old man as a waiter. A year passed, during which time the men became partners, although the existence of the relationship did not go beyond the four walls of the *cantina*, where David also had his home. For more than thirty years the *cantina* had been David's livelihood and node in his networks. During my last meeting with him in August of 2008, we had been discussing the various forms in which he kept order in a place in which situations of violence and conflict can arise all too easily.

It's all about keeping an eye on what's going on. My customers know that nothing can happen here. I always tell my girls not to take anything that belongs to the customers, that I won't allow them to damage my image for a wallet or a mobile phone; I'm full of these items as a bail in order to cover the bills of clients. Imagine, it's me who loses out if someone steals something, because those people never come back. At any rate, something always happens: someone is rowdy, or doesn't want to pay. It's



better if they just go and I sort it out with them after, when their judgement isn't impaired (David, August, 2008).

David was a stocky man, and few people dared to confront him, because on top of that, many of the customers were also his friends, making it relatively easy for him to diffuse situations of conflict, as one of his customers explained:

Once, some guys in the *cantina* started to quarrel. When David saw that a number of them wanted to start a fight, he stood in between and told them that any problem with his customers was also a problem with him. Then they had no choice but to back down because if they didn't, they'd be up against the whole *cantina*.

In his relationship with his partner however, David experienced intimate violence. On a number of occasions his brothers would notice signs that he had been beaten, but David limited himself to denying that it had been carried out by his partner, claiming that the marks had been caused by a fall or a fight at the *cantina*. This meant that even if his family had their suspicions, they never had the chance to intervene, insofar as David preferred to keep them at a distance from his intimate life, as his younger brother, known as Yeyo, explains:

Once, he came here wearing sunglasses. When we asked him what had happened, if that guy was beating him or what, he only said that no, he hadn't hit him, that he had walked into a door. I didn't believe him, but he didn't let anyone get involved (Yeyo, February, 2009).

After he was murdered, some of the women who worked for him confirmed the attacks inflicted on him by his partner. These would occur each time David refused to give him money, meaning that he was careful to give his partner as little as possible to ensure he did not turn violent. This came to symbolize a routine throughout the course of the three years they were together. But this routine was to end abruptly in the early hours of the morning of September 16, 2009.

David had taken advantage of the celebrations on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September, the anniversary of Mexican independence, in order to set up a stall selling refreshments and beer at the central plaza, where the representation of the *Grito de Independencia* (Cry of Independence) would take place. From eleven o'clock that night the plaza was packed and the demand for drinks exceeded David's expectations, forcing him to seek the help of his brother Yeyo and his helper, nicknamed Chato. The sales

reached the point that David had to return to the *cantina* in order to restock the stall. At the end of the night, he confided in his brother that the sales had made ten thousand pesos profit (one thousand dollars approximately).

David returned to the *cantina*, accompanied by Chato at around two o'clock in the morning in order to put away the utensils from the stall. Having done so, both decided to share a drink. At that moment, David's partner arrived, but on this occasion he was accompanied by a friend. Both men asked David for some drinks and began to drink while David and Chato talked at another table. That night, the *cantina* was not open to the public and as such, there were only the four men and the woman who was working for David at that time.

Chato stayed until daybreak as David had confessed him that he was worried that his partner would attack him. Chato left at six o'clock in the morning, when he and David thought the danger had passed. David decided to go to the plaza in order to look for breakfast for his partner and the friend who was with him. It was at around seven o'clock in the morning when one of David's nephews saw him outside the *cantina*, and that was the last time he was seen alive.

The murder was reported to the police by an anonymous call placed by a woman but when they arrived at the *cantina* there was nobody to be found inside. The place had been ransacked in its totality making it clear that all valuable items had been removed. David's body lay below the hammock where he often rested, showing signs of excessive violence,<sup>163</sup> as one of his older sisters who came to identify David remembers:

If you had seen how they left my brother's body, you wouldn't believe it. The brutality with which they killed him hurt me a lot. He was beaten, bitten, his nose and his ribs were fractured. His whole body was bruised, his legs, his arms, well everything, his whole body. (Augusta, February, 2009)

The indignation of those close to David did not allow them to wait, and upon seeing how the local authorities disposed of the case under the justification that a murder is a federal matter, they did not hesitate to look for David's partner. Following another series of violent actions, his partner confessed to have carried out the crime when David refused to

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<sup>163</sup> This situation coincides with records which report the presence of excessive violence in attacks directed towards homosexuals, which do not necessarily correspond to resistance by the victim and which require further study. See (Granados & Delgado, 2008).

hand over the revenues of that night. The man was finally freed from the lynch mob thanks to the intervention of his mother, since the police never arrived at the scene.

David's body was guarded throughout the night and there were considerable shows of support to the family. Members of his neighbourhood, ex-workers, friends, members of the homosexual community, as well as those who were connected to his family network in some way, were all present. The following day, a crowd gathered in the temple and the atrium of the church where, in conformance with local customs, the funeral mass took place and David's body was lowered into a tomb in the cemetery of the *barrio* that saw him grow up. It should be pointed out that neither the local or federal authorities have shown signs of taking the case any further.

David's murder makes clear that intimate violence is not only experienced by women, and that murder is another of the possible outcomes. David's silence about earlier violence committed to him created the conditions for his vulnerability, a situation commonly found in cases where men are involved as victims, as has been found by studies dealing with this issue (Anderson, 1997: 665-667; Flynn, 1990: 196). Prejudice, fear and a homophobic response or legal limitations all contribute to make violence among homosexuals one of the least reported practices with respect to intimate violence (Russell *et al.*, 2009: 146).

When combined with the poor or nonexistent integration of networks where unconventional situations —such as mistreatment and violence in homosexual relationships— can resonate, this can lead to fatal outcomes. Thus there is a requirement to contemplate intimate violence as part of wider articulations, including those of a legal and institutional character, as well as help associations. Even though, in theory homosexuals are integrated into Isthmus societies in an exceptional manner, in practice it is often the case that they do not have the same guarantees with respect to matters related to intimate violence. Hence, it would seem that in Tehuantepec there is a punitive conduct for certain practices, while for many others a situation of invisibility and underestimation predominates. Recognition of this fact becomes indispensable in order to act on the consequences. In this case the ineffectiveness of David's strategies to escape from a situation of conflict is clear, such as constantly returning to his partner, giving in to his demands for money and for allowing the situation to remain cloaked in silence.

## Conclusion

There can be no doubt that intimate violence forms part of everyday life in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and in many cases it is often linked to partners. Moreover, the results of my fieldwork seem to affirm that intimate violence is performed by a series of heterogeneous, dynamic and multiple actors, or rather, actors which form part of complex assemblages that cannot be reduced to the mere incidence of violent attacks. The tolerance of violent behaviour, access to arms, failure to report events, and even words, are all factors which contribute to the assembly of these networks of violence.

Characteristics such as gender, context, culture, age, economic conditions, levels of education, the consumption of alcohol and toxic substances, which may or may not be present in all of the cases, doubtlessly also form part of the elements which allow the violence to take place. In this respect, it is extremely difficult to value the significance of each of these elements individually, and thus it becomes important to be able to conceive of intimate violence as a network. Such an approach leads us to consider intimate violence as a possibility which the actors may encounter in their everyday lives in Tehuantepec, instead of being an abnormal situation.

Instead of only making women visible as victims, an approach which leads one to agree with perspectives of victimization towards women, it is clear that the identification of networks of intimate violence can be affected by other networks. That is to say, there is a group of diverse, multiple and heterogeneous actors, who enact the reconfiguration of their spaces and their own practices in order to attempt to dismantle those networks of intimate violence. This evidence lead me to identify the interactive link between agency and violence; especially if we are talking about actors who seek the possibility of transforming and containing these types of practices in their everyday life, as explained by Long.<sup>164</sup>

The analysis of power processes should not therefore be restricted to an understanding of how social constraints and access to resources shape social action. Nor should it lead to the description of rigid hierarchical categories and hegemonic ideologies that 'oppress passive victims'. Standing back from the tendency to empathise ideologically with these hapless victims, one should instead, explore the extent to which specific actors perceive themselves capable of manoeuvring within given

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<sup>164</sup> See also the notion of 'space for change' (Long, 1984).

contexts or networks and develop strategies for doing so (Long, 2001: 184).

Perspectives of victimization lose their thrust not because they are unable to be consolidated as a homogeneous body, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, but because they lose sight of the multiple, heterogeneous and dynamic articulations which create the conditions for the assemble of intimate violence, as well as others which attempt to disarticulate them, something which become visible here trough by the experiences of local actors. Various notions from Actor Network Theory are relevant here: agency,<sup>165</sup> strength,<sup>166</sup> and weaknesses<sup>167</sup> can account for the assemblages enacted by the actors, be they; real, possible or imaginary.

No actant is so weak that it cannot enlist another. Then the two join together and become one for a third actant, which they can therefore move more easily. An eddy is formed, and it grows by becoming many others (Latour, 1988c: 159).

Counteracting intimate violence involves taking into account people's experiences of the problems they face, as well as their actions towards enacting safety. By trial and error, the actors outline possibilities and set scenes for action. Because these actors are not isolated entities, as is implied from perspectives of victimization, but are instead capable of interacting and even fusing with the fear and violence surrounding them.

Here it is vital to acknowledge that the multiplicity of intimate violence does not only involve what can be described as 'other risk factors' but to the various connections which make it possible and which do not always occur in a linear and continuous form, but which can, and often do occur at different moments and involve a chain of actors, some visible, and others less so, but which overlap in a dynamic and unpredictable manner for those affected.

It is clear that there is a link between the environment and intimate violence (Jones, 2004; Koskela, 1999), although in my opinion, this cannot be as determined and determining situation, both for victims and victimizers, but as part of a collection of practices which the actors

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<sup>165</sup> The traceable associations that take into account the relative share of mediators over intermediaries (Latour, 2005: 652-662).

<sup>166</sup> An actant or actor can gain strength only by associating with others (Latour, 1988c: 160).

<sup>167</sup> It relates to what will resist and what will not resist, a notion that tries to capture the mutable character between "weakness" and "forces", in a sense, that which is seen as weakness could become a force (Latour, 1988c: 155).

succeed in putting in motion. There is no doubt that intimate violence is comprised of a wide spectrum of modalities that include situations which do not involve physical attacks but which nonetheless compromise the welfare of one or all of the family members. In some cases, such as that of Beatriz, violence may be harder to perceive, although it is no less intense. But even here, it is important to recognize the ways in which intimate violence impacts on the actors' lives.

Moreover, many forms and manifestations of intimate violence, or networks, can be found, as well as their effects or resonances, but at the same time there are many different ways of enacting the disarticulation and avoidance of intimate violence in a specific manner, such as the cases of Beatriz and Cirenía, alongside with others who were not fortunate enough to achieve this goal, as was the case with David. Here I would like to stress the importance of placing the emphasis on the building of networks, because an active actor incorporates or acquires more actors and more connections that allow him to gain knowledge of self-care, taking elements from the world which surrounds him or her and sometimes involves resorting to solutions such as running away, legal frameworks, political aid, and pleas and prayers.

The cases have illustrated that action does not always result in the fulfilment of desires or wishes and certain things do not return to the original state. Indeed, as Latour explains: "Everything is still at stake. However, since many players are trying to make the game irreversible and doing everything they can to ensure that everything is not equally possible, the game is over" (Latour, 1988a: 160). To counteract intimate violence is to talk of the production of possibilities; it is to talk of the movements of the actors, forgetting the costs which may arise.

Thus, it is important to recognize the potential of a network, in the sense that an actor can be associated with many others: "That is why it [the network] is able to enrol other actors and borrow their support more easily" (Latour, 1988a: 174). Following this line of argument, intimate violence is just one consequence of an intense activity with multiple associations. Each situation sketched out by the actors were taken in relation to the possible choices made by the actors themselves in given contexts and specific situations, as opposed to those performed by the actors which contribute to the production of networks of intimate violence.



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Coconut harvest





## **Conclusions: The traceabled associations of human sexuality in Tehuantepec**

This research began by studying the discontinuities between the representations and discourses about the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the local actor's practices, especially those referring to the region as focal point for development, a singular prehispanic culture, the cradle of a matriarchy and an active political arena; which is unprecedented in other parts of Mexico.

When trying to articulate these discontinuities, I came to realize that I could achieve this by using various issues related to human sexuality; especially after having gone through some of the most common representations of the women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and what I had experienced and discovered during my initial fieldwork in 2006-2008 in one of its communities. So began the search process of soaking up the daily life in Tehuantepec, as I went along involving myself with and learning from each and every one of the actors I worked with. Some make their presence known in these pages whilst others still reside out of sight in the inkwell.

One of the first situations identified in this thesis was the existence of statements concerning the region and its inhabitants, above all the women which were identified at various points during my fieldwork and in researching the topic. Some of these were taken up to deconstruct concepts, analytical categories, and modes of ordering associated with human sexuality in Tehuantepec.

The information gathered is presented in a narrative form and condensed in case studies which attempt to give evidence of the various connections and complexities which derive from the life histories (Chapter 2). Thus, through the deconstruction of statements about Zapotec culture, matriarchy, modernization, and resistance which have tended to be foreground I tried to make visible the existence of other

realities produced in the daily lives of the actors which, in spite of being present, are usually seen as or kept in the background.

Beauty, gendered spatialities, sexual life, motherhood, and intimate violence highlight different issues in which elements of a multiple, heterogeneous, and dynamic character interfere one with each other. When I mention these other realities, I do not attempt to imply that they have never been mentioned or explored before, but rather that in most of the cases they have been considered from a deterministic viewpoint, as autonomous entities, or even as not applicable to Zapotec societies on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Whereas, in an almost paradoxical way, the situations described in this study appear to be common to many of those who inhabit or have inhabited the Isthmus.

The five topics addressed in the chapters of this thesis lead to the identification of associations, resonances and contexts of change as a product or consequence of those interactions and interferences among the actors that constitute the social, as is recognized in Mol and Law's plural notion of complexities in practices (Chapter 2). That is to say, as an effect of creating and recreating practices in new and different ways, which can also contribute to giving shape to processes of continuity, resilience or break up in relation to the local scenarios or other scenarios in which they might be produced, without implying that such states are permanent, let alone absolute (Mol & Law, 2002).

It is precisely due to the acknowledgment of the actors' agency whose practices are sometimes manifest and sometimes hidden, that one can see them as the protagonists of the action.. Nonetheless, they form part of the complexities that are produced in the everyday life and which in turn form part of wider and connected settings. For this reason, the exploration of human sexuality in Tehuantepec presented here does not base itself on discovering the philosopher's stone or on unveiling the mystery that surrounds the Isthmus region; its culture or the Zapotec society by characterizing it as an 'otherness'. Rather, it is based precisely on becoming engaged with the different and not always self evident ways the actors assemble difference.

### **Changing referents; bringing the research problem into focus**

When I was accepted to carry out my doctoral studies at the Chair group of Rural Development Sociology at Wageningen University in 2005, I had the opportunity to combine my personal interest in carrying out a piece of research in Tehuantepec with my academic training and the practical and reflexive experiences that are involved writing a PhD thesis.

Little by little, reading and discussing academic worries with my colleagues, members of staff, the RDS professor, and above all my supervisor, I came to notice the existence of oversimplifications which are the driving force behind the dichotomies, the linear thinking, and the fixed structures that provide a backdrop to scholarly endeavour, in fact what Latour calls ‘irreductions’ (Chapter 2). I myself had used them as a reference point when I started to focus upon the everyday life and the different situations that occurred in Tehuantepec (Introduction).

I refer here to the representations of the Isthmus communities which tend to reduce the isthmus culture to the Zapotec, the matriarchy, the economic potential, and the constant struggle to maintain their livelihoods and lifeworlds. Such statements have more than once been characterised the rather homogeneous, romantic, superficial, and exotic views about the region and its inhabitants. It was my intention to leave aside the peculiar character of the region in order to make visible the many other specificities that contribute to make it “distinctive and fascinating”, as Alberto Ruy Sánchez (2000: 6) said in reference to its women.

Abandoning the comfort of these oversimplifications and disentangling the commonly held image of the Zapotec peoples of the Isthmus was no easy task; in fact it was one of the first obstacles I faced. Tempting as it was to fall into the trap of employing the stereotypes or trying to demystify them, I was led to ask myself new questions and to endeavour to find the answers in the everyday lives of the actors themselves.

For this purpose it was necessary to go beyond traditionalistic notions related to development, gender and the social, above all those that tie the actors to any kind of determinism, being of a biological, economic, social or cultural sort. The post-structuralist feminism, the Actor Oriented Approach and The Actor Network Theory offered me the theoretical-epistemological trails to focus my attention on the practices enacted by the actors (Chapter 2).

The research took shape covering five aspects associated with human sexuality: beauty, gendered spatialities, sexual life, motherhood, and intimate violence. The deconstruction of these topics invites to be sensitive to complexity, that is, to acknowledge their dynamic, multiple and heterogeneous character. These topics allowed me to open my eyes—both metaphorically and literally—to the existence of other realities, in other words to a new way of thinking where the existence of more than one world, more than one context, more than one intervention, more than

one culture are possible. It is worth clarifying that this does not consist of looking at these pluralities as isolated entities but by making sense of a set of intertwined, overlapping and coexisting worlds; placing special attention on how they hold together (Mol & Law, 2002).

The cases described evoke similarities, but also differences that result from the practices related to human sexuality in Tehuantepec. As it has been shown through this work on Tehuantepec it is not possible to speak of sexuality as a singularity; this is one of the main issues which are shown through this study. The themes researched illustrate the existence of more than one beauty, of more than one way of enacting spatialities, of experiencing sexual life, of enacting motherhood, and of counteracting intimate violence.

Involving oneself in the uncertainty of what escapes from the paradigm, the episteme to gain consciousness appears to be relatively simple, especially if one acknowledges that the world is complex (Chapter 2). It invites one to explore new references in order to rethink categories, modes of ordering, contexts and problematic situations with which to cover the interaction of the human, especially with the non human. I must admit that this study does not capture human sexuality as a totality, nor does it give a complete overview of the sexual practices and their associations in Tehuantepec. Thus my study only partially evokes scenes and situations that can be shared by some and objected by others leaving room for further investigation.

### **Heterogeneity, dynamics and multiplicity in traceable associations**

Heterogeneity, dynamics and multiplicity are the more recurrent aspects throughout this study. The production of human differences which permeates diverse scales of the regional and community life on the Isthmus, such as ethnicity, gender, politics, economics, spatial and territorial appropriation, age, gender and identification, among many others was the starting point for attempting to make noticeable wider series of heterogeneities, including those associated with the non human. Along this line the following observations came to my mind.

The importance of the materialities in the production of differences is revealed in the way in which the actors articulate objects, customs, and contexts, as mediators or intermediaries in the enactment of the different beauties. Only thus can we see the stereotype of Isthmus beauty, the famous Tehuana, as an effect, or as part of a set of a wider group of interconnected actors and not merely as the creation of an icon (Chapter 3).

The spatial heterogeneity is the result of multiple juxtapositions of actors, places, contexts, material and subjective needs, such as providing for a household and carrying out a *mayordomía* that become entangled day by day. This implies a form of appropriation of the space, or rather spaces that in practice are unstable and without fixed boundaries, giving way at the same time to multiple architectures and modes of ordering (Chapter 4).

The assembly of heterogeneous elements like discourses, strategies and justifications associated with courtship, marriage, pleasure and complying with Isthmus norms and traditions give form to a set of multiple and heterogeneous sexual life and love practices situated in specific moments, contexts and spaces which get connected and disconnected to the collective imaginary about human sexuality in the Zapotec world (Chapter 5).

The set of relations to motherhood in the local context lets us glimpse at complex scenes where such elements as local knowledge, medical practices, life styles, desires and imaginings, among others, come into play; all of which come together in producing multiple experiences of the ways of enacting or articulating motherhood in Tehuantepec, despite the strong tendency to homologise medical procedures, in front of the lack of support and the absence of legal guidelines to cover the broad spectrum of situations that take place at the local level; such as home births and abortions, among others (Chapter 6).

The topic of intimate violence reveals the formation and disentanglement of networks in which diverse elements of heterogeneous and multiple characters become indispensable in the actors' actions that are involved in this kind of networks. The change of residence, the search for economic security, the embrace of justice, the expansion of associations, the physical confrontation itself, the expenditures, the prayers to the Divine, among other factors are what can make a difference to counteract domestic violence (Chapter 7).

In this sense, recognizing heterogeneity leads to a sensitivity to what Latour calls 'the proliferation of hybrids' in contemporary societies (Latour, 1993: 1). As can be seen throughout the issues discussed in this study, the diversity of the actors' practices does not lead to the production of clear images, let alone fixed or static images. It is as if they generate a proliferation of divergent, slightly unstable forms which are, moreover, constantly changing and transforming themselves.

### **Links to human sexuality in Tehuantepec**

This study has also been concerned with the production and visibility of interferences or the relational character of actors. This line of thinking has been an important element in the attempt to find paths that did not lead to the commonplaces or to other elements that are taken as a given in Tehuantepec.

In this sense, this work seeks to capture as many ramifications or effects of a given action as possible. Through the capturing of the specificity of a network it is feasible to recognise some of the connections and elements which assemble it and, at the same time, it is also possible to recognise the elements that provide it with a relative solidity and continuity, as well as those elements which can restrict its flux. Similar paths can be seen in each of the findings related to Isthmus sexuality throughout this thesis.

Enacting beauty has produced icons, symbols, collective imaginaries and an ample market and a whole economy around the stereotype of the *tehuana* beauty. Its manifestations become affected by inside and outside elements, such as the contacts with external stereotypes of beauty through migration, the international fashion trade and its attempt to standardize patterns of beauty. All these have had an effect on the production of the various beauties in Tehuantepec. Enacting beauty has likewise shown us some of the connections to specific cultural practices and scenarios in which the enactments of the different beauties tend to occur, such as everyday life, local fiestas, disco nights, *velas*, *barrio* festivities, events in town or cultural centres, even an Isthmus congregation at the Temple of Our Lady of Guadalupe, in México City (Chapter 3).

While searching for some of the connections between spatiality and gender in a domestic network, an entanglement of distinct actors, scenarios, and dynamics was found to be present at the local level. This is the case of the moving from job to job, by and large due to the implementation of macro and micro projects in different periods of time as a part of the effort to spur development and modernization on the Isthmus. It is also the case for other spaces that interfered and intertwined with the previous ones, and where the actors' practices are enacted, such as the market where the women trade, the *centros cervecedores* (beer halls), the cantinas, the schools, the trade union shops, the entertainment centres, to mention just a few. These entanglements bear witness to constant changes and resignifications of the orders or architectures of the network which are connected to the fluctuations and instability of the job market, the

regional ups and downs, the temporality of welfare, the human fluidity, and their effects on the livelihoods and lifeworlds (Chapter 4).

Sexual customs and practices are connected with scenarios in which actors relate to feelings, leisure, and pleasure in everyday life. Among these are parties, parks, the workplace, honeymoons, and furtive rendezvous in hotels. Our line of inquiry was also linked to the production of different norms; the assemblage of an economy related to traditional customs; the existence of unclear differences between Zapotec and non-Zapotec practices; the human mobility to and from the region, the hybridity of practices, the unveiling of the changing significance of the feminine virtue, the importance of rumour, discourses, and the media, and the discontinuities between knowledge and the use of contraception among actors' practices in relation to sex (Chapter 5).

The diverse practices centred on human reproduction have wide ranging ramifications. In this sense, this study exposes the connections that make possible the production of practical and normative changes surrounding the birth of and the bringing up of a child, such as the search for materialities —house, savings, etcetera—, the more or less strict ways of carrying out mores and normativities, like marriage in case of an unexpected pregnancy, the secrecy of abortions and adoptions, even the norms related with the shape of the bodies themselves. Indeed, all of which contribute to gain a certain stability of the networks of motherhood. Based on the identification of these changes, it was possible to evoke another series of connections such as those related to the reproductive practices of the actors, to medical knowledge, to the health system and gynecology-obstetrical care, and to national and global policies on reproduction. The relevance of midwives in the health of mother and child, as well as controversial situations over adoption and abortions also form part of these possible connections that surround what was evoked here as the battlefields of human reproduction (Chapter 6).

Evidence shows that intimate violence is a network that evokes a significant multiplicity of elements; where indifference, the arms and drug markets, alcohol abuse, relocation of employment opportunities, and many other heterogeneous elements may also be involved. The main focus of the argument here was the varying ways of counteracting it, the other assemblages or links which lead to the disarticulation of these networks of intimate violence, such as solidarity among individuals, participation in wider collectives, resorting to the justice system, to law enforcement cadres. Unfortunately, other connections which do not allow breaking up intimate violence networks, such as silence, coercion,



blackmail, prejudice, and institutional bureaucracy were also evident (Chapter 7).

### **The force of traceable associations**

Recognizing the constitution of networks around diverse practices related to human sexuality in Tehuantepec has allowed me to base action and change in the actors' experiences and to situate the action, the change and the transformation of the everyday life of the actors. This focus has been a great tool for situating the production of differences in the Isthmus communities. From the evidence collected in the field it was possible to see that these differences form part of something more complex than what is usually attributed to the intrinsic characteristics of the individual, such as human sexuality, but which appear to be the product of the interferences that affect actors practices in their attempts to become part of or take part in the networks that are constantly assembled locally and connected to the global. The preceding remarks lead me to reflect on the ways networks become sufficiently vigorous to make noticeable and traceable how everything is around them.

The different Isthmus beauties show the strength of the Tehuana, the modern woman, the *muxe*' and the male images; through the liveliness of their presence in the local and other arenas, the relative fluidity to perform one or several images, the flexibility allowed to introduce slighter or bigger changes –including those related with the body itself (Chapter 3).

The strength of the spatialities is noteworthy when we can refer to it as something fluid and uncertain, especially when the boundaries that supposedly determine the actions intertwine and crosscut in an unexpected manner or when the actors decide to explore different possibilities of insertion and action, that become reinforced in the transformation of the plethora of meanings, moralities and symbolisms related to those spaces (Chapter 4).

Recognising the force of sexual practices does not seem odd at least, but here it is not linked to the force of an instinct nor to any other sort of determinism but to a series of practices that allow faithful allies, identifications, to be accepted by the potential lover and the production of different normativities so that others participate in giving shape and solidity to the network as long as it lasts (Chapter 5).

The strength of motherhood does not seem to arise from its apparent solidity and its unconditional character associated with nature, but rather from the set of inconsistencies and struggles the actors face in

shaping pregnancy, childbirth, bringing up children, care, desires, and other associations of motherhood (Chapter 6).

The strength of the actions around counteracting intimate violence becomes evident when every assembly, however small or invisible it may be, has its own force and potency to counteract networks of intimate violence, however strong or invincible they may appear. This situation is reflected in the build up of experiences which by trial and error have had a moral, emotional, and material effect (Chapter 7).

The research carried out in Tehuantepec allowed me to identify those details which make it possible to distinguish the wide spectrum of changes, comings and goings and critical events which the actors face in their everyday lives, as well as the alliances, room for manoeuvre and constant innovations they produce. It is necessary to remember here that the creation of associations does not occur suddenly, or by spontaneous generation. They are assembled little by little, by trial and error, where actors set and reset their actions towards goals that are sometimes clear and sometimes rather confused and fuzzy.

Latour recognizes this when he refers to a network: “as it associates elements together, every actor has a choice: to extend further, risking dissidence and dissociation, or to reinforce consistency and durability, but not go too far” (1988c: 198).

It is precisely the conjunction of agencies in motion, as simple or slight as these may be, or seem to be, which maps out its own way to hold together and thus to find its own stability, consistency and force. The resulting heterogeneous, dynamic, multifaceted and multiplex networks are at the same time fragile, disperse, unstable and unpredictable, which is why their articulations require constant actions on the part of their entities and actors which constitutes them.

### **Answering the research questions**

In this research I looked for a way to reflect on the multiple connections involved in human sexuality in a simple way. The main research question then was framed as: How is human sexuality enacted in Tehuantepec? The other questions, seeking to capture the complexity of the practices related to human sexuality, following this question were: a) How are those enacted practices assembled? b) How is the ontology of these associations? c) How is the order they produce? d) How is the agency of these associations?

*How are those enacted practices assembled?*

Human sexuality, in any of its meanings, whether as an impulse, an act, a series of practices and behaviours, an identity, a set of orientations, stances and desires (Chapter 2), is not something fictitious, nor does it exist in isolation; rather it is something that is interwoven every day, a labour, an activity, a product of complexities that intertwine the heterogeneous, the dynamic and the multiple; in sum a network.

The mystery, if we want to call it like that, to the practices of human sexuality in Tehuantepec resides in the constant action that demands the assembly of networks; be it to form part of it or to relate to it. Discourses, bodies, objects, natures, symbolisms, cultural inscriptions, among others, interact and are enacted in a localized, specific and differentiated way, as part of a conjunction of realities. Here we face one of the greatest challenges.

Human sexuality, as a presence, reveals many of its interactions, as can be seen in the continual representation of the women of the Isthmus, the Tehuana, while others often pass unnoticed leaving the door open, paradoxically, to bring them out and make them visible.

*How is the ontology of these associations?*

This study has kept insisting on the heterogeneity that constitutes human sexuality in Tehuantepec, which leads us to reflect on the ontology of these connections. For this reflection it is necessary to consider the radical change proposed by the ANT about the meaning of the term ontology, commonly defined as: "... the part of philosophy concerned with what there *is* and what there could be" (Law, 2004b: 23, 162). The way ANT theory uses this term is concerned with "what there is, with what reality out-there is composed of" (ibid.). By following this argument I was able to answer this question.

The case studies presented show how the connections made are not constrained by exclusive notions of the sexual, the human, the social, the cultural, and the economic; in short to those referents that are held as unique and pure. Instead I ran into connections that were difficult to separate, that overlapped in many ways, that were interconnected, and in this form were enacted by the actors.

This finding leads me to agree with the production of 'hybrids' in relation to human sexuality, which I understand as the result of those assemblies that produce difference, without concern of the order that might result. In other words, the production of hybrids refers to the

proliferation of the fluid, the impure, the undefined, the elusive (Latour, 1993).

*How is the order these associations produced?*

The network dynamics constituted around human sexuality is another of the elements that has been pointed out on several occasions. However, I would like to stress that it has not been possible to recognize the existence of a single structure which determines the behaviour of the individuals. Nor has there been any intention to suggest the inexistence of any rules, laws or commands. In fact, many orders of different types and scales have been followed, and each of them can take place through the action, stability and force acquired in relation to others.

The way of incorporating an image, of participating in the scenarios, of trying to accomplish the sexual normative, of procuring the wellbeing of an infant, and of trying to find ways to escape from intimate violence, develop faithful allies, regularities, arrangements, ways of being and doing things that result unavoidable when someone or something form or take part of a network of human sexuality.

*How is the agency of these associations?*

The various themes on human sexuality have revealed the intense flow of movements produced by the actors in everyday life. Sometimes these dynamics may appear subtle and blatant whilst others strong, independent and definitive. The latter are the ones most feasible for being represented and becoming commonplace, without implying that their definiteness is free from change.

As we noted earlier, the force of associations or networks, should not be judged by its apparent strength, which is always relative, but by its practicality, and the power of translation and resonances that this may produce in different contexts and arenas. It is thus possible to perceive the fluid and fragile character of associations vis à vis the other networks and assemblages which surrounded them.

*How is human sexuality enacted in Tehuantepec?*

From among the pieces or images in this puzzle of human sexuality in Tehuantepec, the picture emerges that sexuality forms a part of a set of practices enacted everyday. At the same time, these practices are produced

in relation to a set of interactions which are not limited to the human nor to the sexual, embracing different scales and fields of actions.

Beauty, gendered spatiality, sexual life, motherhood and intimate violence are only some of the examples which manifest how human sexuality is placed and enacted, leaving more to be explored. Nevertheless, what has been explored has allowed a glimpse of the production of the different beauties which form part of the Tehuantepec scenario; the entanglement of the spatialities and the actings of the actors; the different ways of experiencing sexuality and the Zapotec customs; the different battlefields around motherhood, and the different forms of counteracting intimate violence.

Furthermore, it is possible to conclude that the exploration of human sexuality in Tehuantepec contributes to a different understanding of beauty, gendered spatiality, sexual life, motherhood and intimate violence in Zapotec and Isthmus societies; since they are conceived as the product of a chain of associations, or networks, that actors intertwine and make alive in the enactments of their every day.

This perspective makes evident the interconnections and interferences between the human and the material, and the production of otherness in ever widening temporal and spatial scales. The recognition of otherness as enacted practices, in a certain way, allowed to recognise that changes can be materialised differently and actions can be performed in multiple ways. This last idea could be also extended to development studies, women's studies and so on.

The way we think and approach a research problem relates to how we try to gather something that just don't fit into our concepts and methods, because of its difference. So, the dilemma is either to choose if we enclose our findings by only taking what we consider certain, or if we take the risk of trying to put in order what it is not, in order to build uncertainties that at least are partial, fragile and temporal, because for sure somebody else might find something else to contradict them.

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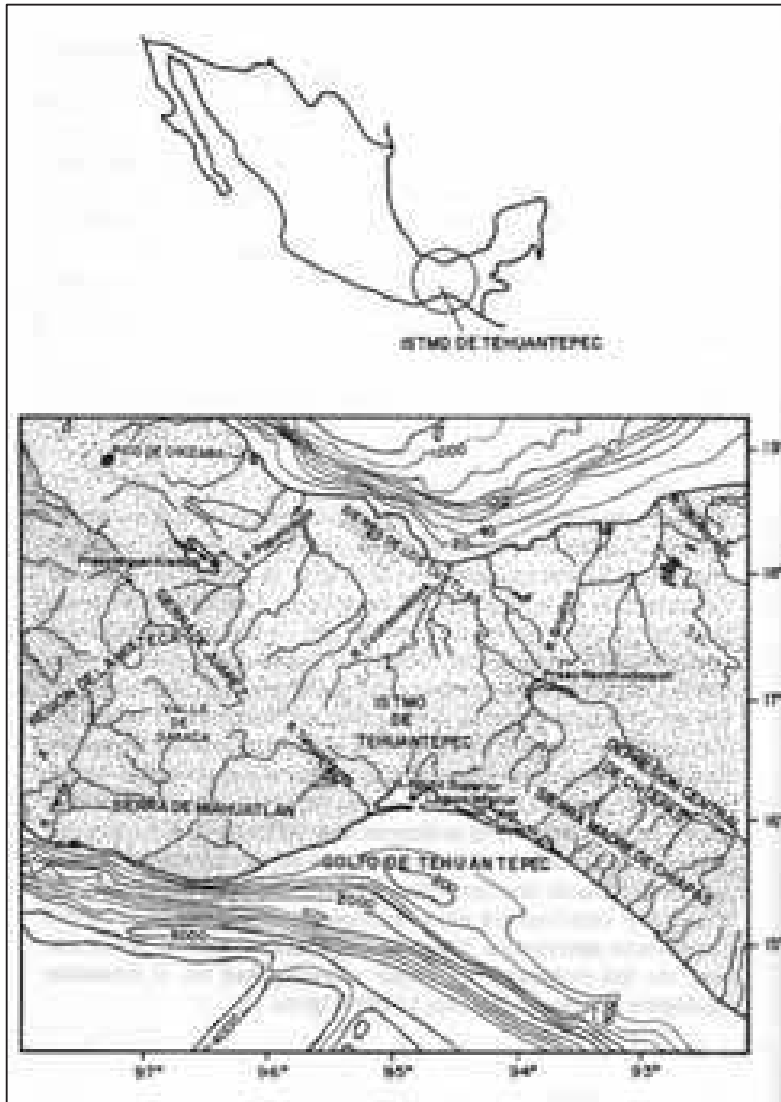
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**Annex**

Map 1

The Isthmus of Tehuantepec



Source: Toledo, 1995: 16



Map 2

Region of study



Source: Google Maps 2010-11-28

Mapa 3



Source: Google Maps, 2010-11-28



## Summary

This work considers human sexuality based on the practices performed by the actors in their everyday lives. It is not conceived of as a spontaneous or autonomous phenomenon, nor as something that is pre-existing or established, but as the result of complex practices which are assembled by a set of actors that go beyond the human and the sexual; that is to say, by networks.

The argument is based on the construction of cases which account for the production of complexities in human sexuality in Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, in the south of Mexico. This community was selected on account of the notoriety of its Zapotec women, an ethnic group often considered to be dominant in the Isthmus. Since for a long time this region has been considered as a pole of economic development, a singular cultural reference point, and the cradle of a matriarchy which is unprecedented in other parts of Mexico.

The study has reviewed a selection of the abundant source of literature existing on the Isthmus communities with the intention of contrasting this with the practices that are carried out by the actors in their everyday lives. The contrast is justified by the identification of situations which do not seem to correspond to the general perspectives, or commonplaces, by which the Isthmus is characterized, such as the dominant role of both women and the Zapotec culture, regardless of what is considered as exotic and the resistance of this people. Above all, the approach is justified on the grounds that, in spite of the popularity of these representations, both locally and beyond, they are also evoked in reference to romantic and superficial visions of the Isthmus reality; hence the requirement for their deconstruction.

The very act of considering the experiences of the actors, to a certain extent, reversed the researcher's point of view. Thus, instead of seeking to verify referential frameworks or established a priori statements, it was the situations experienced by and with the actors which led to find entanglements that allowed the results of the fieldwork to be ordered and simplified. This 'inversion' contributed to the deconstruction of stereotypes and common grounds in order to reveal the differences and elements which form part of the production of human sexuality.

The purpose of the research was to look beyond the superficial appearance and explore in depth the critical moments, achievements and concerns of those who contribute to the enactment of a distinct region

and its society. No claim is made then, to deprive generalizations of their veracity, but instead to concentrate on particularities in order to reveal specificities, or rather, the collection of possible connections which are produced in the interactions between the human and the various elements by which it is surrounded.

The themes considered in this study with respect to human sexuality in Tehuantepec do not escape from this logic. Thus, it is argued that it does not form part of something abstract but something that is produced in the practice of daily life. From this perspective, aspects which make reference to sexuality and the broad spectrum of resonances which involve the practices associated with this term are explored. Beauty, gendered spatiality, sexual life, motherhood and intimate violence were the themes by which the articulation of the practices, discourses and fieldwork observations in this study were achieved.

Methodologically and conceptually, feminism (above all in its post-structuralism guise), the Actor Oriented Approach, and Actor Network Theory all supported this task. On certain occasions, these schools of thought permitted the identification of deterministic statements, and on others the recognition of the binary oppositions or dualisms upon which many of the general perspectives, stereotypes and common positions are erected. However, it was Actor Network Theory which led me to non-conventional forms of approaching the understanding the human and the social, but above all, the study of the 'complex'.

Remaining sensitive to the complex implied recognizing that it is not possible to capture the totality, and that a consequence of simplification is making visible some elements whilst losing sight of others. However in spite of the representation exposed here, thanks to this sensitivity, I have attempted to integrate the majority of the possible connections which provide evidence of the complexities produced with respect to human sexuality. Thus by observing the dynamic, multiple and heterogeneous practices of the actors, it was possible to focus on the association of elements or networks which make these complexities evident.

The introduction, or chapter one, presents the reader with some of the various perspectives on Tehuantepec and the Isthmus region in an attempt to provide the necessary context in order to situate the various practices which are subsequently developed in the study, including the research questions I seek to answer. Throughout this review of the historical, economic and cultural processes which often characterize the region, it becomes clear just how easy it is to fall prey to stereotyped

images, as well as the relevance of being able to see behind the foreground in order to observe the details, or the specific nature, of these traditional landscapes.

The second chapter provides a theoretical and methodological reflection which supports the recognition of the importance of the diverse, actors' practices and their connectivity with their surroundings, particularly with respect to human sexuality. Thus the common grounds regarding women and her societies which have reinforced the exotic character of human sexuality in the region are presented, in addition to a consideration of the production of stereotypes. The intersections with feminist thought are also outlined, both in terms of determinisms and criticisms, discovering some clues which lead towards the identification of the complex. Additionally, the chapter sets out the approach which led me to the practices of the individuals, the deconstruction of stereotypes and backgrounds, and my first look towards heterogeneity. Finally, the chapter arrives at the assembly of associations and the production of complexities in which concepts such as networks, bodies and enactments become keys to the recognition of the assemblages related to human sexuality in practices.

The third chapter sets out some of the representations and discourses regarding beauty in the Isthmus, together with the practices performed by the actors in their everyday life. This section discusses notions which refer to beauty in the Isthmus as something stable, defined and fixed, as well as those which frame it as an antagonism with respect to patterns of beauty suggested as universal in the contemporary world. However, these notions and representations tend to lose their centrality upon consideration of the relevance of the practices of the actors in the performance, enactment and re-enactment of different beauties in Tehuantepec. The notion of 'enacting beauty' is introduced in order to suggest that the various Isthmus beauties are produced through a series of dynamic, heterogeneous, multiple and hybrid associations, in addition to proposing the consideration of Isthmus beauty as something that is malleable and transformable.

The fourth chapter covers the polemical association of spatiality and gender. The arguments which associate the divergence of the public and private are emphasized with respect to the fields of action of men and women, upon which explanations of feminine subordination are often based. The chapter begins by identifying how this gendered spatiality is assumed as atypical in the Isthmus communities, precisely on account of the significant participation of women in the public and private spheres.

However, in line with the fields of action of what is herein proposed as a 'domestic network', it is not easy to identify the boundaries between these spaces and their correspondence with gender in a clear and definitive manner. Instead, even if a link between spatiality and gender is recognized, it is nonetheless considered to be unstable, impure and fluid, in correspondence with the dynamics which the actors themselves succeed in assembling in their daily lives. Hence it is suggested that both categories repeatedly crosscut, interwoven and overlap in a manner that is unexpected and without clear or predefined boundaries, something captured by the term 'entangled boundaries'.

The fifth chapter focuses on some of the possible connections between the Isthmus customs and the practices of the local actors with respect to sexuality, since in Tehuantepec, the legacy of the Zapotec culture seems to set the boundaries that normalise the practices of human sexuality. In order to avoid making reference to elements which can lead to the constitutive and deterministic sense of Zapotec sexual norms, the elements referred to by the actors themselves are used in order to suggest that in Tehuantepec it is they who perform, change or evade sexual norms and customs. 'Sexual bodies' captures these multiple and dynamic connections where the biological, ethnic, cultural and social are neither omnipresent nor exclusive when human sexual life is enacted and re-enacted in Tehuantepec.

The sixth chapter works at the tendency to associate motherhood with women, alongside another series of diverse determinisms, such as assumptions regarding the naturalness of fertility, women's predisposition to procreation, the care, the procuration of life and a culture, among others. Following these arguments in Tehuantepec it would seem that maternity in the Isthmus has remained attached to issues related to nature in a somewhat romantic and categorical manner. However, the cases explored also illustrate how this is a battlefield, in the sense that the actors must remain in constant action, often facing struggles in order to assemble, provide continuity or disconnect from maternal networks. It also touches on additional connections, including elements of more than one ontological character, in which motherhood forms part of wider and more complicated networks, such as reproductive health, population policies and the right to choose, illustrating how it is the product and the producing factor of various situations and contexts which are connected between each other.

The seventh chapter considers another of the practices associated with human sexuality, and an issue in itself, that is confronted in the

everyday life of Tehuantepec: intimate violence. Throughout the course of a consideration of the difficulties and challenges surrounding the conceptualization and visibility of intimate violence, 'Counteracting intimate violence' argues for a broader conception of this topic as a complex network. It also draws attention to recognise the actors' agency in order to make clear that these are not passive victims but dynamic actors who enact other networks which counteract or disarticulate these chains of intimate violence. In the articulation and break up of these chains, the recognition and building of links, finding support and expanding the scenarios are acknowledged as important resources of self-defence and the management of conflict, in recognition of the fact that intimate violence is not something which can be conceived as an isolated and autonomous act.

The eighth chapter, or conclusion, covers the trajectory followed throughout the course of the research in order to make the production of complexities associated with human sexuality visible. It recognizes the necessary shift in reference points in order to move away from a focus on commonplaces. It also identifies human sexuality as a set of practices which can, in turn, be related to different themes and links, or, in other words, as associations. Finally, it recapitulates on the character, connectivity and strength of these associations in order, having responded to the research questions, to consider how these are not generated independently and are not isolated from certain orders, actors or specific contexts. Thus human sexuality is also an interference through which it is possible to make sense of the affects and resonances of various events occurring in everyday life and which give meaning to the different enactments of the actors; in short, a complexity.





## Samenvatting

Dit werk beschouwt menselijke seksualiteit op basis van praktijken in het dagelijks leven van actoren. Deze wordt niet gezien als een spontaan of autonoom fenomeen, nog als iets dat van tevoren bestaat of vastligt, maar als het resultaat van complexe praktijken die samen worden gevoegd door een geheel van actoren welk verder meer omvat dan alleen het menselijke en het seksuele, in andere woorden door netwerken.

Het argument is gebaseerd op de constructie van gevallen die tonen hoe complexiteit wordt geproduceerd in de menselijke seksualiteit in Tehuantepec in Oaxaca, Zuid Mexico. Deze gemeenschap werd gekozen vanwege de reputatie van haar Zapoteekse vrouwen, die vaak als dominant worden beschouwd in de Istmus (Landengte) van Tehuantepec. Studies en representaties van de Zapoteken hebben een grote reikwijdte: zij zijn van invloed op het beeld van de regio als pool van economische ontwikkeling, als eenvoudig cultureel referentiepunt, en als de wieg van een matriarchaat dat ongeëvenaard is in andere delen van Mexico.

De studie geeft een overzicht van de overvloedige literatuur over de Zapoteken in de Istmus, met de bedoeling deze tegenover de dagelijkse praktijken van actoren te plaatsen. Deze tegenoverstelling is gerechtvaardigd op grond van situaties die niet overeen lijken te komen met de algemene beelden of gemeenplaatsen die kenmerkend zijn voor de Istmus, zoals de dominante rol van zowel vrouwen als ook van de Zapoteekse cultuur, de beschouwing van het exotische, en culturele reproductie. Deze benadering is vooral gerechtvaardigd doordat deze beelden, hoewel zij populair zijn zowel op lokaal niveau als daarbuiten, ook worden genoemd met verwijzing naar romantische en oppervlakkige visies op de realiteit van de Istmus. Het is daarom noodzakelijk hen nauwkeuriger onder de loep te nemen.

Het beschouwen van de ervaringen van de actoren zelf als basis van de studie zette het werk van de onderzoeker in zekere mate op zijn kop. In plaats van te proberen om referentiekaders of *a priori* uitspraken te verifiëren, leidden de situaties die werden ervaren door de actoren tot de kaders die het mogelijk maakten om de resultaten van het veldwerk te ordenen en te vereenvoudigen. Deze 'omkering' droeg bij tot de afbraak van stereotypen en gemeenplaatsen ten einde de verschillen en elementen die deel uitmaken van de productie van menselijke seksualiteit te tonen.

Het doel van het onderzoek was om achter oppervlakkige indrukken te kijken en kritische momenten, prestaties en overwegingen

van actoren grondig te onderzoeken. De studie pretendeert niet generalisaties van hun waarheidsgehalte te beroven maar concentreert zich op particulariteiten om het specifieke te openbaren, of veelmeer om mogelijke verbanden te verzamelen welke worden geproduceerd in de interacties tussen mensen en de verschillende elementen die hen omgeven.

De onderwerpen welke in deze studie worden beschouwd in verband met menselijke seksualiteit ontsnappen niet aan deze logica. Er wordt dus beweerd dat zij niet deel uitmaakt van iets abstracts maar van iets dat wordt geproduceerd in de praktijk van het dagelijks leven. Aspecten welke verwijzen naar seksualiteit en naar de resonanties die deel uitmaken van de praktijken welke verband houden met deze term worden vanuit dit perspectief onderzocht. Schoonheid, geslachtsgebonden ruimtelijkheid, seksleven, moederschap en intiem geweld waren de onderwerpen waardoor de articulatie van praktijken, discoursen en veldobservaties werd gerealiseerd in deze studie.

Het feminisme (vooral in zijn post-structuralistische gedaante), de *actor oriented approach* en *actornetwork theory* ondersteunden deze taak. Deze denkscholen maakten soms de identificatie van deterministische uitspraken mogelijk, en soms de herkenning van binaire tegenstellingen of dualismes waarop vele van de algemene perspectieven, stereotypen en gebruikelijke posities zijn gebouwd. Het was echter *actor-network theory* die mij leidde tot niet conventionele benaderingsvormen om het menselijke en het sociale te begrijpen, bovenal de studie van 'het complexe'.

Gevoelig blijven voor het complexe behelst tegelijk de erkenning dat het onmogelijk is om het geheel te vangen, en dat een gevolg van simplificering is dat sommige elementen zichtbaar worden gemaakt terwijl andere uit beeld raken. Dank zij deze gevoeligheid heb ik echter toch geprobeerd om het grootste deel van de mogelijke verbanden te integreren die de complexiteiten aantonen welke worden geproduceerd in verband met menselijke seksualiteit. Door dus de dynamische, meervoudige en heterogene praktijken van de actoren te observeren was het mogelijk om te focussen op de associatie van elementen of netwerken die deze complexiteiten duidelijk laten uitkomen.

De inleiding, of hoofdstuk één, presenteert verscheidene perspectieven op Tehuantepec en het gebied van de Istmus, in een poging om de context te geven die nodig is om de verschillende praktijken die verderop in de studie worden ontwikkeld te plaatsen, met inbegrip van de onderzoeksvragen welke ik tracht te beantwoorden. Doorheen dit overzicht van de historische, economische en culturele processen die de regio vaak karakteriseren wordt duidelijk hoe gemakkelijk het is om tot

stereotype beelden te vervallen, en hoe belangrijk het is om achter de façade te kijken om de details of de specifieke aard van deze traditionele landschappen te observeren.

Hoofdstuk twee geeft een theoretische en methodologische reflectie die het belang onderstreept van het erkennen van het diverse, en van de stem van de actoren en hun verstrengeling met hun omgeving, in het bijzonder in verband met menselijke seksualiteit. De gemeenschappelijke gronden met betrekking tot vrouwen en haar samenlevingen welke het exotische karakter van menselijke seksualiteit in de regio hebben versterkt worden gepresenteerd, bovenop een beschouwing over de productie van stereotypen. De intersecties met feministisch denken worden ook aangegeven, zowel in termen van determinisme als ook van kritiek, en zo worden enkele indicatoren ontdekt die leiden naar de identificatie van het complexe. Bovendien legt het hoofdstuk de benadering uit die mij leidde naar praktijken van individuen, de afbraak van stereotypen en achtergronden, en mijn eerste kijk op heterogeniteit. Ten slotte komt het hoofdstuk aan bij het samenstellen van verbanden en de productie van complexiteiten waarin concepten zoals netwerken, lichamen en uitvoeringen of *enactments* sleutels worden voor de herkenning van de samenstellingen die verband houden met menselijke seksuele praktijken.

Het derde hoofdstuk legt enkele representaties en discoursen uit met betrekking tot schoonheid in de Istmus, samen met de praktijken die de actoren in hun dagelijks leven uitvoeren. Deze sectie bespreekt noties die verwijzen naar schoonheid in de Istmus als iets dat stabiel en gedefinieerd is en vast staat, en noties die haar omschrijven als een tegenstrijdige tegenstelling met betrekking tot de patronen van schoonheid die thans als universeel worden voorgesteld. Echter, deze noties en representaties verliezen hun centrale positie wanneer het belang van de praktijken van actoren bij de uitvoering, vertoning en hervertoning van verschillende schoonheden in Tehuantepec wordt beschouwd. De notie 'schoonheid vertonen' wordt geïntroduceerd om te suggereren dat de verschillende schoonheden in de Istmus geproduceerd worden door een serie van dynamische, heterogene, veelvoudige en hybride associaties, en om bovendien voor te stellen dat schoonheid als iets kneedbaars en transformeerbaars moet worden beschouwd.

Het vierde hoofdstuk bestrijkt de polemische associatie van ruimtelijkheid met geslacht. Argumenten welke de divergentie tussen het publieke en het private in verband brengen met de velden van actie van mannen en vrouwen worden benadrukt. Verklaringen van vrouwelijke

onderschikking zijn vaak gebaseerd op deze argumenten. Het hoofdstuk identificeert eerst hoe deze geslachtelijke ruimtelijkheid als atypisch wordt beschouwd in de gemeenschappen in de Istmus, juist vanwege de belangrijke deelname van vrouwen in publieke en private sferen. Echter, in lijn met actievelden van wat daarbij wordt voorgesteld als een 'huiselijk netwerk', is het is niet eenvoudig om duidelijk en definitief grenzen vast te stellen tussen ruimten en hun overeenstemming met geslacht. In plaats daarvan, zelfs als een verband tussen ruimtelijkheid en geslacht wordt erkend, wordt dit desondanks als onstabiel, onzuiver en vloeiend beschouwd, in overeenstemming met de dynamiek die de actoren zelf samen weten te voegen in hun dagelijks leven. Daarom wordt gesuggereerd dat beide categorieën elkaar vaak oversnijden, met elkaar vervlochten zijn en overlappen, en wel op onverwachte wijze en zonder duidelijke of van tevoren bepaalde grenzen, welk wordt gevat onder de term *entangled boundaries*.

Het vijfde hoofdstuk richt zich op enkele mogelijke verbanden tussen gebruiken in de Istmus en praktijken van de lokale actoren met betrekking tot seksualiteit, omdat de erfenis van de Zapoteekse cultuur in Tehuantepec de grenzen lijkt aan te geven welke de menselijke seksualiteit beheersen. Om de verwijzing naar elementen welke leiden tot het bepalende en deterministische begrip van Zapoteekse seksuele normen te vermijden, worden de elementen gebruikt naar welke de actoren zelf verwijzen om te suggereren dat zij het zijn die seksuele normen en gewoonten uitvoeren, veranderen of ontwijken. 'Seksuele lichamen' vangt deze meervoudige en dynamische verbanden, waar het biologische, etnische, culturele en sociale noch alomtegenwoordig noch exclusief zijn wanneer menselijk seksueel leven wordt uitgevoerd en opnieuw uitgevoerd in Tehuantepec.

Hoofdstuk zes bestudeert de trend om moederschap met de vrouw te verbinden, naast een andere serie van diverse determinismen, zoals vooronderstellingen met betrekking tot natuurlijkheid en vruchtbaarheid, en de vrouwelijke neiging tot voortplanting, zorg en voortzetting van een cultuur. Als deze argumenten in Tehuantepec worden gevolgd, lijkt het alsof moederschap in de Istmus op een wat romantische en categorische wijze verbonden is gebleven met de kwestie van natuur. Echter, de onderzochte gevallen illustreren ook dat dit een slagveld is, in die zin dat de actoren voortdurend in actie moeten blijven en vaak moeten strijden om moederlijke netwerken samen te voegen, voort te zetten of zich ervan te distantieren. Het raakt ook andere verbanden, inclusief elementen van meer dan ontologische aard, waarin

moederschap deel uitmaakt van ruimere en meer gecompliceerde netwerken, zoals reproductieve gezondheid, bevolkingspolitiek en het recht op zelfbeschikking, en illustreert zo hoe zij zowel product alsook productiefactor is van verscheidene situaties en contexten die met elkaar verbonden zijn.

Het zevende hoofdstuk beschouwt een andere praktijk die verband houdt met menselijke seksualiteit en tevens een kwestie op zichzelf is, welke wordt geconfronteerd in het dagelijks leven in Tehuantepec: intiem geweld. In de loop van een beschouwing over de moeilijkheden en uitdagingen rond de conceptualisatie en zichtbaarheid van intiem geweld, pleit 'Intiem geweld tegengaan' voor een breder begrip van dit onderwerp als een complex netwerk. Het vraagt ook aandacht voor de erkenning van handelingen van actoren, om duidelijk te maken dat deze geen passieve slachtoffers zijn, maar dynamische actoren die andere netwerken opvoeren welke deze ketens van intiem geweld tegengaan. Bij het verbinden en verbreken van deze ketens worden de herkenning van verbanden, de mogelijkheid om hulp te vinden, en het uitbreiden van scenario's genoemd als belangrijke bronnen van zelfverdediging en conflicthantering, in erkenning van het feit dat intiem geweld niet kan worden beschouwd als een geïsoleerde en zelfstandige daad.

Hoofdstuk acht, of de conclusie, bestrijkt het traject dat werd gevolgd doorheen de loop van het onderzoek om de productie van complexiteiten die verband houden met menselijke seksualiteit zichtbaar te maken. Het herkent de noodzakelijke verschuiving van referentiepunten om de focus op gemeenplaatsen te verlaten. Het identificeert menselijke seksualiteit tevens als een geheel van praktijken welke op hun beurt kunnen worden gerelateerd aan verschillende onderwerpen en links, in andere woorden als associaties. Het herhaalt ten slotte het karakter, de samenhang en de kracht van deze associaties om, nu de onderzoeksvragen zijn beantwoord, te beschouwen hoe deze noch zelfstandig worden gegenereerd noch los staan van bepaalde ordes, actoren of specifieke contexten. Menselijke seksualiteit is dus ook een interferentie waardoor het mogelijk wordt om de effecten en resonanties van verschillende evenementen welke plaats hebben in het dagelijks leven en welke betekenis geven aan de verschillende uitvoeringen van actoren, in andere woorden een complexiteit, te begrijpen.



## Resumen

Este trabajo aborda la sexualidad humana a partir de las prácticas y experiencias de los actores locales en su vida cotidiana. Aquí, la sexualidad no se concibe como un fenómeno espontáneo y autónomo, ni tampoco como algo preexistente o establecido, sino como el resultado de prácticas complejas que son ensambladas por un conjunto de actores que van más allá de lo humano y de lo sexual; es decir, por redes.

Este argumento es abordado a través de la construcción etnográfica de estudios de caso, con los que se da cuenta de la producción de complejidades relacionadas a la sexualidad humana en Tehuantepec, Oaxaca. Esta comunidad, ubicada en el Istmo del mismo nombre, al sur de México, fue seleccionada por la notoriedad que tienen las mujeres zapotecas; grupo étnico que suele considerarse como dominante en el Istmo oaxaqueño. El estudio y representación de las sociedades zapotecas istmeñas, y de sus mujeres, es por demás amplio; debido a que por mucho tiempo esta región ha sido considerada como un polo para el desarrollo económico, un referente cultural singular y la cuna de un matriarcado inédito en el resto de México.

El estudio retoma parte de la abundante fuente referencial que existe en torno a las comunidades del Istmo, con la intención de contrastarlas con las prácticas que llevan a cabo los actores en su vida cotidiana. Este contraste se justifica a partir de la identificación de situaciones que parecen no corresponder con los panoramas generales que caracterizan al Istmo; tales como, el dominio de la mujer y lo zapoteca, la contemplación de lo exótico, la reproducción de una cultura, entre otros. Sobre todo, porque a pesar de la popularidad de dichas representaciones tanto en lo local como en el exterior, éstas también suelen ser referenciadas como visiones románticas y superficiales sobre la realidad istmeña. De ahí la necesidad de su deconstrucción.

Al tomar como punto de partida las experiencias de los actores en la práctica investigativa, de cierta manera, se invirtieron los papeles. En lugar de buscar la comprobación de marcos referenciales o de supuestos establecidos a priori, fueron las situaciones experimentadas por y con los actores las que condujeron a encontrar las tramas con las cuales poder ordenar y simplificar los resultados de campo. Esta 'inversión' contribuyó a la deconstrucción de estereotipos y lugares comunes, para hacer evidente las diferencias y los elementos que forman parte de la producción de la sexualidad humana.



El propósito de la investigación fue poder ver más allá de la apariencia, y explorar en detalle los momentos críticos, los logros y las preocupaciones de aquellos que contribuyen a dar forma a una sociedad y a una región distinta. Con ello, no se pretende quitarle veracidad a lo general, sino de hurgar en lo particular, para hacer visible lo específico; es decir, el conjunto de posibles conexiones que se producen en la interacción de lo humano con los distintos elementos que lo rodea.

Las temáticas exploradas, en torno a la sexualidad humana en Tehuantepec no escapan a esta lógica; en tanto, se argumenta aquí, que ésta no forma parte de algo abstracto, sino que se produce en la práctica cotidiana. Desde esta perspectiva, se exploran aspectos que refieren a la sexualidad, y a la rica gama de resonancias que involucran las prácticas asociadas a este término. La belleza, la espacialidad de género, las prácticas sexuales, la maternidad y la violencia íntima, han sido las que lograron articular en este ejercicio las prácticas, los discursos y mis observaciones en campo.

Metodológica y conceptualmente, el feminismo —sobre todo el post-estructuralista—, *The Actor Oriented Approach* y *The Actor Network Theory* me auxiliaron en esta tarea. Algunas veces estas corrientes de pensamiento, me permitieron ir identificando la existencia de afirmaciones o supuestos de carácter determinista y, otras tantas, ir reconociendo oposiciones binarias o dualistas sobre las cuales se yerguen muchos de los panoramas generales, de los estereotipos, de los lugares comunes. Aunque, fue *The Actor Network Theory* la que me condujo a formas no convencionales de acercarme al entendimiento de lo humano y lo social; pero sobre todo al estudio de lo ‘complejo’.

Ser sensible a lo complejo implicó reconocer que no es posible capturar el todo, y que su simplificación trae como consecuencia la visibilización de algunos elementos y la ocultación de otros; sin embargo, y a pesar de la representación aquí expuesta, gracias a esta sensibilización he tratado de integrar las más de las posibles conexiones que evidencian la producción de las complejidades que se producen en torno a la sexualidad humana. Por esta razón, al observar las prácticas dinámicas, múltiples y heterogéneas de los actores, presté atención a la asociación de elementos o redes que evidencian estas complejidades.

La introducción, o primer capítulo, presenta al lector algunos de los distintos panoramas sobre Tehuantepec y la región del Istmo. Con ello se pretende proporcionar el contexto necesario para situar las distintas prácticas que se desarrollan en el resto de este documento; incluyendo los cuestionamientos a los que pretende dar respuesta. Durante este

recorrido, sobre procesos históricos, económicos y culturales que suelen caracterizar a esta región, se ilustra lo fácil que resulta caer en imágenes estereotipadas, así como la necesidad de poder mirar detrás del telón para poder observar el detalle, o la especificidad, de dichos paisajes tradicionales.

El segundo capítulo recopila la reflexión teórica y metodológica a la que se recurrió para reconocer la importancia de lo diverso, de la voz de los actores y de la conectividad de éstos con el entorno, en el caso particular de la sexualidad humana. De esta manera, se presentan los lugares comunes sobre la mujer y sus sociedades que han cimentado el carácter particular de la sexualidad humana en la región, así como la producción de estereotipos. También se esbozan las intersecciones con el pensamiento feminista, tanto en sus determinismos como en sus críticas, encontrando algunas pistas para la identificación de lo complejo. Además, se expone el enfoque que me acercó a las prácticas de los individuos, a la deconstrucción de estereotipos o telones de fondo, y a mi primer mirada hacia lo heterogéneo. Y finalmente, se arriba al ensamblaje de asociaciones y a la producción de complejidades, donde conceptos como: redes, cuerpo, enactment, se vuelven claves para reconocer la articulación de prácticas relacionadas a la sexualidad humana.

El tercer capítulo articula algunas de las representaciones y discursos sobre la belleza istmeña, con las prácticas que llevan a cabo los actores en su vida cotidiana. En este apartado se enuncian las nociones que refieren a la belleza istmeña como algo estable, definido y fijo, al igual que aquellas que la enmarcan como un antagonismo con respecto a patrones de belleza que se sugieren universales en el mundo contemporáneo. Sin embargo, dichas nociones y representaciones pierden su centralidad cuando se considera la importancia de las prácticas de los actores en la representación, actuación y reactuación de diferentes bellezas en Tehuantepec. Se introduce la noción 'enacting beauty' para sugerir que las distintas bellezas istmeñas se materializan a través de una serie de asociaciones de carácter dinámico, heterogéneo, múltiple e híbrido; así como también se propone considerar a la belleza istmeña como algo flexible y transformable.

El cuarto capítulo aborda la polémica asociación en torno a la espacialidad y al género. Se hace énfasis en aquellos argumentos que asocian la bifurcación de lo público y lo privado, en correspondencia con los ámbitos de acción de hombres y de mujeres; sobre los cuales suelen basarse explicaciones sobre la subordinación femenina. Se parte de identificar que dicha espacialidad de género se asume como atípica en las

comunidades del Istmo, precisamente, por la amplia participación de la mujer en las esferas de lo público y lo privado. Sin embargo, siguiendo los ámbitos de acción de lo que aquí se propone como una 'red doméstica', no resultó fácil identificar, de manera clara y definida, los límites entre espacios y su correspondencia al género. En su lugar, si bien se reconoce que existe un vínculo entre la espacialidad y el género, se considera que esta relación resulta más bien volátil, inasible y dúctil; en correspondencia con las dinámicas que logran ensamblar los propios actores en la cotidianidad. Por lo tanto, se sugiere que ambas categorías se traspasan, entrecruzan y sobrepone, una y otra vez; de manera imprevista y sin límites claros o predefinidos; lo que se reconoce como 'entangled boundaries'.

El quinto capítulo centra la mirada en algunas de las posibles conexiones, entre la costumbre istmeña y las prácticas de los actores locales en torno a lo sexual; debido a que en Tehuantepec, el legado de la cultura zapoteca pareciera marcar las fronteras que normalizan la práctica sexual humana. Para evitar recurrir a elementos que pueden conducir al sentido constitutivo y determinista de la normatividad sexual zapoteca se acude a los elementos referidos por los actores, para sugerir que en Tehuantepec son éstos quienes transforman, renuevan o descartan la normatividad, o costumbre sexual. 'Sexual bodies' captura esas múltiples y dinámicas conexiones donde lo biológico, lo étnico, la cultura, y lo social no resultan ser omnipresentes, ni exclusivas, cuando se trata de actuar y re-actuar la vida sexual humana en Tehuantepec.

El sexto capítulo indaga en la tendencia a asociar la maternidad con la mujer y con otra serie de determinismos de diverso tipo; es decir, aquellas deducciones sobre la naturalidad de la fertilidad, la predisposición a la procreación, el cuidado y la procuración de la vida, entre otros. Al seguir estos argumentos en Tehuantepec, tal pareciera que la maternidad en el Istmo ha permanecido apegada a cuestiones de natura, de manera un tanto romántica y categórica. Sin embargo, los casos explorados presentan cómo ésta es un campo de batalla, en el sentido de que los actores deben mantenerse en constante acción, muchas veces enfrentando situaciones de conflicto, para ensamblar, dar continuidad o desvincularse de redes maternas. También se arriba a esas otras conexiones, entre elementos de más de un carácter ontológico, donde lo materno forma parte de un entramado, o redes, más amplio y complejo, como la salud reproductiva o las políticas poblacionales, el derecho a decidir, entre otros; es decir, como producto y productor de distintas situaciones y contextos que se conectan entre sí.

El séptimo capítulo aborda otro de los escenarios que se confrontan en la vida cotidiana de Tehuantepec: la violencia íntima. Durante un recorrido por las dificultades y retos que envuelve la conceptualización y la visibilización de la violencia íntima, 'Counteracting intimate violence' arguye por una concepción más amplia de violencia íntima, como una red compleja. Al mismo tiempo que se atrae la atención hacia el reconocimiento de la agencia de los actores, para hacer evidente que éstos no son víctimas pasivas; sino actores dinámicos que articulan otras redes que actúan en contra de esas cadenas de violencia íntima. En la articulación y desarticulación de estas cadenas se reconoce la importancia de tender puentes, procurar asideros y expandir escenarios como recursos importantes para la autoprotección y el manejo del conflicto; reconociendo que la violencia íntima no es algo que se pueda concebir como un hecho aislado y autónomo.

El octavo capítulo, o conclusión, aborda la trayectoria llevada a cabo a lo largo de la investigación para llegar a visibilizar la producción de complejidades asociadas a la sexualidad humana. En él se reconoce el cambio de referentes, necesario para dejar de focalizar los escenarios comunes. También se ubica a la sexualidad humana como un conjunto de prácticas que pueden, a su vez, ser relacionadas a diferentes temáticas y vínculos; en otras palabras como asociaciones. Y finalmente, se recapitula el carácter, conectividad y fortaleza de dichas asociaciones, para, después de dar respuesta a las preguntas investigativas, abordar cómo dichas asociaciones no se generan independientemente, como tampoco se desvinculan de órdenes, actores o contextos específicos. La sexualidad humana, por lo tanto, es también una interferencia a través de la cual se puede llegar a dar sentido a las afectaciones y resonancias de distintos sucesos que acontecen en la vida cotidiana y que dan significado a la actuación de los actores; en pocas palabras, una complejidad.

## **Curriculum Vitae**

Veronica Rodriguez Cabrera was born in México City, on 3 February 1972. In 1994, she obtained a BA degree in Economics from The Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM). In 1995, she started working as a Research Assistant in the same University in the field of economic policy and development. During 1998 until the beginning of 1999, she was a lecturer in Economics at UAM-Xochimilco, where she also participated in different research projects: agrarian reform, land market and territoriality in peasant communities; rural financing, and reproductive health. Between 1998 and 1999, she did an M.A. in Rural Development at UAM, graduating in 2000. From the end of 1999 until 2002, she was head of the Academic Planning and Relations Project at the Planning and Academic Development Coordination, UAM-Xochimilco. She has participated at diverse conferences, and published articles and book chapters out of her research work. In 2005, she got a scholarship from Conacyt to do a PhD at Wageningen University in Rural Development Sociology.

## Completed Training and Supervision Plan Verónica Rodríguez Cabrera



Description	Department/Institute	Month - Year	Credits
<b>I. General</b>			
- CERIS Orientation Program	CERIS, Utrecht	April-May 2005	1
- CERIS presentation tutorials	Hasseltbos, Hilversum	May-June 2005	1
- Literature review and proposal writing	Wageningen University	January-June 2005	3
<b>II. Research Methods and Techniques and Domain Specific Theories</b>			
- CERIS Summer School 2005: 'Governance for Social Transformation'	Institute of Social Studies, The Hague	June 2005	1
- Action Research Seminar	TAC Group, WUR	June 2005	1
- CERIS Advanced Research Seminar Dr. Arturo Escobar	CERIS, WUR	August-Oct. 2007	1
- CERIS Advance Seminar and Annual CERIS Wageningen Lecture Dr. Chris de Wit	CERIS, WUR	October, 2008	1
- Alexander von Humboldt programme: Reflexive Methodology, a lecture series on doing qualitative, post-positivist research	Human Geography, Nijmegen University	November, 2008	1
- Advanced Research Seminars	ICS, WUR	2005-2009	4
<b>III. Academic Skills</b>			
- English courses	Centra, WUR	Jan-Jan 2005, Sept-Dec 2007, 2009	2.5
<b>IV. Presentations of Research Results</b>			
- Impacts of Regional Economic Projects on the Liveworlds of Zapotec People in the Ichiban of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, México	CERIS Summer school	June 2005	1.5
- Intervenciones y transformaciones en las Relaciones de Género en el Istmo de Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, México	ALASRU, FLACSO, Quito, Ecuador	November 2006	2
- Gender and Development in Tehuantepec	CERIS PhD workshop with Arturo Escobar, WUR	October 2007	2
- Transponiendo dominios: género y espacialidades en Tehuantepec	AMEK, México	August 2009	2
- Actuando en contra de la violencia íntima en la rama del matrimonio estables de caso en Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, México	ALASRU, Brasil	November 2010	2
<b>Total</b>			<b>14</b>



