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**SEX WORK IN THE "OTHER" CHIAPAS:
PROSTITUTION, MORALITY, AND MODERNITY IN URBAN MEXICO**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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INTRODUCTION

The dirt road is a long one, seemingly isolated, flanked on both sides by trees and tropical vegetation characteristic of southern Mexico's sweltering lowlands. During the wet season, the road is muddy. Heavy rains carve deep gashes into it. At the height of the dry season, cars kick up a brown dust that coats the trees and bushes, leaving their foliage beige rather than green. Sometimes this dust enters the pirate taxis that travel here, filtering through the floorboards and settling into passenger's clothing, hair, and eyes.

The narrow road opens into a large, unpaved clearing. A few cars and city buses are parked beneath a large sign that reads "*Zona de Tolerancia*." It is here in the tolerance or "red light" zone, where legalized female prostitution occurs, that the men of the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez and the surrounding area come to purchase sex. The tolerance zone is a brothel and its name is the *Zona Galáctica* or Galactic Zone.

This is a study of sex work. But it is also an ethnography of a particular place, the Zona Galáctica, a legal brothel or tolerance zone, administered by the municipal government of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the capital of the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Few social scientists enter the contemporary brothel. Studies of sex work are often historical, the research done in the comparative safety of the past (for recent exceptions see Albert 2001; Brennan 1998; Nencel 2001; O'Connell Davidson 1998; Pollock Sturdevant and Stoltzfus 1992; Schifter 1998). In capturing the rhythm of life in the Zona Galáctica, I seek not to make

broad arguments about the nature of regulated prostitution, but rather to examine the heterogeneity of experiences of selling sex, along with the many contradictions found in regulated prostitution.

A local and regional enterprise, the zona is quite unlike the international sex tourism that occurs in place like Thailand and the Dominican Republic (Brennan 1998; Kempadoo 1999; Lim 1998; Wilson 1998). Constructed in 1991, the Galáctica was the brainchild of Governor José Patrocinio González Garrido (1988-1993), a member of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, PRI) and ally of *priista* (PRI member) President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994). Both González Garrido and Salinas sought to “modernize” the Mexican economy through the implementation of neoliberal economic policies on a local and national scale. The history of the Zona Galáctica, I suggest, may be viewed as part of this global process of contemporary capitalist expansion and “modernization” - a process marked by exclusionary politics, a widening gap between the rich and poor, the decline of rural life, and an increasing state intervention in the sexual and social lives of the working classes.

MODERNIZATION THROUGH NEOLIBERALISM

In 1938, following a lengthy dispute between Mexican laborers and international oil companies, President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) expropriated Mexico’s U.S. - and European-owned oil resources and nationalized the petroleum industry. During his six years in office, Cárdenas

also embarked upon an unprecedented implementation of agrarian reform as promised by Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution, redistributing over 49 million acres of land, much of which had been illegally taken from campesinos during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz or Porfiriato (1876-1911). The majority of the lands were redistributed as *ejidos*, communally-held lands that could not be bought, sold, or traded. Such redistributive reforms incorporated rural populations into the revolutionary government, giving new legitimacy and power to the federal government.

For nearly four decades, until the early 1980s, the Mexican economy was characterized by state-directed economic growth, mixed with private enterprise. During this period the PRI maintained hegemonic control through a combination of corruption and cooptation. A corporatist structure organized diverse interest groups into organizations such as Confederation of Mexican Workers (*Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos*, CTM), the National Confederation of Campesinos (*Confederación Nacional de Campesinos*, CNC), and the National Federation of Organizations and Citizens (*Federación Nacional de Organizaciones y Ciudadanos*, FNOC, known until 1993 as the National Confederation of Popular Organizations).

It was through these sorts of organizations that different sectors of society interacted with the state. A tool of social control, corporatism allowed the poor some voice in the political system, but as June Nash notes, “within a control structure conforming to the priorities of national elites (2001:79; also see Otero 1996:13-14).

During the 1980s, the Mexican economy underwent profound changes.

In 1986, President Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado (1982-1988) began to privatize some sectors of the oil industry, once a great source of nationalist pride.¹ His successor (and former policy advisor) Carlos Salinas de Gortari halted land redistribution and endangered existing ejidos by sponsoring the reform of Article 27 of the Constitution and signed on to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, known in Mexico as the *Tratado de Libre Comercio* , TLC), relinquishing much state-directed economic activity and ceding ground to national and international capitalists.

What precipitated such a massive shift in Mexican political ideology and economic policy? Recession in the U.S., coupled with the debt crisis in Mexico and other developing nations was followed by a shift in both political-economic ideology and practice towards neoliberalism. A global phenomenon, neoliberalism represents a new stage of capitalism marked by: trade liberalization and the embrace of the global “free” markets; a rejection of the Keynesian social contract, accompanied by the implementation of austerity measures and cuts in social welfare spending; the privatization of state industries and a push towards export-led growth; and the deregulation of prices, wages, and environmental standards. Neoliberal economies are typically characterized by the “feminization” of wage labor related to the boom in low-wage service sector employment. Cultural changes ensued with increasing exposure to advertising in daily life, promoting rising consumerism and the transformation of material desires into “needs”, and the consequent growth of individualism. In some regions, the advent of neoliberalism led to political demobilization, but in others, especially in

¹ For a fuller discussion of this and other aspects of privatization in Mexico, see Teichman 1993.

indigenous areas, an emerging civil society began to actively resist these changes.

Mexico's history with neoliberalism began during the presidency of José López Portillo (1976-1982). López Portillo's term ended at the onset of the debt crisis of the 1980s, as recession in the West and declining oil prices left Mexico unable to pay international debt that it had incurred following the discovery of new oil resources in the 1970s. The debt crisis led to the implementation of structural adjustment policies, first by López Portillo and then by his successor de la Madrid. Pressured by global financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to adopt neoliberal stabilization and structural adjustment measures, the state began to decrease social spending, encourage the private export sector as the vehicle for new economic growth, and increase foreign investment in Mexico (Bello 1994).

It was President Salinas who institutionalized neoliberal policies, hoping to modernize the nation and facilitate its entry into the "First World." Such policies, along with highly politicized social programs that cultivated corporatist ties to the PRI, were so strongly identified with Salinas that they came to be known as *Salinismo*. In order to ameliorate some of the unintended consequences of the neoliberal program, Salinas founded Solidarity, an anti-poverty program which provided federal funding for local and regional community-based development projects and for national programs such as tortilla distribution for families officially certified as "needy" (Russell 1994:283). While hardly a successful attack on poverty, Solidarity was a useful tool of political and social control - funds were often

strategically disbursed in an effort to undercut opposition parties, garner support for the PRI, and further concentrate presidential power (Russell 1994).

Though Salinas' reforms were initially considered to be a success by many neoclassical economists, during this period, the gap between the rich and poor grew wider. As John Gledhill writes in his study of neoliberalism and rural poverty in the state of Michoacán, "In the case of Latin America, the richest 5 percent of the population maintained or increased their incomes throughout the Eighties whilst the bottom 75 percent suffered a decrease" (1995:1). In Mexico, the "successes" of neoliberalism brought rising unemployment and reduced social welfare spending. In 1995, the minimum wage in Mexico was lower than it had been in 1980 (Nash 2001:8). In Chiapas, only 36.9 percent of the employed population earned an amount equal to or greater than the daily minimum wage (CIACH 1997:23). Particularly hard hit were rural populations and those dependent upon small-scale agricultural production. Salinas' neoliberal policies did not ease poverty but rather institutionalized it.

In Chiapas, which holds the unenviable position as one of Mexico's poorest states, Governor Patrocinio González Garrido implemented at the state level his own efforts to "modernize" the Mexican economy. Among his contributions to *salinismo* in Chiapas were the privatization of state industries, the decrease of state supports for grain and coffee production, and the promotion of large-scale export agriculture (Harvey 1994).² Such policies have had a negative impact upon many rural communities. In Chiapas, and

² During this period, the state-owned Pujilic sugar mill was privatized. The mill, a mainstay of the regional economy, was later sold back to the government following political protest and financial difficulties.

throughout Mexico (and Latin America for that matter), traditional patterns of consumption and subsistence continue to be sacrificed to the neoliberal agenda of economic “modernity,” as rural life is increasingly threatened by agribusiness. The resulting economic hardship can be measured by a rise in political violence, and migration to urban centers and to the United States.

Political discontent grew as the Mexican population suffered increasing immiseration. Small landholder populations unable to compete in a global economy characterized by large-scale agribusiness migrated to urban areas or to the United States. Others mobilized politically, breaking away from state-sponsored peasant organizations.

In the 1980s, many Mexicans organized around Cuautémoc Cárdenas, a former priista and the son of Lázaro Cárdenas. Disillusioned with the PRI, Cárdenas broke away from the party, running for president against Salinas in 1988 under a left-of-center banner. Most political analysts consider that Cárdenas actually won the 1988 election, which was fraught with irregularities. Unfortunately, the electoral ballots were destroyed in 1992, thus preventing anyone from finding the truth (Castañeda 1994:157).

The corporatist structure that for so long had been able to quell dissent had failed to control the population. The politics of neoliberalism differ from the past pattern of social control and management of opposition movements through cooptation. While PRI loyalty is still often gained through the promise of individual economic rewards, the politics of neoliberalism are rooted in exclusion (see Collier 1999). George Collier describes practices, such as denial of government resources and uneven disbursement of Solidarity

funds along party lines, that are designed to lock some out of the political process while rewarding party supporters (1999). Furthermore, there was increasing use of repression to keep counter-hegemonic visions in check. Such violence was perpetrated not simply by the state but also by state-supported right-wing paramilitary groups. Among these were *Paz y Justicia* (Peace and Justice, a pro-PRI peasant organization), which is responsible for forced evictions, violence, and numerous killings in northern Chiapas (Human Rights Watch 1997). Violence, whether perpetrated by the military, paramilitary, or the police, is of great political value. As Gledhill notes, "The diffuse but pervasive threat of arbitrariness and violence is present in the mind of all those considering how far to commit themselves to an oppositional cause" (1995:23). And so, though collective action continues to play an important role in Mexican politics, many struggles have become the sort which occur at the level of the family or household (Benería 1992:91).

As a gubernatorial candidate, González Garrido espoused Salinas' discourse of *concertación* ("consensus building across the political spectrum" [Collier 1999:140]), but during his governorship, a new politics of exclusion and clientelism emerged in Chiapas. Both cooptation and force were used to ensure stability as the neoliberal project was put into play. Though the state received more Solidarity funds than any other, these were insufficient to reverse the extreme poverty endemic in rural indigenous areas and exacerbated by austerity measures. These funds were also tightly controlled by the governor, as well as by loyal *priista* municipal presidents and *caciques*

(local power brokers).³ In Chiapas, Solidarity was less an effective means of diminishing poverty than a symbol of the continued presence and power of the state (Solidarity slogans were painted on wall throughout the state, often on schools and clinics that were left unstaffed due to lack of funding) and the unequal distribution of political power. When the measures of Solidarity failed to pacify dissent among marginalized populations, González Garrido revised the state penal code, broadening the definition of rebellion, effectively criminalizing both political opposition and public protest.⁴ The governor's term was characterized by the use of repressive tactics against political opposition, a militarization of the state that predates the Zapatista uprising, and human rights abuses (see Collier 1994; Editorial Collective 1994).

As the state implemented policies to "[modernize] the absurd system of extraction and exploitation that prevails in Chiapas" (Subcommandante Marcos 1994:37), urban areas began to experience unprecedented growth as the decline of rural life accelerated. Tuxtla is one of the state's fastest growing cities. These conditions, in part, led to the event that would come to define Chiapas: the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN).⁵ On January 1, 1994 a small army of largely Mayan male and female peasants emerged from the lowlands of

³ See Collier (1999 [1994]:145) for his discussion of the use of Solidarity funds by local PRI officials to build a lavish town hall in the municipality of Zinacantán and the ways in which such expenditures contributed to the exclusionary politics at work in the region.

⁴ Collier (1999 [1994]:127) provides a detailed analysis of the changes to the penal code and its effect upon agrarian activists in Chiapas, many of whom were jailed for dissent.

⁵ Though the EZLN uprising is the most well-known, poor Chiapanecos have been building independent campesino movements since the 1970s (see Collier 1994; Neil Harvey 1994, 1998; Nash 2001).

eastern Chiapas to declare war upon the “illegal dictatorship” of Carlos Salinas and the neoliberal policies that threatened their way of life.⁶ The battle lasted less than a week, but the Zapatista struggle continues. The conflict remains one of low-intensity marked by intermittent peace talks and occasional violence by government supported right-wing paramilitary groups.

GENDER AND NEOLIBERALISM

Women and men in Mexico and throughout Latin America have experienced the crisis of neoliberalism differently. Job loss and the devaluation of the peso have made it increasingly difficult for men to fulfill their traditional (and somewhat idealized) roles as economic provider for the household. As men are increasingly marginalized, women not only bear greater responsibility for maintaining the household but often become the head of the household. Women enter the labor market under unequal conditions in a variety of settings: some may work in the informal sector, as vendors, domestic servants, or sex workers. Others may confine their informal earning activities to the home, doing the laundry of neighbors,

⁶ The EZLN uprising and subsequent collapse of the peso in 1994 tarnished Carlos Salinas' image as the man who would bring modernity to Mexico. His reputation was further tainted by the arrest of his brother Raúl on charges of both corruption and murder after he was accused of masterminding the killing of José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, PRI secretary general and former brother-in-law to the Salinas brothers. Raúl Salinas is currently serving a 50 year prison sentence. Carlos Salinas has lived in various countries under a self-imposed exile since 1995. My last glimpse of Salinas was on Mexican television in 1998. He had returned briefly to the country to oppose the incarceration of his brother by holding a hunger strike. The once dapper technocrat wore a soiled undershirt, was unshaven and appeared desperate. He has since written a book about Mexico, appropriately titled *Un paso difícil a la modernidad* (A Difficult Step Towards Modernity).

sewing, or caring for children. Though the income from such activities is meager, it is often the only employment available to uneducated women; furthermore, working inside the home reinforces female subordination in an ideological way by maintaining the illusion that a woman's husband is the sole provider, as she remains inside the domestic sphere to earn money (Levine 1993:113).

Other women may enter the foreign-owned export-oriented factories or *maquiladoras* (Jefferson 1996; Kamel and Hoffman eds. 1999).⁷ Employment in the export manufacturing sector is by its very nature a low-wage job as there is an abundance of inexpensive labor competing for work not only within the country but also in other labor markets throughout the world; furthermore, the abundance of willing workers throughout the globe increases competition between Mexican workers and others, particularly in Asia. Women are preferred maquila workers. Because of their lower status, they are viewed by management as more submissive and exploitable (Fernández-Kelly 1983; Iglesias Prieto 1997; Ong 1987). In her study of female factory workers in Ciudad Juárez, María Patricia Fernández-Kelly asserts that hiring women workers is a political and economic decision with distinct corporate benefits; women are hired, she writes, "because of their behavior, expectations, and attitudes (linked to gender specific socialization processes), because of their relative youth and because of their subordinate position within their own households; these women constitute a highly vulnerable,

⁷Though the assembly plants or *maquiladoras* of multinational corporations have appeared along Mexico's northern border since the implementation of the Border Industrialization Program in 1962, recent global economic changes such as those described in this chapter have led to their proliferation in southern states with large indigenous populations such as Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas.

docile, and manipulable workforce" (Fernández-Kelly 1983:72). This pattern of female maquila employment, as Melissa Wright (2001) and Henry Selby (1997) observe, is undergoing changes: as some maquila jobs have been transformed and now require greater skill and training, these jobs have been put back in the hands of men (Wright 2001) who have lost their ability to organize and are now considered as docile as female workers (Selby 1997). Unlike central Mexico and the northern border, Tuxtla does not have a large industrial sector. Poor women who enter the workforce there generally do so in the informal and service sectors.

In the indigenous communities of Chiapas, many women engage in activities such as tortilla-making, weaving, and collecting firewood for cash or trade. As the marketing of ethnicity and the Zapatista uprising to foreign and Mexican visitors grows, some indigenous women become deeply immersed in the sale of artisan products to the tourist trade (Collier 1994:113; Nash ed. 1993). The incomes earned from these activities are often marginal and these women workers, like other women throughout Mexico, suffer the "double burden" as they are expected to perform domestic tasks in addition to their work outside the home.

Most women have entered the workforce (as vendors, factory employees, sex workers) not because of some new found emancipation, but rather out of dire economic need. Though there are some benefits to women's entry into wage labor (such as resistance to male domination within household and increased independence from husbands and families [Safa 1995]), ultimately much of women's employment is rooted in unequal

exploitative relations of gender, class, ethnicity, and geopolitics. Unequal gender relations in the domestic sphere are often mirrored in the workplace, as the beauty contests, and “feminization” programs of the maquiladoras show (Fernández-Kelly 1983; Iglesias Prieto 1997). Furthermore, as Robin Adamache, Claudia Culos, and Gerardo Otero note, though women have new economic roles as workers, little has changed with regard to their traditional place in the household and society at large. As a result, “oppression of women resulting from traditional patriarchal relations is now aggravated by class exploitation...” (1993:1).

MACHO MEN AND PURE WOMEN?: GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICO

Contemporary Mexican men of all classes, including the working class, may do housework and care for children while women increasingly work outside the home, become political leaders, and divorce their husbands (Guttman 1996: 251), Mexico is nonetheless still a patriarchal culture in which women are subordinate to men. I am not trying to promote essentializing formulations of gender in Mexico nor adhere to former simplistic ahistorical stereotypes of the Mexican *macho* and the passive, sexually pure and self-sacrificing woman. Many researchers have already shown that such simplistic formulations are untenable (Carrillo 2002; Guttman 1996; Higgins and Coen 2000; Lavrin 1978) since such cultural ideals are historically produced and differ from the reality of actual behavior. In addition, such models are often differentially ascribed, applied, adhered to and resisted according to the

particulars of class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Jelin 1990; Lavrin 1978). Along with social movements of the poor and politically disenfranchised there has emerged in Mexico an increasing awareness of the inequalities of gender and sexual orientation, along with the growth of feminist and gay rights movements seeking to address and transform those inequities.

That said, it is still important to examine the impact and power of cultural ideals about gender and sexuality upon women's and men's lives and bodies. Gender here refers to the historically determined and socioculturally constructed nature of femininity and masculinity. Gender, like class and ethnicity, plays a central role in the workings and expression of power (Alonso 1995:74-75).

In his widely read book *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1985[1950]), Octavio Paz set forth the classic formulation of Mexican masculinity and femininity. Ideal Mexican women are passive, sexually pure, decent, self-sacrificing, and modest. Confined to the domestic sphere, they are the embodiment of motherhood. Physically and figuratively, they are permeable and therefore, vulnerable (Paz 1985). They are the repositories of honor for their families and the maintainers of morality for society at large. Women who do not embody these virtues can be sources of shame to family as well as society and are stigmatized. They are dangerous and a threat to social order. Paz writes, "It is interesting to note that the image of the *mala mujer* - the "bad woman" - is almost always accompanied by the idea of aggressive activity." (1985:39). Men, in contrast, are *machos* and associated with power. They are active, independent, and have a right to express and experience their sexuality. They

merit a masculine honor and respect as long as they use their power in a manner considered appropriate and dignified, though their *machismo* may also be characterized by the unpredictable and destructive use of that power (Paz 1985:81).

In his study of masculinity in a working-class neighborhood in Mexico City, Matthew Guttman discusses a cultural transformation which he refers to as “degendering,” in which certain beliefs and activities, such as alcohol consumption and housework, are disassociated from a particular gender identity and become linked with other social sectors, such as youth, the working class, or particular ethnic groups. It is true that in many sectors of Mexico, gender roles and gendered activities have been undergoing rapid transformation. It is also clear that there exists in Mexico a multiplicity of gender identities, which are easily masked by stereotypes of the Mexican macho and the self-sacrificing woman (*abnegada*) (Guttman 1996:251). “Why,” Gutmann rightly asks,

shouldn't the study of gender in Mexico similarly reject specious conclusions about ubiquitous (national) machos and *abnegadas*, and replace these stereotypes with descriptions and analyses of the diversity of changing gender identities in Mexico at the end of the twentieth century? (1996:251).

This examination of the Zona Galáctica examines the diversity of

changing gender identities and gendered activities. But it also examines the persistence of both men's domination of women and the ways in which beliefs and activities surrounding sex - and stigmatized commercial sex in particular - have not undergone this process of degendering that Gutmann describes.

Gutmann's claim that "the *macho mexicano* stereotypes are today largely inappropriate and misleading" (1996:32) is an important corrective to earlier pervasive images.⁴ There are few men in the following pages that conform in full to the modern idealized image of the Mexican macho, that is a domineering, independent, tough, womanizing, hard-drinking man. Nor do many resemble less contemporary notions of the macho, which view machos as "honorable men" (Gutmann 1996:221).

Yet nearly all the men who appear in the following pages either visit prostitutes and/or seek to control and regulate the activities of women who engage in prostitution. This may tempt some readers to identify them as stereotypical macho Mexicanos who exploit and dominate women, yet as I argue below, the relationships and distribution of power in the Galáctica are far too complex to be reduced to a problem of machismo. Despite this complexity, whether they are clients or government officials or *ejidatarios* (land reform beneficiaries), these men generally share a sense of sexual entitlement and of standing on the moral high ground in relation to the sex workers of the zona. Some elements of machismo and gender inequality are

⁴ For further discussion of the macho and machismo, see Gutmann 1996, chapter 9, and Mirandé 1997. Though I do not make much use of the terms macho and machismo in this study, I suggest we not dismiss them too readily. I believe the terms are still relevant, especially for Mexican women (and foreign female researchers) who experience them in some form on a daily basis.

less subject to change than others.

This moral double standard (*doble moral*) as well as women's vulnerable position in Mexican society was driven home during a late-night conversation with friends not affiliated with the zona. We had been discussing a man who had entered my house from a neighboring roof a few nights before. Though he had disappeared back into his own home before the police arrived, I was fairly certain that the man was the same one who slept on the roof above the flower-shop next door.⁹ I jokingly suggested that I should perhaps sneak into his house one night. Conversation soon turned to stories of robbery and rape. Joel, a middle-class educated young man whom I had known and liked for quite some time, launched into a story of a bricklayer he knew who had raped quite a few women. He laughingly told me, his sister, and his girlfriend about how the man had raped a teenaged Mexican girl who had been out for a walk with her boyfriend and had also raped a *gringa* as she was waiting beside her broken-down car on the highway. The *gringa*, he said, was "older" and "ugly." While the story continued, the other women in the room seemed unfazed. I, on the other hand, was horrified. Seeing the look on my face, Joel said, "Oh, well, you have to hear

⁹ I didn't have a telephone and had to wait on the second story porch hoping for a passing patrolman while the man was on the other side of a locked door in the small kitchen. When the police finally arrived I was to throw them down the keys to the front door so they could enter. It took me a few minutes to finally decide that this would actually be safer for me than taking on the intruder myself with the pepper spray a male friend had given me some months earlier after a few uncomfortable incidents in San Cristóbal. After I let the police in, the four of us, all clutching pepper spray (unlike the private security guards in banks, these municipal patrolmen did not carry guns) ran up the stairs to the roof in single file. The intruder was gone, though his bedding remained on the roof next door. One of the officers sprayed the man's meager belongings with the pepper spray and as the wind shifted, it blew back into our faces and like Keystone Kops, we ran back down the stairs, again in single file, choking. The officers then offered to take me to a hotel and gave me helpful tips as I packed a small overnight bag, "Did you bring underwear? Don't forget your toothbrush."

him tell it." I was trying to figure out how it was that this story was supposed to be entertaining and how hearing it told by the man who had raped the women would make it any funnier. When I asserted that such a man ought to be incarcerated in Cerro Hueco, the local jail, if not worse punishment, Cecilia, Joel's girlfriend commented that it is very difficult to prove rape. I began to feel as though my friends thought I was some sort of extreme man-hating feminist simply because I thought sexual assault was a punishable offense. Though Joel backtracked later that night, saying that rape was an awful thing and that such men should be punished, I couldn't help but feel he was saying so just to appease me. Though over the years I had been subject to all sorts of harassment by men in Mexico, hearing Joel's story was the first time I truly felt I understood the inequality that continues to mark women's lives.

Whether practiced, believed, contested, or not, the moral double standard, men's sexual entitlement, women's subordination, and the stigmatization of certain women impress their power upon society in a variety of ways. For instance, women's entry into wage labor conflicts with ideals that emphasize a woman's domestic role as wife, mother, and daughter. Women who work outside the home have historically been stigmatized in Mexico. Even today, domestic servants are often viewed as outlets for male sexuality within the household, particularly for teenaged boys (Gill 1994; Guttman 1996). More recently, the sexual morality of factory workers is often held up to public scrutiny. Perceived as a threat to a social order marked by gender inequality and female economic reliance upon men,

they are often associated with promiscuity, immorality, and even prostitution. As one factory worker told Fernández-Kelly:

Many people, especially men, treat you differently as soon as they know you have a job at a maquiladora. They think that if you have to work for money, there is also a good chance that you're a whore. But I assure you that my friends and I are decent women (1983:135).

If the morality of a woman who simply works outside the home may be suspect, one can imagine the suspicion that accompanies the transgression of a woman who works outside the home selling sex.

THE BIRTH OF THE GALÁCTICA

There are certain times in history when sexuality comes to the fore. As Gail Rubin says, sexuality may seem a frivolous topic, but during times of social upheaval, "people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality" (1984:267). "Consequently," she continues, "sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress" (1984:267). Sex, as Jeffrey Weeks notes, "has long been a transmission belt for wider social anxieties, and a focus of struggles over power, one of the prime sites in truth where domination and subordination are defined and expressed" (1985:16).

The 1950s in the United States witnessed not only the “red scare” but also an unprecedented period of anti-homosexual campaigns and gay-bashing (see Adam 1995). Victorian England saw both the institution of the Contagious Disease Acts, which called for the sanitary inspection of prostitutes, and the organized campaigns that led to their repeal in 1886 (see Walkowitz 1980). Social anxiety regarding the white slave trade was high during this period in both England and Argentina (Guy 1990). During the regime of Porfirio Díaz, the Mexican state pursued economic liberalism and advocated a social order characterized by eradication of vice and inculcation of values such as morality, family, thrift, and hygiene (French 1992:529). Characterized by the slogan “Order and Progress”, the Porfiriato was steeped in a political program based on rationalism and science.

The Zona Galáctica was born in 1991 during a period of rapid economic changes, cultural transformations, simmering political hostilities, the militarization of civil society, and emerging social movements throughout the country, from gay rights movements to campesino and indigenous movements of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Guerrero and debtors’ movements such as the Barzón, which originated in Jalisco (Senzek 1997; Williams 2001). The EZLN itself sought to address issues not only of class and ethnicity, but also of gender inequality in its “Women’s Revolutionary Law.”

This was also a time when the hegemony of the ruling PRI, in power for some seventy years, was beginning to crumble, as governorships and mayoral races throughout the nation were won by opposition parties such as the conservative National Action Party (*Partido Acción Nacional*, PAN) and

center-left Democratic Revolutionary Party (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática*, PRD). Though Tuxtla Gutiérrez had not yet fallen to the PAN, it would in 1995. The nation would follow suit in 2000. And the PRI would lose Chiapas to the *Alianza por Chiapas*, an alliance of the PAN, PRD, Green Party and Worker's Party later that same year.

In 1989, the rumblings of dissent were growing louder. Immigrants from rural southern Mexico and Central America continued to migrate to Tuxtla Gutiérrez, often settling permanently or temporarily in Chiapas, which shares a border with Guatemala. González Garrido continued his modernization efforts throughout the state, often using a military model of social control to resolve social problems and contain any elements, agrarian activists in particular, that resisted his efforts. The large military base constructed on the outskirts of San Cristóbal assured a constant military presence in the Highlands.

The modernization of sexual commerce in Chiapas was also on the agenda. As the state withdrew from other sectors of the economy, it sought greater control over commercial sex in Chiapas through the 1989 Project Zona Rosa. It is not unlikely that this effort, spearheaded by the governor, was linked to the militarization of the state and a form of preparation for dealing with the coming uprising along with other social tensions, such as out-of-control population growth in the city. Among the goals of the project were the relocation of brothels to "appropriate" sites "outside the perimeters of the city," far from private homes, schools, government offices and churches; the registration and strict medical examination of female sex workers; and the

supervision of sex workers and clients by municipal authorities in order to prevent alcohol abuse and drug use and distribution within the confines of the brothel (Servicios Coordinados de Salud Pública en el Estado de Chiapas 1989). Governor González Garrido played an unusually large role in the creation of the municipal Zona Galáctica, provoking a great deal of gossip. As one official in the State Department of Public Health remarked, "That guy was really interested in prostitution," which is ordinarily a matter of municipal, not state concern.¹⁰

By regulating and controlling prostitutes, long associated with crime and "deviance", the state hoped to discipline and bring into the formal modern market an economic activity that had formerly existed outside of its control. In an era marked by globalization and privatization, there has been much discussion about the weakening power of the state (Otero 1996; Teichman 1996), but neoliberalism is less about the withdrawal of the state from public life than it is about the shifting of arenas of state interest and intervention. Withdrawing state support from small-scale agricultural producers forces many farmers to enter the labor market on terms favorable to elites; creating the infrastructure to corral and control female prostitutes who previously worked independently also serves elite interests by creating an orderly urban environment.

In December 1991, Governor González Garrido, along with priista city officials, inaugurated the Zona Galáctica. Such ceremony is commonplace in

¹⁰ Local gossip suggested that González Garrido's interest in prostitution stemmed from his own sexual activities with the gay male prostitutes of Tuxtla. Whether true or untrue, it is likely that his interest in controlling prostitution stemmed less from his own sexual proclivities than from his political interest in modernizing Chiapas and quelling dissent and alternative cultures, be they agrarian activists or sex workers.

Mexico, where political officials of all levels, from the president of the republic to the mayor of a small village, preside over the openings of schools, bridges, highways, and in this case, a brothel. These festivities, which often include the cutting of ribbons, live music, and speeches, are a validation of both government authority and benevolence, making the power and generosity of the state visible through public spectacle. Smaller government successes, such as the installation of a streetlight or placement of public trash cans do not go uncelebrated. A new lamppost in a low-income neighborhood in eastern Tuxtla is flanked by a large sign advertising the current municipal administration's program for providing lighting. In the Galáctica today, the trash cans installed years earlier still bear the insignia of the previous priista municipal government.

INTO THE GALACTIC ZONE

Although I had passed by the road leading to the zone dozens of times since my first stay in Chiapas in 1992, I came upon the Zona Galáctica in 1997 by chance. I was in southern Mexico visiting family and halfheartedly searching for a dissertation topic. A friend who knew of my interest in commercial sex told me there was a man I should meet - a doctor who worked at the Comitán Center for Health Research (*Centro de Investigaciones en Salud de Comitán*, CISC). He knew a great deal about prostitution and was quite a character, she said. Days later I was sitting knee to knee with him in his cramped office at the center. He was energetic and exuberant as he spoke

to me about sex work in Chiapas. He leaned forward, put his hands on my knees, looked into my eyes and said, “ For example, I am a man and I want to have anal sex with you.” He was speaking hypothetically, of course, about the difficulties and risks sex workers face concerning client desires and condom use. “There is someplace you have to see,” he told me. The next day he brought me to the Zona Galáctica.

It was a side of Chiapas I had never seen before. I was struck by the cleanliness and organization of the place. Visually, it was stunning. Modern buildings painted pink and blue and orange and green and yellow. Women of varied ages and appearance lingering in doorways or strolling about or sitting and eating at one of the zone’s food stands. I met Leticia, a sex worker who appears in the following pages, on that first day and I liked her. It was a funny thing. Though I had spent much of my time in Chiapas investigating all things Mayan, I knew I didn’t want to pursue dissertation research in that area. I felt there were quite enough anthropologists doing that work and wasn’t sure I would be able to contribute much new to such studies. But my decision to stay in the Galáctica stemmed neither from desperation for a research site nor from academic uncertainty. Rather, the decision was a deep, visceral one unmarked by thoughts about the realities of career, funding, and fieldwork. Something like love at first sight, it was deeply felt and not particularly logical.

Having secured funding, I returned to begin fieldwork a year later. Beginning the project, I met with Tuxtla’s new Director of Public Health, a *panista* (member of the conservative PAN) and a gynecologist, who

introduced me to the mayor, also a panista and gynecologist.¹¹ Young, charismatic, and handsome, the mayor extended a hand to me and modestly said in English, "It is a pleasure to meet you. I am the mayor." I liked him immediately. I would be studying regulated prostitution in a city run by young, good-looking, panista gynecologists. Being a panista-politician-gynecologist is not unusual in Mexico; in fact, the mayor's father was Tuxtla's first panista-gynecologist mayor back in the 1970s. As Maria Mies suggests, gynecologists, along with the state are the "guardians of modern patriarchy" (1986:24-25). When the gynecologists run the state, such guardianship is advanced. Doctors and public health specialists have long been involved in political affairs in Mexico - during the revolutionary period in Mexico, such men (referred to as *higienistas*), along with criminologists and social workers were at the forefront of a "social hygiene" movement which sought to control, among other things, female prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases, and the white slave trade (Bliss 2001:15).

"This world [of commercial sex]," Ronald Weitzer notes, "does not offer easy access to the outsider, which helps to account for the paucity of research in many key areas; but gaining access should be viewed as a challenge rather than an insuperable barrier" (2000:13). In the zona, I found that access was not a problem, but rather my own self-consciousness, along with concerns about the ethics of doing ethnography, initially impeded the fieldwork. Yet as the days went by, it was the women who came to me, asked me about my research, and in some cases, even told me how to go about doing it. One day I was approached by two women who were loud, raucous,

¹¹ The PAN first won control of Tuxtla in 1995, and again in 1998.

good-naturedly pushing and shoving one another as they came near. They were Lorena and Desirée and had come to introduce themselves as well as satisfy their curiosity about me. They instructed me how to proceed with my research. They told me I couldn't just go around asking a bunch of questions but rather, "You have to come out with us. You have to drink with us."

Thankfully, being accepted by the zona workers didn't actually require an undue amount of drinking. In fact, what was mostly required was listening. Though I did not live in the zona, I kept regular working hours there and was persuaded by the administration to give English classes to a small group of interested workers. I soon became known as *la maestra* (the teacher), though I was sometimes also referred to as *la güerita* (a diminutive term denoting a fair-skinned person of any national origin).¹² Following my purchase of a white laboratory coat, which I bought at the suggestion (almost the insistence) of a zona secretary (it served as something of a repellent to prospective clients), some clients and workers also referred to me as *la doctorcita* (the little doctor). To most, I was simply *Paty*.

I arrived at the zona one morning in late April, after seven months of research, to find that a surprise birthday party had been organized for me at Pepe's food stand just inside the zona's main gate. Pepe had generously brought extra plates and plastic cups. Some of the sex workers brought a cake decorated with the words *Felicitades Paty* (Congratulations Patty). Jesús, the leader of the pirate taxi drivers had also brought a decorated cake. I was showered with gifts from workers that I opened as the zona's janitorial staff

¹² This term is by and large considered a flattering one; the politics of ethnicity and skin color are quite alive in Mexico. Though in the U.S., I am an olive-skinned, dark-haired petite woman, in Mexico I was transformed into an average-sized, light-skinned, green-eyed redhead.

and police set off loud fireworks in honor of the celebration. A group of us left the zona and spent the day at a local *balneario* [bathing resort], drinking beer, eating *botanas* (small appetizers usually consisting of grilled meats, cheeses, and pickled vegetables), napping, and swimming.

I was moved by their generosity, which at times I found difficult to accept. It was hard for me not to think of each meal they paid for as the equivalent of sex with one client. Though I certainly earned more money than they did because of my grant, it was rare that the women would allow me to pay on the occasions we went out to eat or drink. Often when I would attempt to pay my fare when arriving at the zona by taxi, I would find that one of the workers had already paid it. They advised me and watched my back on more than one occasion. They have been great and generous teachers.

Later that night I am in bed, dreaming that someone is calling my name. I awaken to find the head of Paula, my new roommate, peering into my room. "Do you hear Las Mañanitas?" she asks, "It's for you". Las Mañanitas is a traditional song sung at birthdays and other celebrations. It is not quite 5:00 in the morning. And still dark out. Naked, I stumble out of bed and reach for the red silk robe I bought in Chinatown during my last visit home. Only later, when I see the photographs, will I realize it is on inside out. I can't find the belt, so I wrap the robe around my body tightly, holding it closed with one hand. I am still asleep. Struggling to unlock the front door, I can hear the musicians on the other side and they are loud. It is my first serenade [serenata].

Outside, there is a group from the zona. I find Patricia, a man whom I wrongly assume is her husband, Roberto (a former sex worker), Rafaela, and a guitar and accordion player, all in various states of drunkenness. It is a lovely sight. They hug me and tell me over and over, "Es tu día" (It is your day). In a drunken, sleepy, dreamlike state we sit in the darkness on the curb in front of my house, singing and swaying to the music. They request "Cielito Lindo," one of the few songs I recognize. "Ay yay yay yay, canta, no llores...." Every so often Roberto's head drops and he begins to nod off. The man whom I assumed was Patricia's husband but who is in fact a client from the zona, stands up and sings. Rafaela lets out a few long, loud, plaintive ranchero-style laughs. Her voice is strong and sharp, cutting through the darkness. A few lone figures pass by, on their way to work. Rafaela, who like Patricia and Roberto is an immigrant from Guatemala, tells me, "We want you to have good memories of Mexico." The sky is beginning to lighten. During a pause in the music, Roberto and the client debate over the finale. Roberto, often melancholy, wants a sad song and the client, a happy ending. Happy wins and the birds begin to sing their morning songs. The musicians wander off, guitar and accordion in hand, while we stay outside in the cool morning, chatting and laughing and only then do I realize it is Teacher's Day and this is why they have brought the serenata. Giggling, Roberto says to me, "We are teachers too, but we teach sex." It is 7:00 a.m., and someone hails the next passing cab. We all embrace and they are gone. The tortillería (tortilla shop) next door is now open, the sun is up, and there is a line forming. Women, children and a few men, wait to buy breakfast, clutching in their

hands the colorful cloths in which they will wrap their warm tortillas.

ON ORDER AND PROGRESS: CONSTRUCTING NEOLIBERALISM AND WRITING ETHNOGRAPHY

Chaos should be regarded as extremely good news. -Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

This dissertation is analyzes several significant issues. First, it is about changes in capitalism and the ways in which broad global patterns of change are experienced and negotiated locally. It examines how, within a world where in too many places capitalism (of the neoliberal variety), democracy and modernity have become synonyms, people live and behave, think, feel, and cope.

More specifically, this is a study about the modernization of the sex industry in the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez during the neoliberal era. It examines the model of social control used in the Zona Galáctica and how such control shapes and is sometimes in turn shaped by the practice of prostitution. I argue here neither for nor against legalized prostitution and I neither exalt nor condemn sex work. Rather I seek to step away from broad arguments about sex work and settle into more specific and deeper discussions, examining prostitution in order to look more closely at issues such as sex, gender, money, family, morality, stigma, and work. I also examine urban commercial sex in a way that highlights the strong and sometimes surprising linkages and overlaps between the urban and the rural, the “modern” and the “traditional,” and the prostitute and the ejidatario.

There have been in recent times many bitter polemics about commercial sex. Some feminists argue that all prostitution is patriarchal exploitation and female victimization and does not constitute “work” (Barry; 1979; Dworkin 1981; Overall 1992). Others discard terms such as victimization, focusing instead upon agency, the social construction of sexuality, the variety of female experience in sex work, as they call it, and sometimes even its liberatory potential (Assiter and Avedon 1993; Bell 1997; Church Gibson and Gibson 1993).

When framed in the terms of the debate, contrasting patriarchy with female power, the complexity of the multiple power relations embedded in the practice of prostitution is obfuscated, reduced to a simple question of gender inequality. In this study, I view prostitution as a form of labor experienced differently by different women (Shrage 1994), and move beyond such issues, rejecting the false dichotomy of exploitation/liberation. The heterogeneity of sex work is quite visible in the zona, making it difficult to formulate generalizations about prostitution. In this study, I have chosen to use the terms prostitution and sex work interchangeably. Prostitution, defined here as the exchange of sexual services for money, is one form of sex work (different from stripping, phone sex, or participation in pornographic films or still photos).

Yet how does one approach the study of prostitution from a different perspective when the lens of gender is hegemonic? In this study, I rely upon not only feminist theory and gender studies, but also theories of space and place, social control, and class and political economy. But more than

anything, I make use of ethnography.

In his book about poor white sharecroppers in rural Alabama, James Agee writes, “This is a *book* only by necessity” (Agee and Evans 1960[1939]:xv). He continues, “If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement” (Agee and Evans 1960[1939]:12).

Writing this work has been difficult. It is hard and perhaps even wrong to tame and make logical a wildly inconsistent and contradictory reality. As the modern neoliberal project requires a certain taming of chaos, of populations and ideas that threaten the production of hegemony, so too does academic writing call for the management and control of sometimes unruly data. Writing ethnography requires the shaping of disorderly and wonderfully jumbled human experience into linear and orderly knowledge. Writing good ethnography requires doing so without sacrificing the contradictions of human experience or compartmentalizing social facts simply for the sake of analytical coherence.

Though I have some ambivalence about this process of writing and producing knowledge, the dissertation is by necessity organized in the following manner. Chapter 1 examines the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez and its historical place within Chiapas. It explores Tuxtla’s transformation from a hot lowland backwater to a symbol of modernity. The Zona Galáctica is considered as part of Tuxtla’s modern image. Chapter 2 discusses the control and regulation of commercial sex in the modern city. It examines both

clandestine, or street prostitution, as well as the regulated prostitution which occurs in the zona. It also examines cultural beliefs about morality with respect to “visible” prostitution and some of the ironies and contradictions of state efforts at controlling sex work and sex workers. Chapter 3 looks at the conflict between a group of ejidatarios who sought to reclaim the land beneath the zona, the city government, zona landlords, and sex workers. This incident exposes the multiple levels of exploitation present in the Galáctica and firmly places the zona in the context of Mexican neoliberalism. The final three chapters examine more deeply the Galáctica and the lives of the men and women who work and seek distraction there. Chapter 4 explores the lives and roles of the women who work in the zona. It examines both nationality and a worker’s status as pimped or independent in order to better understand complex relationships between work, competition, morality, and domination. Chapter 5 describes the way both workers and clients in the zona negotiate price and services, and more broadly, gender and sexuality. This chapter also examines the construction of desire and the ways in which men in particular “learn” gender and desire in the zona. Chapter 6 explores the complex interplay between sex work, stigma, and money. In examining prostitution as a highly stigmatized form of service sector employment, I illustrate the complexity of power relations in and out of the zona. In this section I argue that the stigma of working as a prostitute is for many workers more difficult than the more obvious hardships of the work, such as having sex with sometimes unsavory strangers or lacking health and retirement benefits.

CHAPTER 1

MODERN SEX IN A MODERN CITY

THE MODERN CITY OF TUXTLA GUTIÉRREZ

Anthropologists and other social scientists have been at work in Chiapas for over half a century; most research has centered upon the indigenous peoples of the Highlands region; the Zapatista uprising extended researchers' field of interest both thematically and geographically.¹³ The rich work produced by scholars over the decades has generated a particular image of Chiapas - a Chiapas which is agricultural, indigenous, impoverished, and deeply conflicted over issues of ethnicity, land, class, and politics. Chiapas is indeed all of these things, but it is also urban, ladino, and for some, a place to seek economic prosperity. This aspect of Chiapas has received less attention from Western anthropologists who historically have come to Chiapas to study indigenous peoples.¹⁴

As capital of the state known as the birthplace of the new Mexican Revolution led by the EZLN, Tuxtla Gutiérrez is perhaps not what many imagine. Located in the hot lowlands of Chiapas, Tuxtla, home to the Zona Galáctica, is a city of nearly half a million people. If Chiapas is, as it came to be

¹³ Writing in the 1980s, Robert Wasserstrom notes, "Perhaps more than any other social group in recent history, the native people of the central Highlands of Chiapas have been subject of a prolonged and continuous scrutiny, of a rigorous examination of the most intimate details of their daily life" (1983:11, translation mine). The Zapatista uprising also generated an abundance of information about Chiapas as international media coverage brought the rebellion to a global audience (see Nash 1997).

¹⁴ There have of course been exceptions to this general trend. See Colby 1966; Siverts ed. 1973; Rus 1997.

known after the uprising, “the other Mexico - backward and left behind” (Cleaver 1994:15), then Tuxtla is, in many ways the other Chiapas.

In 1892, Governor Emilio Rabasa transferred the capital of Chiapas from San Cristóbal de las Casas to Tuxtla with the hopes of ridding the state government of the provincialism and corruption found in the Highlands government, as well as to effect the “geographic reorientation of Chiapas” (Benjamin 1989:42), turning it away from Guatemala and towards Mexico City.¹⁵ The young Rabasa (he became governor at age thirty-five) was less an elected official than an appointed one: he was chosen by President Porfirio Díaz, whose regime (1876-1911) was known for its embrace of economic liberalism, modernization, science, and rational thought, to implement the very values for which the regime stood. Rabasa, writes historian Thomas Benjamin, played a key role in the political modernization of Chiapas (1989:45).

Over a century later, San Cristóbal is still plagued by a reputation for provincialism, while Tuxtla prides itself on its reputation as a modern city. Tuxtla showcases its modernity while San Cristóbal makes much of its colonial roots. In a document written by municipal authorities, Tuxtla is portrayed as a city without a past, an antidote to San Cristóbal, with its indigenous population and colonial architecture, both considered distinctively pre-modern:

¹⁵ Chiapas constituted the northernmost territory of Guatemala until September 14, 1824, when it was annexed by Mexico. The annexation was contested by many, including merchants living outside of the Central Highlands in the cities of Comitán, Tapachula, and Tuxtla who feared that union with Mexico would cut them off from Guatemalan markets while disproportionately favoring the economically powerful elites of San Cristóbal (Benjamin 1989:8).

Outside of the museum, the visitor to Tuxtla will search in vain for signs of the colonial era and vestiges of the Spanish epoch. Tuxtla is like that, it is a very new city, its ancient traces having disappeared with modern urbanization and it would be useless to hope to still find here an atmosphere of centuries past. (H. Ayuntamiento 1988:109, translation mine)

This description of Tuxtla cleanses the city of its colonial past, and of its late nineteenth-century reputation in San Cristóbal as a lowland backwoods town lacking amenities. It was not until the middle of the twentieth-century that Tuxtla truly began to develop the infrastructure characteristic of a modern city. In 1930, the city lacked both a drainage system and paved roads; only the central block had running water, and four medical doctors were all that were available to serve the entire population of Tuxtla and its hinterlands (del Carpio Penagos 1995:78).

Finally, in the 1940s, the state intervened, furthering Tuxtla's "urbanization in order to consolidate it as the worthy capital of the state of Chiapas" (Mérida Mancilla 1995:123); the move coincided with the beginning of the state-led development of Mexico on a national scale. During this period, many of Tuxtla's old and colonial-style buildings were demolished, along with parks, aging hospitals, and decaying markets, all replaced by modern structures, changing greatly the image of the city. The state widened principal roads in order to accommodate automobiles, those "symbols of modernity" (Mérida Mancilla 1995:123) and completed the construction of the

Pan-American Highway in 1942, facilitating Tuxtla's communication with Mexico City and its expansion, as new settlements sprang up in the east and west along the highway's edge.

The 1960's witnessed still greater urbanization and population growth in Tuxtla. An infrastructure of paved roads and electric street lights, along with a new airport, continued to develop and fountains and monuments, symbols of the consolidation of power, were built throughout the city. Tuxtla's main thoroughfare, called Avenida Central in the eastern half of the city and Boulevard Belisario Domínguez in the west, was widened as residential neighborhoods were constructed. Some of these neighborhoods were private *fraccionamientos* or subdivisions while others, such as Colonia Bienestar Social, were state-sponsored sites for public housing. Tuxtla's wealthier residents tended to live in the western half of the city (as they still do), while poorer *Tuxtlecos* (residents of Tuxtla) live in eastern Tuxtla (home to the Zona Galáctica); Tuxtla is very much a city divided by class - even its movie theaters (like sexual services) are class-stratified, ranging from the more expensive, cleaner, air-conditioned cineplex of the central plaza to the poorly maintained, cheaper theaters with sound systems that barely function.

The 1970s have been characterized as a period of "disorderly urban growth." Tuxtla's population surged following the arrival of poor rural migrants, families from the neighboring city of Chiapa de Corzo displaced by an earthquake, and workers from as far away as Guatemala who had come to work building the dam at nearby Chicoasén, part of a massive, state-sponsored hydroelectric complex. Between 1970 and 1980 the number of

residents doubled, reaching nearly 167,000 (H. Ayuntamiento 1988:116-117). Many of these new migrants settled on uncultivated lands in the foothills in the northern and southern sections of the city.

As the debt crisis and economic chaos engulfed Mexico during the 1980s, massive public works projects were undertaken in Tuxtla. During this time, growing economic, social, and political strife besieged rural Chiapas: croplands continued to fall into the hands of large landholders, many of whom raised cattle; authorities jailed campesinos protesting the loss of lands, as the newly militarized state and judicial police repressed dissent; Guatemalan refugees poured into Chiapas, fleeing the murderous military regime of General Efraín Ríos Montt. Government authorities worried about the possibility of insurrection in Chiapas. And so during this period, despite the austerity measures being implemented throughout the nation, the state government in Tuxtla began a campaign to construct a new capital, showcasing state power and the successes of urbanization. It is little surprise that the idea for the construction of state-sponsored prostitution grew out of the period. Public funds were used to remodel the downtown center, construct the Unidad Administrativa, two massive buildings which house many of the offices of the state government. The Museum of Anthropology, the City Theater, and the Libramiento Sur, a wide highway which traverses the city's southern edge were all built in this period.

In many ways Tuxtla stands apart from the agricultural and indigenous Chiapas represented by social scientists who bypass this often maligned city on their way to the Highlands. Writing of Tuxtla in 1939, Graham Greene

referred to it as the “new ugly capital”, suggesting that Chiapas “should be all wild mountain and old churches and swallowed ruins and the Indians plodding by...” (1984 [1939]:194). Tuxtla has no ruins, many of its churches are modern in design, and there is little indigenous presence in the city. Today, Tuxtla’s population is nearly half a million people; its high annual growth rate of 7.3 percent worries public officials as shanties continue to sprout up in the hills overlooking the city. According to the mayor, two-thirds of this population growth stems from migration. Unlike the rest of Chiapas where some 60 percent of the economically active population are employed in primary sector activities such as agriculture, fishing, or cattle-raising, nearly 75 percent of Tuxtlecos earn their living in the commercial and service sectors, with only 4.3 percent engaged in agriculture (INEGI 1993:60). This is not to say that Tuxtlecos are not landholders; many of the city’s wealthy families earn money from rural landholdings and maintain ranches, a status symbol for local elites, in the countryside surrounding the city.

There exists in Tuxtla a highly developed consumer culture and service economy, influenced greatly by the media and the United States. Many consumers from San Cristóbal and elsewhere come to Tuxtla to purchase items and receive services (particularly medical care) unavailable in the Highlands. Tuxtla’s western and wealthier half is home to a Domino’s Pizza, a McDonald’s and a Kentucky Fried Chicken; the latter two have drive-through windows, making consumption as fast and easy (and U.S.-style) as possible. Both of these venues have also made some concessions to local culture: the “No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service” mantra of U.S. fast food

restaurants does not apply in Tuxtla's McDonald's, as small barefoot children belonging to middle-and upper-class families tear through the restaurant and its adjoining playground while their parents order McMexicanas - hamburgers with avocado and salsa. In Kentucky Fried Chicken, now called KFC, the Colonel, whose cultural symbolism would be lost on most Mexicans, has been replaced by a cartoon chicken with very robust pectoral muscles. Directly behind McDonald's is the newly opened Sam's Club, a Wal-Mart affiliated price club, which during the Christmas season offered shoppers pine trees shipped from the United States. A few blocks further west is the Plaza Cristal, an upscale shopping mall with a food court where local middle-class teens gather while their younger, darker skinned, poorer counterparts bag groceries in the large modern grocery that is one of the mall's anchor stores.

Increasing commoditization and U.S. cultural influences also permeate sexuality in Tuxtla. Though the city has long had its share of sex workers and even a soft-core pornographic movie theater located within sight of both the municipal and state government offices, daily newspapers which five years ago had perhaps one or two ads for "hostesses" that provide sexual services now contains pages of such advertisements. The ads often picture blond Hollywood actresses and thin Western fashion models who have come to define new cultural standards of beauty and sexiness.

Tuxtla, despite its Zoque origins, is primarily a ladino city. While over 25 percent of all *Chiapenecos* (residents of Chiapas) over the age of five speak an indigenous language, in Tuxtla this figure is just two percent (INEGI

1993:22).¹⁶ Immigrant Tzotzil and Tzeltal speakers from Highlands communities such as Chamula and Zinacantan now outnumber the few hundred Zoques remaining in Tuxtla. The three groups work primarily in local traditional markets, selling fresh flowers, vegetables, and traditional foods.

While Chiapas is one of Mexico's most impoverished states, Tuxtla is one of the nation's least impoverished municipalities.¹⁷ The infant mortality rate in Tuxtla is 3.8 percent; nationwide this figure is 4.9 percent while in some Chiapas municipalities, such as the indigenous town of Chamula, this figure is 16.8 percent (CIACH 1997:18). Tuxtla boasts the highest rates of literacy in the state and the largest number of prisons (or, as they are called, Centers for Social Rehabilitation). While 33 percent of homes in Chiapas lack electricity (despite the continued operation of the massive hydroelectric complex referred to earlier), in Tuxtla this figure is 3.2 percent; nationally, 12.5 percent of Mexican homes do not have access to electricity (CIACH 1997:40). Tuxtla also boasts the Zona Galáctica, considered by its administrators to be one of the most modern brothels in the nation.

And so, in many ways Tuxtla is "the other Chiapas," contrasting in most respects to the indigenous Chiapas observed by anthropologists over the past five decades and by the media since the EZLN uprising. Yet Tuxtla and its Zona Galáctica are not separate from the political economic trends that

¹⁶ Chiapas is also home to nearly fifteen percent of Mexico's indigenous people (CIACH 1997:87).

¹⁷ Of the 2,403 municipalities in Mexico, Tuxtla ranks just 2,260 in terms of its level of marginality, making it one of the least impoverished of Mexican municipalities (CIACH 1997:7). Indicators for marginality include infant mortality, literacy, employment, and access to electricity and running water.

gave rise to the Chiapas that has become so well-known, but rather were born from these same trends. The same policies that contribute to rural poverty and underdevelopment often contribute to increasing urbanization. Nearly two-thirds of the high population growth in the city is a product of immigration. Despite the city's prosperity, there are plenty of impoverished Tuxtlecos who are unemployed or underemployed, working in the booming informal economy that flourishes in Tuxtla's streets, homes, and brothels. Those living in the shanties in the foothills above the city watch the prosperity from a distance. Below, in the city center, hundreds of people line up each evening outside the public Regional Hospital, waiting for medical care. The police crime pages report stories of robbery and violence as the private security guard industry flourishes. It may be the other Chiapas, but Tuxtla is still Mexico.

THE ZONA GALÁCTICA AND THE MODERNIZATION OF PROSTITUTION

The Zona Galáctica lies four miles away from Tuxtla's bustling city center, down a lonely, bumpy dirt road flanked by vibrant green vegetation, *flamboyán* trees blooming bright orange in the springtime, and the occasional pack of vultures picking apart the carcass of an unfortunate dog. One does not arrive at the zona by chance; rather one must seek it out. Its location is a testimony to the current status of commercial sex throughout much of Mexico: available yet ideally, invisible.

The dirt road, after a mile or so, widens into a large open unpaved lot

where a handful of cars may be parked. Most zona clients do not own their own transportation. Directly in front of the visitor, behind a tall chain link fence that is gated and locked during the day, lies the King Kong, one of the zone's two nightclubs where some sex workers perform striptease. To the right are two small refreshment stands that flank the entry to the Galáctica; one of them is rarely open. In front of the stands, there is a line of microbuses and Volkswagon Beetles that provide transportation for zona clients, workers, and staff. The micros, as they are called, cost four pesos (US\$0.47), and make many stops between downtown Tuxtla and the zona. They provide little anonymity for sex workers and clients, who share the bus with others making shorter trips within the city. The Volkswagens, known as *piratas* (pirate or unlicensed taxicabs), charge five pesos (US\$0.59) and proceed directly to the zona once they are filled; this mode of transportation is generally considered more desirable because it is a quicker and usually more discrete way to arrive at the Galáctica, though if the taxi does not fill up at the taxi stand it will slowly cruise one of Tuxtla's main thoroughfares with a sign in the window that reads "ZONA," which also can lessen the anonymity of both workers and clients.

Outside the main gate there is a large sign that reads in bold black block letters Zona de Tolerancia. The Coca-Cola insignia that used to appear on each side of the sign was painted over following a dispute with the local Coca-Cola distributors over a monetary donation to the zona holiday party (the distributors refused the request for funds). Beneath the large sign there is a smaller one, stating the many rules of the zona. Linger outside the gates

are clients and workers waiting for transportation. Female municipal staff rarely wait in this manner, preferring to remain inside their offices since they generally prefer not to interact with sex workers and clients. They usually exit their office when they hear the horn of the *pirata* or the calls of the teenaged boys who collect bus fares: “*Centro. Centro. There’s still room!*” Carlos, a fourteen-year-old Tzeltal who appears to be nine or ten, stands outside the main gate selling gum, candy, and cigarettes.¹⁸ He is accompanied by Paco, another teenager who sells flavored shaved ices from a bright blue wooden cart.

In order to enter the *zona*, which is open from nine o’clock in the morning until nine in the evening (the two clubs located outside the main gate open at night), clients must purchase a ticket for three pesos (US\$0.35). This ticket, like the garbage cans, street lights, and other municipally funded projects, bears the imprint of the municipal administration, along with the slogan: “Tuxtla needs you. Participate!” Municipal police will then briefly search the client and if he is found to be sober (enough) and free of potential weapons, he will be allowed to enter. Inside the gate are eighteen *módulos* (units), barracks-style buildings, each containing ten rooms. Though the city administers the *zona*, each unit is independently owned. Most owners come to the *zona* only to collect rents, preferring to leave the daily administration of their unit to a hired hand. A few, like Doña Mari, prefer a more hands-on approach, and one, Doña Esperanza actually lives there. Unpopular with many *zona* workers, sex workers say that Doña Esperanza is hated even by her

¹⁸ Many indigenous people appear far younger than they are as children, often due to poor nutrition. I was saddened to find during my last visit to the *zona* in 2001 that Carlos himself had begun to smoke.

own daughter and that she lives in the zona because she has nowhere else to go. Such gossip about Doña Esperanza reveals that it is not simply sex workers who are stigmatized, but also women who do not maintain family ties.

There are three rows of buildings with two wide concrete pathways in between. Each building is constructed to facilitate client browsing as well as surveillance of workers: the three sides of the unit open into a central open air courtyard through which clients may stroll while “shopping.” There are no dark corners or invisible spaces in the zona.

Just inside the main gate are two administrative buildings. The northernmost building houses the Anti-Venereal Medical Service (*Servicios Médicos Anti-Venereos*, SMAV) which is staffed by three medical doctors, two nurses, a chemist, and a secretary. The interior of the SMAV is fairly spartan: a few desks and plastic chairs, and in a small room off to the side, a table for gynecological examinations, a desk, and a chair. Posters advertising birth control and safe sex are taped up here and there along with handwritten signs instructing workers to bring their worker identification cards with them when they come for their weekly gynecological exam. A few plants cling to life in the corners. During the Day of the Dead celebrations, old x-rays were cut up in the shape of bats and hung from the ceiling with strings by someone feeling unusually festive; they remained hanging for quite some time, creating an atmosphere that was more macabre than cheery. The other building is used by the zona administrator (an accountant by training whom everyone refers to as *El Contador* - The Accountant), his secretary, and his two assistants, along with the municipal police. This building also contains two

small jail cells used to detain troublesome clients and workers. Just outside the cells is a large room with two long tables and a few chairs, used for classes in adult education.

Aside from prostitutes and municipal staff, many other Tuxtlecoc earn their income in the zona. Scattered throughout the Galáctica are small stands where vendors sell food, refreshments, toilet paper, bleach, candles, and music cassettes. Nearly all of the food vendors are gay men who find that the Galáctica, being a tolerance zone where hegemonic norms of sexuality and gender may be challenged, is one of the few places in the city where they can express fully their sexual orientation as they choose without fear of excessive harassment or abuse. Many of these workers wear earrings and aprons. Others who earn income in the zona are visiting ambulatory vendors and shoe-shine boys who must receive permission and pay a fee in order to work, middle-aged mustachioed twin brothers with kind eyes who form the zona's municipal janitorial staff, and privately hired janitors who work for the owners of the buildings and also perform errands for the workers (such as the elderly man nicknamed Snubnose for obvious reasons, and Roberto, a young gay man from Guatemala who formerly worked selling sexual services in Cancún).

While the ways in which the work of the female prostitutes of the zona supports their individual kin are readily apparent, less visible is the way in which the prostitution of the zona women has become entrenched in the local economy, generating a flow of material resources upon which families

throughout the city rely for economic survival.¹⁹ Though it represents only a small part of the city's booming service sector, the economic opportunity offered by the zona is crucial for many Tuxtlecos.

Commodified sexual relations have a lengthy history in Mexico; ask any Tuxtleco about prostitution and he or she is likely to comment, "It has always existed." But referring to prostitution as "the world's oldest profession," as the tired expression goes, dehistoricizes sex work, failing to account for how the practice changes and the ways in which it is shaped by time, space, and culture. Prostitution becomes essentialized, inevitable and unchanging. While prostitution has a long history in Mexico (historical evidence suggests that commercial sex existed in pre-Conquest times [see Clendinnen 1991]), the ways in which it has been practiced, regulated, and perceived varies in space and time. Prostitution is constantly being shaped and reshaped by politics, economy, and culture.

Indeed, the "modernity" of regulated prostitution, a belief popularized during the last quarter of the nineteenth century (particularly during the Porfiriato) and found once again in contemporary Tuxtla, has not been uniformly supported and practiced since the late nineteenth century campaigns of economic liberalism and social order. As Katherine Bliss points out, during the revolutionary period in Mexico City, some activists and reformers who sought to bring the benefits of the revolution to the popular classes and redeem "fallen women" believed that regulated prostitution was not simply anti-revolutionary, but also "antimodern" (2001:15), associated as

¹⁹ While it could be argued that the consumption of sexual services by clients has a negative economic effect upon their families, the low prices charged by Zona workers make their services available even to men of few means. The poorest of the poor do not frequent the zona.

it was with Porfirian corruption and authoritarianism. Prostitution during this time was not seen as inevitable, but rather as something which could be eradicated were the goals of the revolution fulfilled.

In contemporary Mexico there exists no federal law against prostitution; rather it is legislated by state governments and administered by municipalities. Currently 13 of Mexico's 31 states use what is referred to by theorists of prostitution as the regulationist method to control commercial sex.²⁰ In contrast to the "abolitionist" stance, which seeks to prevent the existence of commodified sex in any form, regulationists seek to control sex work and workers through confinement to a particular space (tolerance zone), medical examination, and registration. Not surprisingly, the modern tolerance zones in Mexico emerged during the Porfiriato, a period (not unlike the current one) in which the state was known for its economic liberalism, conservative views regarding sexuality, family, and alcohol consumption, and its embrace of science, positivism, and modernization. As economic and social crisis accompanied Porfirian "modernization," the numbers of women working as prostitutes in Mexico increased (Bliss 2001:11; see also McCreery 1987). During this period, to many middle-class Porfirians, the prostitute became a "symbol of lower -class transience, immorality, and separateness" (French 1992:543). Regulating the prostitute through health inspections, registration, and confinement was considered indispensable to conserve order and protect public health.

The first tolerance zones, known as district zones, were located on the

²⁰ As Katherine Bliss (2001:2) notes, Mexico's experimentation with regulation prostitution began in 1865, when the first formal system of regulation, originating in Europe, was imposed during French occupation.

borders of tourist and shopping districts, most commonly in northern Mexico. Prostitutes were removed from the city center streets, bars, and cafes and subjected to increasing regulation and control. Compound zones, like the Zona Galáctica, appeared later; the compound zones, located far outside the periphery of the city, invisible to the citizenry, began to appear as early as the 1940s, as a response to resident and government concerns about social hygiene and public image to tourists (Curtis and Arreola 1991). As in Tuxtla, these zones often co-exist with the “clandestine,” unregulated and illicit prostitution that occurs in streets, hotels, bars, and private homes throughout urban Mexico. The existence of such zones are dependent upon state and local politics; the zone in Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo, was closed by the state following the election of a governor who was staunchly abolitionist. It was later reopened.

The Zona Galáctica brought to fruition Governor González Garrido's dream of modernizing sex work in Chiapas. The city's previous red-light district, El Cocal, was considered anything but modern. Located in southwestern Tuxtla, El Cocal had been operating since the early 1980s, when private landowners had begun to build rooms to house prostitutes on a piece of land that was at the time on the outskirts of the city. El Cocal grew in a disorderly fashion. As landlords built poorly constructed rooms when finances permitted, the district took on a shantytown appearance. Many workers remember it as an ugly place that was poorly lit and sometimes felt unsafe. As in the current zona, the clientele consisted mostly of men of the laboring classes along with some lower-middle class white collar workers and

teenaged boys from well-to-do families. There was no police presence and little municipal intervention in El Cocal, which functioned as a private enterprise; though workers were supposed to register with the city's Department of Public Health and travel to the city center to receive medical examinations, there was no on-site administration to enforce such rules.

As Tuxtla continued to grow rapidly, El Cocal soon became engulfed by urban growth and was increasingly visible to residents of Tuxtla. City officials and complaining residents alike considered the situation unseemly. In 1991, the *priista* municipal government, acting in conjunction with the *priista* state, expropriated the land beneath El Cocal, demolished the buildings, and created a new district. The new municipally administered Zona Galáctica was discretely located out on the old road to Cupia, far from the city center and invisible to the public. Tuxtla's current Director of Public Health reasons that the Galáctica was built in order to "decrease rape and street crime and to decrease the number of *sexoservidoras* [sex workers] in the city."

Interestingly, along with the modernization of the sex industry, there has developed in Tuxtla a modern vocabulary of sexual commerce which now includes words such as *sexoservidoras* and *trabajadores sexuales* [sex workers]; though the term prostitute continues to be used, sex workers in the zona and administrators alike use these terms as well.²¹ Yet these terms do not suggest greater acceptance or diminished stigmatization of the women to whom these labels apply; while the use of these terms by sex workers themselves may be

²¹ Other segments of the sex industry have also adopted English words to describe services. The Gitano, a nightclub located within the Galáctica, offers a *Show Table Dance, Estilo Las Vegas* [Las Vegas Style Table Dance Show]. Its advertisement lets customers know in English that there is "No Cover." Furthermore, massage parlors that offer male customers hand manipulation refer to the service in English as "relax."

preferable to words such as prostitute or whore, I suggest that the use of these terms is more another way to sanitize and modernize commercial sex in Mexico than it is a legitimization of prostitution as work.

Sitting in Pepe's open air food stand inside the zona, Doña Blanca, a former landlord in El Cocal and current owner in the Galáctica, recalled the city's actions, bitterly describing the way she had been given only seventy-two hours to vacate her premises. The wrecking crews, she said, demolished one of her rooms before she was able to remove the contents. Pepe, busy behind the counter preparing tacos, threw his hands up in the air and chimed in (as he was prone to do), "And they haven't even built anything on that land. It's a dump!"

The destruction of El Cocal and its replacement by the Zona Galáctica transformed organized prostitution in Tuxtla from a largely private unregulated and uncontrolled industry to a public-private partnership operated both by the city and private landlords. Many of the landlords who purchased buildings in the Galáctica were formerly landlords in El Cocal. This new arrangement effectively gave the city control over commercial sex and those who profit from it, bringing it into the formal market economy. This arrangement also freed the city from accusations of *lenoncinio*, or pimping. By maintaining private ownership of the buildings in which the women worked, the city was able to maintain its distance from pimping, an activity considered deplorable by nearly all Tuxtlecos (while prostitution is not considered a crime, the pimping of street workers is). Building owners do not, of course, refer to themselves as pimps, but they are referred to as such in

many city documents, as it is they who directly earn money from the sex workers through collection of exorbitant rents of up to US\$4.70 a day. The city, on the other hand, earns three pesos (US\$0.35) for each client who enters, one peso (US\$0.12) for each automobile, rents from vendors, and worker payments for medical laboratory fees. City officials claim the Galáctica is not a great source of revenue, as the expenses of administering the zone are relatively high. My own examination of their accounting books seems to support this claim. The benefits of the Galáctica for the city and state perhaps relate more to social hygiene and control of the poor and “deviant,” providing a showcase for modernity and state power.

The site chosen for the Zona Galáctica was four hectares of land on the city’s eastern edge which belonged to the *ejido* Francisco I. Madero.²² In early September 1991, a deal was struck between the city, the state and the ruling body of Francisco I. Madero, known as the Ejido Commission. Documents in the municipal archives describe the deal as an exchange of land for “works of infrastructure, consisting of the construction of a recreational park, expansion of the water and drainage systems, the paving of one road, and the construction of a bridge...” (Archivo de la Zona Galáctica, n.d.). Documents emanating from the Ejido Commission described the deal as a donation of land to priista Municipal President Esquinca Méndez and Governor González Garrido. As will be shown in subsequent pages, this land exchange would come to play a crucial role in understanding the Zona Galáctica and its place

²² The *ejido* system is a form of communal land-holding in Mexico. This system of landholding was protected by Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, which stated that such communal lands could not be sold, bought, or rented. The article was reversed in 1992 by Carlos Salinas de Gortari in order to prepare the groundwork for the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the opening up of communal lands to private enterprise and agribusiness.

in modern Tuxtla.

Though the city government is entirely responsible for the day to day operations and administration of the zone, the state did play a crucial role in the opening and naming of the Galáctica. It is said that the Galáctica was named by Governor González Garrido; tales and jokes regarding his reasoning abound: One city official suggests the name has something to do with women's breasts: "Galáctica. Lactic. Milk. Breast milk. Breasts. Get it?" His logic is not convincing. Another doctor jokes that it has something to do with the former governor's rumored homosexuality; *puto*, a word used to describe both gay men and male prostitutes, rhymes with Pluto, the planet. Pluto is part of the solar system, hence the name Galáctica. The word "galactic" itself, with its futuristic sensibility, conveys a sense of the modern, conjuring up space-imagery.

Whatever the reasoning, the name is fitting, as the Galactic Zone, is in many ways other-worldly. Brothels, like military bases, are, as Cynthia Enloe suggests "artificial societies created out of unequal relations..." (1989:2). Upon entering the zona, one is struck by how sharply it contrasts with not only Tuxtla, but with Chiapas as a whole. There are elements in the zona that one would find in any Mexican city: street vendors, the occasional shoe-shine boy, a few stray lactating dogs (though the puppies are never seen), men and women coming and going, music playing, the scent of tacos in the air. But certain features are missing: the sight of ongoing construction projects, so common in Mexico, is absent. Every building is painted: red, tan, light blue, bright blue, yellow and kelly green, Pepto-Bismo pink, orange and black, or

some equally unlikely combination of colors. This contrasts greatly with Tuxtla's poorer neighborhoods that are the grim grey of concrete or dull brown of scavenged wood. There are no street children begging or blind men playing musical instruments. And the place is exceedingly clean: there is no stray garbage to be found anywhere.

A "city" of sex run by the state, the zona, as a place, is quite unlike most places. It is a public-private enterprise where men come to spend money, learn desire, and enact cultural ideals with respect to gender and sexuality. The women of the zona, in contrast, come to earn money while acting outside the boundaries of acceptable behavior. The work of Michel Foucault provides some insights into the nature of the Galáctica. The zona, I suggest, qualifies as what Michele Foucault calls a *heterotopia*, that is, places

which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality (Foucault 1986:24).

The Zona Galáctica may be considered a crisis heterotopia (a venerated place used by individuals experiencing cultural transformation such as adolescents or pregnant women) as many individuals who visit the zona are young men seeking (or sometimes being forced into, by friends or male relatives) their first sexual experience. Like the menstruating woman or

expectant mother, he is in a state of cultural crisis and will undergo imminent transformation, ritually passing from one stage of life to another. Yet the zona is also a heterotopia of “deviance” where individuals (prostitutes, clients with “perverse” desires, homosexual food vendors dabbling in transvestism) whose behavior falls far from the expected norm are confined. In this sense it is a “modern” heterotopia in which those considered deviant are placed: asylums, prisons, and even retirement homes (the idleness of the elderly may be considered deviant within an economic system that prizes productivity) (Foucault 1986:24).

The Galáctica is at once isolated (located on the periphery of the city, accessible only by one road and a single entrance / exit), and penetrable by people who desire to come and go, but who first must “submit to rites” (the frisking of the client before he enters) and “purifications” (the sex worker must undergo frequent medical examinations in order to be permitted to work). Like the Galáctica, heterotopic sites, according to Foucault, are also characterized by a particular “system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory [like a barracks or a prison]...or else the individual has to submit to rites [and] purifications...” (1986:26).

The zona could easily be both a “space of illusion” and “another real space, as perfect, meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed and jumbled” (1986:27): illusion is created as men realize their fantasies in a space quite unlike the rest of their world. Yet the zona is also a real space that

seeks perfection, where sexual relations are ideally regulated, uncomplicated, and sanitized. Indeed, the zona is a city far cleaner and more orderly than much of Tuxtla and Chiapas. Each room is equipped with indoor plumbing and television, walkways are paved, and consumers can purchase food, sex, and and music in a relatively safe environment. The zona as a place lies in stark contrast to many of the cities and towns of Chiapas, one of Mexico's poorest states.

Yet, despite both the intriguing insights that the work of Michel Foucault provides and the utopian tendencies and aspirations of the Galáctica, the zona is a real place troubled by real problems.²³ It is a heterotopia marred by inequalities of gender, class, and more subtly, ethnicity. During its first years (1992-1995), the Galáctica, administered by the priista municipal government, was plagued by problems. The atmosphere, in one worker's words, was "a drag" (she said that I would not have liked it and would have been unable to conduct my research unmolested, as I generally did). It is perhaps these early years that established the zona's reputation as an "ugly place" to city residents, though the zona could often be quite pleasant, particularly on slow, warm mornings when groups of women would gather at Pepe's food stand, eating papaya freshly picked from one of the nearby trees.

During the priista period, alcohol was sold in the zona (which conflicts

²³ There has been much recent discussion of the applicability and relevance of the work of theorists such as Foucault who are popular among practitioners of what is called the "new cultural history" of Mexico (see Haber 1999; Knight 2002; Mallon 1999; Van Young 1999). In his recent essay on Mexican historiography Alan Knight views the debate as one polarized between the "narrow positivism" of critics of new cultural history, such as Stephen Haber, and the "fashionable postmodernism" of the new cultural historians (2002:136). Like Knight, I reject this false dichotomy. When I wish to examine the zona as a place of illusion, a utopic site, Foucault's insights work quite nicely. And when I wish to further interrogate the zona as a place of class inequalities and gendered struggle, I simply look elsewhere for insights.

with the initial proposals of the 1989 Proyecto Zona Rosa). Some workers recall those days fondly, remembering how clients would often buy them drinks. Immediately after the Zapatista uprising, truckfuls of soldiers would arrive with pesos to spend on drinks for both themselves and the workers. But some workers, along with landlords and the administration within the zona, felt the consumption of alcohol was excessive, often leading to violence and arguments among and between both workers and clients. On April 7, 1994, Enrique López Peña, the lead administrator of the zona, sent a letter to Municipal Secretary Hermann Hoppenstedt Pariente, asking that something be done about *El Pollo Galáctico* (The Galactic Chicken), a restaurant within the zone that was “selling alcoholic beverages in excess to all clients that frequent the place as well as to the prostitutes that work here, and they violate the dry law [which prohibits the sale of alcoholic beverages on election day and other national political holidays] and the rule of no serving after 6 p.m.” (Archivo de la Zona Galáctica). The city government did not consider the problems of the Galáctica a priority, as two weeks later, López Peña sent another, slightly more desperate letter, stating “...we have not had an answer from you and the [Galactic Chicken] continues violating the rules of this administration...”.

Governor González Garrido’s dream of modernizing and controlling commercial sex in the state was not fully realized in the Galáctica. The city’s efforts at making sex safer by providing condoms to clients at the gate, for example, were not terribly effective. In the early days, clients received a condom at the main gate when purchasing their entry ticket. Clients were

given neither instructions, education, nor incentive to use the condoms. They often ended up unused in municipal garbage pails or were turned into toys, being blown up like balloons by clients. The opening of the Galáctica did not cleanse the city center of sex workers. Clandestine prostitutes, male and female, continued to work throughout the city, and the number of rooms in the zona was insufficient to house all the displaced *Cocalitas* (women who worked in El Cocal). In its early years, the Anti-Venereal Medical Service lacked furnishings and medical equipment, and most interestingly, a gynecologist. As noted in the municipal archives, "The boss of the Anti-Venereal Medical Service of the Municipality is not the proper person to perform this job. Said position is occupied by dentist Richard Cruz Coello." Of course, many of these problems were resolved with time, and the dentist, whom many of the workers remember fondly - Mónica smiles to show the work he did on her teeth - was eventually replaced by a medical doctor.

Currently, the zona is managed by the panista municipal government, as it has been since 1995. The current administration, which entered office in 1998, is led by a young panista gynecologist, as is the Department of Public Health. The administration, it would seem, was designed to run the zona. Many policy changes came with the conservative PAN: alcohol was banned entirely in the zona, and following a strike by sex workers (described in the following chapter), condoms were given directly to the women rather than to the clients.

Yet despite the efforts of the city to control and regulate prostitution (and in doing so, further cleansing and modernizing the city) through the

construction of the Zona Galáctica, clandestine or unregulated sexual commerce continued to grow throughout the city. As population growth and poverty challenged municipal attempts to decrease visible prostitution in the city center, authorities intensified their attention to the men and women who work selling sex in Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

CHAPTER 2

RAIDS, RULES, AND RESISTANCE: THE REGULATION OF COMMERCIAL SEX

It is not a witchhunt. -Tuxtla's Director of Public Health, on raids of street prostitutes

It is 12:30 a.m. on a Saturday and the municipal Department of Public Health, working in conjunction with the municipal police, are readying to hold an *operativo*, or raid, against the unregistered prostitutes who work the city center, part of the city's new campaign against clandestine prostitution. The raids are an expression not only of state power, but also of masculinity: it is men who conduct the raids against women and other men who contradict norms of masculinity by dressing as women and having sex with other men. Though officials claim the rounding up of suspected unregistered sex workers is a means of controlling prostitution and securing public health, it is more a carnivalesque, game-like display of power, a way to harass poor women and men through detention and the gathering of information, and to create the illusion of the control of visible prostitution by the state, than an effective means of protecting the health of Tuxtlecos.

I was invited by municipal officials to come along and observe a raid, an event that one doctor from the zona described as "fun." Atop a hill overlooking the western half of the city are two red pick-up trucks that belong to Public Health, a paddywagon, and an official police pick-up truck. I sit in one of the red trucks, intermittently chatting with people participating in the

raid and napping. The cars are parked along the road leading to the Camino Real, the city's finest hotel, which boasts a waterfall and swimming pool surrounded by a lush garden. Also along this road is the popular upscale nightclub, La Uno. Often the dark road is lined with parked cars; groups of young people who cannot afford to get drunk inside La Uno sometimes sit on the hoods of their cars drinking beer purchased at a small shop.

On this evening the road is crowded with vehicles, yet there are few people out drinking by their cars. Those people who were drinking have their cases of Dos Equis beer and a few bottles of rum seized by the authorities. The other owners of the cars are all inside La Uno due to the evening's special event: through the fogged glass walls of the club one can see the dancing, flesh-colored shadows of nearly nude men, their muscular torsos twisting and hips gyrating. They are surrounded by the darker shadows of women, arms outstretched, screaming with glee. "For Women Only," a traveling male strip-tease show, has arrived in Tuxtla.²⁴

As the Tuxtlecas inside the nightclub express their culturally circumscribed sexual desire and fantasy in a socially sanctioned way (though some men I spoke with said they did not want their wives to attend), the caravan of municipal vehicles begins speeding down the hill towards the San Remo nightclub, a place notorious for commercial sex, located on Boulevard Belisario Domínguez, Tuxtla's main thoroughfare. Standing at the bustop across from the club are three women. Jacobo, a city health inspector whose

²⁴ While the PAN is generally known for its conservatism regarding issues of gender and sexuality, there is a great deal of regional difference in how the party operates. Around this time a similar male striptease show was banned in the more conservative PANista city of Guadalajara.

girlfriend Flor works as a prostitute in the zona, slams on the brakes of the pick-up we are in and the other city workers jump out of the bed of the truck and run towards the three women, who also begin to run. The other vehicles in the caravan have also stopped as police and health inspectors dash across the street to the San Remo. All traffic on the boulevard has come to a halt. The sex workers, mostly women on this evening, are being rounded up and put into a police vehicle and into the backs of pick-up trucks. Some are crying. Others look confused. The manager of the San Remo is taking photographs. The entire event is being videotaped by a young man from the city's Office of Social Communication. In recent months the new administration has had some street workers file complaints against it with the State Commission on Human Rights (*Centro Estatal de Derechos Humanos, CEDH*); the videotaping, it is hoped, will protect the city from further accusations and future legal troubles.

The women rounded up are brought to the *Centro Reclusorio por Faltas Administrativas* (Jail for Minor Offenses; a *falta administrativa* is similar to a misdemeanor offense such as public drunkenness or disorderly conduct) where they are registered and put into a holding cell for the evening. The city workers then head back to La Uno to wait for the next raid, which will take place when the bar closes and customers and sex workers spill out into the streets to make last minute deals. There is anticipation in the air. I am surprised and ashamed to find that though I strongly disagree with the rounding-up of street workers, I share this anticipation, which is a powerful force. Police and health inspectors coordinate with one another via radio. At

three o'clock in the morning we once again speed down the hill to the San Remo. A siren sits quietly on the dashboard of the truck I am in, broken. It is the sort that plugs into the lighter and the inspectors, who at times seem boyishly excited about their roles in the raids, were fiddling with it earlier in an effort to repair it.

Despite the lack of the siren, the scene outside the nightclub is loud and chaotic. Women are being taken by the arms and walked to city vehicles. For some reason, there are no male transvestite prostitutes arrested on this night. Prospective clients as well as men simply out for the evening stand about watching. Journalists, most likely tipped off by the city in order to have their efforts well-publicized, have arrived and are snapping photographs and filming. The women in the back of the pick-up trucks are visible and unprotected. They duck their heads and cover their faces. One woman walks by, an inspector holding her arm, and a rose in her hand, and asks sadly, "Why me?" A man who is likely a pimp lingers about, asking where the women are being taken.

The disciplining of women who subvert social norms by selling sex in the streets begins not in the holding center, but in the pick-up truck where they are filmed, photographed, and exposed, losing the anonymity associated with clandestine prostitution. The beds of the trucks are now filled with women, who are prevented from jumping out by male health inspectors and police who sit on the edge of the flatbed. One woman mistakes me for a sex worker and asks why I am allowed to ride inside the cab of the truck instead of the back. Rather than heading directly to the holding pen, the truck I am in

slowly cruises east along Avenida Central, looking for both female prostitutes and a well-known gay male transvestite prostitute who goes by the name *La Aceituna* (the olive). The women must endure being paraded through town as part of their punishment. Inside the cab of the truck the inspectors scan the streets, on the lookout for more street workers. A woman in a black minidress walks quickly into a *taqueria* and one of the inspectors says, "There's one" but keeps driving. I find my own eyes scanning the streets, searching, and fear that if I see a sex worker I too will unintentionally cry out, "There's one," so I place a finger across my lips in an effort to keep them closed. In the back of the truck, a few women are crying. But as we near the cemetery, somebody shouts out, *Baja en la parada!* (Getting off at the stop! - how one asks to be let off public transportation) and suddenly everyone, men and women begin to laugh, their white teeth bright on this near full moon night.

As a group, the women do not quietly accept their fate. Rather they shout, negotiate, and complain. On this outing, eighteen women have been rounded up and will be registered. Waiting to be processed, the large group is gathered in the small front room of the Centro Reclusorio. A few women stand at the window, speaking to a small group of men who are on the street outside. These are their pimps, and they have come to pay their fines and get them released. A man well into his sixties offers to pay my fine and I politely decline his offer. The group is loud and angry. Though I don't feel unsafe standing among them, one inspector leads me away a few feet, warning that they may hit me. As they are trapped within this small room, the press takes

pictures. Some scream about the presence of the press, who are then asked to leave. Others threaten to file a complaint with the CEDH. One woman appears very pregnant. Somebody is calling for cold water.

The detainees are processed in the following way: first they must answer a series of questions regarding name, age, address, and place of origin. The woman stands next to a desk as four men, some police, some health inspectors, sit, questioning, listening and writing. The scene is a highly gendered display of power - on this evening those exercising power are male and those on the receiving end are female. An officer standing behind the desk searches each detainee's purse and puts the contents in a clear plastic bag. None of the women carries condoms. An inspector says that many workers make the client buy them and many more, he says with a laugh, do it "au naturel - it feels better." The detainee then signs a number of forms. Some cannot write. The forms are not read to the women nor are they given time to read them themselves. An officer takes the woman's photograph.

The women are more assertive in a group; as they are processed individually, there is less resistance. Some refuse to look into the camera. One woman holds her long dark hair across her face as though it were a veil, leaving only her eyes visible. At one point she removes it to make a funny face and stick out her tongue at the group of police and inspectors. As she goes to sign the documents she seats herself on the lap of one of the policemen, laughing. An inspector turns to me and says with a laugh, "Affectionate, isn't she?" Next, the detainee is led to a small room to be visually examined by a doctor in order to make sure that she had not been bruised or beaten during

the course of the raid, another effort by the local government to stave off accusations of human rights violations.²⁵ The detainee is then walked to a common holding cell. Across from this cell is another cell for men, many of whom are quite drunk, singing songs, and shouting about the prostitutes. The detainees will pay a fine and be released early in the morning, only to return to the streets for work in the evening, much to the chagrin of city officials.

The raids upon clandestine prostitutes and the control of prostitution in general are expressions of power that reinforce already existing inequalities of gender and class. It is working women who are subject to arrest, not their male pimps nor their male clients. The raids are a reflection of the moral double standard that punishes poor women but not the men, who either as entrepreneurs (pimps) or clients, profit from or pay for their labor. The raids also are an effort at cleansing the city of both “dangerous” and less than “modern” elements which includes not only prostitutes but unregulated street vendors of all kinds. In her work on Ciudad Juárez, geographer Melissa Wright (2002) describes the clandestine prostitute as “pre-modern,” a stumbling block in municipal efforts to create cleaner and safer public spaces. By making such women invisible, by controlling their movements and their sexual-economic activities, Tuxtla’s image as a modern city remains intact.

VISIBILITY AND THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL

Unregulated clandestine prostitution is common in Tuxtla, and while

²⁵ Ironically, during a year in the field among pimps, consumers of sexual services, and a wide assortment of undesirable men, this doctor in charge of inspecting the women to make sure they were not assaulted, was in my estimation, among the least principled characters I had met.

there are no statistics on the number of unregistered men and women working in the city's sex industry, they certainly outnumber the legal zona workers. The city maintains that through their raids they are not trying to eradicate prostitution or punish prostitutes, but rather to regulate and control prostitution, in the process making it less visible. As one public health official states, "It is not that we want to punish them. What we want is to register them." Municipal authorities often stated it was not prostitution that they were against, but unregulated prostitution. While it is generally understood by city officials that the women work in the industry because of "socioeconomic difficulties," efforts to control and regulate commercial sex fail to address this root cause.²⁸ According to Tuxtla's Director of Public Health, the primary motivation for registering street workers is one of public health, in particular of being able to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, especially AIDS.

Yet the raids have little affect upon the transmission of sexually transmitted disease. Writing of the origins of the Contagious Disease Acts in Great Britain (passed in 1864, 1866, and 1869 and repealed in 1886), Judith Walkowitz writes that the ostensible "goal" of the acts to control venereal disease in military men, was undermined since they were applied primarily to women and never required the medical examination of men (1980:3). As in Victorian Britain, the raids do not call for the medical examination of male consumers of commercial sex. Furthermore, they do not (and legally cannot)

²⁸ Within the city government there is some conflict over the causes of prostitution. During a visit with public officials, the mayor described prostitution as "an economic problem and a moral problem" while the Director of Public Health strongly and quickly disagreed with the characterization of commercial sex as a "moral problem."

require the mandatory medical testing and treatment of clandestine sex workers. Like the Contagious Disease Acts, what the raids express is “a new enthusiasm for state intervention into the lives of the poor on medical and sanitary grounds” (Walkowitz 1980:71). It is not surprising that during a time of rapid population growth, fueled in part by rural to urban migration, increasing immiseration of the population, and profound political changes, including revolution, that the municipal government began a more structured program of raids upon clandestine sex workers. This new program also coincided with the land conflict occurring in the zona, as we shall see in the following chapter.

But the question of visibility is also an important one; much official discourse surrounding clandestine prostitution focuses not simply upon health, but also upon the spatial regulation of prostitution. It was not until the 18th century that urban planning and architecture began to play a prime role in the conscious creation of the moral and orderly city, when the perceived problems of urban life (order, hygiene, epidemic disease, and political turmoil) were first met with spatial solutions (Rabinow 1984). I attended many official government meetings where city officials often referred to clandestine prostitution as “out of context” and the need to place unregulated workers in “appropriate places.”

To many Tuxtlecó and the city government, visible prostitution represents social disorder, chaos, immorality, and potential disease. It is considered a pollutant, and pollution, as Mary Douglas (1966) suggests, has much to do with morals. When practiced publicly, prostitution is

transformed from a *mal necesario* (necessary evil) into an unclean and dangerous anomaly, into “matter out of place” or as Douglas says, “dirt”:

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt, there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systemic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements (Douglas 1966:35).

Visible commercial sex, is considered unsightly, dangerous, and wrong; it is a challenge to a pattern of “tidily ordered ideas and values” and therefore must be approached through order (Douglas 1966:39-40). The raids against street prostitutes, then, are part of this effort to maintain not simply social and symbolic order in the city by maintaining what is “clean” and fitting while segregating or eliminating social anomalies.

Each month the Department of Public Health receives numerous complains from city residents. Among the list of grievances are the clandestine raising and slaughtering of pigs within private homes, street dogs, bats, *aguas negras* (sewage), septic tank problems, public urination outside of

a rental hall for parties where there is only one bathroom, the unusual case of a man who defecates in the street in front of his dwelling every morning, and public prostitution.

While complaints regarding pig slaughtering or black waters outnumber those concerning prostitution by two to one, in 1999, the Department of Public Health for the first time created a separate file for complaints about prostitution, reflecting the city's new interest in controlling clandestine sex work. Despite the withdrawal of the state from certain arenas of the economy, in neoliberal times, there is continued and even growing state involvement in issues of social hygiene, public order, and sanitation; globally, it has become the responsibility of the state to cleanse cityscapes and to lay the groundwork for a social order that will support the new economic order.²⁷

Complainants, both male and female, are generally concerned with visible prostitution that takes place in bars, streets, and private homes throughout the city. Such complaints are generally filed not by wealthy residents of Tuxtla, as they are protected from such scandal since visible prostitution tends to occur in working-class neighborhoods and in public spaces such as the city's central plaza. In many complaints, prostitution is linked to other forms of perceived delinquency and immorality, such as the illegal sale of alcoholic beverages, noise, fighting, and scandalous behavior

²⁷ During my first meeting with Tuxtla's new mayor, he showed me a promotional video he had made of some early successes of his administration. I was most struck by the repetitive footage of a garbage truck moving through the city at night, a great source of pride for the administration. Incidentally, the mayor told me that he was quite impressed with the administration of New York City's Rudy Giuliani, whose tenure was marked by the cleansing of New York's streets, often at the expense of the poor.

which endangers both minors and “public morals.” Describing the teenaged prostitutes who work in a clandestine bar in her neighborhood, one complainant wrote, “They come out and stand in the doorway almost nude. There are families with boys and girls that play in the street or pass by there and some even stop to look at the *chicas*. And besides, they create an uproar...”

There are no complaints about the Zona Galáctica or the activities there. Prostitution is generally an accepted (and sometimes valued) element of Mexican culture, as long as it is confined and invisible. This confinement of people and activities deemed immoral in turn, helps to create a “moral” city.

While the city’s response to unregulated prostitution is purportedly motivated by concern for public health and social hygiene, the raids against street workers do not serve this purpose. Sex workers detained by local authorities are given neither the information (discussion, pamphlets, etc.) nor the means (condom distribution) to protect themselves and others. Furthermore, though the authorities aim to register female sex workers, there are few empty rooms in the Galáctica, the city’s only legal zone; there are certainly not enough rooms to accommodate the numbers of individuals who work Tuxtla’s streets, bars, and hotels.

The raids are, more than anything, an attempt to spatially control the activities of commercial sex workers. “Immoral” populations have long been confined to peripheral areas lacking economic and political power (Symanski 1981; Marín Hernández 1994) and efforts to regulate or eradicate commercial

sex are often spatial (Curtis and Arreola 1991; Gilfoyle 1992). In Tuxtla, city officials wish to remove prostitution from public view, making invisible men and women who are “pre-modern” symbols of social decay and disorder while making visible the power of the state through a well publicized campaign against street prostitution. Just as the illusion of intimacy is created in commercial sexual relations, the state, in its effort to control those relations, builds an illusion of stability, progress, and order to counteract the disorder of growing poverty and the visible manifestations of poverty: prostitution, street vending, homelessness, the growth of shantytowns and so on.

Furthermore, the raids are an effective means of gathering information about Tuxtla’s population of commercial sex workers in an effort to transform them from casual, part-time sex workers to full-time prostitutes; from “delinquents” laboring in the informal economy to disciplined workers. For many street workers, selling sex is a casual activity that they may engage in sporadically in order to earn money in times of crisis. Some street workers work nights in order to supplement a low-paying day job or, as in the case of Ernesto, to pay for their education. Others work more frequently, but unlike the women of the zona, who may work from nine o’clock in the morning until the late afternoon, often work shorter shifts. There is then, a continuum from part to full-time work. All of the zona workers are full-time sex workers. This is less often the case for street workers.

The regulationist system, with its registration, testing, and confinement of sex workers, creates prostitutes. Workers in the Galáctica are

women who for a variety of reasons have opted for the legal zona and to some degree acknowledge their role as full-time sex workers. In contrast, unregulated workers, particularly those that practice prostitution as a casual activity, need not recognize, admit, or concede that they are prostitutes. This creation of prostitutes through regulation and confinement is not a new phenomenon. According to Donna Guy (1988:61), the regulationist movement in late 19th century Buenos Aires transformed a casual, informal economic activity into a permanent and highly stigmatized one which had little impact on actually improving public health or the lives of sex workers. The passage of the Contagious Disease Acts in Great Britain during the same era affected poor women in a similar way, calling for medical and police supervision of workers, which “created an outcast class of ‘sexually deviant’ females, forcing prostitutes to acknowledge their status as ‘public’ women and destroying their private associations with the general community of the laboring poor” (Walkowitz 1980:5).

The role male transvestite prostitutes played during this time of heightened attention to clandestine commercial sex reveals much about cultural views regarding homosexuality, the state, public considerations of what constitutes “acceptable” commercial sex, and the political mobilization of workers despite their economic competition against one another. Gay male transvestite prostitutes (*travestis*) are not allowed to work in the Zona Galáctica. According to Juana Ramos, the doctor who performs the medical examinations in the SMAV, the sex workers of the Galáctica feel threatened by the travestis, who often are considered much more attractive than zona

women. "They maintain themselves very well," said the doctor. This characterization of travestis as more attractive than female prostitutes is not uncommon in Mexico; in their study of travestis in Oaxaca City, Michael Higgins and Tanya Coen found that the travestis themselves felt that female sex workers "don't put enough effort into fixing themselves up and creating an attractive look" (2000:115). Indeed, many of the transvestite prostitutes better fit current norms of what is now considered beautiful in Mexico: they were all thin. Sitting in the mayor's office one afternoon, a group of us looked at photographs of a recent raid. One photograph showed a woman with curly shoulder length hair wearing a flattering dress, light make-up highlighting the delicate features of her fine-boned face. We all expressed surprise at the fact that she was a travesti.

While homosexual activity of all kinds is stigmatized in Mexico, it is more acceptable for a man to engage in anal intercourse with another man as the active or insertive partner than as the receptive partner. By performing the active role, a man adheres to hegemonic norms of male dominance (see Carrier 1995; Carrillo 2002; for a similar discussion for Nicaragua, see Lancaster 1992).²⁸ Men who have active sex with other men (*activos*) may not necessarily identify or be identified as gay, but rather may be identified as

²⁸ In his study of sexual desire and identity in Guadalajara, Héctor Carrillo describes the "overwhelmingly negative" view of bisexuality (2002:77). More disparaged than homosexuality, Carrillo found that "Both heterosexual and homosexual people were strongly judgmental toward bisexuality" (2002:77). My own experience supports this claim. Both Tuxtla's heterosexual Director of Public Health and Roberto, the former gay male sex worker who performed janitorial work in the zona expressed some contempt for bisexuals. Like Carrillo's informants, both suggested that they "don't know what they want." Roberto said there were two sorts of people to whom he strongly objected: bisexuals and overweight people. Bisexuals because "they should define who they are, one way or another" and *gordos* [fat people] because it showed a lack of self discipline. He himself, he said, used to be overweight and that if God were ever to punish him he would make him fall in love with a "fat bisexual."

what Héctor Carrillo describes as *hombres* or *hombres normales* (men or normal men) (2002:38). When this is considered, it is not surprising that the women of the zona view the travestis as economic competitors; their customers may be considered normal men and therefore, potential clients.

Unlike the female street workers or the sex workers of the Galáctica, many of the male transvestite prostitutes of Tuxtla are part of an organized social movement, *El Círculo Cultural Gay* (The Gay Cultural Circle).²⁹ This stems in part from their conscious shared identity as both transvestites and homosexuals; these men, despite their competition against one another as workers in the sexual marketplace, have created a social network that provides them with support and solidarity as gays.

Following months of raids upon clandestine prostitutes, a group of male sex workers began dialogues with the municipal government regarding homophobia, human rights, and their right to work. On a Tuesday afternoon in June, I left the zona and headed directly to city hall to observe a meeting of the panista bureaucrats and the male sex workers. Waiting in the hallway on the second floor of the municipal palace, the workers begin to arrive. They greet each other warmly and are clearly a community. Sitting on a couch are a number of travestis. Soon there are nearly two dozen men, the majority dressed as women, lining the halls. Blonde hair pinned up, with bangs falling on a heavily made-up face. White leggings, white turtleneck covered with a

²⁹ The gay rights movement emerged as a force in Tuxtla during the mid-1990s following a series of murders of gay men, transvestite prostitutes in particular. The murders spurred the gay community into action, as leaders met with the press and government officials in an effort to stop the killings and arrest those responsible. This mobilization occurred in February 1994, only weeks after the Zapatista uprising. Though police arrested a suspect, who was sentenced to eight years in prison for homicide, many Chiapenecos believe that Governor González Garrido and the state police force were responsible for the murders.

blue fitted blazer, and white pumps. Pert pony tails, purses, and false breasts. And then there is the lovely transvestite I first saw in the photographs of a raid. Tall and thin, she wears a long slim skirt covered with flowers and a cropped tank top. Her hair is pulled back into a short ponytail to reveal a face that is stunningly beautiful. As they wait, they are passed by other Tuxtlecós who have come to city hall to take care of business. An elderly indigenous woman wrapped in a shawl passes, as do campesino men in sombreros and sandals, panista functionaries in suits and administrative workers.

The solidarity that exists among this group is not shared by their female counterparts in the streets or in the Galáctica. It is a solidarity based less upon their identity as sex workers than upon their self-identification as members of an oppressed "sexual minority." The lack of organization among female prostitutes is in part the result of economic competition, but it is also, I would argue, a consequence of both male domination and the greater social consequences for and stigmatization of women who transgress sexual norms. Though the travestis are gay and sell sex, as men they are allowed greater freedom in the arena of sexuality than women. Women who sell sex, I would argue, suffer a greater stigmatization than men who do so, simply because they are women. Female sex workers in Tuxtla generally seek total anonymity. Though some men on this day were wary of being photographed while in the meeting, the travesti sitting next to me, upon seeing a camera, asked me, "Are they going to take photos?" and proceeded to take down her ponytail, shaking loose her thick and wavy black hair. By arriving at the municipal palace during the day in full female dress, the male transvestites

willingly give up anonymity and upset a social and spatial order which segregates “deviance.”

The meeting between the panistas and the travestis focused upon a single issue: finding a space for the travestis to work without being subject to raids and police harassment. Importantly, there was no discussion of public health concerns during the meeting. Tuxtla’s Director of Public Health stood up and spoke first, saying “We don’t have anything against homosexuality. What we are against is prostitution.” He maintained that prostitution should not take place in “public view” and that the men should look for a building where they can put on *espectáculos* (shows or performances) and do their work that is in a proper place, not right on a main street, and far from schools and homes. The travestis begin to describe the places that they have been considering. One location they briefly considered “did not suit us because it is too far from the city” and another, close to downtown, they knew would be a problem because it was too “centrally located.”

The travestis are caught in a complex dilemma. Though the city wants them to pursue their economic activities in an area not visible to the public, they fear that being too far from the city center will isolate them from the very members of the public whom they serve and rely upon for income. Furthermore, as one worker noted, being in public view protects street workers from abuse by clients precisely because “it is well-lit and centrally located.” Pushing their activities into the margins could serve to increase crime and violence against them. One man stood up and asked, “In the meantime, what are we supposed to do? We are going to continue to work

and you are going to continue the raids.” The group repeatedly asked for a fifteen-day reprieve from raids in order for workers to earn the money to help rent a building, organize, and “tell clients who are accustomed to having us on Avenida Central” what is going on. They also requested that the city give them financial assistance to open their new venue. “Give the girls a break,” they asked. Though city officials refused both of these requests (providing public funds for commercial sex between men is not a possibility, given cultural beliefs about gender and sexuality), they said they would continue to look at the options for locating the travestis in their own venue.

Following months of raids, street prostitution did become less visible in Tuxtla, but like drug dealing in New York City in the 1990s, it became less visible simply because it moved indoors. One evening after months of raids, I was driving down Avenida Central with a doctor from the Department of Public Health. He said, “Look. No prostitutes.” Indeed, he was right. There were no sex workers at the bus stop or in front of the Sam Remo nightclub. But as I looked into the car next to us, I saw two young men seated in the front and a man and woman (likely a prostitute and a client) having sex in the back seat.

THE GALÁCTICA: A MODEL FOR CONTROL

The Zona Galáctica became a model for the control of populations that challenged the social order - informal and often undocumented workers whose sexuality was deemed dangerous. It is no accident that Governor

González Garrido invested heavily in regulating and modernizing the sex industry at the same time as the state was modernizing other sectors of the economy. While the men and the women who worked the streets became symbols of disorder, the Galáctica, with its regulations, medical service, and location far from the city center became a source of pride and a symbol of progress.

The official document titled “Regulations for the Control and Vigilance of Prostitution in the Municipality of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas,” which dates to 1993, lays out the basic rules of the Galáctica. Unlike the streets, bars, massage parlors, and hotels of the city, which welcome all prospective workers, city regulations list the prohibitions and requirements for sex workers in the tolerance zone. Such workers may not practice if they lack the health certificate given by the city, if they are pregnant, or if they suffer from contagious diseases; each worker must be above eighteen years of age, “demonstrate that she is able to discern the risks of the activity,” be in “full use of mental faculties and not addicted to drugs,” and “carry out her activity in the tolerance zone called Zona Galáctica.” Basic rules aside, it is important to see that power and control exercised in the zona takes multiple forms. It is not simply a matter of gender oppression, with men (as clients, landlords, police, and zona officials) exploiting women.

THE VISIT: HEALTH AND ANONYMITY

The “Sanitary Control Card” that workers must purchase upon

entering the Galáctica not only declares a woman's health status, but also is one of the tools used to strip the woman of the anonymity associated with clandestine prostitution. The card declares the woman a prostitute as a matter of public record. The card is purchased by workers for fifty pesos (US\$5.90) and lasts approximately three months. On the back of the card is a calendar in which a zona health inspector marks the date of the worker's periodic gynecological inspections, known as *visitas*, or visits. The worker's photograph, name, room and building number, and landlord appear on the front of the card. Attached to the lower left hand corner of the card is an HIV-negative certificate, which also bears her name and photograph (this card too must be purchased).

The worker's weekly visit to the Anti-Venereal Medical Service is the linchpin of medical control. Each morning, with the exception of Sundays and holidays, a group of workers enters the SMAV. They arrive in various states of dress: some ready to work, fully made-up and dressed; others in street clothes, long night-shirts, and flip-flops. Those who wear complicated high heeled shoes that must be buckled or tied often stroll in with them undone, as they may easier slip them off when their turn comes. They wait with control cards in hand, standing, or sitting in the white plastic chairs that line the hall leading to the exam room. On the wall is a hand-written note reminding workers to bring their cards.

Each week, workers undergo a basic vaginal examination that includes a swabbing for any abnormalities such as vaginosis, yeast and other types of infections, and gonorrhea. During the exam, a number of other tests may

occur: a worker is tested for syphilis every three months, HIV every four months, and receives a Pap smear (named after its inventor, George N. Papanicolaou) twice a year. Every two weeks a worker receives a free box of one-hundred condoms. Workers themselves are responsible for paying laboratory fees. When a worker is found to test positive for a transmissible illness or infection, she is suspended until cured. If a worker is found to be HIV positive, she is suspended permanently. A worker who tests positive is said to be *ponchada*, or punctured, a word normally used to refer to tires. Like a car with a flat tire, a zona worker who is *ponchada* is simply not usable.

Though the stated goal of the regulationist system is to secure public health by testing prostitutes and controlling commercial sex, the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases in Mexican states and other countries that regulate prostitution is no less than in places that do not (Uribe et al 1998:184). Furthermore, a narrowly focused prevention effort that targets a small sector of society (like female prostitutes) is unlikely to have a great impact upon the transmission of HIV in Mexico. Though the incidence of HIV infection in Mexican prostitutes is fairly low (various studies put the percentage at between 0.5 percent and 2.2 percent [Rivera, Vicente-Ralde, and Lucero 1992; Uribe et al 1998]), prostitute women continue to be scapegoated for the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted illnesses. In part, the lack of intravenous drug use among Mexican sex workers (far more common in Europe and the United States) contributes to this low rate of HIV infection (Rivera, Vicente-Ralde, and Lucero 1992; Uribe et. al. 1998). Furthermore, though it is growing rapidly, especially among heterosexual youth and

women, heterosexual infection and transmission of HIV is relatively recent in Mexico (Uribe et. al. 1998:189). Another factor contributing to the low prevalence of infection is that often prostitutes are informed about HIV risk and many adopt preventative measures. In many cases, sex workers know more about HIV risk and prevention than their sexually active non-sex worker counterparts.

In the Zona Galáctica, I was told there had never been a case of HIV infection and though I found it surprising, I naively believed this claim. But during a visit to the zona after the period of fieldwork was over, I found out the danger of such naivete. As I had begun to wonder about HIV infection in the zona, so too had municipal authorities, who switched the medical laboratory that had been testing the blood of zona workers for many years. Upon doing so, three women were found to be HIV positive. It appears as though the laboratory was either testing the women's blood and not reporting the results, or more likely, not testing the blood at all, though it took the fees which the women paid for it to do so. Neither the SMAV, the municipal government nor the sex workers, who may not have known about the change of laboratories, pursued the issue, which is murderous in a country where the drugs necessary to prolong the life of HIV positive persons are not readily available to the poor.

This focus upon testing the bodies and controlling the activities of the female sex workers while their male clients remain free from such regulations serves to reinforce and perpetuate already existing and broader patterns of gender inequality in Mexico, where women's sexuality is relatively

circumscribed while men's is not. Though some health workers and administrators in the zona do discuss the medical exams as a way to prevent disease in sex workers for the purpose of protecting the workers themselves, generally concern is greater for the health of clients and society at large. Speaking of the visit, one zona administrator described its purpose as a way to "care for the clients." Glaringly absent from his discussion is the well-being of the women who serve the clients. Clients themselves receive no medical tests or information regarding the sexual transmission of illness.

The SMAV also offers lectures and workshops on various topics such as self-esteem, sexually transmitted diseases, chronic gastritis, family planning, miscarriage, domestic violence, and once, human rights.³⁰ Often these lectures are sponsored by a pharmaceutical company or laboratory. In mid-March, following a lecture in which only two workers showed up, the SMAV staff informed the women that lectures were now mandatory and that if they did not show up they would be suspended from working for three days. Workers were not compensated for the time they spent listening to the lecture. This new pressure to attend occurred in the midst of the land conflict between campesinos and the municipal government, as city officials struggled to contain street prostitution and extend control within the zona.

Though workers generally do not resist the required visit, viewing it as their responsibility, they do privately express many complaints about the

³⁰ When I arrived, I suggested to the doctor in charge that perhaps I, along with the workers, could help make a newsletter for the workers that would be a forum for discussion of zona issues and broader issues that the workers felt were relevant. He told me it was not a good idea and that it would just cause trouble because since some people from Mexico City came and gave a talk on human rights and organizing sex workers that the workers complained more and thought everything was an abuse of their rights.

functioning of the SMAV. Workers object to the fees they must pay for laboratory tests. As Lorena notes, were she to have her Pap smear done in the city center at a public hospital it would certainly be cheaper than the sixty pesos (US\$7.05) she is charged in the Galáctica, but she says the SMAV will not accept the results of outside tests. Other workers complain that their bimonthly allotment of condoms is not sufficient. The marginalization of zona workers is evident in the way they are treated by SMAV staff. The staff often arrives late, leaving sex workers waiting for their medical examinations when they could be in their rooms, working. Furthermore, though there is supposed to be a medical doctor available for consultations until the afternoon, Dr. Ramos and her assistants often leave the zona many hours earlier.

This decided lack of concern about the well-being of zona workers and impunity and lack of accountability of zona staff is reflected in a story told to me by Edith, an SMAV secretary. My relationship with the sex workers caused some SMAV staff to question both my moral character and good sense. Edith herself had warned me about socializing with sex workers, saying that among their ranks were criminals and lesbians. But on this day Edith came to me at Pepe's food stand looking worried and angry. She confided that during the visita that morning, as the workers were lining up waiting, it became clear that there was no soap with which to wash the speculums. Though they should actually be sterilized after each use, the speculums are washed with soap in a large tub of water by Olivia, a nurse. According to Edith, upon telling the accountant that there was no soap and that Olivia would not be

washing the speculums, he replied, "So, don't wash them." Ana Maria, another secretary, claimed it was not part of her job to run errands and refused to go to the city center to buy the soap. Finally Dr. Ramos exclaimed in front of a group of women waiting for their gynecological exams, "I don't care if they are washed or not."

It is during the daily visits that the world and values of the workers of the Galáctica meet and sometimes clash with those of the SMAV staff. The SMAV building is a site of power and protest and the visita is the occasion on which the constructions of the "moral" and "immoral" city collide, despite city efforts to keep the two separate. While the staff views the SMAV as a place of employment that has attached to it certain middle-class behavioral norms, many zona workers, though they earn more than some SMAV staff, have their own standards of acceptable behavior within the brothel (often quite unlike their standards of behavior outside the zona), which frequently include yelling, laughing and cursing. Such raucous behavior is certainly a way for some workers, who are sometimes told to "shut up" by SMAV staff, to express their displeasure with the controls of the regulationist system. Many workers speak angrily about the rudeness of the SMAV staff. Dr. Ramos, who performs the examinations during the week, they say, is brusque. She yells at them to relax and according to Lina, is rough during the exam and does not lubricate the speculum. Many workers prefer to go for their visit on Saturdays when the soft-spoken and respectful Dr. Felipe Otero, a man, performs the exams.

REDEMPTION AND RESOCIALIZATION IN THE ZONA

Leaving the Anti-Venereal Medical Service, I am about to head down to the modules to see who is around. On my way I see Laura, a doctor who is doing some research in the Galáctica. She stops me and asks with amazement, "Do you go down there?" It is very rare for any of the female staff of the Galáctica to *bajar*, or go down to see the women in their rooms or pass through the modules; the SMAV is located just next to the entrance to the zona - its staff can come and go without ever having to pass by the workers' rooms. On the rare occasion that they must go down, they always travel in groups. On this day, I take a curious Laura with me. We stroll along, running into people: Verónica has just returned from El Salvador. We kiss and I welcome her back. Lina is on her way to the center of town. She is dressed casually in jeans, a green t shirt, white sneakers, and eyeglasses. We chat briefly and when she leaves, Laura asks, "Is she a professional (*profesionista*, a respectable professional working person)?" and without thinking, I say yes. I soon realize what she means by professional - she means not a prostitute. So I say, "Well, she is a professional, but she works here."

This story illustrates the place that prostitute women occupy in Mexican society. Rarely are they viewed as workers (despite increasing use of the term *trabajadora sexual*), much less as professionals. Rather they are viewed as a deviant population that inspires curiosity, fear, disrespect, and sometimes sympathy. The behavior of prostitute women lies beyond cultural norms and is often considered "scandalous" and an affront to public morals,

as the complaints of Tuxtlecos about clandestine prostitution reveal. The zona is a place in which to gather such a dangerous population, not only to contain them, but also in order to control and modify such behavior. There is constant surveillance in the zona by municipal police who man the front gate. The front gate serves as both the only entrance to and exit from the zona, allowing the movement of both workers and clients to be scrutinized and regulated. The high fence which surrounds the zona serves as a subtle form of coercion: unable to exit without the notice of a police officer, individuals are less likely to misbehave within the confines of the zona.

The surveillance and confinement of sex workers in the Galáctica disciplines and individualizes the women, serving to preclude collective action or revolt. Such surveillance and confinement, when combined with the free market which reigns in the zona, produces a heightened sense of economic competition which further increases isolation and individualization among workers. "Discipline," writes Michel Foucault, "increases the forces of the body (in terms of economic utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (1977:138). The body of the regulated prostitute is then, in some ways, the docile body of which Michel Foucault writes (1977). Like the soldier, the sex worker has been made useful as her services are sold within a modern economy of pleasure.

Sex workers are not considered beyond redemption by municipal authorities. There is much discussion by SMAV officials of "rehabilitating" the women of the Galáctica and preparing them to enter "normal" society. Efforts at rehabilitation (which generally target younger workers - older

workers are often considered hopeless cases) include not only the lectures on physical and mental health, but also occasional job training workshops in dressmaking and baking. Such training prepares zona women for jobs that pay less than what they earn as sex workers, but which are considered suitable for poor women, and thus reinforce patterns of gender and class inequality.

Courses sponsored by the National Institute for Adult Education (*Instituto Nacional de Educación para Adultos*, INEA) held in the Galáctica are in some ways a more appropriate response to the marginality of sex workers. Though it is frequently poverty and a lack of education that bring women to the zona, educating zona workers does not necessarily cause women to leave prostitution; sex work offers educated women more money than they can earn using their training because of the nature of the Mexican economy, depressed wages, and their gender. What the primary and secondary school classes do provide workers with is a sense of both community and self-worth. A retiree well into his seventies who is referred to as "Profe" (short for professor) teaches the classes. The Profe is a frail man with rheumy eyes and a soft voice that sounds like bare feet walking across a gravel path. His skin hangs down from his thin face like a hound dog's jowls. Profe said he was bored staying home and felt there was a need to educate the women of the zona so that they would not be "marginalized from society." Of his eight full-time and eight drop-in students, he says they are not *malcriadas* (poorly raised) and that his class runs smoothly because, "I respect them and they respect me."

One third of zona workers cannot read or write.³¹ Some students, like Adriana, have learned to read in Profe's class. When Adriana arrived at the zona, she could not read at all. Now she sat in class, struggling but proudly reading aloud: "I...live...with... my husband." Moving on to multiplication, Patricia looked over Adriana's shoulder and helped her, "There are four sweet rolls in each basket. There are four baskets..." The two women counted together, "One, two, three, four." Some students, like Patricia, have managed to pass through primary school and have advanced into secondary school. One afternoon I accompanied a group of students to go to the INEA offices to pick up the results of their last examinations. Roberto is extremely nervous; he did not pass the last round of exams and was not able to move on to secondary school. Evita, as usual, is extremely quiet. This time we found Roberto had passed his mathematics examination with a high score of eight and would be moving on to secondary school. He was incredulous and exuberant, "I can't believe I got an eight! I thought maybe a seven." Evita had not passed some of the exams and looked rather dejected. I told her, "Next time" as Patricia put an arm around her briefly in a surprising and rare show of physical affection between workers.

The programs that sex workers receive shed light on the complex inequalities that exist among those inside the Galáctica. While prostitute women suffer social stigma because of their profession and gender inequalities, they earn more than many other zona workers. The zona

³¹ This figure is about equal to the number of Chiapanecos over the age of fifteen who are illiterate (thirty percent) but far greater than the ten percent of Tuxtlecos over the age of fifteen who are illiterate (CIACH et al. 1997:35-36). Statewide, illiterate women outnumber illiterate men by nearly two to one (CIACH et al. 1997:36).

"classroom" was an open space in the administrative building that also held a small office for the police, two small jail cells, and the, and the office of the accountant. Often, during English classes which I gave, a few police officers would linger in the back of the room, silent, listening intently, and sometimes taking notes.³² One day after class, Emilio, a tall and very thin police officer in his late twenties approached me, saying politely that he too would like to learn English. Sadly, this wasn't a possibility, as the classes were for the sex workers (though Dr. Ramos and Olivia sometimes attended class). Furthermore, it was feared that the animosity that exists at times between the workers and the police would cause conflict in the classroom. Something about Emiliano's desire to learn was heartbreaking. Earning far less than the sex workers whom he guarded, Emiliano's life situation seemed more bleak than that of many zona women.³³ When I returned to the classroom days later, I found that somebody with poor penmanship had scrawled on the blackboard in English a single crooked word: love.

SEIZING LA GALÁCTICA

They shut our mouths with a box of condoms. -Desirée

On the fifth day of August in 1996, two years before I arrived, the sex workers of the Galáctica took control of the zona. They blocked the access road with rocks, a fallen tree, and their bodies, secured the entrance with padlocked

³² Prior to my arrive, the Profe had been doing his best to teach English, but as he neither reads nor speaks English, the lessons were usually filled with errors.

³³ The municipal police working in the zona earn 1,300 pesos (U.S.\$153) every two weeks.

chains, locked Auber Domínguez, administrator of the zona, in his office, and raised a red flag as a symbol of their struggle. The prostitutes were on strike.

What precipitated this collective action was the administration's decision to raise the price of the entry ticket that clients must purchase from two to three pesos (US\$0.24 to US\$0.35). Clients had previously paid two pesos to enter the zona and another peso if they wished to use the public toilet. Some workers feared that the price increase would prevent clients from coming to the zona or make it more difficult to negotiate higher payments for their services. As Leticia remembers, "This is why they got angry. They said that the men weren't going to come or that there weren't going to be any people because the entry fee was expensive and they weren't going to want to pay." Striking workers demanded that the administration lower the entry ticket price back to two pesos. Furthermore, they wanted the city to pave and install streetlights along the poorly maintained dirt road leading to the zona; decrease the price of the Sanitary Control Card; relocate the clandestine prostitutes working the city center to the zona in order to decrease "unfair competition;" and ensure that they and their human rights are respected, particularly by municipal police officers in the zona.

The strike of 1996 shows that even in the face of fierce economic competition and spatial, behavioral, and medical regulation of zona workers, dissent is still possible. Though criticized for the lack of human actors in his work and his denial of agency, Michel Foucault himself wrote that, "No matter how terrifying a given system may be, there always remain the possibilities of resistance, disobedience, and oppositional groupings"

(Rabinow ed.1984:245). As the strike reveals, the prostitute body has not been transformed into one which is entirely docile and politically obedient.

But a deeper examination of the strike also reveals the fragmentation among zona workers, even as they engaged in collective political action. Some workers felt that they were forced to participate in the strike against their own will. Leticia, one of the zona's more politically active workers, recalls that she did not want to participate but wanted to go home and take care of her two daughters. She bargained with strike leaders, saying that she would stay for a while if they would let her go home to her daughters later. Lorena had been home sick and was surprised to arrive at the zona to find "everything closed and the women piled up there out front." Once she entered the zona, the other workers wouldn't let her leave. Lorena was interested in what was happening but disturbed to find that many of her colleagues were drinking alcohol. She went to the vendor and demanded that he stop, warning him that under such circumstances, the women could take a bottle or a knife and go after the police. The vendor complied with her wishes. Bárbara, known for her individualism and lack of political engagement, remembers:

I didn't think it [the taking of the zona] was good.
They had no reason to go meddling in that, and
besides, the majority that were involved in that
were foreigners...and the number one person that
was there, making this kind of scandal was Desirée.

She was supposedly the leader of all of them and even demanded that we didn't sleep in our rooms but that we had to sleep outside [near the entrance], on strike. They made us stay out there and stay up late... everyone had to do it.

Though her account does not ignore the dissent within the ranks of the workers, Desirée, from Guatemala, remembers the event somewhat differently. Of the administrator locked in his office she recalls, "He asked me to let him out and I said, "No. Ask Valentina" and she said, "No. Ask so-and-so" and it went on like that. And we didn't let him leave and we put a lock on the door." Of the night spent outdoors, she recalls

And we were here all night, with the mattresses out in the center and everything... Some police sat down to eat with us. They supported us, put things in the street so that cars couldn't pass. The owners brought food, coffee, and didn't charge rent. It was really nice because everybody supported us...The Poblanas (workers, some from the state of Puebla, who have pimps), since they have pimps, didn't want to support us...I hit one of them. All of us will benefit from this. We were all united. We ate dinner together as a group, talked through the night,

and stayed up late.

Following two hours of talks with Samuel Hernández Solís, Tuxtla's Director of Public Health at that time, a partial agreement was reached on August 6, 1996. The entry fee would remain at three pesos, though there would no longer be a charge for clients to use the public toilet. Furthermore, the funds would be used to improve the road and install street lights. Municipal authorities promised they would look for a way to decrease the cost of the Sanitary Control Card and agreed that the women could now have their Pap smears done at the public Regional Health Center, free of charge (though this new policy was never enacted).

One of the most important achievement of the strike was the worker's demand that they receive condoms directly from the SMAV rather than having them distributed to clients at the main gate. This method of condom distribution both empowers workers to better negotiate condom use and saves them from having to spend their own money on condoms and charging clients extra for this expenditure. Clients would often throw the condoms out, play with them, and arrive at a worker's room claiming that they had not received a condom when they entered. As Leticia remembers:

I personally talked with Dr. Samuel and I told him, "Look, so that we don't have these kinds of problems because of the condom, provide us with the boxes of condoms every fifteen days...

Give them to us so that we can protect ourselves
and so that there isn't the problem of the client
throwing out the condom because I already have
it in my hand and it is put on him."

Despite some of the gains of the strike, some workers view the event as a failure. As Desirée recalls, "I went out and they made a deal when I wasn't there. They shut our mouths with a box of condoms." Lorena also felt that "we sold ourselves for a box of condoms." Since this time, there has been little collective activity in the zona among workers, many of whom were disillusioned with the outcome of the strike and others who held resentments about what they felt was their forced participation in the struggle. But as we will read in the following chapter, the zona remains a site of power and protest.

CHAPTER 3

PANISTAS, PROSTITUTES, AND POLITICS: THE STRUGGLE FOR EJIDO LAND

The newspaper headlines screamed: "400 Ejidatarios Could Take over the Zona Galáctica"; "They Want to Throw Sex Workers out of the Galáctica"; "Eviction Feared in the Zona Galáctica." It was the early spring of 1999 and the people of the *Ejido* Francisco I. Madero were looking to reclaim their land - four hectares located at the end of a lonely dirt road eight kilometers east of the city center of Tuxtla Gutiérrez. The land, unfortunately, was not vacant. Rather, since 1991, the communal ejido land was known as the Zona Galáctica. The landholders or ejidatarios warned that if the city did not return their lands by the 2nd of April they would "arrive well armed" and evict the inhabitants of the *zona*, using force if necessary.

This local land struggle involving the communal landholders of the Francisco I. Madero Ejido, the municipal government, and the private landlords and prostitutes of the Zona Galáctica reveals another aspect of the city's increasing regulation of commercial sex. This event propelled prostitution to the forefront of public discussion and government activity. It was precisely during this period of conflict that the municipal government increased both its activities against clandestine prostitution in the city center and control in the *zona*, while also making an effort to make known the "successes" of the Galáctica through press briefings.

The unfolding conflict also reveals the continuation of a Mexico that existed before the advent of neoliberal capitalist expansion and manic pursuit

of what is considered modernity. Even within Tuxtla Gutiérrez, a city that has become a showcase for modernity in Chiapas, older patterns of thinking and being, embodied by the ejidatarios of Francisco I. Madero, continue to exist and resist. In *México Profundo*, anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla claims there exist two Mexicos, an “imaginary Mexico” and what he refers to as *México profundo* (Bonfil Batalla 1996). The small minority of the powerful who have pursued Western models of development in Mexico for the past five centuries constitute the “imaginary Mexico,” while *México profundo*, rooted in Mesoamerican culture, resists the “civilizational programs” of “imaginary Mexico.” Formed by the majority of the population, *México profundo* is diverse, including both indigenous rural populations of subsistence agriculturalists and urban populations who have retained various traits of Mesoamerican civilization. What unifies those people that form *México profundo* is “that they are the bearers of ways of understanding the world and organizing human life that have their origins in Mesoamerican civilization and that have been forged here in Mexico through a long and complicated historical process” (Bonfil Batalla 1996:1).

Bonfil Batalla’s conceptualization of Mexico as a dichotomous pair of coexisting civilizations (Western and Mesoamerican) that have not blended to create what he refers to as a “new civilizational plan” may cry out for a more nuanced and delicate approach. But his argument nonetheless has particular resonance in Chiapas, where one finds both subsistence and neoliberal economies and, in the case of the Galáctica, both the “modern” brothel of the “imaginary Mexico” and those representatives of Bonfil

Batalla's *México profundo*, the ejidatarios of Francisco I. Madero.

I had come to Tuxtla to work in the "other Chiapas," removed from the land and ethnic conflicts so central to the work of many others in the region, until the ejido conflict, a convergence of local, national, and global politics, exploded in the Galáctica, threatening its very existence. Despite my stubborn intention while in Chiapas to research something, anything other than land disputes, I found myself studying just that as *México profundo* emerged in the middle of the Zona Galáctica. The history of Mexico is after all a history of conflicts over land, labor, and ethnicity.

LAND DEALS AND PARTY POLITICS

It is a warm May afternoon in the downtown office of the Ejido Francisco I. Madero. These communal landholders are the original owners of the land now occupied by the Zona Galáctica. I am sitting at a table leafing through ejido archives. A tall, imposing, mustachioed man enters the office smoking a cigarette and complaining loudly of a hangover. "It is not a headache," he groans, "It's that everything is spinning." He puts his large hands around my waist and says, "*Buenos días, chaparrita*" (Good morning, shorty). He is Emilio Santiago Romero, the ejido's brash and charismatic spokesperson. He launches into a tirade about prostitution in Tuxtla, questioning what the city calls "control." A secretary with startling ice-blue eyes brings him coffee and he gruffly calls to his nephew to bring him the *Cuarto Poder*, one of the city's most widely read daily newspapers. He speaks

of how only about 150 women work in the zona and how there are many more in the streets and bars of Tuxtla. My mention of clandestine prostitution, that is, unregulated prostitution, makes him laugh incredulously, "How can it be called clandestine?!?!? It's public!" Indeed, he is right. It is regulated prostitution which is clandestine, its practitioners and clients secreted away and made invisible, while what is referred to as clandestine prostitution is often visible to the public. But for the state, it is a prostitute who is unregistered, unknown, unconfined and therefore uncontrollable, who is clandestine.

Santiago Romero smokes cigarettes at an alarming rate and opens the newspaper to the classified section and begins to read aloud from the many advertisement that offer sexual services. These ads are a new phenomenon, beginning to appear in the daily newspapers only during the past five years, as sexuality has become increasingly commoditized. He reads, "Bored? Forget stress! How about a relaxing massage? Oriental massages." He pauses, looks up from the paper, takes a drag on his cigarette, and exhaling, says to me, "And I will tell you right now, there is not one Japanese or Chinese girl in there." A group of men enter the office and I introduce myself as an anthropologist. One man asks if I am studying ruins, but before I can answer, Santiago Romero answers for me, "Yes, the ruins of Mexican society."

The communal landholders of Francisco I. Madero are not morally opposed to prostitution. Indeed, when I asked their opinion of the women of the zona, the reply was, "They are beautiful." What is at issue is the use of once communally held lands for what the ejidatarios view as a money-

making business for the city and the landlords who rent the rooms to zona workers. Santiago Romero tells me the ejidatarios have donated other parcels of land throughout the city for various good (and non-profit) causes, including the land beneath the Patricia Ecological Park in northeastern Tuxtla.

According to documents from both the municipal and ejido archives, in September 1991 (during the term of priista Governor González Garrido) four months before the Zona Galáctica was officially inaugurated, a land deal was negotiated between the two parties. Ejidal documents describe the deal as an exchange of services from the priista government for four hectares "that are no longer lands of any use to the Ejidatarios of this place and that will serve for the settlement of marginal groups lacking public services." The ejidatarios of Francisco I. Madero are an urban population who have been largely integrated into the urban economy and are no longer wholly dependent upon agricultural production. Municipal archives explain the deal as an exchange of land for public works projects. In a letter addressed to the priista Municipal President Dr. Enrique Esquinca Méndez, dated September 19, 1991, a state representative of the Secretary of Agrarian Reform approved the exchange, stating that there was "no legal impediment to the donation made by the Ejidal Assembly to the [priista] Municipal Council of this city...as long as the ejido receives in exchange multiple collective social benefits in their community, compensating the ejido in a fair and equitable manner." He ends the letter advising the priista city government to legitimize the land exchange by requesting from the Federal Secretary of Agrarian Reform the

legal expropriation of the four hectares.

The paperwork was never completed. As the city archives state, "In seven years the land was never formally transferred." The zona operated for seven years and no efforts were made to reclaim the land until April 18, 1998, when the ejido registered a claim against the city government (now led by the opposition PAN), demanding restitution of ejidal lands, payment for damages to the community, and the payment of all legal expenses. It is perhaps significant that the land deal was made with priista city and state governments and that the challenge arose when Tuxtla was run by the opposition PAN, in a weakened position vis-a-vis the priista state and federal governments. A week later, panista Municipal President Enoch Araujo Sánchez moved to request that the Secretary of Agrarian Reform expropriate the land in accordance with Article 93 of the Agrarian Law which states that communal lands may be expropriated for the cause of "public utility." The lands would be used, he claimed, for a public park.

The ejidatarios soon found out about the mayor's efforts, and they too wrote to the Secretary of Agrarian Reform, stating that the land in question was not going to be used for a park as the city claimed, but that it was "already being used for prostitution and strip clubs" (Archivo de Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Expediente Zona Galáctica). On February 2, 1999, the city's request for expropriation was canceled by the Secretary of Agrarian Reform, who rejected all claims of "public utility." The ejidatarios gave the city until April 2 to give up the Galáctica. By this time Mayor Araujo's term had ended. Inheriting this problem was the new mayor, the *panista* gynecologist.

A month later, the conflict was made public and received a great deal of press coverage. Images of machete-wielding campesinos, ready to “shed blood” for their cause and the convergence of “women of dubious reputation” upon Tuxtla’s downtown were the *Galáctica* to close began to circulate in the press and among the public. Interestingly, both populations were considered a source of fear and danger. The new municipal administration was in a difficult situation. Tuxtla’s new Director of Public Health, also an obstetrician-gynecologist, could be heard lamenting the previous mayor’s decision to lie about the zona, sighing, “He told them it was going to be a park.”

It was precisely during this period of conflict with the communal landholders that municipal authorities stepped up their efforts to control street prostitution. Such efforts were well-publicized. Yet, as noted earlier, the raids serve more as a display of state power than anything else, as prostitution did not become more regulated but simply moved to the shadows. The city’s new efforts were partly (and perhaps unintentionally) a response to the ejidatarios and any sympathizers who would question the city’s control of street prostitution and the necessity of the Zona Galáctica.

In the *Galáctica*, the conflict between the city and the ejido had a ripple effect, laying bare the competing interests and multiple levels of exploitation present in the zona. Sex workers worried first about slowed business and the threatened loss of livelihood, and second, about potential violence. Some believed the state would resolve the problem by cracking down on the ejidatarios, but others disagreed. Doña Paula, a former sex worker who now

ran a food stand in the zona, asserted that, in the wake of the EZLN uprising, the campesinos are no longer as easily subdued as they once were. "Once their eyes have been opened," she said, "it is not so easy to shut them again."

Lorena viewed the conflict as "purely political" and asserted that the panista mayor would not receive any support in resolving the conflict from the priista state government.

While the motivations of the Ejidal Assembly and the timing of their actions are open to question, there were many observers who believed their actions were linked to Tuxtla's uneasy place with the Mexican political system. While discussing the situation with Lorena she gave me a pop quiz on Mexican politics in order to prove her point. "Who is the president of Mexico?", she asked. "Zedillo." "And what party does he belong to?" "The PRI," I answered. She continued, "And who is the governor of Chiapas?" "Albores." "And what party does he belong to?" "The PRI." "And who is the mayor of Tuxtla?" she asked. I was catching on, "Rojas and he's a panista," I answered. "There you have it," said Lorena, "That's why I said it's purely political."

Hostilities also arose between the sex workers and their landlords, all of whom except one had removed the televisions, one of the workers' few ways of passing time, from the workers' rooms in order to safeguard their property in case the ejidatarios came to loot. Without television, gossip became a primary and destructive source of killing time while waiting for clients. Workers resented the owners' removal of the televisions, in particular because their exorbitant room rates had not been lowered to reflect this

change. Many women were also angered by the fact that some owners had stopped paying the city their mortgage payments, as well as water and electricity, while they continued to collect rents from the women. Some sex workers, like Mónica, threatened to use the media coverage of the ejidatario challenge to make public the landlords' exploitation of the women through their charging of exorbitant room rents.³⁴ Landlord Don Alejandro believed that Mónica would not dare to publicly proclaim herself a sex worker, but she said, "Oh yes, I will. Besides, Channel Five doesn't reach Veracruz (her home state)." Business was slow in the zona as clients, fearing violence or believing the zona was closed, stayed away. Inside the zona, tensions ran high.

Landlords who had bought the buildings from the city were angry that the city had failed to protect their interests. They expressed disbelief that they could be paying all these years for land that was not saleable. Landlords banded together and wrote collective letters to the priista state governor. Drawing upon the standard rhetoric, they begged for his "valuable help" in protecting them from the "campesinos" who would "spill blood" in the Galáctica. They claimed they were the "legitimate owners" and that their work in the zona was "the only source of support for our families."

Workers in the Anti-Venereal Medical Service were also concerned. The extra police protection promised by the city had not yet arrived and April 2nd, the deadline the ejidatarios had given the city to vacate, was fast approaching. Edith, a secretary in the SMAV, was angry about what she perceived as the city's lack of concern for zona staff. "It said in the paper they

³⁴ Workers pay as much as US\$125 per month to rent a small dark room in the Galáctica. For this same price one could rent a two bedroom house in a safe upper middle-class neighborhood in western Tuxtla.

[the ejidatarios] would use violence...there could even be rape!" She looked out the window into the zona's entryway and said bitterly, "They said they were going to send twenty police officers today. And where are they? I don't see them. Yes, look at all the police out there protecting us."

The 2nd of April, also Good Friday, came and went without incident. As it was a holiday there was little transportation serving the zona. The medical service and administration buildings appeared empty. Much of the zona staff were off for the day and others refused to come due to the ejido conflict. Clients who had come seeking pleasure were forced to walk the kilometer from the zona to the highway in 104 degree heat. With their shirts pulled up, revealing their sweaty bellies covered with brown dust kicked up by the rare passing car, they looked like sad, beaten warriors. Inside the zona, the extra police had arrived and were scattered about, leaning against the walls of the buildings, seeking shade. Many of these men appeared not to be actual police officers, but rather day laborers hired to protect the Galáctica. In contrast to the uniform-clad officers carrying guns, these young men wore street clothes, a blue police-officer style cap, and carried black batons. The "police" leered and halfheartedly called out to passing women. By noon many of the food vendors and sex workers who had dared to come to work decided to call it a day. Pepe, busy stacking up the white plastic chairs at his stand, sighed, "There is nothing." I left with Lydia, going back to the small dirt-floor shack where she and her sons lived in the city's southern hills. She killed a turkey for me and we watched on live television the re-enactment of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ which takes places annually in Itzapalapa. Whether

due to the holiday or the ejidatarios, there was no business in the zona.

The zona conflict continued to play itself out in the press during the weeks following April 2nd. The city and the ejidatarios negotiated intermittently, but most communication was carried out through press conferences, press releases, and letters. By mid-May, news coverage of the conflict died down, fears had subsided, and the owners had returned the televisions. The ejidatarios had begun to make fewer threats and there was more discussion of payment and of surveying the land to assess its worth. But meanwhile, the city was taking a different approach, hoping that if it could prove the “public utility” of the Zona Galáctica, that this time around it would be able to legally expropriate the land.

THE PUBLIC UTILITY OF PROSTITUTION AND THE POLITICAL UTILITY OF MORAL PANIC

The land dispute of the spring of 1999, and the discussions about it by the public, press, ejidatarios, and city officials created what may be termed a “moral panic,” in which an agrarian dispute between the state and communal landholders was converted into broader public anxiety regarding prostitution.

Popularized by Stanley Cohen (1972) in his study of a minor incident of youth violence in coastal England and the social reactions to the incident, the term moral panic refers to an episode in which

people have become intensely concerned about a

particular issue or perceived threat - which, as measured by concrete indicators, turns out not to be especially damaging - and have assembled, and taken action, to remedy the problem; yet, somehow, at a later point in time, they lost interest in the issue or threat, often turning their attention to other matters (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994:4).

The media plays a crucial role in fomenting moral panics, often giving undue coverage of a sensationalized nature to the event (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). Press reports detailed the calamities that would follow were the *zona* to be closed: first Galáctica prostitutes would come to the city center to work. One of the state's most widely circulated papers published a large photo of a woman seated on a bench in Tuxtla's Central Park, surrounded by three municipal police officers. The caption read: "Fleeing the Galáctica, sex workers in the center of Tuxtla." Once again, visibility and space had become key issues in the discussion of prostitution in the city. Yet the threat of the sex workers of the Galáctica converging on the city center was hardly real.

Few regulated workers would leave the relative safety and legality of the Galáctica to work the streets; they fear the police, as well as abusive and sometimes murderous clients. In addition, in the *zona* undocumented immigrant women work fairly freely. On the streets they might be arrested, harassed, and face greater risk of deportation. *Zona* sex workers do not view themselves as law breakers but as women who respect the law. One worker even suggested that to work in public view was morally wrong and

that citizens who complain to the city about clandestine prostitution are right. "That's why we have the *zona*, but they don't want to come here", she said.

Zona women express a great deal of ambivalence about street workers. When a Galáctica police officer, hoping to get in her good graces, told Liliana that when his beat was in the city center, he did not like to arrest the prostitutes there, she simply asked, "Why not?" There is little camaraderie felt for them as co-workers. As revealed by the workers' demands during the strike of 1996 that clandestine prostitutes be brought to the *zona*, street prostitutes, even though they charged more for services, were viewed by *zona* sex workers as "unfair competition." Legal workers sometimes envy the freedom and economic power of street workers - they are free from "all the rules" and often charge more and spend less than their legal counterparts. As Flor said, "Why would they want to come here? In the street they charge 200 pesos (US\$23.50). Here 20 (US\$2.35), and you have expenses to pay."

Yet despite the ambivalence and sometimes overt hostility towards unregulated workers, some *zona* women do feel for the street workers. Both Doña Paula and Flor spoke of the abuses that the street women suffer during the raids upon them, how they are sometimes grabbed by the hair. Flor has told her partner Jacobo, the city employee who participates in the raids, that he had better not be mistreating the women. She identifies with the street workers not as fellow prostitutes, but rather as women, saying of the abuse of other women, "I am a whore, but I am also a woman, and as a woman, I say it is wrong." Flor's statement not only reveals the distinct lack of solidarity among prostitutes as workers but also the way in which identifying herself as

a whore silences her. She speaks out on behalf of other sex workers not as one herself, but as a woman. As a "whore," she does not speak. As a "woman," she does.

A moral panic may be likened to a disaster in that both are characterized by warnings of impending doom, danger, rumor, and false alarms (Cohen 1972; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). Though press reports suggested a disaster of unimaginable proportions were the Galáctica to be closed (as one reporter wrote, the city would be "totally unable" to control prostitution in the streets), it is unlikely legal sex workers would find their way to the city center to work. Many would probably do as they do when business is down in the *zona* and head for other legal zones and bars throughout southern Mexico. The photograph of the woman working the center was not a woman from the Galáctica but one of the many unregulated workers already present in the city center.

Other press reports highlighted not simply the presence of prostitutes in the city center, but also the potential threat to public health. One reporter suggested that "the prostitutes will surely be launched to the streets of Tuxtla Gutiérrez in search of earning a living, and without medical control, the venereal diseases will truly begin to wreak havoc among them and those who purchase this type of 'service' ." In short, the health and social consequences would be disastrous and the city out of control.

Women, and in particular women who sell sex, are often a source of moral anxiety for the public and a political liability for the state (Weeks 1981:256). From Latin America to the United States to Southeast Asia, the

“dangerous” sexuality of unregulated prostitutes challenges not only cultural moral codes but also the spatial ordering of society (Guy 1990; Symanski 1981). In Tuxtla, it was believed the closing of the Galáctica and supposed resulting increase in public prostitution would be a health and moral nightmare. City officials and *ejidatarios* alike not only agreed with the conclusions above, but also, as moral panics generally contain some element of social engineering, promoted them as much as possible in order to influence popular opinion and advance their own respective causes. The prostitute became a symbol of disorder and disease, Stanley Cohen’s “folk devil” who embodies deviance and wrong-doing (see Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994:28-29); in order to safeguard the city, her inevitable presence had to be contained and controlled and the only way to do this was to settle the matter of the land dispute. Prostitutes, both regulated and clandestine, became pawns used by both sides in the struggle over the four hectares beneath the Zona Galáctica.

As those who currently administered the zona, the municipal government had the upper hand and cast itself in the role of protector of the city.³⁵ Once the dispute was public, it launched a campaign to prove the public utility of the Zona Galáctica. City propaganda detailing the zone’s social benefits appeared in the press and television news crews were invited on site to film, much to the dismay of sex workers.

These stories highlighted the “safety” of the *zona* and the “dangers” of uncontrolled prostitution. The Municipal Secretary suggested that if the *zona*

³⁵ Though I focus here on the city’s efforts to maintain control of the Galáctica, the campesinos also used the press to promote their cause, though to a lesser degree. During my first meeting with the *comisariado ejidal* (ruling body of the *ejido*), I met a journalist and friend of the campesinos who had just written a full page article about the dispute, detailing the injustices the *ejidatarios* had suffered, in a local daily paper.

were taken back by the campesinos it would “increase the possibility of diseases, above all of venereal types, since there could be no strict control of prostitutes.” During a press conference, the mayor spoke of the return of prostitution to the city center and the serious social and health consequences of loss of city control. City officials repeatedly emphasized the importance of having a “controlled population,” as in the Galáctica.

Sex with regulated workers, the city implied, would be safer. In the Galáctica, they said, the Anti-Venereal Medical Service distributes 30,000 condoms a month to workers who also receive medical services and exams. In fact, the actual number of condoms distributed is several thousand less than 30,000, which is the average number of clients who visit the Galáctica each month. The inflated figure of 30,000 condoms wrongly gives the impression that each sexual act performed in the *zona* is potentially a “safe” act, thanks to the city’s Anti-Venereal Medical Service. Furthermore, while for some women the biweekly allotment of condoms is sufficient, for others it is not, and they are forced to either purchase more with their own earnings (in the pharmacy where condoms are rather costly or from other workers who have not used their allotment) or have unprotected sex. Municipal functionaries claimed there had not been one case of HIV in the Galáctica and, while they themselves likely believed this claim, as seen in the previous chapter, it was probably untrue. City propaganda also emphasized the health-related lectures that sex workers received on topics such as HIV prevention and miscarriage. Before the land dispute became public knowledge, these lectures were voluntarily attended; later, as the city increased control of

prostitution both on the streets and in the *zona*, lectures became mandatory, much to the consternation of the workers who were not compensated for their time.

Appealing to the citizenry who could be expected to (and often did) complain about public prostitution, city officials claimed that the existence of a regulated tolerance zone decreased not only prostitution but also crime and rape in the city center. Some sex workers themselves felt they were providing a public service by assisting with rape prevention, thus finding larger purpose and value in their work. This notion of prostitution as a “social service” is not unique; in their studies of Scotland and the United States, both Liz Bondi (1998) and Alexa Albert (2001) respectively found a similar discourse among the public and sex workers. In the *Galáctica*, one sex worker spoke of clients who wanted to enact their rape fantasies with the workers, asking the women to leave their undergarments on during intercourse. It is believed that if such clients had not had the opportunity to act out their fantasies with a prostitute that they might actually rape respectable non-prostitute women. This discourse surrounding rape illustrates a widespread cultural belief that men need sex, and that some men may be prone to rape if their “needs” go unmet. Furthermore, the discourse divides women into two camps: those that should be protected from rape (respectable and wealthier women) and those who work to protect them (poor women, who by virtue of their class are sexually suspect).

Anxiety about rape, besides being about male “needs” and female purity, also has a strong class component. *Zona* men tend to be clients from

the laboring classes; in the regulated zone, it is not the sexuality of Tuxtla's upper classes that is being controlled, but rather the sexuality of the working poor, which is deemed more dangerous and perhaps even violent. Struggles over sexuality are frequently not simply struggles over sexuality, but also, as in Tuxtla, struggles over class and an expression of economic power and powerlessness. These discourses about rape and prostitution justify controlling and enclosing the sexuality of poor men and poor "loose" women in a tolerance zone.

Of course, the entire notion that consensual intercourse with a prostitute is a substitute for rape is simply wrong - one does not replace the other. Rape is less about sex than it is an expression of power and gender; as Susan Brownmiller wrote in her groundbreaking book *Against Our Will*, "...rape is not a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust, but is a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession..." (1975:391; see also Ward 1995). Access to a consenting partner does not stop rape (and furthermore, many clients do have access to a sexual partner - their wives) and men who rape come from all economic classes.

Prostitution in Mexico and elsewhere has long been associated with criminal activity and other "deviant" behavior. Implicit in the city's messages about the public utility of the *zona* was the fear of both sexually transmitted diseases and the moral and social decay associated with the possible presence of prostitutes in the city center (even though sex workers had been present there long before the land dispute). What was born as a land dispute between municipal authorities and communal landholders was transformed into a

moral panic promoted through the media and a dispute about public prostitution.

During this time, the figure of the prostitute was not only constructed as a source of disease and decay, but also, ironically, as a source of wealth and economic order. In their dealings with the media, city officials stressed the way in which the prostitution of zona workers has become entrenched in the local economy, generating a flow of material resources upon which families throughout the city rely for economic survival. Though Tuxtla is a large city with a booming service sector, municipal authorities stressed that up to six hundred Tuxtlecos could remain without employment were the Galáctica to close. It is the legal and state-organized nature of zona prostitution which makes this so; the clandestine prostitution of Tuxtla's streets does not necessitate an extensive infrastructure nor give rise to the same exchange of material resources. Pervading the legal sex trade are "networks of dependencies," (Lim 1998:1) the very existence of which makes legal prostitution in Tuxtla something of a family affair. Aside from sex workers, the Galáctica directly employs medical, administrative, security, and janitorial staff. Also earning their living in the zona are taxi and microbus owners, drivers, and fare collectors, the private owners of the módulos, stationary and ambulatory vendors, laundresses, seamstresses, and privately hired janitors. City officials highlighted the possible economic devastation brought to families dependent upon the continued existence of the Galáctica.

Perhaps the most fascinating effort by the local government to prove the public utility of the Galáctica was the Mother's Day fiesta held for sex

workers in the *zona* on the 26th of May 1999, some two weeks after Mother's Day. The festivities, to which the press was invited, were a showcase for the municipal government to display its power to control prostitution and promote the public good. The Mother's Day fiesta not only gave the city the opportunity to instill middle class values of femininity, domesticity, and maternity in *zona* women, but also provided another chance to prove the social benefits of the Galáctica. As luck (or good planning) would have it, the event also distracted *zona* workers from the campesinos of Francisco I. Madero who arrived on that very day with their own surveyor in order to take measurements of the land.

And so, as a small group of ejidatarios walked about the *zona*, dropping plumb lines, tape measures drawn, the city's official marimba band played beneath a tent put up for the occasion. Workers from DIF Municipal (*Desarrollo Integral de la Familia*, the city's social service organization) were busy warming tamales in Pepe's food stand. Pepe himself had dressed up in dark pants and a fine lacy white shirt for the occasion. Inside the Anti-Venereal Medical Service, darker skinned, sullen looking beauty students, wearing red and white striped uniforms, cut and permed and colored sex worker's hair in an effort to "feminize" them. This observation about skin color highlights the occupational class and ethnic hierarchy that exists in Chiapas, as well as the relationship between cultural conceptions of beauty and skin color. For many clients, a lighter skinned prostitute is a more

desirable prostitute.³⁶ Psychologists were on hand for counseling. A reggae-rap band from Honduras, replete with female dancers and a male dancing dwarf, took the stage. Functionaries from the *panista* city government gave speeches to boost sex workers' morale and to remind them of their duties as women. One local male official compared them to Mary Magdalene. Another representative, employing essentialist notions of what a woman is, spoke to them of their roles as both women and mothers:

As women, we have much to give, and as the mothers of families that we are, we must not forget our function. This *primordial* function is to educate our children, to instill in them a love of life...You must take for always the responsibility that is not simply to give life, but also to watch over our children, to give them what they need which is not just food, but also love, guidance and a good example.

Carefully avoiding any direct reference to their current employment, the speaker added that perhaps in time, with training provided by the city, the women would be able to find other (class and gender appropriate) work, as beauticians or dressmakers. The majority of zona women are mothers (generally single mothers). My own random sampling of zona workers found that 70 percent were mothers. A random survey conducted by the Comitán

³⁶ Though there is a preference among clients for light-skinned, non-indigenous prostitutes in the zona today, Katherine Bliss notes that during the 1930s, a magazine reported that one Mexico City brothel procured young indigenous women from Chiapas and Oaxaca in order to please clients who had a particular penchant for such women (2001:179)

Center for Health Research four years earlier in 1994 found this figure to be 100 percent (CISC 1994:8).³⁷ It is sex work which allows women to provide economically for their children and while Lydia admits to having a child who died from neglect, most *zona* workers take this responsibility fairly seriously. Speaking of her own children, the words of Lorena bear a striking resemblance to those of the city representative:

What a rich life I give them! They live untroubled, yes
untroubled and happy. And before anything else, before
I give them luxuries, I give them affection, I give them
education, and the tiny bit of wisdom that I have, I
instill in them.

A final effort to domesticate the prostitutes came in the form of a gift whose symbolism was clear: the end of the festivities was marked by the distribution of a few condoms as well as aprons which bore the following words: "For Mama, Compassion, Affection, Support. DIF Municipal. Tuxtla Gutiérrez, 1999-2001." Unfortunately, the *zona* rooms, where some women live as well as work, lack cooking facilities of any kind.

Sex workers' responses to the day's events were varied. Some were angry they had not been forewarned that clients would not be permitted to
³⁷ This discrepancy may be explained by the possibility that workers lie about having children in order to avoid the greater stigma attached to women who work in the *zona* only to support themselves. Such women are considered less "needy" and therefore more "indecent" than single mothers who are forced to work in prostitution. In their study of urban Oaxaca, one prostitute woman initially lied to Michael Higgins and Tanya Coen about her status as a mother. When she later revealed the truth, she told them she thought they would be "upset with her" if they knew she had no children (2000:172).

enter during the fiesta and that they, thus, would be unable to work. As prospective clients clung to the chain-link fence bordering the zona, peering in, these women fretted about earning the money to pay their daily room fees. Others, like Magda, were excited about both the aprons and the presence of the beauticians; by the day's end her frizzy auburn hair would be transformed into tight dark curls. Still others viewed the city's efforts with cynicism, commenting on the "cheapness" of the cloth from which the aprons were made. Lorena held hers up and asked sarcastically, "And what are these for? So I can be a great housewife?" Many of the workers who viewed the city's efforts with contempt attended the fiesta only in the hope of gaining an audience with the mayor's wife who was rumored to be among the city representatives present. These workers were hoping to air their grievances about a dispute that occurred between a sex worker and a municipal police officer in the zone, which ended with the worker's temporary confinement in the city jail. The mayor's wife did not show up.

All told, the fiesta (to which the press was invited) drew attention to the zona women as a controllable population, being cleaned up, groomed, and learning solid family values, and in doing so rendered the zona a training ground for transforming deviant sexualized creatures into good mothers. Recalling that the event coincided with Mexico's leap into neoliberalism, it is interesting to reflect on where the state is putting its energies. Clearly, ejidatarios are not considered viable economic actors in a "modern" economy, but regulated sex workers are.

Writing about heroin use among the working class in 1929 Costa Rica,

Steven Palmer suggests that moral panics "...hide more than they reveal; rarely are they about what they seem to be about, and inevitably, they end increasing the power of moral and repressive authorities to intervene in the lives of the less powerful, with the pretext of the urgent necessity to resolve a social crisis" (1994:218). The land dispute between municipal authorities and the *ejidatarios* and the moral panic about prostitution that grew out of the dispute were the impetus not simply for the Mother's Day fiesta, but also for increased control of prostitution both in Tuxtla's streets and within the Zona Galáctica. Triggered by the potential closing of the Galáctica, fears about public prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as the social and moral decay of the city increased municipal control of commercial sex throughout Tuxtla. Yet the ostensible aims of this increased control - the regulation of clandestine prostitutes, prevention of crime, deviance, and rape in the city center, and the protection of public health - are not achieved through raids upon street prostitutes and the corralling of a small group of sex workers into a regulated zone.

Contrary to the discourses that emerged about the public utility of the Galáctica, the presence of a tolerance zone does not guarantee the "safety" of the city. The *zona* is not a particularly safe place for sex - many workers do not use condoms, clients often refuse them and an HIV test administered only three times a year is not a very useful preventative, particularly when a

worker may service over 200 clients a month.³⁸ Furthermore, despite the raids against them, clandestine sex workers, both male and female, outnumber regulated workers. Arresting and fining clandestine workers will not prevent them from practicing prostitution though it will make them more careful about where they practice it. In addition, of the scores of women arrested during raids, I am not aware of one clandestine worker who went to work in the regulated *zona*. Finally, as mentioned, sex crimes are more about power than they are about sex and are not prevented by providing access to a consenting partner.

The discourses that emerged out of the land dispute are not just about public prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases, or class oppression, but also speak to and reinforce deeply held beliefs about gender and sexuality: that sex for men is not a luxury, but a need. Without access to women, they may be prone to rape, especially the working-class men who frequent the inexpensive *zona*. The women who are available to these men are linked to delinquency, though their only crime is economic need and their transgression of moral (and sometimes geographic) borders in order to satisfy such need.

Though characterized by austerity measures that reduce state supports for small-scale agriculture and social welfare programs, the economic shifts of neoliberal times do not necessarily signal a withdrawal of the state from

³⁸ It should be noted that prostitute women, both those who work under regulation and those who work clandestinely, are often unfairly blamed for spreading infectious diseases. Some researchers argue that sex workers are more likely to know how to protect themselves than other sexually active populations, such as teenaged girls engaging in non-commercial sex (Delacoste and Alexander eds 1987). As Lorena once said, "It's like a secretary with her typewriter. I've got to keep my machine clean."

public life, but rather a shift in arenas of state intervention. The ejido conflict, the Mother's Day fiesta, and the relationship between the prostitute and the ejidatario expose the current priorities of the state: order and modernity. The events of the spring of 1999 also signify a broader global economic shift, in which the service economy is privileged over subsistence agriculture, in which sex workers are considered economically viable and campesinos are not, in which communal lands are taken away in order to make room for greater, more modern forms of exploitation.

CHAPTER 4

WOMEN OF THE AMBIENTE³

There has been much discussion both in the academy and among sex work activists about the necessity and relevance of writing about why women become prostitutes. Some suggest that the question be avoided altogether; that we “take sex work as a given and start from there.” This remark was made in a New York City feminist bookstore-cafe by the male editor of a collection of non-fiction writing by sex workers. The audience in attendance was a mostly white, young, and literary crowd, as were the book’s contributors. In the United States, sex work is sometimes viewed by this same population as a trendy and decidedly hip way to earn money. For the largely poor, non-white, uneducated women laboring in the Galáctica, prostitution is anything but trendy or hip. Rather it is a highly stigmatized form of employment that is often one of the last options among few undesirable job choices for unskilled workers. As such, sex work and the conditions under which women (and men) enter the ambiente need to be interrogated rather than “taken as a given.” Others warn that inquiry should focus not upon families of origin, but rather upon economic histories - that “data about a woman’s home life

³ There is no strict definition for word *ambiente*. Taken generally, it means “milieu” or “scene”. In much of Mexico, it is sometimes used to refer to the male gay scene. Higgins and Coen (2000) use the term when discussing the social world of gay male transvestite prostitutes in Oaxaca. Carrillo suggests it has been used since the early 20th century as a euphemism for same-sex male desire (2002:18). In describing female prostitution, the term *la vida* (the life) has long been in use (see Bliss 2001:30) but in the Galáctica, sex workers refer to the world of commercial sex as the ambiente, as do sex workers in Peru (Nencel 2001:152-155) and Costa Rica (Ortiz C. et. al. 1998). This use of the term ambiente in the zona is perhaps due to Chiapas’ history with and proximity to Central America where the term is more common, along with the presence of Central American prostitutes in the zona.

reveal only the quality of her home life; how a woman spends her earnings explains something about why she became a prostitute" (White 1990:10). While the question of how a sex worker spends her money does reveal a great deal about her entry into prostitution (a woman forced into prostitution generally gives her earnings to a pimp, while a woman working independently to support her children may spend the bulk of her earnings on rent, food, and school supplies), there are multiple intertwined and overlapping social, political, and cultural, along with economic, factors that contribute to a woman's entry into sex work.

The practice of prostitution is continuously being shaped and reshaped by culture, politics, and society, as are the circumstances under which women enter prostitution. Such a perspective is inherently critical of the radical feminist belief which homogenizes and dehistoricizes sex work by claiming that *all* prostitution is sexual slavery and a form of gendered violence against women (Barry 1984, 1995; Dworkin 1981; Farley and Kelly 2000; Overall 1992; Wynter 1987). Historicizing women's lives and examining the totality of their lived experiences allows for an understanding of how the prostitute, as a dehistoricized stereotypical figure, is constructed and how prostitution is actually experienced in diverse ways by diverse women through space and time.

This chapter examines the ways in which women enter prostitution and explores the ways in which their identities are crafted, embraced, and contested upon entering the sexual marketplace.

BECOMING A SEX WORKER

It began innocently. -Magda

When asked how she came to work as a prostitute, fifty-year old Magda, who has worked in prostitution for over two decades, replied, “Well, ...it began innocently.” Indeed, many of the workers’ stories reflect strongly their recollections that there was a time in their lives when they did not work as prostitutes; that they became prostitutes. Furthermore, the stories reveal that while all workers live within a larger framework of dependency and inequality, each woman enters sex work somewhere along a continuum ranging from choice (often among limited options) to force. The radical feminist perspective which asserts that prostitution is not work and that women who sell sex do so as a result of male force rather than by choice not only undermines the rights due to prostitute women as workers but also essentializes female experience, failing to grasp the differences of class and culture that shape women’s lives. Those researchers and activists who do view prostitution as work argue for the recognition of difference and correctly assert that one must “see how the social context shapes it to make it distinct” (Shrage 1994:566; also see McClintock 1993). The circumstances under which a woman enters sex work determines much about how that woman experiences and practices prostitution.

The room that serves as Leticia’s dining room and living room is painted the same antacid pink as many of the rooms back in the zona. In the

center of the room is a long table covered with a plastic tablecloth and surrounded by a few plastic chairs. The room is rather spartan, save these items, a bookshelf holding a VCR and color television, and a large refrigerator that hums quietly. Ximena, Leticia's eldest daughter, sits quietly, cutting out pictures of famed Mexican military leaders for a school assignment as her mother begins to tell her story.

Thirty-four years old, Leticia is from the state of Puebla. Speaking of her childhood there, she recalled, "I grew up like a little animal, with nothing more than luck and God." When her mother died, nine-year-old Leticia stopped attending school in order to work. Her father, sunk in depression, took little responsibility for the care of Leticia and her four siblings. "He would leave the house around five in the afternoon, and come back around this time, drunk", she remembered, glancing at her watch which read 7:30 in the evening. Sometimes her father would come home with a bag of bread that someone had given him for the children, but more often he returned empty-handed. Leticia and her siblings would beg, "Please Papi, go to work. Bring us food. We want to eat."

By age twelve, Leticia, like many other young, poor girls in Latin America, left home to work as a servant. Along with factory work, domestic servants comprise one of the largest categories of the economically active female workforce in Latin America (Chaney and Garcia Castro 1989:3; Gill 1994). They also constitute one of the most exploited and unprotected sectors of the working class (Chaney and Garcia Castro 1989), with a work experience marked heavily by female to female subordination. "They mistreated me as

well," Leticia said, recalling the frequent verbal abuse of her female employer. "And the stove", she said, gesturing with her hand to just above her breasts, "was up to here! I was just a girl." She grew up like an "orphan," without guidance or advice from anyone. When her first period came, she didn't know what it was. There was nobody to tell her, "You are a señorita now. You need to be more careful; take care of yourself."

An early marriage to an older man provided Leticia with an escape from her life as a servant (few women work as servants while married) and gave her two things she longed for: a house and a family. But marriage also brought a host of new problems; her husband had a violent temper. After enduring nearly a decade of physical and verbal abuse, Leticia decided to leave him. She saw sex work as a path towards freedom from domestic abuse. Without education, a new partner to support her, or resources, and with children to support, it seemed the only way she could escape a decade-long financially sound but unhappy marriage to a man who beat and humiliated her:

Who is going to accept you into his house with children? Nobody is going to say to you, "Come, I accept you with the kids and everything." So, I knew about this, that this work existed. It exists everywhere. If I was going to go, I would put myself to work, even if it was in this, in being a prostitute.

Leticia left her husband, moved to Tuxtla where she had an acquaintance, and became a sex worker. She could have worked as a servant, she said, but the earnings from such work would not enable her to pay the rent, send her children to school, and feed them properly. As noted in the previous chapter, in the zona, the majority of women, approximately seventy percent, are single mothers. As Leticia notes, the employment options for women with few skills or little education (servant, cook, factory worker) are poorly paid. In her study of maquiladoras in Ciudad Juárez, Maria Patricia Fernández-Kelly writes “factory work offers wages and benefits that keep women only a step removed from the circumstances that can lead to prostitution” (1983:143). Working as a servant or a cook is often even less lucrative.

Leticia’s story illustrates that for women with few economic options, sex work is one of the only viable forms of employment available. Unskilled poor women with children to support often enter sex work in order to escape an unhappy marriage, or following abandonment by a male partner who has left them with children to support. The issue of male financial support figures prominently in women’s entry into prostitution. Structural socioeconomic changes imposed by neoliberalism make it increasingly difficult for men to fulfill their culturally prescribed responsibilities within the household, and women must take on increasing economic responsibility, despite cultural attitudes which continue to stigmatize them for working outside the home (Gledhill 1995; Safa 1995).

Like Leticia, many of the women of the Galáctica have come to sex

work in order to support themselves and often their children, while simultaneously freeing themselves from abusive, unreliable, or, unhappy relationships. Twenty-one-year-old Juanita moved to Tuxtla from the southern city of Tapachula in order to escape the father of her four-year-old son, who was “abusive and horrible.” “Every now and then he would insult me, hit me, and I felt desperate. Finally, there came a moment when I woke up and said, ‘Why am I putting up with this man?’” Leaving her son in the care of her financially secure mother, Juanita asked the manager of the pharmacy where she was employed to transfer her to their branch in Tuxtla in order to escape the man “who would not leave me in peace.” One day while sitting in Tuxtla’s Parque Central, she was approached by a man; “I didn’t know he was a *padrote* (male pimp).” She agreed that he could bring her to the zona and introduce her to one of the landlords. Following this meeting, they agreed to meet again and she would go to the SMAV for her initial medical exam and begin to work. Feeling both fear and shame, Juanita did not meet with the pimp the next day. She said to herself, “Ay, no. How could it be possible that I am going to work in this?” Juanita returned to her job at the pharmacy, but only for a few weeks. Then, she returned to the zona, but alone, of her own volition. Juanita had decided to enter the ambiente. The prospect of earning more money in the zona was appealing to Juanita, who describes herself as a “liberal woman” who prefers the relative cosmopolitanism of Tuxtla to what she describes as the more conservative ethics of Tapachula.

Women who work as sex workers generally do so in a location far from

family and friends, which provides them with a degree of anonymity that most workers feel is necessary in order to perform such highly stigmatized labor. Juanita's choice to prostitute was in part precipitated by her move from her home city to Tuxtla, a town where she knew few people and could work in the Galáctica without the fears of encountering a relative or acquaintance. Indeed, during my time in the zona, I met not one woman who was a native of Tuxtla.

As in Juanita's story, many women enter the ambiente after they are introduced to it by a second party. This individual is sometimes a *padrote* or *madrote* (female pimp or madam), a person who gains financially from a woman's entry into sex work. Other times, the person is simply a relative or acquaintance associated with the ambiente who provides entry into a world of commercial sex that initially seems for most outsiders unknown and perhaps even dangerous.

When writing about sex work, the word "choice" becomes pivotal and sometimes contentious. While radical feminist theorists who oppose sex work in any form argue that there is always some degree of male force or coercion present, others have argued that many women enter sex work through a rational and often economic decision, and that it is indeed a choice (Delacoste and Alexander eds. 1987)) As the ethnographic data here reveal, women enter sex work for a variety of reasons. Some, such as Lorena, more freely choose sex work while for others (like Mónica) this "choice" is sometimes a last resort among other equally limited options.

Speaking of her previous jobs, Lorena says:

Oh, I have had a thousand uses - I worked in fishing, I worked sowing melon in the countryside, I worked harvesting, cutting melon, lime, mango. I worked packing, carrying, shipping, picking and [was a] personnel manager. My strength has always been brute force. Before, I had a good job in a PEMEX (*Petroleos Mexicanos*, the national oil industry) store in D.F.. I was a security guard. I was a bodyguard. My value was in carrying heavy things, before I had my son. The moment they gave me the Caesarean, I lost half my life. I couldn't lift the same way, keep up the same rhythm that I had previously. I was practically left, as they say here, an invalid.

Lorena is a 31-year-old woman born and raised in Chiapas. Unlike the majority of zona workers, Lorena has completed high school, along with secretarial studies and three years of university, where she studied psychology. Lorena finds the field of psychology interesting and useful in daily life. She says her studies were not about earning money but rather a way for her to understand both herself and others, to "give respect to others and see your own value too." But for work, Lorena, a large, imposing woman, has always used her body.

For many lesbian women with female partners, relying upon a male lover for economic support is neither a desire nor a possibility. Ironically,

lesbian sex workers in the Galáctica, while not dependent upon or seeking a male partner for economic support, enter into another kind of dependence upon men in the form of a client-sex worker relationship. This statement could be made for all sex workers, both gay and straight. The independence they gain from men as spouses or family members is accompanied by a new kind of dependence upon men as clients. Lorena, a lesbian herself, became a sex worker in 1994, following the complicated birth of her son which left her weakened and during a difficult period with her girlfriend, who had been working in the sex industry for over a decade. There are a handful of lesbian women currently working in the zona. Though the work demands sexual intercourse with men, for most workers this act is linked neither to sexual desire nor sexual orientation.

For Lorena, entering sex work was an attempt to resolve problems in her personal life. Lorena had been caring for her own child and the two children of her partner. But relying upon her lover for financial support was difficult for the independent Lorena, and it made her feel, she says, like a *padrotito* (little pimp). Furthermore, rumors had reached Lorena that her partner was romantically involved with another zona woman; her partner would often arrive home drunk and belligerent. Lorena decided to take control of her crumbling home life and feelings of dependency by becoming a sex worker herself:

So, I said to her, "Know what? From here on in, I'm no longer going to be the fool. You stay home and I'll

go to work. I'll show you what it is to work." And so, she returned to the house and I began to work in this.

When describing their entry into the ambiente, sex workers often speak of their immediate and individual circumstances of emotional desperation and/or economic need. Rarely do they reflect upon the broader structural constraints faced by poor women throughout the region and their own place within this population. 42-year-old Mónica is a pretty woman, tall, with a lovely smile (thanks in part to the Gálactica's former head doctor-dentist) and short hair. She is often dressed in dark colored leggings and a loose t-shirt, looking very much like a suburban housewife. She has a second grade education and entered the ambiente a few years after her husband shot and killed himself, leaving 22-year-old Mónica alone with their young daughter. They had been together since Mónica was fourteen. Her in-laws tried to find Mónica work in law enforcement, where her husband had been employed, but could not because of her lack of education. Speaking of her entry into sex work, she says, "Nobody put a knife to me, but always a person is a little bit influenced by bad friendships." She attributes her entry into sex work primarily to another person who led her into it, along with what she describes as her own "insecurity and lack of education."

While some sex workers like Mónica describe those who introduced them to the ambiente in negative terms, others like Alejandra express gratitude. Born in Guatemala, Alejandra left school at a young age, unable to attend classes due to a debilitating respiratory illness. Had she been healthy,

she probably still would not have attended school; her single mother struggled to feed the family and when Alejandra recovered from her illness she began to work rather than returning to school. It was not chronic poverty that would provoke her initial foray into prostitution, but rather an acute financial crisis: when Alejandra's mother became gravely ill and was hospitalized, there were no funds to pay for medical care. Desperate, Alejandra simply sat down in the street and cried. She was approached by a "very well-dressed" woman who gave her one hundred pesos (US\$11.75), told her to pay the hospital, and buy herself some food. Stunned by the woman's generosity, Alejandra neglected to ask the woman her name or address so that she could repay her. Days later, she began to look for her. She found the woman, who invited her to eat in a restaurant, though shame kept Alejandra from ordering more than a cup of coffee. "It was she who got me into this ambiente," says Alejandra, "She had a noble heart."

Not all persons who recruit or introduce women to the ambiente have such noble intents. Many women speak of deception and trickery when they recall their entry into the prostitution. The degree of deception ranges from misleading a woman about the nature of the work or her earnings to the use of physical force. Twenty-year-old Lina was brought to the Galáctica from El Salvador by an aunt, who also worked there. During her first months, the aunt took much of Lina's money, spending it on herself until Lina was able to move out of her aunt's house and work in the ambiente on her own. It is not unusual for women to enter the ambiente following a relative's entry. Women in the Galáctica are not social isolates without family; many often

have a cousin, aunt, or sister who also works in the ambiente.

Magda says her entry into the ambiente also involved a degree of deception. Magda used to work in a restaurant near the bus station in the port city of Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz (the same city where Mónica entered the ambiente). Separated from the father of her son, she sent the child to live with his paternal grandmother while Magda worked long shifts waiting tables. Each parent contributed to the maintenance of the child: the father gave money for food (which is fairly inexpensive) while Magda provided funds for more costly items such as clothing.

For many women in Mexico finding a man to support them economically is the culturally prescribed way to live. Though the father of her son had left her, Magda found a new man to support her while waiting tables. He was the captain of a ship based in Isla Mujeres; he treated her respectfully and left generous tips. The two fell in love and though the captain was married and had two children, he also gave economic support to Magda, whom he convinced to leave her job.

He took me out of work. Bought me everything: a fan, a bed, everything. He gave me my *quincena* (the formal pay that is paid to an employee every fifteen days that is also used to refer to the payment that a man gives to his partner) and opened a bank account for me in my own name. When I would go to visit my little son, he would buy me things for him. Very responsible.

Suddenly, without warning, the love letters, telegrams, and money wires stopped arriving. Some two decades later, the pain is still fresh. Sitting in her room in the Galáctica, Magda begins to cry softly and says, "By the way, here I still have the telegrams and letters, hidden away as a beautiful memory."

After six months of desperate waiting and hoping, a depressed Magda returned to work at the restaurant, a job which she liked and felt she was well-suited for due to what she refers as her "affectionate disposition." She tells of meeting a female customer who would change her life:

So, this lady came to eat. "What is there to eat?", she asked. I told her, "*Mi amor*, there's some of this and that." I offered her the best we had. "Look," I said, "this is still warm. It just came out of the kitchen, *mi reina* (my queen)." I liked to treat people this way, because I knew that even if it were only twenty or fifty cents, they would leave me a tip.

Like many service workers, Magda had learned that by fully and pleasantly fulfilling her role as server, she could earn greater income. The woman asked Magda how much she earned and told her, "Look, where I work, one earns a lot. And with that friendliness you have, you'll earn good money." The woman told her she would be working in a restaurant in Huimanguillo, Tabasco. "I was ignorant and innocent," recalls Magda.

Magda arrived in Tabasco surprised to find that the restaurant was actually a *cantina*, a bar that is a traditional bastion of masculinity. "I said to the woman, 'Señora, where is the kitchen?' and I looked around for it because she told me the place was a restaurant. I said, 'Ay, ay *Dios*. It's a *cervecería* (beer joint)!' And there I was, carrying my little box of clothing, innocent with my little long sleeved dress and little collar up to here [she gestures to the middle of her neck]. My clothes, well, they were the clothes of a decent woman, no?" Magda worked that very day as a *fichera* (a woman paid to serve and drink with clients who may also have sex with them for money), serving beer to clients who would comment on her appearance and try to touch her. "I would say to them, 'Listen mister, don't you disrespect me!' I didn't know. I didn't know that I was working in the ambiente and that this was how it was."

Though Magda says that she initially thought the cantina was a horrible place, the promises of financial gain were too good to leave behind; she began waitressing and socializing with the clients, receiving one peso for each beer the clients bought for her. Magda never describes how she made the transition from waitressing to prostituting and never herself uses the word prostitution. When she speaks about her work, she emphasizes mostly the economics of prostitution. The owner of the bar provided her with a bed and birth control pills while the clients would pay 50 pesos (US\$5.90) for sex.⁴⁰ She worked Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays and would return to Coatzacoalcos during the week. Through sex work, Magda earned in three

⁴⁰ Sex workers' methods of birth control vary. Though we did not often discuss the issue, from informal conversations I learned that some workers relied upon injections (Depo-Provera) and others used only condoms.

days what she had earned at the restaurant in a month full of fourteen-hour shifts. Though Magda did not ever intend to enter the ambiente, she says, "That's how I came to like the money, and I said to myself, 'Well, I'll stay.' That is how I came to like the ambiente."

While the majority of the approximately 140 women who work in the Galáctica do so independently, nearly a dozen women are *obligadas*, women obligated or coerced into prostitution by one of two pimps active in the zona. Women generally become obligadas through deception and/or physical and verbal abuse by men they presume to be their boyfriends or by women who promise them employment. The padrote or madrote may take the woman away from her home and familiar surroundings to a place where she has no social relationships or support, thereby increasing her vulnerability and the pimp's control. The obligadas in the Galáctica generally arrive at the zona by way of Puebla, and for this reason are sometimes referred to as *Poblanas* (residents of Puebla), a word which in the zone has become synonymous with pimped.

Ramona is a 25-year-old Chiapaneca who has worked in the ambiente for two years. She is a shy and modest woman, petite, with brown hair that grazes her shoulders. Ramona grew up in rural Chiapas where her family had a small farm. She left school in the third grade in order to help her father and sisters tend plots of corn and beans they grew both for sale and subsistence. Reflecting on her childhood, she feels little nostalgia: "I worked hard"; she attributes her dark skin to the many years spent working under the hot sun: "This is why I am so sunburnt, because I spent so much time in the fields." It

is more likely that Ramona's skin coloring comes from indigenous descent than a childhood spent toiling under the sun. But in a society and a sexual marketplace that privileges those with lighter skin, her attitude is not surprising.

At fifteen, Ramona left home for Tuxtla. This decision was precipitated in part by a desire to escape the difficult life of the fields. She got a job as an employee in a small lunch counter, where she worked for eight years earning "good money," until she met and fell in love with Damian. Soon afterward, the two moved to Puebla, where Ramona says they lived "like man and wife," until the day they came to also live as pimp and prostitute. While she expected to work in Puebla, she never could have guessed that the man she loved would demand that she prostitute herself. Yet soon after their arrival in Puebla, Damian insisted that Ramona engage in sex work to support them. "I began to understand then that what he wanted was money; before, I didn't know what his intentions were." Ramona refused, thinking of her family, "What would they say?" and of the physical dangers, "That cannot be, that kind of work is horrible, a person runs the risk of infection." Damian did not accept her refusal:

And he told me I couldn't say no and that was when he came at me and started to hit me. "You have to work, you have to do it," he said. And that's how he did it, hitting me until I said yes.

Pimping is not a purely male phenomenon. As Liliana's story illustrates, women are also involved in the recruitment and exploitation of other women in prostitution. Liliana first came to Chiapas in the late 1980s with her infant son at the invitation of a woman she had met in her home country of El Salvador. The woman told Liliana that she had many businesses in Mexico: stores, clothing boutiques, a restaurant. Then 18 years old, Liliana was eager to leave urban El Salvador, where she lived in a single room with her son and the father of her child, with whom she sometimes had violent arguments concerning his suspected infidelity. When the woman offered her well-paid work in Mexico, Liliana packed a bit of clothing, some milk and sugar, and soon found herself crossing borders with five other girls, some as young as fourteen. She left not only due to the father of her child, but also "because of the poverty I was living in. I wanted to have my own things, so that I would be able to say, 'This is mine.' But when I left my house, I thought there were jobs that paid well here [in Mexico]."

Arriving at Mexico's southern border the group came upon a manned migration checkpoint. She was told by those transporting her to get out of the vehicle and run. Unable to move quickly with her baby in her arms, she hid herself in the bushes, covering the child's mouth with her hand so that his cries would not give them away. After some time, she began to walk, crossing the border into Chiapas.

Liliana settled in southeastern Chiapas where she found work as a servant. During this time she encountered the woman who had arranged her journey from El Salvador. The woman charged that Liliana still owed her for

the transportation and forced her to work in a club in Tapachula by separating her from her son. Of this time, Liliana said, "I had only had one man in my entire life. How was I going to go with others? But that señora said to me, 'If you don't want to come out of your room, girl, you'll lose your son. I'll give him away to who knows who because you don't want to work for him.' And so I went to work. They put make-up on me. Never before had I worn make-up."

While in the bar Liliana met a man who saw she was upset. She told him her story and the man, an official with the National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM*), demanded that the woman let Liliana and her son go, or he would report her to the police for involvement in the white slave trade. Liliana left the bar with her son and returned to work as a servant until one day while in the market she happened upon another girl with whom she had made the journey from El Salvador who had also escaped from the señora. The girl said to her, "Listen Liliana, why are you working here as a servant? What you earn here in a month you can earn in a day." And so, Liliana took her son and went to Tuxtla to work in El Cocal, and later in the Galáctica.

The women's stories of becoming prostitutes reveal not only the diversity of this experience, but also general underlying structures involved in the process. Women who enter prostitution rarely have the financial support of a male partner. More frequently they have been in unhappy relationships and also bear the economic burden of caring for children who are the products of those relationships. For some women, such as Leticia, sex

work provided a path towards freedom from a physically and verbally abusive husband. While Leticia notes that the work is difficult and because of its stigmatized nature, she struggles to maintain her self-esteem, she also says, "You should have seen me when I first arrived here [in the zona]." She notes that free of her husband, she was transformed from a quiet, deeply depressed person to a sometimes outspoken, confident, and much happier woman. For other women, like Ramona, it was physical and verbal abuse by a partner that forced them into prostitution under circumstances very different from Leticia's. While Leticia found some degree of liberation in sex work, Ramona, while working for a pimp, experienced only degradation and exploitation. Through an ethnographic exploration of prostitution, it becomes clear that the highly polarized sex work debate which pits women's exploitation against women's liberation simply cannot capture the truth about the nature of prostitution.

Knowing somebody already connected to the ambiente plays a key role for women new to sex work. Again, while the presence of a second party who introduces the worker to the ambiente is often common to most workers' experience, the role this person plays differs greatly. The individual may be a role model, as in Alejandra's case; someone monied and well-dressed who offers the worker information on sex work and may even instruct them on how to practice. Or the individual may be a male or even female pimp who forcibly recruits young women into prostitution for their own economic gains.

Accounts of becoming a sex worker reveal not only the similarities and

differences of the experience, but also cultural perspectives on morality. Stressing their degree of economic need, emotional desperation, and/or deception mitigates the moral judgments and stigma associated with prostitution; for many Tuxtlecos, and sex workers too, a woman tricked into sex work or driven there by extreme desperation is subject to less scorn and judgment than those who come to the ambiente more freely. Many outside the ambiente question women's accounts of their personal histories, suggesting they lie or mislead in order to obscure the "moral shortcomings" (including greed and laziness) that caused them to enter prostitution. Upon relaying to one municipal doctor the story of Lina's rape in El Salvador, the doctor suggested that she had fabricated the incident in order to gain sympathy and make excuses for her work in the Galáctica (Lina did not present her rape as an excuse for working in the ambiente and neither is it my intention to do so here).

While Lina's life history rang true, some workers certainly rework their biographies, disingenuously lessening the element of choice in their becoming prostitutes in an effort to reduce the stigma associated with the work. Such was the case with Desirée, a Guatemalan single mother who claimed to be eighteen and completely estranged from her family with whom she said she had had no contact for many years. While out to lunch with a number of workers from the zona at a *marisquería* (seafood restaurant), conversation and beer began to flow as the marimba played. Viviana and I danced until the next course, shrimp with garlic, arrived at the table. My dance partner, it turned out, was the 24-year-old Desirée's sister. What is

revealing here is less the particulars of Desirée's true history than her efforts to make herself both younger (and thus more vulnerable and innocent) and more isolated from her family (thereby increasing her degree of need). Due to the stigmatized nature of their work, it is difficult for many zona women to speak of their involvement in prostitution without drawing upon excuses or subtle apologies.

Women who enter sex work in Mexico also do so living within a political-economic system which offers few employment options for the poor and working classes. The structural reforms of neoliberalism have led to an increasing concentration of wealth and a constriction of opportunity for the masses. Women experience the crisis of advanced capitalism differently from men. Due to an oppressive system of gender inequality, women comprise an inordinate percentage of the global population of the poor. They enter the labor market as poorly paid workers, must carry the double burden of being both a wage-earner and maintainer of the home, and increasingly find themselves without male financial support, thus bearing total responsibility as the head of the household (Benería and Feldman 1992:). As June Nash maintains, within the current neoliberal system, "women and children are the principal losers" (1990:338).

And so as the Mexican economy (as well as much of Latin America) undergoes the crisis of a more savage capitalism that is in some circles mistaken for modernity, poor women increasingly enter the labor market at a distinct disadvantage. Prostitution, one of the few forms of employment always available, flourishes, particularly as part of the informal economy

which also includes household laborers, day laborers, and street vendors. But in Tuxtla and throughout Mexico, unregulated workers who occupy public spaces selling goods such as pirated compact discs and videos or services, sexual and otherwise, are often considered by municipal and state governments not only as unsightly and unruly, but, because they operate beyond the boundaries of the formal market system, decidedly not-modern. Though a by-product of the “modern” neoliberal system, they are often considered the antithesis of that system. In Mexico City (as in New York City), street vendors are arrested and fined during periodic sweeps of the metropolis’s historic district. In Tuxtla, street workers are rounded up by the municipal police. In contrast, the women of the Galáctica are models of modernity, registered employees working in the the city’s booming service sector. The modern neoliberal economy is also one characterized by global movements of the workforce, as laborers migrate seeking economic opportunity. In the Galáctica, the global nature of prostitution is visible as Central American women, propelled north by unemployment, find their way to the zona.

“LOVELY MEXICANS” AND “FILTHY FOREIGNERS”: WORK, MORALITY, AND NATIONAL ORIGINS

A small group was gathered in Lorena’s room when I arrived. She leaned over, kissed my cheek and asked, “Did you hear there is a United Nations meeting happening today?” I told her no. She began to laugh and said, “Yeah, right here: El Salvador, Mexico, the United States, Guatemala,”

referring to the national origins of those of us in her room. Happily impressed with her own wit, she continued laughing, disappearing behind the curtain that leads to her bathroom.

In the *zona*, a worker's identity as a Mexican or an *extranjera* (foreigner) is relevant for a number of reasons. First, though not paramount, a foreign woman must take certain precautions in order to keep from being deported. Second, because of their precarious migrant status, this population is more vulnerable to abuses by police, INM officials, landlords, clients, and *zona* staff. Third, one's identity as a Mexican or foreigner can influence work patterns, habits, and consumption. Finally, one's citizenship becomes an important issue in the economic and quasi-moral competition in which many *zona* workers find themselves embroiled.

As *zona* workers are a floating population, it is impossible to cite fixed statistics, but at any given time anywhere from 30 to 60 percent of the worker population may be foreign born - specifically Central American. The *Reglamento de la Zona de Tolerancia* (Regulation of the Tolerance Zone, a municipal document), as well as Mexican law, states that registered prostitutes working in regulated zones must be Mexican citizens. However, this law is only sporadically enforced, depending upon location, practices of corruption, and current public opinion regarding undocumented migrants.

While Chiapas is one of Mexico's poorest states, for many Central Americans, its urban centers are places where they can settle and sometimes achieve a relative degree of economic stability, or places to stop and earn money for their trip north to the United States. Immigrant *zona* workers

come primarily from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, countries with histories of civil war, extreme poverty produced by neoliberal restructuring, and in the case of Honduras, natural disasters such as Hurricane Mitch (which devastated much of the country, hitting the poor the hardest).

Immigrant workers, Guatemalans in particular, have a lengthy history in Chiapas. They have long been employed as workers in large state-funded construction projects and as rural day laborers (*braceros*) on ranches and coffee plantations. Between 1936 and 1942, when many large ranches in Chiapas began to feel the effects of agrarian reform, Guatemalan laborers became attractive to employers since, as immigrants, they could make no claims on ejidal lands (Wasserstrom 1976:12). Furthermore, it was believed that as undocumented and therefore more vulnerable workers, they would be easier to control and less likely to unionize (Benjamin 1989:205; Wasserstrom 1976:12). Like their Mexican counterparts in the United States, Mexico's immigrant laborers are often subject to exploitation at the hands of employers - they are paid even less than poorly paid Chiapanecos and often live in miserable conditions (Wasserstrom 1976:12).⁴¹ In Tuxtla, much of the labor required by the state-sponsored urban growth that occurred in the early 1980s was performed by Guatemalan workers, many of whom were fleeing not only poverty but also the terror of abuses by the rightist military government which routinely murdered and tortured thousands its own citizens.

Today, Chiapas continues to be a main crossing point into Mexico for immigrants not only from Central America, but also from South America

⁴¹ In 1990, there were over 70,000 documented immigrant workers employed in agriculture alone in Chiapas (Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social Consejo Nacional de Población 1994:84).

and as far away as India and China (other southern frontier states are Tabasco, Campeche, and Quintana Roo). Throughout Mexico, and in particular in Chiapas, there is currently a great emphasis on the detention and repatriation of undocumented migrants, both those who have settled in Mexico and transmigrants who aspire to reach the United States. The United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) works in conjunction with Mexican authorities to halt prospective migrants to the United States while they are still in Mexico, long before they have reached the northern border.⁴² In Chiapas, authorities have initiated plans such as the Seal the Southern Border Program in order to quell this migration. Furthermore, they have increased the presence of INM officials along the southern border. Undocumented migrants are not only targeted by migration authorities but also by the state criminal justice system which often intercepts migrants as part of its new Zero Tolerance Against Delinquency Program.

Migrating Central Americans are seen as both a source of crime and victims of delinquency in Chiapas, particularly in the southeastern border regions. Newspapers are replete with stories of Central Americans carrying drugs, robbing citizens, and contributing to vice, in particular to prostitution and even the spread of AIDS. According to newspaper accounts, citizens have asked for increased controls upon immigrants who "have come to take up prostitution and gang activity," "begin to commit crime," "perform dances

⁴² As part of their efforts to combat illegal migration, the United States INS began to offer financial rewards for information leading to the detention of *polleros*, individuals who guide migrants across the border in exchange for money (*Diario de Chiapas*, July 5, 1999).

known as 'table dances,'"⁴³ and "prostitute in order to save money and then continue their journey to the United States." So synonymous have delinquency and illegal migration become in public discourse that the two are sometimes paired together in newspaper articles; on May 15, 1999, two unrelated incidents were described in a single article in two separate newspapers: "The PGF Intercepts Illegals in Ciudad Hidalgo - Also Secured 970 Grams of Cocaine in Tonalá" and "In Two Separate Police Raids: They Seize Drugs and Detain 12 Illegals." Such discourse demonizes migrants while masking the harsh economic realities that drive them from their home communities.

Yet this same population is also subject to abuses by INM authorities, the *polleros* who transport them, and those who prey upon vulnerable immigrants. According to government statistics, during the first six months of 1999, over 170,000 immigrants were victims of some crime or abuse committed by government authorities or Mexican citizens; of this number approximately 10,000 of the reported cases occurred in Chiapas.⁴⁴ While many immigrants suffer rape, robbery, and abuse during their stay in Mexico, other aspiring migrants never complete the journey - they drown crossing the river that separates Guatemala and Chiapas. In one instance, two small boats carrying undocumented migrants crashed off the coast near the Chiapas/Oaxaca border, killing more than thirty people. Though there is strong anti-immigrant sentiment in some parts of Chiapas, both government

⁴³ A table dance is a private striptease that a sex worker does for a client at his table. This word, along with a host of other commercial sex -related terms, is another example of the cultural influence of the United States in Mexico.

⁴⁴ *Diario de Chiapas*, July 5, 1999

authorities and non-governmental organizations, such as the *Beta Sur* Group for the Protection of Immigrants, have organized to try to lessen the crime and abuses against undocumented Central Americans.

Within the zona, Central American women work with the knowledge of the municipal government and with minimal intervention by the INM. According to workers, the landlords pay *mordidas* (bites or bribes) to corrupt immigration officials who allow the foreign zona women to work unmolested. This arrangement was briefly in jeopardy during the spring of 1999 when migration agents sought to increase the mordida; during this time there was fearful talk in the zona of a possible visit by migration agents who ordinarily only come if they are searching for someone in particular or have been ordered to come by supervisors. Eventually owners and agents reached a compromise. During my year in the field I never saw an INM official in the zona. As Antonio, part of the zona staff, said, "Migration lets them work untroubled."

Yet bribery only offers partial protection to foreign workers: during the first half of 1999, it was not unusual to see a red Chevy Suburban belonging to the INM parked at the crossroads of the Pan-American Highway and the major road south. Authorities often stopped vehicles entering Tuxtla, intercepting "illegals." Before 1999, this checkpoint would have been of little consequence to zona workers as it was located about one-quarter mile east of and past the zona entrance, in the opposite direction from the city center. But the state government constructed a highway divider replete with struggling palm trees and wilting flowers that made it impossible for anyone to exit the

zona, turn left, and head west, directly back to the city center. The divider not only “beautified” the gateway to Tuxtla but also effectively controlled zona traffic, diverting those leaving toward the busy intersection where the INM’s Suburban was parked. Yet zona workers found a way to outwit the migration agents: during the height of immigration worries in the zone, they simply exited the car at the Pan-American Highway, crossed on foot, walking over the divider, and waited on the other side for the driver to return after he had passed the migration checkpoint with an empty taxi. I was a participant in this subterfuge several times.⁴⁵

Such encounters with the red Suburban illustrate not only the uneven enforcement of laws in Mexico, but also a sense of national pride to be found among many zone workers. When Flor was “caught” by migration, for example, she refused to lie about her origins or her employment and expressed scorn for those who do. She says she told the agents, “I am Honduran and I work in the Zona Galáctica.” She did lie though when the officer, hoping to exact a payment, asked her how much she earned. She told

⁴⁵ The fieldwork period was one of heightened political instability in Chiapas. As the PRI struggled to maintain control, researchers’ areas of investigation were circumscribed. Deportations of foreign tourists (many participating in a phenomenon labeled Zapaturismo - Zapatista tourism), activists, and intellectuals alike were not uncommon. Even the Honduran reggae-rap band who performed at the Mother’s Day fiesta was picked up by INM authorities, only to be bailed out by the municipal government which felt responsible for their plight. As a researcher and foreigner working in an increasingly xenophobic state, I did my best to remain invisible to authorities of the INM, as the threat of deportation was very real. After countless interviews and much paperwork my research visa was approved by the INM some six months after I made the initial request. Happening upon a caravan of Zapatistas in San Cristóbal for dialogues, I returned home immediately; as I had learned through the experience of friends, accidental proximity alone could get a person deported. My efforts at invisibility were not always successful. Soon after the land conflict in the zona erupted, television news crews came to cover the event. I was urged by the staff of the SMAV to leave quickly, exiting through a side gate that was reserved for police and staff. I did this, but not soon enough. That evening both Pepe and I appeared on the evening news, eating tacos and sipping Cokes at his food stand.

him, "Oh, I make maybe a hundred pesos a day, enough to pay the rent and food." The officer let her go. Lydia, a Guatemalan worker of Belizean descent has not had any encounters with migration in Tuxtla, but laments that she is unable to make a trip home to visit her family as other women do; because her skin is black, she is extremely visible. Of the INM she says, "They'd grab me. And with this skin, they'd know immediately."

Foreign-born workers are also vulnerable to exploitation or betrayal by Mexican co-workers and others in the zona who may use their precarious status as undocumented migrants against them. Angry with Roberto (the young former sex worker from Guatemala who now earns money cleaning rooms and running errands in the zona) following a vicious verbal argument which almost came to blows, Mónica threatened that she would report him to the INM. Some clients, police, landlords, and co-workers see the "foreigners," as they are called, as individuals easy to exploit or at the very least, easier to control. But foreign workers are also, as shown in the strike of 1996, more assertive and politically informed than many Mexican zona workers. Despite the difficulties faced by foreign workers, Central American women will continue to cross both physical and moral borders in order to work in the zona as long as global economic inequalities mean there is less opportunity in their home countries.

There are various reasons why immigrant women are able to work in the zona relatively unmolested by migration authorities. First, as Tuxtla is in the western half of the state far from the southeastern border and coastal regions where many immigrants first arrive, there is less of the hostile

discourse regarding Central Americans. Furthermore, due to the workers' location outside of the city and in a regulated zone, municipal and migration agents receive no complaints from city residents, as is common in border cities and towns. The Central American prostitute population in Tuxtla, though relatively large, remains for the most part invisible, which offers them some protection. In addition, as prostitution is a culturally embedded phenomenon viewed by many, including sex workers themselves, as a necessary social service, women working invisibly in the regulated zone, Mexican or not, are subject to less harassment by government authorities than visible street workers.

According to Pepe, who runs the food stand just inside the zona entrance, Central American zona workers used to suffer more harassment from migration officials, but now, with "free trade," as he put it, they are allowed to work undisturbed. To illustrate his point, he said, "Before, you couldn't even bring an orange into the country, and now, with free trade, you can!" Pepe is of course partially correct - there is indeed a linkage between "free trade" (in a broader sense) and the prostitution of Central American women in the zona. It is the impact of "free trade," of economic restructuring, which increases the immiseration of poor populations throughout the Americas that keeps women (and men) from remaining in their native countries and communities.

Some Central American women express longing for their homes and travel there regularly, often during Holy Week (*Semana Santa*) and during the rainy season in August when business in the zona is slow. Liliana worries

aloud about dying in Mexico, far from her family and native El Salvador. Others have become accustomed to Mexico and the economic benefits it offers. Both Patricia and Liliana travel into Guatemala crossing the river in order to avoid migration agents who sometimes charge as much as 800 pesos (US \$94) to let them pass through. While many zona workers are stable, having settled in Tuxtla and remaining in the zona for many years, others view it as a temporary workplace where they can earn money to fund their trip to the United States. Liliana dreams of moving to the United States. She has a cousin in Los Angeles and a brother in Virginia, though she calls the latter a hypocrite; she says her brother, who recently became a Jehovah's Witness, has become self-righteous and selfish. He continues to neglect their mother in El Salvador and has abandoned a woman pregnant with his child. Olga, from Lima, Peru, is a recent arrival to the zona and intends to make it to the United States where she has a brother in New Jersey. Juanita has only recently returned to the zona from the New York City, where she was visiting a sister. She returned to Mexico, she says, due to the extreme cold and her inability to speak English.

Much of the discussion surrounding possible travels to the United States is positive; workers tell stories of women who simply perform striptease (without sexual contact) earning in an hour what they themselves earn in a week. Another worker, certainly influenced by movies and television programs from the U.S. that are ubiquitous in Mexico, suggests that everyone in the United States is thin and pretty. Despite my efforts to dissuade her of this notion, she is stubborn. For many in the zona, the United

States represents a promised land attractive to zona workers, though few actually have the initiative or ability to make the journey.

Other workers have no aspirations to leave Mexico. Elena is an argumentative and caustic woman who works not in the zona, but in a private house in a neighboring town. The mother of two teenaged girls, she is a chubby woman with large almond-shaped eyes, full lips, a round nose, pale skin, and a head full of orange curls. Her incessant complaining is somehow endearing. On my birthday a small group of us gathered at Cahuaré, a local *balneario* (swimming pool with an outdoor restaurant and music) situated alongside the Grijalva River. Looking at the glasses of water the waiter brought, Elena found a chip in one. “*That*, that to me is an insult.” Of the waiter, she exclaimed, “He should be standing right here ready to serve us. At Quinta Los Robles [a similar establishment just up the road] the service is much better and the food too!” When conversation turned to the subject of the United States, Mónica said that she would consider going if she could speak English. Elena, on the other hand, claimed she had no interest in going and spat bitterly, “The American dream. Ha!”, punctuating her sentence by giving the middle finger to nobody in particular.

A worker’s status as Mexican or immigrant influences how she may work and more importantly, the ways in which she is perceived by others. The presence of Central American workers and what they represent is sometimes hotly contested in the zona. Among many Mexican workers there is a decidedly anti-immigrant sentiment, fueled in part by a competitive work environment. As workers compete against each other for clients, both

Mexican and Central American workers use the banner of national identity in a variety of ways. Leticia sums up the situation rather well:

And they [the foreigners] say to us Mexicans,
“Ay, those Mexicans. They are foolish, stupid,
because they don’t know how to get ahead.”
Because they do services that sometimes we
Mexicans don’t do. So, they will do it, and for a
low price, and that’s the worst thing, because,
for example, I as a Mexican could do it, but say
for instance, that they charge the minimum. I
could charge more, but if all were in agreement on
the price, well, there wouldn’t be a problem. But,
if she charges less, it’s logical that she is going to
win out, even if she just earns the smallest
amount, but she does it so that the client doesn’t
leave. And this is what they do and that is why
there is a great difference between us and them.

Such attitudes towards work and migration are, of course, not unique to Mexico. As global capitalism causes widespread social and economic dislocation for poor populations, immigrants are increasingly forced to leave their home countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, to find work. The patterns of ethnic or racial hatred that are engendered by the structural

vulnerability of native workers and competition between them and new immigrants that is found in the zona repeats itself again and again. In his study of Puerto Rican crack dealers in New York City's Spanish Harlem, Philippe Bourgois (1995) provides another illustration of the ways in which structural economic forces pit workers of different ethnic origins (in this case Mexicans and Puerto Ricans) against one another. A Mexican man, prompted by Bourgois, tells him why it is that Bourgois' Puerto Rican informants cannot find well-paying jobs: "Okay, okay, I'll explain it to you in one word: Because the Puerto Ricans are stupid! Stupid!" Of Mexicans, he says, "We come here to work and that's all" (1995:130-131). In contrast, a Puerto Rican man describes how he feels when he crosses paths with a Mexican: "Makes me feel like shit when I see them, 'cause I know they work for cheaper than me" (1995:166). Such feelings, Bourgois notes, often leads to violence against Mexican workers.

Some immigrant workers in the zona work longer hours and charge less money (like many immigrant workers worldwide), and sometimes perform "special services." Few workers speak in detail of the services they provide to clients, particularly if those services include anal or oral sex, acts which are highly stigmatized. Sometimes, however, workers are able to discern what services are sold by co-workers; if a client arrives at one's door requesting oral sex, is refused, and then enters into negotiations with a neighboring worker and enters her room, it is not unlikely that that worker has agreed to perform special services. Other clues to how a woman works include the sounds of pornography emanating from her room, and the

nature of her clientele - some regular clients are known for their sexual proclivities and it is obvious to most zona workers which women they frequent. Yet it is not only immigrant workers who perform special services. Furthermore many immigrant workers will not perform special services; Liliana, from El Salvador, groans with disgust at the thought of engaging in sexual acts other than intercourse.⁴⁶

This intersection of nationalism, sexuality, and morality within the realm of prostitution is not a new phenomenon. In her study of prostitution in Mexico City, Katherine Bliss describes a letter written in 1927 by Mexican prostitutes to President Calles, in which they decry, among other things, the foreign prostitutes who provided "indecent" services to their clients (2001:2). Despite the likelihood that special services are performed by some Mexican and foreign workers alike, many Mexican workers, particular older women, denounce what they perceive as the changing nature of sex work and attribute these changes to the presence of foreign workers. According to 50 year old Magda:

It's the foreigners that are very, very depraved. They make a disaster of things and are too flamboyant. Like the Paquita, La del Barrio song says, they do it all, the foreigners. They use pornography. That which a Mexican woman wouldn't dare do, much

⁴⁶ Such a perspective on sexuality is not uncommon in Central America. In Nicaragua, Roger Lancaster found that many of his informants also expressed revulsion at, and at times ignorance of, certain sexual activities, oral sex in particular. He attributes this revulsion to cultural beliefs regarding the mouth as "a primary route of contamination" and sex as *sucio* (dirty) (1992:241).

less speak of. And they won't just tell you about it. They'll do it with you and that's the problem of the filthy foreigners and the lovely Mexicanas.

In this construction, the Central American prostitute is the "other," not simply a foreigner, but a foreigner who constitutes an immoral, disreputable being who has created a new division of sexual labor in prostitution and whose "immorality" unfairly increases economic competition in the zona.

Such nationalist discourse describes Central American workers as both foreign and deviant. One worker even suggested that it is not Central American women who are responsible for demands for special services by clients, but rather *gringas*, North American and other Western women who come to Mexico and engage in sexual relations with Mexican men. Though sex workers may rebuke and refuse clients who ask for special services, they generally are not blamed by sex workers for their desire for anal and oral sex; as men, their sexual desires are less circumscribed by cultural beliefs which stigmatize women for engaging in the very sex acts that men may desire.

A few women, like Lorena, reject this constructed division between Mexicans and Central Americans. She asserts it is "foolishness" to refer to the latter as "foreigners." "Before anything else," she says, "they are human beings." Likening the situation of the Central American women in the zona to that of Mexican immigrants in the United States, she says:

It's like a Mexican that leaves for the United States.

She automatically knows that if she screws around she won't get anywhere. If she goes to the United States, it's because she has the drive to earn money. It's the same with those from Guatemala that come here. They come, but they don't just come to spend the day or whatever. No, they come for the money. Because if they venture to come here, with the risks and the danger and everything, it's for money.

In a comment that echoes Benedict Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined communities, Lorena, a Chiapaneca, rejects the notion of the nation itself, examining the socially constructed nature of borders and national identities:

I am Guatemalan. Do you know why I am Guatemalan? Because if many of us were familiar with our real history they would know why I say I am Guatemalan. I am Guatemalan because of the simple fact that before, the state of Chiapas was part of Guatemala. And not that long ago. A hundred years ago. I don't know. It belonged to Guatemala. So, I carry Guatemalan blood. All Chiapanecos, we are all of Guatemalan blood. For what do we act so innocent?

Lorena's informed perspective on Central American zona workers is not the norm. More often, they are looked upon as depraved women, unfair competition, and troublemakers. Some Mexican zona women view Central American workers as complainers who create undesirable turmoil with both the zona staff and clients. Indeed, Central American sex workers in the zona are often more politically engaged, likely a product of the recent tumultuous political histories of their home countries. When a representative from a prostitutes' union in Mexico City came to speak to zona workers about organizing and later invited them to participate in a conference in the Federal District, the only workers who expressed interest, with the exception of Lorena, were immigrant workers. And these workers were unable to participate due to their undocumented status.

For their part, many foreign workers view themselves as diligent and goal-oriented, believing their Mexican counterparts to be not only lazy, but also weak women who are unable to assert themselves. Various conversations with workers highlight these beliefs. Flor, from Honduras, says that she sometimes thinks of going to the United States; as a Honduran, she says she believes she would be welcomed because it is well known that Central Americans work hard, while Mexicans, in contrast, do not. Salvadorans also take pride in their work ethic; as Cecilia Menjivar notes, they are sometimes referred to "the Germans" or "the Japanese" of Central America (2000:98). Mexican women are perceived not only as lacking a strong work ethic but also as more willing to tolerate abuse from others, including romantic partners whom they may maintain financially.

Flor has been living for over a year with Jacobo, a municipal employee who works as a “health inspector,” rounding up street prostitutes. One day, Flor sat at Doña Paula’s food stand, sipping soda and looking very sad, as she had heard through gossip that Jacobo had been *bajando*, literally ‘going down,’ visiting another zona woman in her room and engaging in romantic or sexual relations with her. Some weeks later, she appeared much more animated, saying that having yelled at and hit Jacobo, their relationship is now much better. “He is being very affectionate,” she said, and he had even raised her quincena from 600 to 900 pesos (US\$70 to US\$106). Her unwillingness to tolerate Jacobo’s infidelity and mistreatment, according to Flor, stems from her national origins: “He can’t treat me like that; I’m hondureña.” For Desirée, the main difference between foreign and Mexican women is that the former receive money from their romantic partners, while the latter give money. In the zona, as we shall see, a woman is judged by the relationship between her money and her lover.

OBLIGADAS, MANTENIDOS, Y INDEPENDIENTES

In Puebla, Ramona’s life with her partner-turned-pimp grew increasingly difficult. She was working the streets steadily, seeing clients in hotels. She gave all her earnings to Damian who would threaten and hit her, but occasionally buy her clothing and new shoes. In those days, Ramona worked without a condom and received no medical care. Following an outreach to sex workers by a local social services organization, Ramona told

Damian she wanted to see a doctor. His response was, "Ay, what for? Here's your doctor right here. I can examine you whenever you want." On one occasion, when she became infected with a sore on her genitals, Damian applied to it a liquid which burned terribly and "like that he sent me out to work." Since that time, Ramona says, she has tried to always use a condom; "I said to myself, 'It's my life.' It's not his life, he does nothing more than ask for the cash, but it is my life that is at risk."

Frequent physical abuse by Damian spurred Ramona to demand that he take her back to Chiapas, where she could be closer to her family, who did not know that she had become a sex worker. Reluctant to lose a source of income, Damian brought Ramona to Tuxtla to work in the Galáctica. During this period the pair did not live together and Ramona began to suspect that he was seeing another woman. What she would soon find out was that Damian had four other women working for him in the zona.

Ramona recalls the "very painful day" that her relationship with Damian ended. On this day he arrived at Ramona's apartment and accused her of infidelity, an act which would threaten his physical, emotional, and financial control over Ramona. He beat her and tried to strangle her.

He would have preferred I were dead before I left him, he told me. "Oh God," I was saying, "Oh God, protect me," because before I had believed in God. *Bueno*, I still do, but one quickly forgets when one begins to do this kind of work.

Ramona escaped with her life, though Damian retained control of her apartment and her belongings. Following this event, she moved to the southeastern city of Comitán and worked the zone there for a few months, waiting for the air to clear, serving mostly soldiers brought from northern Mexico to participate in the ongoing Zapatista conflict. Ramona eventually returned to the Galáctica, but to work for herself, selling sexual services to clients for thirty pesos (US\$3.50), fifty (US\$5.90) if they would like vaginal intercourse in a position other than the missionary style. Of Damian, she says she has little contact with him and has told him she will go to the police if he bothers her. For the moment, the four other women who continue to work for Damian leave her alone, but their anger is clear:

You can see it in their faces. Before, I would come and they would greet me, "Hi. How are you? How good that you have come." Very happy. But now they just turn their faces away and that's it. They see that I'm no longer giving [money to Damian] and that's what really gets to them - that I am working and earning my own money, my own money that is mine. That's what bothers them.

While the majority of the zona's 140 workers labor independently, nearly a dozen women are obligadas, women obligated, or coerced into prostitution by one of two pimps active in the Galáctica. Women generally

become obligadas through physical and verbal abuse by men they presume to be their boyfriends. The padrote (pimp) may take the woman away from her home and familiar surroundings to a place where she has no social relationships or support, as Damian did with Ramona, thereby increasing her vulnerability and his control.

In contrast to obligadas, who are forced into prostitution by men who retain control of their earnings, the independent worker (*independiente*) works for herself and may use her earnings to support children or extended family. Located between these two types of workers are women who have entered the ambiente on their own or due to the persuasion of a partner who is then totally or partially financially maintained by his girlfriend and does not give her a quincena (this man is called a *mantenido*, a somewhat disparaging term referring to a man who is supported by his partner).

These categories though, are blurred, subject to change and contestation, and not mutually exclusive. As Ramona's case illustrates, an obligada may become an independent agent. Furthermore, the distinction between a man who is a pimp and a man who simply accepts money from his partner is sometimes unclear. Alicia lives in small home made of concrete blocks located just off the main highway on the road that leads to the zona. Sometimes she or her male spouse can be seen sitting outside the house from the piratas on their way to the zona. Some workers gossip that her spouse is a *mantenido*, implying both that he is not fulfilling his duties as a man and that she is foolish. One worker says he is a pimp. Alicia herself would likely deny both accusations. Women who do have pimps nearly always refer to

him as their boyfriend or spouse (*esposo*). In addition, most workers, whether they are free agents, pimped, or working to maintain a lover, experience some aspect of exploitation in prostitution; it is often simply the degree and nature of this exploitation which varies. As we have seen, regulated prostitution cannot be reduced to a simple question of gender oppression.

A woman's status as an obligada affects the way she both works and socializes in the zona. Generally, these women must earn a certain amount each day which they will give to their padrote. Unmet quotas may provoke physical or verbal abuse; in order to avoid these repercussions, an obligada may employ a number of strategies: she may work cheaply to attract many clients or conversely, negotiate the highest price possible with a client; she may work without a condom, which may attract both those clients who refuse to use them and those clients willing to pay more for this service; she may work long hours; and finally she may perform special services.

Though it is foreign women who are often suspected of performing special services, women who work obligada are generally of Mexican origin and may at times perform these same acts, thus challenging the division of the "filthy" foreigner and "lovely" Mexicans. Again, we see that this discourse is based less in actual fact than it is in an ethnocentric morality fueled by divisive economic competition among working-class women.

Obligadas tend to engage in less social interaction with independent zone workers and may go to great lengths to protect their padrote and his

economic well-being.⁴⁷ They are often seen in one another's company, which allows the women to effectively police one another for the benefit of their padrote; when independent workers Leticia and Flor advised one obligada to leave her pimp, they were threatened by the other women working for him who said they would inform the padrote that they had been "advising" her. Leticia's partner Miguel, a municipal police officer who used to work at the zona's front gate, recalled with dismay how after he had arrested a padrote for beating one of his workers, the same worker showed up to bail him out of jail, proclaiming her love for her padrote and her anger at Miguel. The situation, he said, made him feel helpless: "I felt about as small as an ant." Women who leave their padrote are often met with scorn by other obligadas, as in Ramona's case. These workers may have to earn more in order to cover the lost earnings or bear the brunt of the padrote's foul mood and increasingly violent efforts to maintain control following the loss of a worker.

In Mexico, the pimp is generally considered a nefarious character. This characterization is reflected in the Mexican legal system; there is no federal law against prostitution and in Chiapas no state law prohibiting such activity when it is regulated but the state legal code devotes an entire chapter to the crime of pimping (*lenoncinio*). According to the state penal code, a pimp (padrote or *lenon*) is one who "exploits the body of another in sexual commerce and is maintained or obtains some profit from this commerce; who manages or sustains places destined to exercise prostitution." Also

⁴⁷ Most of my ethnographic data regarding forced prostitution came from observation and formal and informal interviews with two women who had formerly worked as obligadas. Evidence suggested that a third woman, Maura, a former college student from Puebla now working in the zone, was also an obligada, but Maura refused to identify herself as one, carefully referring to the man that most zona workers and staff knew to be her pimp, as her "partner" [*pareja*].

considered a pimp by state law is someone who facilitates another's entry into prostitution or who opens or manages a brothel, *casa de cita*, or other place where prostitution occurs. The punishment for pimping is four to eight years in prison and a fine; this punishment is increased by four years if the pimp is working in collaboration with law enforcement. Yet despite this perception of pimping, padrotes in the zona and the street continue to operate freely, reflecting the male domination embedded in the legal system and Mexican culture at large.

Discourses about the dangers of the padrote are common both inside and outside of the zona. Before moving to Tuxtla from the small town of Soyalá, Ana María was warned by her mother not to fall prey to a pimp; she explained to her daughter how they might look and the ways in which they take advantage of young women. Ana María laughs at the irony of her mother's warnings - she now works in the zona, but as a secretary and says, "And I have yet to see a pimp!" On a number of occasions Bárbara repeated a cautionary tale about an obligada from El Cocal. The woman was older, tall, and pretty with "an incredible body." According to Bárbara, the woman earned a good deal of money for her pimp but, "she got sick with cancer, of the uterus, I think. And do you think he was there to help her? When she died, she was left in her room for three days and there wasn't even money for a coffin. The dogs wanted to eat her! The women [in El Cocal] had to chip in and buy the casket." The obligadas, Bárbara says, "are squeezed like oranges and when there is no juice left, they are thrown out."

The stories of exploitative men who gain from women's involvement

in commercial sex reveal much about the cultural construction of gender in Mexico. Dominant cultural values continue to assert that men are to support women economically, rather than exploiting them for profit. Men who fail to adhere to these norms, even within an economic crisis which makes achieving this difficult, are often considered of questionable moral character. The pimp then, is someone who not only rejects societal norms, but turns them on their head. Yet, ironically, the pimp also embodies cultural values which assert that female sexuality must be controlled and male sexual “needs” must be met: by facilitating and controlling the sale of female sexuality while ensuring that other men receive the sexual activity due to them as men, the *padrote* (much like the prostitute), though maligned for the role he plays, also reinforces certain hegemonic norms regarding gender.

While there is some empathy among independent workers towards those women who work as *obligadas*, many workers express disdain towards *padrotes* and others who unfairly benefit from the women’s work. Bárbara says if she were able to leave the *ambiente* she would never return to work as a madam or as a *zona* landlady. Other workers express similar sentiments. One afternoon in Leticia’s kitchen, she, Miguel, and I were eating *mixiotes*, a dish of chicken and chiles wrapped in little foil packages, as we sat under the watchful eye of Alfonso, a green parrot with glaring orange eyes perched outside the window in the decaying courtyard where residents wash clothes, bathe, and use the common toilet. Leticia and Miguel speak of the *padrotes*, how they show up with nice, new cars, “Topaz, Jetta, all the latest models.” They both express disgust as they describe the ways in which the *padrotes*

abuse their workers and threaten to tell their families that they are working as prostitutes. Former obligadas such as Evita and Ramona express contempt for the men who forced them into prostitution.

The obligadas are pitied by other workers and sometimes even scorned for being beholden to a pimp whom they must give their earnings, and to whom they often refer to as their lover or partner rather than their pimp. When Liliana left the Galáctica to work in an unregulated area in an alley in the state of Morelos, she found she was the only worker there without a padrote. She said to one co-worker, "How much you pay to sleep with him!" to which her colleague responded, laughing, "Shut up, damn China!"⁴⁸ Liliana's astute comment reveals the complexity of the obligada's relationships: she is both a prostitute, but also, in a sense, a client, in that she gives money to a man in return for intimacy, or the illusion of it.

The obligadas often find themselves in the unusual situation of having intercourse with strangers for money in order to have intercourse with their partners, again for money. Of former obligada Evita, Viviana says, "She is pretty but not very bright", adding "Nobody forced me to do what I am doing." Mónica refers to the obligadas as "poor things", and says that she entered the ambiente on her own, that "nobody put a knife to my throat." The obligadas represent an extreme form of prostitution in which women are overtly forced to sell sexual services; their presence in the zona allows independent workers to mask the social and economic circumstances that brought them into the ambiente, replacing them with a discourse of "free

⁴⁸ Due to her Asian features, Liliana is often referred to as "China" or "La Chinita", meaning "China girl."

will.”

CHAPTER 5

SELLERS AND BUYERS

Looking out the window from the offices of the Anti-Venereal Medical Service where Edith distributes condoms to sex workers, she and I watch clients come and go. Sex work, according to Edith (herself a single mother) and many Tuxtlecós is “the easy life” - “an easy way to make money.” We watch in silence as a shabbily dressed man with one arm, the other an oddly shaped stub with a pointed end, heads up the stairs to the exit. Edith finally speaks, saying it is awful to ride the bus back to the city center with clients, especially when they are “disrespectful.” She pauses for a moment, looking pensive, and then says, “The women have to put up with a lot. What I said before about this being the easy life, well, maybe it’s not so easy. They have to put up with a lot.”

A common perception among many Tuxtlecós is that prostitute women are looking for “the easy life,” a quick and simple way to make money. Inside the zona, workers tell another story. Riding in the pirate taxi, Leticia speaks of clients who claim the work is easy: “I tell them, ‘You think this work is easy?!?!? You think this is easy? This is NOT easy!’ The work is hard going with man after man. Some think it’s easy. Others think that we are women without hearts; that we don’t feel.” Lina despairs about the ways in which society “goes around criticizing,” saying, “They call it the easy life, but it’s not.”

Performing sexual labor is far from quick and simple. Workers must be skilled arbitrators, able to extract money from clients while sometimes

enduring insults and verbal abuse. The exchange of services for cash is based upon a series of negotiations and sometimes outright refusals on the part of the worker or the client. This chapter will examine the process of negotiation, refusal, and submission that occurs in the sex worker-client encounter and explore more deeply the role of the consumer of sexual services in the Galáctica.

PRICES AND SERVICES

They need us and we need them. - Ramona

The thousand men who walk through the gates of the zona each day come in search of a woman who will provide them with the services they are looking for at a price they are willing to pay. The one-hundred and forty women who wait in their rooms or doorways are looking for a client who will pay their asking price for the services they are willing to provide. The process of negotiating a sale is riddled with multiple, overlapping and sometimes surprising power relations: class, gender, age, appearance, experience, and ethnicity may come into play during negotiations. Negotiations can be difficult, as rarely are the desires of the seller and the buyer the same. Sitting in Pepe's food stand, Bárbara wrote down the conflict in my notebook:

The clients prefer those that

-charge less - give all - don't use a condom
and the women prefer
giving normal services, charge what is fair, and put on a condom.

A typical encounter may be something like this: the client enters the front gate, purchases his three-peso (US\$0.35) entry ticket, is briefly searched by municipal police manning the entry and heads down the pathway between the food stands of Pepe and Doña Paula, past the SMAV, to the rooms. He may go from courtyard to courtyard, room to room, peering through doorways at the workers who may be lying on their beds, watching television, reading comics, or talking with a co-worker. When he finds a woman he likes, he may ask, "How much?" and might also inquire about any special services he would like. If the pair come to an agreement, the client will enter. If not, he will continue his search. Regular clients who come to the zona to see particular workers can forego this selection and negotiation process, instead heading directly to the room of their favored worker, knowing in advance what services they will be able to receive and how much they will pay.

As a client may choose a prostitute, so may the prostitute choose or reject a client. It is not unusual for a client to have a door slammed in his face, be yelled at, ignored, or in one memorable incident, to have a bucket of water thrown at him. As the service sector economy, prostitution included, expands globally, workers are increasingly expected to perform labor that meets both the material desires and emotional wants of the consumer. This

growth in the service sector stems from recent economic changes that have led to decreasing options for employment as a result of privatization, foreign competition, and technological advances that leave human workers behind. Furthermore, the feminization of the workforce has led to what Cameron Lynne MacDonald and Carmen Sirianni call “a self-fulfilling cycle in which the entrance of more women in the workforce has led to increased demand for those consumer services once provided gratis by housewives (cooking, cleaning, childcare, etc.), which in turn has produced more service jobs that are predominantly filled by women” (1996:2). Yet the zona is one place where the worker, though in the service industry, retains some degree of freedom from the expectations of “service.” Many workers resist the notion of service as well as clients’ perspectives that a “whore” should and will do anything, if paid. As Bárbara said, “They [the clients] think that we are here just to serve them, but that’s not how it is.” Furthermore, they refuse to interpret clients’ resistance to paying them what they ask as an indicator of their own self-worth, instead asserting that it is the clients who are unwilling to pay a good price who are “miserable” and “cheap.”

For a number of reasons many workers prefer their regular clients to strangers (*extraños*): they feel comfortable and safe with them, having developed a relationship of sorts that has some basis in trust. The worker knows that she will be well-paid and sometimes even receive a tip for the services she is willing to provide in a safe, predictable situation. Some workers, like Bárbara, are very discriminating, refusing to serve many unknown clients, preferring to wait for the arrival of her regular customers.

Bárbara has five regular clients who arrive twice a week and a few others that may arrive once or twice a month. Of her regular clients, Desirée says, “I have many clients that I can say are good. They come a few times a week and treat me with respect, with tenderness.” But sometimes the intimacy of a regular client can cause problems as well - as Lina notes, they may become difficult and expect more because of their status as a well-paying regular client.

As with most service sector jobs, the sex worker must often contend with a demanding and sometimes hostile public. Clients may verbally or even physically abuse a worker, they are often unwilling to part with their money, and as described, may even steal from a worker. They may smell bad or be physically repulsive. Some workers choose the more desirable clients (well-paying, non-demanding, and relatively good-looking) while others do not discriminate. Sitting outside her room on a hot day, Liliana sighed, “There is not one good-looking man here today.” Client appearances are important to some workers while others, like Lorena, place no importance on looks. Cleanliness, however, is a quality that most workers hope for but do not always find in a client.

If she wishes to earn money, a worker must often ignore her aversion to certain types of clients, instead feigning politeness and even interest. In *The Managed Heart* (1983), Arlie Hochschild comments on the dangers of personality control and the lack of freedom of emotion linked with service sector employment. Such disciplining of emotion, she suggests, may lead to estrangement from self and problems of identity. Service workers must contend with weighty issues, asking “What is my work role and what is ‘me’?”

How do I do deep acting without 'feeling phony' and losing self-esteem? How can I redefine the job as 'illusion making' without becoming cynical?" (1983:181). Many zona worker's complain of a lack of self-esteem, the difficulty of emotional detachment, and the problem of redefining sex as work.

Some workers have few regular customers. Liliana is unwilling to falsify emotions or feign interest in her clients; of them she says, "They come once or twice and then they never return." Other workers are not or cannot afford to behave in such a way or be so discriminating, and may serve any client that agrees to their price.

While there are workers like Lorena who seek only a consumer who is willing to pay, others may cater to a specific clientele or prefer clients of a certain age or appearance. Bárbara says she prefers middle-aged men to the young boys from the high school (*prepa*), whom she says are "demanding" and so cheap that "they won't even buy you a Coke." Indeed, many of the high school and even junior high school students who frequent the zona lack the maturity and experience to view their visits to the zona as part of a socially constructed sexual and commercial experience in which clients are expected to fulfill particular roles.

NEGOTIATING SEXUAL SERVICES: THE MARRIAGE BED, SPECIAL SERVICES, AND OTHER DEPRAVITIES

I am sitting with a friend who works in Tuxtla's Department of Public Health beneath the tall thatch roof in Los Explosivos, a popular palapa bar. We order drinks, wait for his girlfriend to

arrive and for the show, a transvestite cabaret, to begin. When Graciela finally arrives she is angry. Her taxicab driver mistook her for a prostitute; she got out of his cab and hailed another. Francis, a tall thin blond male in drag, soon takes the stage. She tells one joke after another and cuentos colorados (off-color stories). She excitedly launches into a story about three old friends who reunite over dinner after many years apart. One woman has become a nun. Another is a housewife. The third confesses that she has become a prostitute. They eat and talk and when the waiter arrives to offer dessert, each woman orders a banana. Francis goes on to describe and imitate each woman eating the banana. The nun, she says, holds it delicately, caresses it with wonder, makes the sign of the cross, and eats it gently while looking up towards the heavens. The prostitute peels it roughly, and goes right at it, all business. And the housewife puts her hand on the back of her head and forces it down quickly and roughly over the banana. The audience bursts into laughter.

In the zona it is an unusually hot day, nearing 100 degrees. Bárbara and I sit at Pepe's, watching the few clients come and go. An exiting client catches my eye: he is light skinned with glasses, his long hair in a ponytail, and he is dressed in black chinos and a long-sleeved black button-down shirt. I comment on his unusual choice of wardrobe on such a hot day and Bárbara tells me that the fellow "wants it all." I press for more information and she

says, "*Tocho morocho*. Ask Pepe what it means." I look to Pepe, who is standing behind the counter, dishrag in hand. As I repeat the words *tocho morocho*, Pepe is overcome by a fit a giggles as he repeatedly makes the sign of the cross. Seeing Pepe's inability to speak, Bárbara translates, "It means everything, all sexual services, referring more than anything to different positions."

In the Galáctica, there are prostitutes who work "normally," those who will "do it all," and those in between. To work "normally" is to engage only in vaginal intercourse, and more often, though not always, in the missionary position. "Special services" may consist of oral or anal sex, or other varieties of sexual activity. These services are sometimes referred to as "chico, mamey, and papaya": chico refers to the fruit chico zapote and is a euphemism for anal sex; mamey, another fruit, sounds much like the verb *mamar*, meaning to suck, and refers to fellatio; and finally papaya, with its vaginal appearance when sliced in half, refers to cunnilingus. In addition to these services, some women who have VCRs in their rooms may provide pornographic movies for clients. The decision to use pornography, though condemned by some workers as depraved, is less a moral decision than an economic strategy commonly used by prostitutes. Lydia often has pornographic videos playing in her room; when her door is open, the sounds and sights attract clients. When her door is closed and the client enters, the visual stimulation may bring the client to orgasm faster, allowing her to earn money more quickly.

While the decision to provide special services is ultimately an economic one, as described in the previous chapter, it is often linked to issues

of morality, deviance, sexual norms, and even the sense of fair play among competing co-workers. Because there is competition for clients in the zona, a tension sometimes arises between those workers who provide or who are believed to provide special services and those who say they do not. Workers who say they work “normal” pass moral judgments on both special services and the women who provide them. Fifty-year-old Magda is extremely opinionated regarding morality and what she refers to as “depravity”:

I’m not a maniac. I’m not depraved. And I don’t do things outside of what would normally happen in marriage. Like I say to the client, “What happens with me, you should realize, that you are with your wife, *mi’jito*. You are not with a woman of the street.” I am a woman of the street, but with dignity, with shame.

Xenophobia fueled by economic competition aside, Magda’s viewpoint may in part be due to her age and the number of years she has been working in the ambiente. She says that the “depravities” that occur in the zona occur because “the women let them happen,” in particular the foreigners, and says that in the zona in Villahermosa, where she once worked, men who even suggested such “depravities” were not tolerated. Though surely there have probably always been some workers willing to perform “special services” in the ambiente, recent changes in Mexican sexual culture and consumption

(increasing availability of pornography, increasing options for commercial sex, changing media presentations of sex, often influenced by the United States, and of course the Internet) have perhaps led to an increasing demand for such services.

While women who work “normal” often refuse to perform other services, even at a higher price, those women who provide “special services” see them as an economic opportunity. Former obligada Evita recently refused a foreign man who very much wanted to pay her for oral and anal sex. The man, the workers said, was handsome, recently divorced, and on his way to Cuba (very likely to take advantage of the flourishing sex tourism there). Lydia, on the other hand, speaks of the services she provides in a detached and very detailed manner. She describes services involving oral and anal sex, and in one instance, a carrot. One recent client gave her 400 pesos (US\$47) - a hefty sum for the zona or the street. Both clients and workers take time into account when negotiating price, and considering the large sum, one would assume the client was with her for at least thirty minutes. When asked, she replied, “No, [it took] only a few minutes. Let me show you why.” She reached over and turned on the television mounted on the wall over the bed and popped into the VCR a hardcore lesbian pornography video.⁴⁹ For Lydia, showing clients pornography has little to do with morality, rather it is simply another strategy to maximize her income and minimize her effort.

While there is a certain sexual freedom or relaxation of sexual cultural norms in the zona, negotiating services is not completely unmarked by

⁴⁹ I was astounded and amused to see that the hardcore video, which starred three Western women and was in English, was subtitled.

hegemonic cultural and moral beliefs. Clients who come to the zona seeking special services often need to learn how to ask for what they want. Because many men who “respect” their wives or girlfriends are unlikely to ask them for anal or oral sex, many customers arrive at the zona unable to articulate their desires, lacking the proper and acceptable vocabulary.

Uneducated sexually, and often in other ways, many clients arrive at the zona unprepared to negotiate services. Some negotiations, even when they do not result in an exchange, are smooth and professional. When a client arrived at Leticia’s door and asked, “How much?” and then “How much for oral sex?”, she replied that she doesn’t do that. He told her, “That’s cool” and moved on. According to Leticia, some of her neighbors do not handle such inquiries professionally, instead yelling obscenities at the clients. The interaction is worsened when clients do not know the proper terminology. A man wanting oral sex should ask for oral sex. A man asking, “Will you suck me?” is more likely to have a door slammed in his face, at the very least.

Sex in the zona then is not a straightforward uncontested activity. Nor is it quite the romanticized and fantasy-laden sex often portrayed in books and film. There are no workers dressed as royalty and dominatrixes or clients disguised as generals or priests (see Genet 1966[1958]). There is little theatrical in the zona. As much as the Galáctica is another space, free from dominant norms regarding gender and sexuality, where men and women both may learn and experience alternative sexualities, it is also a place where cultural codes are reinforced. And, it is a public marketplace where the Mexican

tradition of haggling (distinctively pre-modern) is quite alive.

THE CHEAPEST BROTHEL IN THE MEXICAN REPUBLIC: NEGOTIATING PRICES

One could say that the tolerance zone is one of the cheapest places there could be in the Mexican Republic. Yes, Tuxtla Gutiérrez and its tolerance zone is one of the cheapest places there is. Not Oaxaca. Not Mexico City. Minimum, minimum, minimum a woman who works a normal service, fifty, eighty pesos minimum. And here, twenty. Fifteen sometimes. A woman who is elderly will charge you ten.

-Lorena

The women of the Zona Galáctica are reputed to offer the least expensive sexual services in Chiapas and southern Mexico. A woman providing normal services in the Galáctica may earn anywhere from ten to forty pesos (US\$1.20 to \$4.70) though the average price is somewhere around thirty or thirty-five pesos (US\$3.50 to \$4.10). Liliana left the zona to work in Morelos, where she earned sixty to seventy pesos (US\$7.05 to \$8.25) per client for normal services. In Comitán, workers who serve a largely military clientele who have pesos to spend, earn seventy pesos (US\$8.25) for each encounter. Street workers generally charge more than zona workers and in

some cases may earn as much as 200 pesos (US\$23.50) per client.⁵⁰

Located at the intersection of elite fears about working-class sexuality, urban expansion and population growth, and desires for modernity, order, and hygiene, the zona is by design and necessity a place where sexual services can be purchased cheaply. Competition in the zona puts a ceiling on what a worker can charge for her services. The lack of organizing among workers (due partially to such competition and resulting individualism) in part ensures that the sex workers will not come to any agreement about charging a set price. Furthermore, if the women were to find a way to collectively charge more, it is unlikely such a price increase would be tolerated by city officials as many of the clients would then not be able to pay for services in the zona, thus undermining the state's goal of managing the "dangerous" sexuality of the lower classes.

The consumption of sexual services in Tuxtla is segmented by class. As Katherine Bliss (2001:154) describes in early twentieth-century Mexico City, working-class men are associated with "low-rent" prostitutes. In the zona, they are provided with them by the state. Just as a monied consumer will buy his clothing at Fábricas de Francia, the upscale department store in western Tuxtla, and their sexual services from a pretty college student working in an elite hostess agency, so will the working-class consumer purchase his clothing at one of the small, inexpensive shops in downtown Tuxtla and his sex at the Galáctica. Furthermore, the state-sponsored character of the zona also detracts

⁵⁰ In the neighboring state of Oaxaca, Michael Higgins and Tanya Coen found that male transvestite prostitutes working the street in Oaxaca City charged between 80 and 150 pesos per client (U.S.\$9.40 and 17.65) while older women (in their late thirties to fifties) working the streets charged between 40 and 60 pesos (U.S.\$4.70 and \$7.05) (2000:170), a price the authors refer to as "minimal."

from the status of the zona. In the neoliberal era, characterized by privatization, the “public” loses status. Whether it be public schools, publicly-run businesses, or in this case, a public brothel, there is in neoliberal times a new valuing of the “private,” based in increasing acceptance of exclusivity and privilege, which lessens the attractiveness and even the “sexiness” of publicly-run enterprises.

Competition in the zona can at times be fierce. Business has slowed since the days of clients and workers drinking together at the rowdy Galactic Chicken and later during the early months of the Zapatista conflict when the zona was so saturated with military it “was a green zone, as if they were plants.” Though the upper range of price in the zona is subtly institutionalized, price ranges are influenced by a number of overlapping factors such as: a worker’s age and appearance; services provided; a worker’s economic need which may vary; a client’s status as a regular or stranger; the number of potential clients arriving; the amount of money clients are willing to spend; and the prices charged by other workers performing similar work.

A woman’s value is in part determined by her age and appearance. According to municipal statistics, zona workers are from nineteen to fifty-five years old. In reality, the range is surely much greater. Women may lie about their age for a number of reasons: to enter the world of regulated prostitution, to attract more clients, to avoid the shame that accompanies being a middle-aged or older prostitute. Young Central American women who arrive seeking employment in the zona often lack the documents to prove that they are eighteen years old, the legal age required to practice prostitution. Marta, for

example, arrived from Guatemala, claiming to be eighteen but unable to prove it. She was subject to a dental exam by the SMAV staff and based on her molars, was deemed to be of the proper age. Desirée alternately claims that she is eighteen or nineteen when she is in fact twenty-four; such misrepresentations of truth serve various purposes. Younger zona workers not only may receive a greater price for their services; they are also often perceived as more “innocent” and thus may be treated more sympathetically by both clients and staff.

Women in their forties and fifties who have made careers of prostitution are considered by zona staff to be beyond “rehabilitation.” These women are often not invited by zona administrators to participate in “resocialization” activities such as language classes or job-training workshops. Older prostitutes transgress cultural boundaries that define older women as nonsexual creatures and may suffer greater stigmatization as they no longer have small children to maintain and are perceived as less economically needy than younger workers. While some researchers have suggested that women’s lives cross-culturally appear to improve with the onset of middle-age as they experience fewer restrictions upon their behavior and their authority in decision-making becomes more socially acceptable (Brown 1982), there are few benefits for the mature zona worker. In fact, as a woman ages in the ambiente, she may suffer increased stigmatization as she is transformed from a young worker there *por necesidad* (because of need) into one who is there due to greed or habit.

While advanced age does not prevent a sex worker from receiving

clients, it does affect a worker's value, her clientele, and in many cases, her own sense of self-worth. A younger woman may set her average price at forty-five or fifty pesos (US\$5.30 or \$5.90) while a woman in her fifties may accept as little as eight or ten pesos (US\$0.95 or \$1.15). Though I had never formally met her, I had repeatedly heard the stories of the *señora* nearing sixty years old who worked for anything from five to ten pesos (this figure was subject to change, depending on the storyteller). Nearing the end of her career and no longer considered attractive, she was said to have huge breasts that she would show by wearing very low-cut blouses (this I knew to be true, as I had seen her on a number of occasions). Her clientele consisted mainly of teenagers from the local high school who had little disposable income to spend on sexual services. She found her niche market, and according to one observer, tells the young men "she would teach them, treat them like a son." As a woman ages in the ambiente, concessions like those made by the *señora* must be made if a worker hopes to receive clients.

At forty-two, Mónica is extremely conscious of her age and how it determines her value in the zona. In her youth, Mónica was stunningly beautiful. One day as we sat in her room, she pulled out old photos. One showed her and her young husband who had killed himself. Another was a photo of her soon after she had entered the ambiente. She sat on the hood of a car, dressed in shorts and an indigo, flowing, hippie-style shirt. On her head she wore the bright yellow hardhat of an oil worker, her brown curls flowing over her tanned shoulders as she stared into the camera confidently, smiling. Nowadays she complains that clients call her "old lady" and speaks of her

retirement from the ambiente because, as she puts it, "I'm getting old." Sitting at Pepe's on a slow, hot day, Mónica and I watch Desirée leaving early in the afternoon. Mónica turns to me and says, "And she is young," meaning that even the younger and therefore more desirable workers are not receiving clients on this slow afternoon.

Appearance is another important factor to be considered by workers. Many workers arrive at the zona in their street clothes: jeans and tank tops, sweatpants and t-shirts, skirts and blouses. For some women, the change they make from their street clothing to work clothing is extreme: Leticia arrives wearing pants and a loose t-shirt and changes into a blue negligee with black lace and high heels. For others the change is less drastic and more symbolic, marking a shift from their home roles to their work roles: Rafaela changes from a black miniskirt and tanktop to a multicolored miniskirt and tanktop. Still others do not change their attire. For some, this may signify their complete immersion in the ambiente; for Mónica, who lives in the zona and has worked in the ambiente for nearly fifteen years, the leggings and t-shirts she wears serve her both in the zona and during her outings to downtown Tuxtla. For the young Bárbara, who normally wears a long full skirt and modest blouse, her refusal to change her attire represents a resistance to identifying herself as a prostitute or to dress according to the dictates of the ambiente (even though there is a wide variety of dress):

From the beginning, since I came, well, many
[women] change. They come from other places,

dress in long skirts, very discrete. And when they stay, thongs, miniskirts; they catch on. But not me. Even though I am in the ambiente, I keep dressing the same. I arrived with a long skirt. And know what they would tell me? That I looked like a crazy old woman. But I could care less, and I have never stopped [dressing this way].

Others remark on the changes they have made. For Liliana, the first time she ever wore make-up was when she was forced to work in a bar in Tapachula. Lina notes the difference between her work and home personae:

They have said to me, "You don't look like you work in this place." Because they see me like a normal person. And when I leave here I don't make myself up like I do here. I change everything. I dress more casually, sporty, and only put on a little make-up. On the other hand, here I put on blush, eyeliner, red lipstick. Everything. I'm not the same. Even my behavior is different. Here, I try to walk so that my butt stands out. When I'm in the *centro*, I tie back my hair and here, I leave

it loose.⁵¹

Workers' concern with weight reflects recent shifts in Mexican cultural standards of beauty. Slender women, once widely considered less than womanly, are quite popular with many zona clients, as are women with fair skin and hair. One need only turn on the television and watch a *telenovela* [soap opera] to see who currently embodies female beauty: most actresses are young, fair, and of course, thin. Despite an emphasis on thinness, much of a worker's social life within the zona revolves around eating. Women may gather at one of the four food stands to share gossip, relax, or escape the confines and boredom of their small, dimly lit rooms. As the zona lacks the facilities for the women to do their own cooking and making the trip to the centro to eat would be time-consuming and costly, workers are largely dependent upon vendors like Pepe and Doña Paula for their daily meals.⁵² Upon their arrival at the zona in the morning, many workers will pass by their favored vendor, asking, "What did you bring?" Some women, like Flor, complain of their weight and claim the gain has come with their entry into the zona. Mónica complains of the zona's "T" diet: taco, tortilla, *torta* (sandwich), which she is convinced makes a person fat.

⁵¹ At the time of this interview, Lina had only been working in the ambiente for a short while. Despite her descriptions of the changes she has made, she still looked very much like a young, sporty, middle-class woman. When I returned to the zona one year later I was shocked by the dramatic change in her appearance: she had put on a great deal of weight, begun to wear the specially made revealing dresses that some other workers wear, and had heavily increased her use of make-up.

⁵² On occasion a worker may have the opportunity to prepare her own food: one room in the building of Doña Mari has been converted into a makeshift kitchen, where her workers may occasionally prepare meals. Pepe sometimes lets a trusted woman prepare food in his stand, which will often be shared by a handful of workers.

Younger and more attractive women do receive more clients than other zona workers. These women often use up the free allotted amount of condoms (100 every two weeks), a situation which has created an underground condom economy in the zona, as workers who do not use all of their condoms sell them at a price less expensive than in the city center to workers who serve more clients. This situation was unacceptable to the zona administration, which was spending municipal dollars to provide the women with condoms and it caused resentment among the women who were buying the condoms when they felt the SMAV should be providing them to ensure that every sex act was a "safe" one. On his first day as new director of the SMAV, Dr. Ruiz met with a small group of workers who aired complaints about the situation, hoping to convince him to provide more condoms to the women, free of charge. The doctor refused, replying, "The truth is that only a few women, I'm sorry to say, those that are younger and prettier" needed more than the allotted amount, since they receive more clients.

A woman's asking price is also influenced by the the services she is willing to provide to a client whom she is willing to serve (a woman may accept a client she would not ordinarily serve if business is slow). For example, Flor receives thirty pesos (US\$3.50) for vaginal intercourse in missionary position; this fee is increased to fifty (US\$5.90) if the client requests *de perrito* (dog-style). Many women do not work completely nude and charge extra for it.⁵³ Though a worker may have her ideal asking price and way of

⁵³ For similar findings among male gay transvestite prostitutes in Oaxaca City, see Higgins and Coen 2000.

working, these ideals and bargaining power of workers are subject to change due to temporal shifts in economic need - a woman behind on the rent or under chronic economic pressures may work without a condom or perform an act not ordinarily in her repertoire in order to not lose a client. On a slow day when a woman has not yet earned enough to pay her daily rent and food costs, she may be willing to expand her services without raising her asking price.

Shifts in the Mexican economy and local political activity also impact a worker's asking price. During the summer of 1998, heavy rains and storms destroyed harvests in much of the state. Men who earned their living from the land had less disposable income to spend in the zona. As competition for clients increased in the zona, some workers lowered their prices. During the conflict with the ejidatarios of Francisco I. Madero, many clients believed that the zona was closed or did not come for fear of becoming embroiled in a violent land dispute. Again, workers were forced to lower their prices in order to compete for the few arriving clients. Bárbara says she sometimes goes with a client "just for the damn fact that I have to pay the rent." Though she has her set price that she tries not to waiver from (a strategy for maintaining dignity and a sense of self-worth), she says, "but sometimes dignity only goes so far." At other times, especially on the days following the quincena (bimonthly payday), the zona may be busy enough that workers will receive their asking price.

As Cynthia Enloe tells us, "War - and militarized peace - are occasions when sexual relations take on particular meanings" (1993:144). Sexual activity

has long been considered a necessity for soldiers and militarization is often accompanied by prostitution (Enloe 1989; Pollock Sturdevant and Stoltzfus 1992).⁵⁴ Militarization of the state following the EZLN uprising in 1994 brought an increase in prostitution to Chiapas, particularly in the conflict regions in the eastern half of the state. But local political manifestations not of a military nature also affect activity in the zona. During a statewide teacher's strike in which educators from all over came to participate in a protest and work stoppage, the zona was overflowing with clients who formed a line before the Galáctica had even opened.

Some workers may ignore variables such as services, age, condom use, and, because of the lack of solidarity or organizing in the zona, undercut their competitors by charging a low price. Such was the case with Sandra, a new, young worker who was considered to be very beautiful. During her early days in the Galáctica she charged as little as fifteen pesos (US\$1.75) and at times had a line of clients waiting outside her door, much to the dismay of her co-workers. Perhaps due to pressure from co-workers, this situation did not last long.

Workers can also earn money for activities that do not include sexual services. Some clients come only to talk and to be heard. Patricia fondly recalls one client who only wanted to caress her gently. Bárbara will charge a client if he wishes to use her bathroom or shower (the public men's room attached to the administrative building often smells terrible). Sometimes men will be

⁵⁴ It is important to remember, as Cynthia Enloe writes, that the link between militarization and prostitution should not be naturalized: "Militarized, masculinized sexual desire, by itself, isn't sufficient to sustain a full-fledged prostitution industry. It requires rural poverty, male entrepreneurship, urban commercialized demand, police protection, and overlapping government interests to ensure its success" (1993:147).

charged simply for entering a woman's room. If the door has been shut behind him, he has begun to use a worker's time and may have even prevented her from seeing another client and will therefore be expected to pay. If upon disrobing, a client is found to have some kind of infection (many workers have been taught by SMAV staff to look for signs of sexually transmitted diseases), the worker will normally not serve him and may even offer medical advice, but she will also charge him for the time he has used. This can lead to arguing and even violence between client and worker.

Clients, for their part, will often use a variety of methods in order to pay as little as possible. Some, according to Bárbara, will try to use their social standing as a way to receive free services, asking the worker, "Don't you know who I am?" Bárbara's typical response is, "I don't care who you are," though of course few men of public importance arrive at the zona; rather they go to more discrete and costly places such as hotels and private "hostess" services.

Though women in the zona transgress hegemonic moral codes by selling sex and are sometimes portrayed as (and indeed are) women who live by an alternative system of belief, many zona workers adhere to cultural norms that claim a woman should be supported by a man. While they may in some ways be independent, zona workers are also particularly vulnerable to clients who make romantic and economic promises. Clients may put on a romantic act, pay compliments, and make promises of a continuing emotional and financial relationship. Such was the case with Héctor, an older man and new client of Mónica's who arrived at the zona, paid for his services, flirted with Mónica, and told her he would lend her one thousand

pesos (US\$118) so she could leave the zona and set up a taco stand. He returned to the Galáctica four times afterwards, romanced Mónica with compliments and promises of money, received services without paying, and even stole a music cassette from her nightstand. He never returned. Telling the story, Mónica is hurt, saying she had begun to fall in love with the man. In vain, she had angrily gone to the centro to look for him.

Other clients use less subtle methods to receive less expensive or even free services. Some will steal their money back on their way out the door if it has been left on a bedside table. Others will claim they have paid when they did not and sometimes even risk leaving it to the municipal police to sort out the situation. Some will haggle down to the last peso; according to Bárbara there are some clients who moan, "But it's for my chewing gum, it's for the bus fare." As Desirée describes it, a client will come and ask, "How much?" Once the worker gives her price, a client will say, "How come so expensive? How about cheaper? Twenty." If the worker refuses, the client may continue his efforts, "Twenty. That's alot to be giving you." These sorts of encounters rarely happen with regular customers, for as Bárbara notes, "It's not so easy to separate the extraños from their money."

Not all clients are "*codo, tacaño, miserable*" (cheap, miserly, miserable), as Liliana describes them. On Valentine's Day, some workers left the zona with candy, stuffed animals, and other gifts they had received from regular clients. On hot days, a client may buy a soda for a worker and in some instances may even take a woman out for dinner or a night on the town, as did the client who brought the serenade to my home. Furthermore, both

regular clients and strangers may tip above and beyond a woman's asking price.

Women's perceptions of clients who can pay are greatly influenced by a client's appearance and ethnic identity. According to Liliana and Rita, during the daytime hours many of the men who arrive are campesinos, who are viewed as ugly and cheap and referred to as *Chamulitos* (men from the indigenous village of Chamula). Handsome men are considered to have more money to spend and while no worker ever admitted to me that she enjoyed the sex she had with a client, some did allude to the fact that they preferred to give their services to men they considered handsome.⁵⁵

SOLO CON CONDON?

Every two weeks, the Anti-Venereal Medical Service distributes a box containing 100 condoms to each zona worker. The Galáctica's program of condom distribution is uncommon in Mexico and provides an incentive for some sex workers from other parts of Mexico, like Magda, to transfer their business to the Galáctica. As many women travel from brothel to brothel, co-workers in Tabasco who had worked in the Galáctica told Magda of the condom distribution there. Of her decision to leave Tabasco in order to work

⁵⁵ In her book about the Mustang Ranch, one of Nevada's legal brothels, Alexa Albert found the matter of a worker enjoying sex quite controversial. Some workers asserted they never enjoyed the sex and that it would be wrong to do so, but others disagreed. As one worker told her, "With as much sex as we have, how could a woman not enjoy it occasionally?" (2001:136). But in the Mustang Ranch, a woman who enjoyed sex with a client did not speak about it for fear of being stigmatized by other workers. In the Zona Galáctica, a woman who said she enjoyed sex with a client would also be stigmatized, as any claim to being in the zona not por gusto but por necesidad would be invalidated. No worker ever spoke to me of being in the zona por gusto, though it was not unusual for a worker to find a boyfriend in a client.

in the Galáctica, Magda says:

I came to try it out and more than anything, for the condoms. I came for my box of condoms, because there [in Tabasco] they are bought. One has to buy them in the pharmacy; they don't give them out. It's very expensive. The cheapest are \$3.50 pesos. But I would buy them because I didn't like to lose a client because of a [lack of] condom. And I didn't like to tell the client that I would charge him thirty pesos plus a condom: "Oye, give me five pesos more" and there goes the client. So, it's better that I would have it, and I would buy it with my own money, and that I would already have a set price, including the condom, whether they want one or not.

While some clients do request the use of a condom, most do not and some refuse entirely. There are some workers, like Alejandra, who work "only with a condom" (this phrase - *sólo con condón* - has worked its way into prostitute discourse thanks in part to an outreach by the Comitán Center for Health Investigations, CISC). A large handwritten sign on her wall next to the bed states clearly: "35 pesos (US\$4.10). Only with a condom" which frees her from the sometimes troublesome process of trying to convince clients to

use a condom. Yet for each worker who always uses a condom, there is another who will work without a condom in order to keep a client. Other workers use the condom sporadically, as they say, "Ninety-nine percent of the time." Or as Desirée describes her condom use, "I use it with all the clients, except with my partner and clients who only see me." Sometimes clients insinuate that if a worker wishes to use a condom it is because it is she who carries a sexually transmitted disease.

Like workers who do special services, women who don't use a condom are reputed to "work more," in that they can serve both clients who want to use a condom as well as those who refuse. Women who insist on condoms often have to convince their clients to use them. According to Bárbara, "You have to convince them. Sometimes I tell them the important reasons, the risks, the benefits. I tell them, 'Look if you do it with a condom you can enjoy it more. And if you do it without a condom? Infections. You can be more calm and do it without regrets. With safety and confidence. For your family. You don't have to worry about your well-being.'"

Leticia says that about half her clients "know what can happen, know the risk of not putting it on." She has her own way of telling clients about her strict use of condoms:

For example, they say to me, "How much do you charge?" and I tell them, "This much." "Good."

And then, if I tell them before they enter the room, before the door is shut, I see they sometimes go.

So, once they are inside, I tell them, "You know, it's with a condom." "No, it's that I don't like it like that," they say. And I tell them, "Look, I'm going to help you. I'll put it on you and I'll take it off you." And so in order to motivate them and convince them, I put it on them. "It doesn't feel the same." "We'll try to make it feel the same." And I will convince them. But there are some that say, "No. No, I don't want to use it." And then one must battle to convince him and some even say, "Know what, I'm not going to stay. It's better that I go." And I tell him, "But this is lost time." and he says, "Give me back my money." and I tell them, "Time is time and you know in this place one runs the risk of an illness." "No," he says, "you all protect yourselves." *Bueno*, I protect myself, Paty, but *them*?

Within a cultural system of male privilege and dominance, the male clients of prostitutes, though sometimes seen as symbols of disorder, are rarely viewed as purveyors of disease. As Ann Stoler writes, not all bodies are viewed as "equally susceptible" to disease (1995); furthermore, some individuals, to due their class, gender, or ethnicity are constructed as "victims" of disease while others are seen as those who are the transmitters of

illness. In the brothels of Belize, British soldiers stationed in the former colony are encouraged to provide authorities with the names of prostitutes who they suspect of having exposed them to a sexually transmitted disease (STD); the prostitute is then punished or even fired (Enloe 1993:147). In Tuxtla, there is no discussion by government officials or the media of the consumers of sexual services as men who transmit illness.

Only sex workers and a few vocal feminist leaders speak of such a thing, though wives, sexual partners, and women who work as prostitutes continue to be infected with STDs by male partners. In January of 2000, government statistics showed 42,762 reports cases of AIDS in Mexico since the beginning of the epidemic; 14.2% of those cases are women.⁵⁶ In listing the numbers of reported cases of HIV / AIDS by occupation, housewives, who have little power to negotiate condom use with their husbands, rank third while sex workers occupy 16th place.⁵⁷

Workers use other methods besides talking about risk to encourage condom use. MEXFAM and other organizations came and taught the women how to put a condom on using their mouths (though I never had a worker tell me she used this method) or how to place a drop of lubricant inside the condom to help it feel more "natural." Bárbara has used this latter method, but says that because of a lack of trust between workers and clients (and a dearth of sexual knowledge on the part of the client), some men fear the worker has put something inside the condom that will harm them. Such

⁵⁶ (La Jornada en Internet, Letra S, March 2, 2000).

⁵⁷ (La Jornada en Internet, Letra S, March 2, 2000). For similar findings in Costa Rica, where housewives make up 36 percent of the total population of reported cases of HIV infection while prostitutes constitute 10 percent, see Ortiz C. et. al. 1995:262).

male anxiety may be described as a part of a broader pattern of gender antagonism that is present where there exists gender inequality. Men, fearful of losing their dominant role, may harbor fears about a changing social order or women's increased power. The brothel then is not only a site where certain patterns of male dominance are enforced but also a location of struggle where gender identities and male dominance (particularly in the arena of knowledge about sexuality and health) may be subject to question, causing some clients to view the prostitute with suspicion and fear.

As conscious as many regulated workers are about the importance of condom use, ironically, the regulationist system of the zona, which encourages low earnings for workers, makes many workers less inclined to use a condom, as they can earn more without one. In this way, the regulated prostitution in the Galáctica may actually be less "safe" than other forms of prostitution where workers earn more and may be less likely to work without a condom in order to earn a few extra pesos.

MEN, DESIRE, AND COMMERCIAL SEX

Listening to the radio, an ad for a local hardware store is playing. The deep-voiced announcer offers construction-related items for "all your building needs for your *casa grande* and your *casa chica*." At the advertisement's end a female voice asks sweetly, "Is the *casa chica* for my mama, *amor*?" and a male voice, presumably her husband, answers haltingly, "Uhhhh.....yes, *mi vida*." The *casa chica* (little house) is an enduring Mexican

institution in which a married man provides a home and financial assistance for his mistress. This radio advertisement, intended to be humorous, demonstrates the cultural embeddedness of rightful male infidelity and presumed female naivete or denial.

The ability of men to provide a *casa chica* for *la otra* (the other woman) is subject to changing economic conditions. As Levine notes in her study of gender roles in Cuernavaca, the economic crisis of the early 1980s forced many men to give up or refrain from building their *casas chicas* (1993:). For men who cannot afford to romance a woman and provide her with financial assistance, or for those who simply desire or “need” a mere dalliance without commitment, there is the prostitute.

I asked Tuxtla’s Director of Public Health about the *zona clients*. He responded thoughtfully,

I think that for these people, well, it is the easiest and simplest way to be able to have sex. Because the other [having sex with a romantic partner] would imply many other things. Having a girlfriend and talking with her. Probably trying to convince her in order to be able to have sexual relations. Many of these people have a girlfriend, but one could say, in quotes, ‘They respect them’ and they look for an easier way, without a commitment.

Though one would assume that clients arrive at the *Galáctica* for one obvious reason, motivations for visiting a prostitute are complex, bound up

with cultural attitudes towards gender and morality (Monto 2000). Some clients come because they are seeking sex without an emotional commitment. Having sexual relations with a girlfriend, as the Director of Public Health suggests, often implies a moral obligation of some kind or even a promise of marriage, a commitment that many young men are not willing to make. Others may come for reasons of emotion, seeking conversation and comfort. Some clients seek a diversity of partners while others a diversity of activity. Though there are certainly couples who engage in all forms of sexual activity, for many Mexicans, there are sexual acts a man performs with his wife and there are other sexual acts (such as special services performed in the zona). There are sexual desires that a wife may refuse or may share, but that are left unfulfilled as they may be considered inappropriate for a woman of her status, as wife and mother, and therefore, as a "decent" woman. While a man's desire is generally circumscribed only by his choice of partner (wife, mistress, or prostitute) or the role he plays (active), certain activities and desires are taboo for all "respectable" women and ultimately determine to some degree whether a woman is a "whore."

It is a Saturday afternoon in the Galáctica and there are nearly a dozen clients seated at Pepe's food stand. Rarely does Pepe see such business, but today he has a way to attract clients: he has brought in a small black and white television which sits on the counter showing a soccer game, Mexico versus Japan. Though generally of the working classes, the crowd is in other ways diverse: seated at a table sipping a Coke is fifty-three year old Fernando, a gas company employee and zona regular. At another table sits a thin, dark-

skinned man wearing fancy black cowboy boots with intricate stitching. At his feet is a young boy of no more than twelve, shining his boots. The man stares intently at his boots and the boy's hands move quickly and deftly, cleaning and shining. There are a few high school boys and a handful of middle-aged men, all sipping Sprites and Cokes. A few men are noticeably better dressed than the others. Standing on the edge of the stand is an elderly campesino, wearing a cowboy hat and a button down shirt that was probably once white, his crusty feet covered with sandals. He does not enter the food stand, nor does he buy a Coke, but simply stares at the television from a distance.

In the days when drinking was permitted in the zona, clients would sometimes spend an entire day or an evening in the Galáctica, drinking, watching sporting events, eating, and buying sex. Some men, referred to as *mirones* (men who look but do not buy) could spend hours in the zona without ever actually buying services. Today, clients rarely spend an entire day in the zona, as there are not enough activities beyond sex to keep them there. Mirones, though, still frequent the zona, incurring the wrath of workers who gripe, "They come here just to look as if this were a zoo!"

The Galáctica is primarily a local and regional phenomenon. Most clients are Tuxtlecos, or come from neighboring towns such as Berriozabal or Chiapa de Corzo. But the Galáctica is also well known throughout southern Mexico and clients from other parts of Chiapas such as San Cristóbal de las Casas, Ocosingo, and Las Margaritas, as well as from other southern states such as Yucatán, Tabasco, and Oaxaca do sometimes appear. Few foreigners and tourists find their way to the zona, and when they do, word spreads

quickly. Within hours of his visit, most people inside the zona had heard about the divorced *gringo* who wanted to purchase sex from Evita, who refused him, perhaps because of the services he requested. During my year in the zona, I heard of three foreign clients, two of whom I met. One happened to be from my hometown on Long Island.⁵⁶ Despite the global trends that have brought Central American women to the zona and the occasional use of imported pornographic movies and magazines, the prostitution that occurs in the Galáctica, though influenced by global political-economic trends, is not like the sex tourism industry that has developed in places like the Dominican Republic or Southeast Asia.

The majority of clients are working men: truckers (a group favored by workers for their generosity), taxi drivers, manual laborers, security guards, campesinos, police officers, and service workers. The teenage boys from the prepa are an exception - many of them come from middle and upper-class families but they themselves may have little disposable income to spend on such diversions. Clients are generally ladino - few indigenous men frequent the zona. The poorest men cannot afford the Galáctica. Despite the continuing Zapatista uprising and the strong military presence throughout Chiapas, soldiers are not a particularly strong presence in the Galáctica (the military does make occasional appearances but since uniformed military and police are not allowed in the zona or in establishments that serve alcohol, it is

⁵⁶ This client was older, a doctor, and coincidentally had the same name as my mother's husband. I sat behind him on the bus on the way back to town and struck up a conversation with him in Spanish. He assumed that I was Mexican, or at the very least Latin American, and thus felt that his anonymity as a client was protected. When I suddenly and purposely switched to English, the poor fellow was shocked and dismayed. We went to lunch together and laughed at his "bad luck" of being "caught" in a brothel by someone from his hometown. I completely destroyed the desired sense of anonymity that sex tourists have when in a foreign country.

difficult to distinguish military clients from those in law enforcement. One can guess, however, that a client belongs to one of these groups by his short crewcut). White-collar workers such as teachers, engineers, and low-level local government officials also frequent the zona.

According to the zona regulations, a client is supposed to be over fourteen years old in order to enter the zona. Clients often appear younger, snapping their chewing gum and boisterously pushing and shoving each other as they enter. The majority of clients are men in their twenties and thirties, though some are far older. At my questioning, one client proudly boasted, "I am eighty-five years old!"

In the zona, men teach one another what it is to be a man. Through their group visits to the zona they are practicing culture, reinforcing hegemonic beliefs about gender and sexuality that need constant maintenance, especially in a rapidly changing Mexico. As Cynthia Enloe writes, "Sexual practice is one of the sites of masculinity's - and femininity's - daily construction..." (1992:25). Cultural beliefs are not merely static givens but are subject to contestation and are shaped by human action. The zona, despite its modern reputation, is also a place where more traditional codes of gender are practiced and reinforced. A little more than half of the clients arrive at the zona alone. These men tend to be older, that is, middle-aged and accustomed to the routine of commercial sex. Regular clients generally arrive alone more often than the others. They too already know their role and do not need the support or guidance of other men. But for many, especially younger men and boys, prostitution is a diversion that is to be shared with friends and that

sometimes requires the social support of a peer group. A boss may arrive with his employees in an act of gender solidarity. High school students tend to arrive in pairs or in larger groups. Sometimes packs of uniformed students from the nearby *Prepa 5* can be seen wandering the zona together.

LEARNING DESIRE, LEARNING PRIVILEGE

By the time I leave at about 2, I am beat. I ride the micro back. It's packed, various men and a large contingent of six or seven prepa boys, some still in uniform, a white and burgundy polo bearing the insignia of their school. I notice that the younger boys nearly always travel in groups while the older men do not as often. A boy of no more than fourteen or fifteen sits next to me. He is eating what looks like a mango flavored ice. In fact, all the boys, scattered throughout the micro, are eating ices. The sound of them digging into the ice with their spoons fills the micro and has an almost musical quality, like a güiro, an instrument the street musicians play. The boy eats his ice and reads a magazine dedicated entirely to Dragonball, the unbelievably popular Japanese futuristic and violent cartoon. I have seen it too many times

at Lety's house and still don't get it. The boy is on episode #51. The first line reads, "The search for the dragonball continues."

Young men come or are brought to the zona to learn cultural norms regarding sexuality, their roles as men, and desire. As there is little that is "natural" about sex and gender roles, so too is desire a construct, shaped by history, culture, and power (Foucault 1985; Stoler 1995). The brothel is a place not only where desire is regulated and expressed, but also a place where desire is shaped and learned.

Standing at the entry to the zona, I see a young boy walking down towards the rooms, accompanied by an older man. The boy is just that, a boy; he looks no older than thirteen years old. Later, I ask the cashier who mans the main gate about the pair and he tells me, "For his development." Though I am not suggesting it is the norm, it is not unusual for a young boy to have his first sexual experience with a prostitute.⁵⁰ For middle and upper class boys, a female servant is another alternative for sexual initiation. They are taken by fathers or uncles to the zona in order to become initiated into the world of sexual relations and desire.

Though family and friends might be quite enthusiastic, often times the

⁵⁰ In his study of machismo in Mexico City, Matthew Gutmann refutes the common notion that "many or most Latin American men have their first sexual escapades with prostitutes..." (1996:132). He further writes that with the exception of one man, all of his informants had said that they had never been with a prostitute, and writes that though it could be possible that they were not telling the truth, it was more likely that it was not common for men in that area of Mexico City to pay for sexual services (1996:133). He further suggests that paying for sex may be more of a tradition among middle and upper class young men than among his working-class informants. Approximately 1000 working-class men a day visit the Galáctica; I suggest here that at least some of Gutmann's informants were less than completely truthful.

boy is not an eager participant in his sexual initiation, experiencing both trauma and disappointment (see Carillo 2002:83;106). In the Galáctica young boys who don't desire commercial sex sometimes learn such desire. Dr. Otero, who works weekends in the SMAV, says he has seen very young boys being brought to the zona on their birthdays. According to the doctor, the degree of coercion was visible, as boys were dragged by the arm. He felt sorry for them, he said.

Sometimes boys are initiated not by older men, but by their friends who pressure them into a visit to a prostitute. One day while waiting outside the gate for transport back to downtown Tuxtla, I struck up a conversation with three teenaged boys who were also waiting. Two of the boys were brothers, a 14-and 15-year-old who had been to the zona on previous occasions, brought there by a family member. The other boy, 14, was a friend who the brothers brought to the zona for the time. The brothers told me they thought that prostitution was a fine thing and seemed quite happy about their visit, but the other boy looked somewhat shaken. When I asked him what he thought of prostitution he said he didn't like it, that it wasn't "good." Clearly, boys' initiation into the world of sexual relations with prostitutes is a complex matter, sometimes marked by trauma for the new client.

It is the wife who marries. -Mexican saying

Though the consumers of commercial sex may be single, married, divorced, widowed, or living with a partner, when asked, many clients claim

to be single. One morning I conducted a survey with clients as they purchased their tickets to the zona. Two-thirds of the 162 men interviewed claimed they were single. Some paused before answering, looking me over. One man began to say he was married before abruptly changing his answer to single. Certainly, my status had something to do with the men's answers - perhaps they were reluctant to admit to a seemingly "decent" woman that they were not single.

Fidelity and extramarital sexual relations are contested and complex topics of discussion in Tuxtla and throughout Mexico. A man who has sexual relations with more than one woman (who are not sex workers) is a *mujeriego*, or womanizer. This behavior is generally acceptable, encouraged, and even valorized by other men. Non-prostitute women who engage in similar behavior must do so discreetly, because as one female friend noted, "we have much more to lose" than a man: "A woman who has lovers, well, people think there is no difference between her and the women in the Zona Galáctica."

The prevailing cultural norms regarding gender and fidelity are wonderfully illustrated by the live musical performance of the song *Tú te crees valiente* (You think you are so brave). A popular afternoon ritual in Tuxtla among both middle and working-class Tuxtlecos is a visit to a palapa bar, a huge thatched-roof building where male and female patrons drink alcohol, eat *botanas* (appetizers of pickled vegetables, cheeses and grilled meats), and watch live performances. The line-up generally includes a salsa band, a comedian, and a variety of singers, including the omnipresent Juan

Gabriel impersonator (a singer of love ballads). The palapa bar opens for business at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and patrons generally stay for three to six hours, until they are too drunk and full to consume any more, they have to return to work, and/or the palapa is closing.

The performance of *Tú te crees valiente* is often the biggest crowd-pleaser. Performed by a man and one or two women, the song details the infidelity of a man and the angry reaction of his female partner. She sings at him, "You'll never again touch these lips, this body" and he acts indifferent, shrugging off her threats. She tells him, "Go with her!" and stomps about the stage alternately weeping and bitterly laughing as she struggles to retain some dignity. She hits him. He grabs her by the hair. The audience goes wild. It is very exciting. Male audience members shout, advising him to smack her. Female audience members jeer the man and cheer on the woman. Sometimes "the other woman" will march onto the stage and a physical fight will begin between her and the rightful female partner.

This performance resonates with audience members for many reasons: it is a performance of culture, of male infidelity, female sexuality, and female-female competition for men. But it is also more than that. The performance is also a group activity in which audience members are encouraged to take part in reinforcing cultural beliefs and it is a chance for women, some of whom perhaps have unfaithful husbands themselves, to express their discontent in a channeled and controlled manner.

According to both workers and clients, engaging in sexual relations with a prostitute does not constitute infidelity. A prostitute is not *la otra*. A

man is unfaithful not simply by having sexual relations with another woman, but rather by having a *compromiso* or commitment to another woman. As Bárbara said, “No, [visiting a prostitute] is not infidelity because there is no sentimental commitment. Infidelity is when I have a wife and a lover - a romantic relationship. It is different.” As one client said, coming to the zona is not a “definite relationship” but simply “a coming and going,” “a moment of satisfaction.” He adds, “My wife may have a fever, a cold, her period, or she may not want to. She may be busy with the children or thinking of other things. So, I come here, but she doesn’t know.” This statement reveals that though it is a common belief that a wife should indulge her husband when he wants to have sexual relations, clearly culture is not actually practiced in this way; a wife has many methods of and reasons for declining sexual activity with her spouse. Furthermore, women are perceived as not having the same sexual appetites as men. Finally, though prostitution is not considered infidelity by clients and workers, that clients do not tell their spouses reveal that it is certainly not acceptable to wives.

What kind of sex is this then, that does not constitute infidelity, but still must be hidden by men from female romantic partners? Although whether or not visiting a prostitute is an emotional or romantic betrayal may be subject to contestation, visiting a prostitute in a culture where men are expected to provide for their female partners is an economic betrayal as well as a potentially physical betrayal which could endanger a spouses’s well-being if her husband does not use a condom. By using family resources which could be spent to support a household to buy sexual services, a man of few resources

is making a decision to indulge his own desires rather than the needs of his family (though prices in the zona are so low, a thrifty consumer buying sex there on occasion is unlikely to break the family budget). While a husband may deceive (and endanger) his wife by engaging in sexual relations with a prostitute, also significant is the act of spending earnings at a brothel rather than upon household needs. The way men spend money on luxury items instead of household needs is a source of domestic conflict common to many Mexican households, especially working-class households (Collier 1999; Levine 1993). Though a client would have to be very poor (or very virile) in order to cause the economic collapse of a household by purchasing services at the zona (it is the cheapest in the state and now that alcohol is no longer served, a client would be hard pressed to spend more than 60 pesos (US\$7.00) during a visit), money spent at the zona could be spent on the family.

Furthermore, visiting a prostitute for some clients is a form of male rebellion against female domination within certain arenas of the household realm. A man who is dominated by his wife is called a *mandilón* (coming from the noun *mandil* (apron), it implies that the man has assumed a wife's role) (Carillo 2002:99; also see Gutmann 1996:232-233). A defiant *mandilón* may arrive at the zona on a Saturday afternoon with a sack full of tomatoes and garlic that his wife had sent him out to buy. Having sex with a prostitute is a way of enacting one's masculinity while also passively resisting the label *mandilón*.

A SAFE PLACE FOR SEX BUT NOT A PLACE FOR SAFE SEX: CLIENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE ZONA

Many clients wrongly believe that sex in the zona is without risk because zona women receive health examinations. Due to this belief, clients may be even less likely to use a condom, endangering themselves, their partners, the workers, and undermining one of the ostensible aims of the regulationist system- to protect public health. This perception among clients, combined with the low prices that may make some sex workers more likely to have sex without a condom, make the zona perhaps less “safe” than authorities would care to admit. As the researchers from the Comitán Center for Health Research suggest:

The Zona Galáctica implies fantasies of security against sexually transmitted diseases. The zona “guarantees” control over health. The men are unfamiliar with the exact mechanism under which the women are tested and what types of examinations are done. They simply know that there is medical attention, which instills in them a fantasy of control and guarantees of health (CISC n.d.: p13).

Rafael is a young Tuxtleco who works in a bank. He says he comes to the zona because the sex workers receive medical examinations and thus it is safer to buy commercial sex from them than from street workers. Félix came to the zona after propositioning a teenage worker in downtown Tuxtla who upon

closer inspection he found to be covered with “bumps, pimples, and stains, and was dirty.” He told himself, “Better I go to the zona.” Clients generally believe that the zona is a “safe” place to buy commercial sex - “safe” in that it is a secure environment that is manned by police where clients are unlikely to be robbed or abused, “safe” from public view, and “safe” from exposure to sexually transmitted diseases.

While clients are less likely to be robbed within the zona or seen entering the zona by a spouse, the physical examinations that workers are required to undergo do not ensure that a client (or a prostitute for that matter, though this is not the primary concern of the SMAV) is safe from contracting a sexually transmitted illness. This situation calls into raises serious questions about the purpose of this modern brothel and the regulation of commercial sex in Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

CHAPTER 6

SEX WORK, STIGMA, AND MONEY

SEX AND MONEY

Flor and I are having lunch in her home, eating shrimp with garlic and a salad of cabbage, radish, tomato, jalapeño, cilantro, and lime, when a teenaged girl from the neighborhood arrives bearing plastic sunflowers that Flor will bring with her to a baptism she has to attend later in the day. Though she is young, the girl's breasts are very large and her face has a haggard, aged quality about it. After the girl leaves, Flor confides in hushed tones, "She is not a *señorita* (literally, young woman, but figuratively, virgin) and she is fifteen years old. She gives herself away." Flor clearly finds the girl's situation unsettling, as did the girl's mother, who kicked her out of the house. She now lives near Flor with an aunt. Flor has befriended her and sometimes gives her small sums of money to run errands.

Though there exists a continuum between sex work and sexual relationships that take place within free unions and formal marriage, there are important distinctions between sex within marriage or a formal relationship (*unión libre*), sex that is "given away" (*regalada*, or gifted) and sex purchased in the zona. Bárbara speaks of women who look for lovers, who "give it away" without receiving anything in return. "People see the women that sell it as bad, bad because of the simple fact that they charge." But

she notes that women who have many lovers and do not charge are also viewed negatively by society. For Bárbara, and for most Tuxtlecas, implicit in every sexual relationship is an expectation of material exchange. A client pays directly, a romantic partner provides financial assistance and gifts.

Yet despite the common thread of men's payment (direct or indirect) for sexual relations, according to sex workers, relationships with clients and with partners are nothing alike (though these boundaries may sometimes blur, as was the case with Mónica and Héctor). Many workers have had hundreds of clients; these same women have had few boyfriends. Bárbara herself estimates that she has served over 2,000 clients, but of romantic partners, she says she has had five. Of her last partner, she said, "He broke my heart." After eight months together, she found out that he had another girlfriend to whom he gave money so that she could support a child she had conceived with another man, while he rarely gave Bárbara anything. Sex with a client is "totally different" from sex with a partner, as there is an emotional bond and commitment between the pair.

Sex workers delineate or mark this boundary between romantic sex and sex as work in a number of ways: clients will receive certain sexual services while other acts, such as kissing or even the fondling of breasts, will be reserved only for partners. In this way workers are able to redefine sex as work, dividing sexual activity into acts that take place in the arena of work and acts that are for romance. Other strategies that create a distinct work identity are as follows: workers put on a "uniform" at work, which consists not only of make-up, dress, and a change of name but sometimes of attitude.

They also will often leave some article of clothing, such as a bra, on during sex with clients rather than disrobing entirely; in this way they are literally and figuratively not entirely exposing themselves to clients as they may to a partner. Workers who do disrobe completely often charge extra for this service. Some women, like Lydia, say that they immediately wash after sex with a client while they do not with their partners.

For many women then, sex workers and non-sex workers alike, an exchange of material goods is an important dimension of sexual activity. Prostitution is distinct in that it is labeled an economic transaction that, though it has its own norms and rites, is ideally unmarked by the intricacies and complexities of a committed relationship. In her study of masculinity and modernity in Papua New Guinea, Holly Wardlow writes that “gender and sexuality have always been key domains by which individuals are transformed into specific types of persons...” (1998:7). The Galáctica is a place where modern principles of efficiency, order, and hygiene are purportedly practiced, where an effort is made to streamline sexual relations. It is a place where poor women are transformed into both commodities and, as we shall see, consumers. Working class men too become consumers in the service economy, while also enacting traditional notions of masculinity in a confined place in order that they do not pollute the city center. The Zona Galáctica then provides a modern way of maintaining (and sometimes even contesting) traditional and “deviant” gender roles in a controlled environment within the neoliberal economy.

ECONOMICS OF PROSTITUTION

As seen through the discussion of entering the ambiente in Chapter 4, women enter prostitution primarily because of economic need. The opportunity to earn on a good day up to ten times the daily minimum wage in Chiapas (27 pesos or U.S.\$3.15) is of course the greatest benefit of sex work. In a country where women with little education or resources have few options, prostitution quickly becomes a viable alternative to a life of poverty and material deprivation.

Sex work can offer women economic freedom and self-sufficiency. It gave Bárbara the opportunity to escape an unhappy home life and for Leticia, it was knowing that she could support herself and her two daughters through prostitution that gave her the incentive to leave her violent husband. As Leticia said:

I could have worked as a servant, but what I would have earned wouldn't have been enough to pay the rent, to send my daughters to school, and to feed them. I wouldn't let my daughters eat nothing more than beans or some simple little thing or that they didn't have milk or that they walked around without shoes or were in the street begging.

Another option for economic survival is reliance on a male romantic partner for money and housing. But for single women with children, finding a partner who is willing and able to support children can be difficult. For many zona women, it is the work that they do in zona, culturally viewed as the antithesis of the "decent" woman embodied by the mother, that enables them to raise their children, providing them with the necessities of daily life.

Earnings from prostitution not only enable sex workers to fulfill their cultural obligations, but also their responsibilities to their extended families, including parents and siblings. Prostitute women employed in urban areas throughout the developing world send remittances to families; often they are the family's single most important source of income (Carter 1987; Odzer 1994; Phongpaichit 1982). Even as economic changes and migration strain traditional family bonds and alter the family roles of men, women, and children, the cult of family remains strong in Latin America. Deeply-rooted cultural beliefs that tie daughters to their families of origin motivate many women who work in prostitution to provide financial support for parents, siblings, and even cousins in some cases.⁸⁰ Many sex workers migrate from rural areas or depressed cities, leaving behind dependent families impoverished by the new neoliberal economy, that they must now support.

Both immigrant and Mexican workers often use their earnings to support their immediate as well as extended families. Patricia, from Guatemala, worked in the ambiente for eight years in order to support her extended family back home; she recently left the ambiente, as her family achieved some degree of economic stability and she would like to start her

⁸⁰ For similar processes in Southeast Asia see Lim 1998; Phongpaichit 1982.

own family with her husband, an engineer employed by the state. A large portion of Liliana's earnings are sent to El Salvador in order to support her mother, brother, and teenaged son. Of her family, she says, "Economically speaking, they depend on me." Liliana moved to Morelos to earn more money so that she could raise funds for cancer surgery for her mother. Her life has long been characterized by sacrifice in order to support her extended family. She has worked to help support them since she was a child, picking cotton and planting coffee in El Salvador. Of the work, she said, "It was in order to help my mother because we didn't have any place to live, nothing." During her youth, she only received one year of schooling. She never met her father or the eight siblings who came before her who died of curable illnesses and speaks little of El Salvador's long guerrilla struggle, only saying that there was war and poverty. Liliana's story is not unusual, as many poor uneducated women bear the burden of economic responsibility for entire families, a burden they can manage only because they are born with a commodity - their bodies.

The combination of cultural norms, obligation, need, guilt, and familial love which compels many women to work for their families can be a volatile one. Ironically, many workers, though they support entire families, receive little status from their role as breadwinner and often find themselves in vulnerable rather than powerful positions. In yet another manifestation of the contradiction that sex workers must live with, they, as family breadwinners receive little compensation themselves in terms of social standing. This in part is due to the stigmatized nature of their work and also

their standing within a patriarchal gender system that expects women to unselfishly serve their families as daughters, mothers, and spouses, without reward. In this sense, there are some gender-based inequalities that sex work does not help women break free from.

Many families of sex workers are unaware of how the remittances they receive are earned; some families are grateful and supportive while others are not. Magda's family lives rent-free on a piece of land she owns in the city of Tapachula. Though she has not yet constructed a well-built house made of wood on this land, which she laments, she does have many "good things," such as a refrigerator, armoires of cedar and mahogany, and a cedar dressing table. Magda has given economic assistance to her younger sisters for many years. The youngest, a single mother, received a great deal of "help" from Magda who also supported her nephew. She says, "I helped her with the little boy since kindergarten, buying uniforms, shoes, sneakers, school supplies, everything. I saw him as though he were my own son. I took care of him and I took care of the bills."

In 1997 Magda fell and badly broke her leg. To this day she walks slowly, with a strong limp. Unable to work or even walk well after the accident, she returned to Tapachula to recover. At this time she had stopped giving remittances for her nephew. According to Magda, her first week or two at home was wonderful. She was happy to be home, she had missed her family, and felt "in heaven", "like I was Carlos Salinas de Gortari."⁶¹ Tears well up in her eyes as Magda speaks of how after a few weeks her family

⁶¹ Before the Zapatista uprising and collapse of the peso, many Mexicans approved of Carlos Salinas. Today there are still some who continue to think that his presidency was a good one.

began to "behave badly." It is something she says she rarely speaks of to anybody; she is ashamed and does not want anyone in the zona to know.

My sister would arrive home from the market and give the best fruit to her daughters and to me, she would give maybe two or three little fruits...One time we were eating and my sister said to me, 'Do you want the stew that is in the refrigerator? It's three days old, but in the refrigerator [it is still edible].' I told her it was a shame to waste it and to leave it for me and that I would eat it. And my unmarried sister said, 'Ay, what a pig. She's like a swine that eats rotten food.'

Magda also speaks of how her nieces would sweep but leave the area around her bed dirty. They did not help her make her bed or bring her clean sheets. These are things Magda says she will never forget, "not even in my coffin under twenty tons of dirt, will I forget!" The mistreatment Magda suffered at the hands of her family might be explained by her work as a prostitute. Though she claims they do not know what she does for work, it is likely that after nearly three decades in the ambiente, her family has somehow surmised what it is she does for work and thus treats her accordingly. Or perhaps their mistreatment of Magda stems from her inability to give them money during

her recuperation.

Whether it be within a romantic or paid sexual encounter, in relationships with family members, or with co-workers, the notion of reciprocity plays a central role in the lives of zona women. Because of her family's lack of reciprocity, Magda now says she feels alone, that she has no family. She uses the phrase "one hand washes the other" to explain the nature of reciprocal relationships within the zona. As we are sitting in her room, a co-worker comes by with a sweet roll for Magda. She says, "See how just now that girl gave me some bread and now I give her a little coffee, and like my mother said, may she rest in peace, 'One hand washes the other.' And look, that is why what my family did hurts me so much."

Lina sends remittances to El Salvador to support her parents, her son, and two younger siblings. She clearly remembers the difficulties her family experienced during the political violence of the 1980s: "It was an ugly time. We would hear bombs dropping and bullets and all of us would hide under the bed. We didn't have anything to eat and didn't want to go outside for fear of a stray bullet." While the conflict in El Salvador has ended, the poverty that spurred it has not, and Lina's father, a former soldier who now works as a musician, cannot support the family. "There a tomato costs a peso. Everything is expensive. And the price of meat is sky-high - twenty pesos (US\$2.35) for half a kilo! Everything costs so much." Though she understands her parents need, she feels that they expect and often demand too much: "They want to ring the last drop out of me. If I had a hundred pesos (US\$11.70) in my hand, it would be gone in an hour."

The earnings from sex work, aside from allowing women to provide for themselves and their families, have another important consequence: they allow poor women entry into a modern consumer economy. As Liliana lamented of her time in the zona, "Here, one becomes much more materialistic." As poor women suddenly find themselves able not only to survive but also to purchase consumer goods, they experience shifts in desire as new "wants" are created and transformed into "needs." Aside from consumption that is work-related (clothing, shoes, make-up), some workers also begin to purchase items such as inexpensive jewelry, clothing, electronic goods, and cell phones for themselves, as well as toys, clothing, and other items for their children.⁸² This transformation from poor women with little disposable income into somewhat less poor women who are consumers is particularly drastic for rural women, who are new to an urban environment in which they are bombarded with messages about consumption via radio, television, billboards, and the embeddedness of spending in everyday urban life.

Along with such shifts in spending habits come shifts in beliefs about identity, happiness, and self-worth. Magda's words reveal the way in which sex work transformed her from a poor child to a "self-made" woman and proud consumer:

I grew up in a very humble house. We ate sitting on
a mat on the floor, *tortillita* with salt and line. And

⁸² A cell phone is somewhat less extravagant than it may seem when one considers that getting a telephone installed in one's house can be costly and time-consuming, often involving many months of waiting.

since I have been a woman who has suffered, today I am the happiest woman in the world. I have what I have from nothing. I made myself from nothing. Never did I think I would have a cassette player, or an air conditioner of two horsepower, or three pieces of property, thanks to God. I never imagined this, and three, four electric fans.

The situation that Magda describes makes it difficult for women to leave the ambiente, as there is no other job for which they are qualified that would allow sex workers to earn and purchase as they do when working the Galáctica. Though their work causes women to lose the dignity or worth ascribed to "respectable" women, by ascending the economic ladder they experience a new kind of worth associated not with gender but with class. This is yet another of the contradictions prostitute women must cope with: they earn more than many of their clients, but due to cultural beliefs regarding gender and morality, they are still marginalized. Becoming consumers allows the women to mitigate the stigma associated with selling sex.

Leaving the ambiente often means giving up the ability to earn and spend as one did when employed in prostitution. Desire to find other employment is further hampered by the demands of supporting families who have a vested interest in the continued prostitution of their daughter, sister, or cousin. While many workers speak of leaving the zona, few do. It is a

difficult choice to make. Leticia, like most other workers, had spoken frequently of leaving the zona in order to open up a little shop. When I returned to Mexico a year after I had left, I found Leticia selling fish in a storefront not far from her home and within view of the pirate taxi stand that serves the Galáctica. Leticia sat on one side of a doorway inside a dark empty room on a wooden chair behind a metal table that held a pile of small *mojarras* (a common whitefish). A white cat curled around the legs of the table. Leticia's teenaged daughter Ximena stood by, waving a rag over the fish to keep the flies from landing for more than a few seconds. On the other side of the doorway sat a woman with a large basket of plucked yellow chickens. Leticia recounted how the other women in the zona had made fun of her for leaving the ambiente in order to become a fishmonger. While she admitted she made far less money selling fish than she did selling sexual services, Leticia felt happy to be able to work outside the ambiente in a job she did not have to lie about, close to home, and with her daughter. It is important to note that Leticia was able to leave the ambiente only because of the financial support she received from her partner Miguel.

The zona, as much as it provides illusion for clients, also provides a fantasy of wellness and prosperity for workers. Though the work is difficult and not without stigma, the women work in nice clothing and make-up. The space is clean and fairly well-maintained. One leaves work with cash in hand and is able to attain some of the respectability that is endowed upon persons with money to spend. This contrasts greatly with the reality of wearing an apron covered with fish blood while sitting in a dark, hot doorway, sprayed

with fish scales scraped off of a pile of dead, smelly fish, only to earn a meager living.

Some workers who wish to leave the ambiente find they cannot. Roberto, the former sex worker from Guatemala, desperately wanted to leave, and though he did give up sex work, he continues to work in the ambiente, as a janitor/gofer. Though no longer a sex worker, he still speaks of wanting to leave the ambiente. When I asked him why he didn't look for work outside the ambiente, he said, "Because of my lack of study and knowledge...I've lived with people of the ambiente since I was a teenager." Because Roberto has been involved in the ambiente in some form from a young age, he is reticent to leave an atmosphere that he knows well, in which he feels relatively comfortable to fully express his sexuality, and has friends and acquaintances. Doña Paula who runs a food stand across from Pepe's, used to work as a prostitute in the Galáctica. She eased her way out of it, both running the food stand and prostituting, before she finally was able to switch over to working her food stand full-time and earn the respectable title of *Doña*, reserved for women who work in the ambiente in capacities other than sex worker.

STIGMA

Women come to sex work primarily because of the money. Some feminist theorists and others argue that gender-and class-based exploitation constitutes the major reason why sex work is difficult for women. I would suggest that it is the social construction of sexuality and gender along with the

resulting stigma, marginalization, silence, invisibility and shame attached to selling sex that for many women can be the most difficult to bear. Zona workers are stigmatized and disciplined, as both women and workers, for stepping beyond the boundaries of acceptable female behavior.

In his classic work on the subject, Erving Goffman writes that while stigma refers to “an attribute that is deeply discrediting,” it is also about relationships - an attribute may not be inherently discrediting in itself but sometimes is constructed to define its possessor as discreditable in relation to another, who by lack of that attribute is confirmed as “normal” (1963:3). In the case of female sex workers, the stigma they suffer is what Goffman refers to as a “blemish of individual character” in which the stigmatized person is perceived as possessing weak will, unnatural passions, treacherous beliefs, and the like. Other groups who may bear such stigma of character include, according to Goffman, homosexuals, alcoholics, felons, the unemployed, political radicals, and the insane (1963:4).

Mónica, Pepe, and I leave the zona together on a Thursday afternoon, heading by taxi to Los Explosivos, a popular palapa bar on Tuxtla’s south side. We are going to attend the seventeenth birthday party for Elena’s teenage daughter, Larissa. Elena too is a sex worker, but currently works in a private house in another town. Pepe looks very put together and is particularly animated today. In his sixties, he appears much younger. He is short and thin, beginning to bald with grey hair swept back off his face. He is gay, but I have not known him to have a boyfriend. He has changed from his zona workclothes (a t-shirt, pants rolled up to the ankles, and plastic thongs) to a

black and white button down shirt, grey slacks, and shoes. He is speaking quickly, happily, loudly, explaining to nobody in particular why he brought such fine clothes to change into, "*Chinga tu madre* (Fuck your mother). I'm not going to waste them [by working in them], get them all dirty."

I was surprised and saddened to find that the attendees of Larissa's party were largely affiliated with the zone: taxi drivers, sex workers, a food vendor, and me. The only other guests were Elena's younger daughter Mari and a friend of Larissa's. We ate botanas, drank, and watched the stage show. I was impressed by Pepe for drinking what appeared to be simply mineral water, and more impressed when I would realize hours later that he had quietly been getting thoroughly tanked on vodka tonics. He begins to tell Mónica he loves her. Mónica, who had been attending a woman's group of Alcoholics Anonymous, is drinking wine coolers. Pepe dances with Larissa. The normally brash and explosive Elena is quite tranquil. Before we left the bar to head back to Elena's house for cake, she approached me in the bathroom and lowered her voice, saying of her daughters, "They don't know what I do." I reassured her that I would keep her secret.

I lend Elena fifty pesos so she can pay the entire bill. We pile into one of the driver's pirate taxis and head for Elena's apartment in the southern hills that overlook the city. The neighborhood is a poor one and home to other women from the Galáctica. The streets are not maintained and some remain unpaved. There are deep potholes that resemble small canyons. The houses though are made of concrete and wood, unlike the poorer homes of the shanties in the southwestern hills. Elena rents part of a large house - she

has a kitchen, bedroom, bathroom and large porch. A curtain divides her section of the home from the other tenants.

We sit on the porch on rickety wooden chairs and continue to drink. Dolores and Lulu arrive from the zone. Lulu has dyed her hair from red to dark brown. Mónica tells her, "Why did you do that? You had it the perfect color. This doesn't suit you." Relationships in the zona are complex, involve a great deal of lying and moments of brutal honesty. We all, Elena's daughters included, gathered in a circle, talking. Pepe sat in his chair, concentrating, it appeared, on not falling out of it. He then began to talk as drunk people often do. His big watery brown eyes looked at me lovingly as he said to me in his poor English, "Come here. I done know. Yes, plis." We pull his chair over towards me and he begins to hug me, saying loudly in Spanish now, "I love you. I love you more than anyone. I love you more than anyone in Mexico. I love you more than anyone in the Galactic Zone!" The last two words cut through the warm night air and everyone fell silent - it seemed a long and sobering silence. The words Zona Galáctica, rarely uttered outside of the zona by workers, fall heavily onto every conversation, ending them like a giant period. Finally Mónica's voice breaks in, "Pepe!" she shouts scolding him. Even in his drunken state, he appeared to know he had done something very, very wrong. He stares down at the ground. And as silent as it had been only moments before, conversation suddenly erupted everywhere, as we attempted to cover up the awkward moment. We hoped that Elena's daughters had somehow missed the last few minutes, though surely they did not. Mónica firmly and quietly tells Pepe he should have more manners and I

am sent to the bedroom with Larissa and Mari, where we lie on the bed and I help them translate into Spanish the lyrics on a Rod Stewart cassette. It is getting late and I decide to leave. Larissa and Mari tell me that the party will go on all night and that they have to wake up for school at seven in the morning. "We are used to it," they say. I force Pepe into a cab with me though he insists he is not ready to go home. I get dropped off first, but Pepe is too drunk to remember where he lives so I dig out my address book and instruct the driver, praying that Pepe gets home safely without getting robbed or assaulted. Even on occasions such as this when Galáctica workers attempt to broaden their circle for life celebrations, they remain isolated.

The stigma of working as a full-time prostitute circumscribes one's social relations, causes fear and shame, and creates situations of inauthenticity in daily life. Unlike Tuxtla's street prostitutes who work intermittently in order to supplement the earnings from their day jobs or work only a few hours late in the night servicing perhaps only one or two clients, a woman who works as a prostitute full-time, particularly a registered zona worker, has made a greater commitment to sex work and as such bears its stigma to a greater extent. The clandestine sex worker is indeed clandestine, in that she works at night in private locations unlike the regulated prostitute who often works during the day in the Galáctica where she is registered and on display.

As Elena's story illustrates, most workers attempt to keep their employment a secret, even from those closest to them. Keeping one's work a secret requires a great deal of effort and can generate an enormous amount of

anxiety and alienation. As Erving Goffman tells us:

Close relationships that the individual had before he came to have something to conceal therefore become compromised, automatically deficient in shared information. Newly-formed or "post-stigma" relationships are very likely to carry the discreditable person past the point where he feels it has been honorable of him to withhold the facts. And, in some cases, even very fleeting relationships can constitute a danger, since the small talk suitable between strangers who have struck up a conversation can touch on secret failings...(1963:86-86).

Though workers employ various strategies in order to separate their work and home identities, this compartmentalization of life can never be fully complete. Workers often become known in town and may run across clients, zona staff, and co-workers in the city center. A zona worker must lie frequently and can rarely let her guard down, even or especially in her own home. There are few occupations, aside from international spy, mobster, or police informant, that require so much subterfuge from its practitioners.

Women who work as prostitutes generally do so in a place that they are new to, where they have no family, so they do not have to risk the humiliation of being seen by a brother, cousin, or uncle. In this way, worker's

worlds become divided spatially between places where the stigma they suffer is to be concealed or revealed. Yet with time, the anonymity sought by zona workers decreases, as they become known by some of the hundreds of clients who visit the Galáctica each day. As much as workers try to create borders between their lives outside the zona and their work in the ambiente, these borders are permeable. When zona and centro meet, anxiety is created for workers. Adriana spoke of the horror she felt when she saw a man from her neighborhood in the Galáctica. She hid in her room for hours, working, but leaving her door open only a few inches. Workers may also find themselves approached by clients when in the centro. Leticia remembers two such incidents:

One time I was in the pharmacy with my boyfriend when suddenly a man came up and grabbed me and hugged me and said to me, "Hi. You didn't go to the zona today?" Then the cashier stared at me and I just lowered my head. Another time I was going to the market with my daughter and another man in the street said hello to me and wanted to hug me. I stepped to the side and said to him, "What is with you?" He asked me if I went to work today and I felt bad because I was with my daughter.

These sorts of actions indicate to workers a lack of respect towards the

women. As Leticia remarked to one client, "Look, inside here [the zona] I am whatever you want, but outside, respect me, because I too have family."

Being approached and being ignored alike reinforce a woman's role as a prostitute, something she is trying to shed when she leaves the zona. While being approached by clients in the centro is anathema to workers, being ignored by those who staff the SMAV and administrative office angers many women, who feel they are being snubbed. Sitting at Doña Paula's food stand one hot day, Flor expressed her anger with the "rudeness" of the zona staff. She had recently seen both the accountant and the doctor while in town and had been ignored by each of them. Even Olivia, a nurse whose husband is a pirate taxi driver and whose mother-in-law is Doña Mari, a zona landlady, ignores them, says Flor.

During my early days in the field it was often difficult to know what actions to take towards workers outside the zona. One afternoon when I had stopped by the municipal government offices to speak with the mayor, I soon found myself swept along into a parade that the city government was sponsoring. As I walked down the street with the mayor and his functionaries and a few dozen people of Zoque descent in traditional dress I looked up to see a woman who looked like Liliana standing nearby on the curb, smiling at me. I was unsure what to do. Would going to say hello to her somehow give away her secret? I was new to the ambiente and didn't know. I smiled back and kept marching. In another instance, I was sitting in the plaza in San Cristóbal, immersed in conversation with a friend when suddenly Viviana appeared in front of me with a few children in tow. We hugged and chatted

for a while and made plans to get together for pizza that evening. Later she told me that when she first saw me in the plaza that day she waved and that I looked at her and went back to talking with my friend. I did not see her or her wave, but she said to herself, "Maybe Paty doesn't want to talk to me. Maybe she has changed" and it took all her courage to approach me and possibly be rebuffed rather than simply walking off.

When Liliana entered the ambiente she told her family in El Salvador that she was a clothing vendor who traveled from city to city. For someone who has never worked selling clothing, she is well informed about such businesses; she can easily discuss how to rent a location from the city, where to buy the clothing wholesale, how to price it, and travel. Of her knowledge, she says, "It was a good idea for me to learn all that in case they (my family) ask me questions." Lying to her family was at first difficult, but she says, "After a while you start to believe it until you think it is true."

While lying to family members who live in another city, state, or even country can be difficult, even more so is lying to children who may live with sex workers. Many women find that as children grow older they become more curious and even suspicious. As Leticia's children grew older they often asked her what she did for work and even asked that she take them with her. She told them she worked as a waitress, a cook, and sometimes a maid - the sorts of jobs she would probably be doing were she not in the zona. But Leticia chose to tell her children about her work when she felt they were old enough to understand. As she explains it, "I could not bear any longer what I carried inside from lying to them and so when I saw that she [Ximena, her eldest

daughter] was getting older and was already in her second year of secondary school, I told her I wanted to talk with her.” Leticia knew that her daughter probably already had some idea of what prostitution was from watching movies, soap operas, and dramatic television programs such as *Casos de la Vida Real* (Real Life Cases, a television program that reenacts true and horrifying stories. The one time I saw it a very depressed teenaged girl committed suicide by sticking her head in the oven. She was unhappy following the divorce of her parents and lack of attention from her mother). Though fearful that her daughter would reject her, Leticia could no longer lie:

So, I said to her, ‘Listen, Ximena, I want to talk with you. What would you do if you were told that your mama is a woman of the street, or that your mama works in a place that is not decent, that is indecent?’ She just sat there looking at me and said to me, ‘Look mommy, if it is in order to help us move forward, I will defend you. Even if they were to say you are the worst of women, to me you are the best of mamas because for me and my sister you are papa and mama at the same time.’ I told her, ‘Thank you’ and felt like she didn’t disappoint me because I thought there are many children who reject their mamas when they find out they work in this. And I feel they shouldn’t reject them, but on the contrary, they should support them and love them more because

even though here we are, filled with sex with men,
we don't do it with pleasure. It's because they are
paying you a certain sum that you endure it.

Leticia's story illustrates the complex interactions between stigma, morality, familial love, and responsibility. Many zona women work as prostitutes in order to support children and extended families, but do so at the risk of losing the emotional support and respect of those very people they financially support. While Leticia's daughter defended her mother's choice to work as a prostitute, Mónica attributes her tempestuous relationship with her son who lives in Veracruz to his recent discovery of her employment when he overheard a phone conversation between the relatives he lives with and his mother. Bárbara suggests that even if one's family members appear to accept their work in the ambiente, "there is a wound, a certain feeling. On the outside they forgive you, but inside, no. I wouldn't be able to get along with my family if they found out about this because they wouldn't trust me and wouldn't treat me like their daughter. More like a stranger or something. And with a certain contempt. And I could not bear that."

Telling one's friends that they are sex workers is not a cause of concern for most women, as they have few friends outside the ambiente. Lina says she has little contact with people outside of the zona, such as neighbors, "I go home and I close the door." Leticia explains, "For example, say I met you in the street and we became friends and afterwards you say to me, 'Hey Leticia, where do you work?'. 'Mmmmm, I work in a store,' I say. I'm not going to tell you because if I tell you I work in the zona, you aren't going to talk to me."

Working in the zona isolates women, cuts them off from social relationships and support that other workers have outside the workplace, and makes it more difficult to leave the ambiente. Leticia has few relationships with women outside of the ambiente as these women, she says, would reject her, fear that she had a contagious illness, or would make sexual advances towards their boyfriends.

The stigma associated with sex work may be mitigated according to how a worker spends her earnings and how one experiences the work. A prostitute who spends her earnings drinking, who neglects family members, and who appears to enjoy her work is considered less moral or “decent”, even by other sex workers. Ideas of decent as opposed to loose or immoral women are deeply ingrained, even in sex workers who by their actions may appear to and sometimes have been able to free themselves from some oppressive cultural norms regarding gender and sex. One may work as a prostitute, but a decent woman should do so, as Magda says, “with shame.”

It is the way in which a worker spends her earnings that makes the work morally defensible. As Xímena told her mother, “Look mommy, *if it is in order to help us move forward, I will defend you.*” As Leticia’s words imply, there comes with sacrificing for one’s family, with doing the job not for pleasure (*por gusto*) but rather out of necessity, something that renders sex work less immoral. As Leticia notes, “The bad thing is that people scorn us *without seeing the motives we have for doing this.*” There is a moral value attached to properly caring for one’s children. Those women considered negligent in their perceived responsibilities to their families are looked down

upon and sometimes gossiped about by other zona women. Obligadas, who give their earnings to pimps, are somewhat free from such moral judgments, as it is known that they haven't any choice as to how to spend their money (though they may be considered stupid). Most zona women accept a very traditional view of motherhood and it is their work as prostitutes which allows them to fulfill this traditional role.

Independent workers who use their earnings to support only themselves may also provoke judgment from co-workers.⁶³ Young, single women without dependents may be viewed as less "needy" than their counterparts who are either mothers (who have greater economic need) and obligadas (who have less "choice"). In the zona, there is a direct correlation between a worker's perceived "need" and her moral standing. A worker's lack of responsibilities or stable socioeconomic status will often be reason enough for other workers to judge her. Speaking of a conversation she had with Juanita, Lina said, "I told her if my father had money like hers, I wouldn't be doing this." Whatever their economic status and social responsibilities, most women stress that they are in the zona not "for pleasure" (*por gusto*) but rather "for need" (*por necesidad*).

One need not work as a prostitute to experience the shame that comes with being associated with the Galáctica. Roberto, though no longer a sex worker, was sitting in a worker's room one day when he was seen by a young man from the centro with whom he had a friendship and who Roberto was hoping was gay, like him. Roberto had not told his friend of his homosexuality or his place of employment, for fear of alienating him. When

⁶³ For similar findings, see Brennan 1998.

his friend asked Roberto what he was doing there, he lied, claiming he was just visiting a friend. This incident caused Roberto a great deal of worry: Did the man he was romantically interested in have sexual relations with the women in the zona? Did he know that Roberto worked in the zona? Did he now know that Roberto was gay?

This last cause of concern, having one's sexual orientation revealed simply by being a male worker in the Galáctica, may seem peculiar until one understands that it is generally well known by Tuxtlecos who have been to the zona or know somebody who has been there that most men who do service work in the zona (all the male food vendors and Roberto, not the police, administration, or handymen) are gay. Roberto's hopes about his friend's sexuality and his fears about being "outed" in front of his friend, when seen in this light, are entirely justifiable.

STIGMATIZED FREEDOMS AND REGULATED LIBERTIES: CONTRADICTIONS OF MORALITY AND SEXUALITY IN THE ZONA

It is evening in the zona and Carla has arrived for work. She has a boyish appearance: short hair, no make-up, an extra-large light green polo shirt covers her thin torso and skinny legs poke out of her short blue pants. She wears white sneakers and no socks. Carla is not a sex worker, but a seamstress who sews strappy, revealing minidresses for the workers, the sorts of dresses impossible to find in any store. She presents a tiny red Lycra dress to Ramona who goes behind the curtain to her bathroom to try it on. When she comes out, wearing the dress, Carla tells her the bodice is too loose, that she

has nothing to fill it out. There is a brief discussion of breast size among the three of us which culminates with Carla lifting her shirt and pulling a breast out of a lacy black bra (which provides a startling contrast to her boyish exterior) and complaining of her lack of “firmness.”

Carla’s willingness to expose her breasts was surprising; in the zona, most workers, though they may sometimes dress in a revealing way, adhere to certain cultural notions of female modesty and propriety. Though they sell sex, most zona workers operate within the system of cultural norms regarding gender. Social interactions with women outside the zona made visible the ways in which workers accept prevailing standards of female modesty, which often stood in great contrast to my own norms. During at outing to Chicoasén for swimming, I was dissuaded by sex workers from wearing my bikini in the river and loaned shorts and a baggy top instead. On another occasion, following a swim at a local pool, I returned from the bathroom in a knee-length skirt with my wet undergarments which I swam in (under a long t-shirt lent to me) in my hands. The women from the zona were shocked and worried aloud about what would happen were I to fall down and accidentally expose myself. When a group of us entered a bar recommended by El Profe, the elderly man who taught adult education in the zona, the workers were dismayed to find it was a cantina and not a “family-style” bar. While we stayed, it was not without a certain level of discomfort.

While some women may strut about the zona in revealing clothing and defiantly proclaim, “*Soy puta* [I’m a whore],” this demeanor often conflicts with the women’s behavior outside of work. In the Galáctica, Flor is

known for her consistent and loud use of profanity and sometimes refers to herself as a “whore.” Yet she remains angry and unforgiving about the time Pepe called her a whore. At home, she speaks less loudly, curses infrequently, and hides her work from her neighbors and acquaintances. Lorena, the most educated and politically informed worker, defends the women’s right to behave as they wish in the zona, using curse words and behaving in a raucous way. “After all,” she says, “this is a whorehouse, not an office.” But Lorena also compartmentalizes her life, separating her working self from her home self: “Here in the zona, I am Lorena and in the street I am Fernanda.”

The zona is a space apart, where hegemonic norms regarding gender and sexuality are not only enacted but also subverted. There are certain liberties to be found in the zona for workers. It is a place where women may leave behind the cultural restrictions placed upon dress, speech, and behavior. More importantly, it is a place where women can live and work without the dependence upon male spouses or family that Mexican culture prescribes. Sex workers often find independence and self-reliance in the Galáctica. Working in the zona allowed Bárbara to leave an unhappy home life with her mother and stepfather and Leticia to leave an abusive husband. Women who work independently in the zona are in a way, truly independent - from a cultural system that would have them rely upon a spouse for financial support. In her personal relationships, the independent worker is able to maintain a great deal control over both her finances and her sexuality (and the two are not unconnected).

In the zona, one may also express their sexual orientation without fear

of reprisals from co-workers. Homosexuality and bisexuality are generally tolerated and openly discussed among zona workers. Many of the gay male food vendors (Pepe excepted) wear feminine aprons, hairstyles, and jewelry and openly discuss their sexual selves. Over dinner one evening, Viviana told me how her thirteen-year-old daughter had a *lesbianita* (little lesbian) in her class at school and that she told her daughter to respect the girl. In another instance, Ofelia recently returned to the zona soon after having a baby with her partner (she said that since she was already having sex at home with her partner, she may as well come back to work). One day a group of us sat in Lorena's room, where she was lying down and Ofelia sat leaning up against Lorena's stomach. Lorena began to jokingly moan with desire and grope around at Ofelia's breasts, accentuated by a tight halter top. Gaby and Ofelia began to tease Lorena, accusing her of getting excited when Ofelia suddenly jumped off the bed and shouted at her laughing, "You're wet!" Ofelia leaned over to look at Lorena's crotch for evidence of wetness that would indicate sexual excitement as Lorena lay on the bed laughing and hugging a pillow. She then went to open Lorena's sweatpants as they were the sort that button up the sides and may be opened up completely with a swift pull. Unfortunately, this pair had been sewn shut and they ripped. "Oops," said Ofelia, apologizing. The room, Lorena included, erupted with laughter and Ofelia revealed her own sexual history, saying, "It's been two years since I craved a woman anyhow." There was little in the way of teasing to suggest that this play was mean-spirited.

The zona then is simultaneously a place of confinement and

restriction, a “holding pen” for populations defined as deviant, and also a space of freedom, where these populations can experience alternative expressions of sexuality, gender, speech, and dress. When I asked the Director of Public Health why it is that the majority of men employed in the zona as vendors are gay, he suggested that they were there because of their own “perversions” - that they enjoyed watching the male clients come and go. Indeed, some of the vendor do enjoy looking at the clients; on slow days Pepe is prone to looking forlorn and sighing, “Not one handsome man here today.” Of course, this behavior is not an expression of some culturally-constructed perversion but rather an open and rare expression of his sexual orientation that would be less acceptable in the city center than it is in the zona. Yet the liberties found in the ambiente are diminished by the stigma of working there, which effectively controls and separates the women, inhibiting them from engaging in collective activity as prostitutes outside the Galáctica.

INDEPENDENCE AND ORGANIZING

While landlords may occasionally pressure the women to work more so that they can collect the rent, independent zona workers experience a great deal of freedom and exercise control over their work. Aside from making their own hours, women decide what prices they will charge (though this is based on their “value,” competition, and what they provide), what services they will offer, and what clients they will serve. As Leticia said, “I have the

opportunity to say no. Nobody forces me to go with a client if I don't want to." According to Lorena, "There is freedom here. You behave freely. You don't have a yoke around your neck, a boss telling you, 'Get up, get to work, do this, do that.' It's up to you if you work or do not work and how you are going to resolve your debts. We are not working right now, and look at me, I'm calm. I know that for an hour or two I'll be charging my batteries and that I have to make an effort to pay the rent."

There exists among zona workers a certain independent entrepreneurial spirit. When asked what they would like to do were they not employed in the zona, nearly all the workers responded that they would like to set up a small shop or vending booth of some kind, be it a taco stand (Mónica), a small clothing boutique (Bárbara), or a chicken vending stand (Leticia). Patricia hopes to be a teacher one day while the deeply religious Magda says that when she leaves the ambiente, she would like to spend her time evangelizing. Workers' hopes for the future are realistic and shaped by the realities of the Mexican economy and their own educations; as already noted, there are few jobs available outside the informal, self-employed service sector and the women lack the skills and education to gain employment in an office or another formal setting in which they would have a boss. Some zona women currently supplement their incomes with small side businesses, selling merchandise such as shoes, beauty supplies, or household goods imported cheaply from Guatemala. Ramona sells goods from a catalog, appropriated titled in English for these neoliberal times characterized by privatization, "Privacy Life."

The individualism and entrepreneurial ethic found among workers is accompanied by economic competition and a lack of unity. When the Galáctica first opened and drinking alcoholic beverages was permitted, clients arrived in greater numbers. When the new panista administration banned alcohol in the zona, the clientele decreased and competition intensified. As described earlier, competition is further fueled by the presence of workers who will perform special services and those who undercut their competitors by charging lower than normal prices.

The individualism and decided lack of shared consciousness as workers that is found in the zona is a common characteristic of these neoliberal times throughout Latin America (Farthing 1995; Vilas 1993). Unemployment, underemployment, increasing fragmentation of the labor market, growth in the informal economy, decreases in social spending, and the diminished power of unions, all consequences of recent economic restructuring, have led to the erosion of class identity among Latin American workers (Vilas 1993:41). That the women on the Galáctica express little class consciousness is not surprising considering these powerful politically demobilizing effects of neoliberalism.

Some workers, such as Leticia, Lorena, and Flor, decry the lack of unity and shared worker consciousness in the zona. Leticia says she used to be outspoken about workers' rights. She attended health workshops and organizing meetings, and became interested in making the zona a better place to work. She was supportive of many of the activities that CISC, the health-related NGO, undertook in the zona. When a CISC representative arrived in

the zona and spoke to the women about forming a cooperative in order to purchase necessities such as soap and toilet paper, Leticia was eager to take action. But, according to Leticia, nothing came of the doctor's suggestion because there is little agreement among workers and because "there is no union." Leticia's outspokenness soon transformed her not into a leader, but into a pariah; during a workshop on sexually transmitted diseases she actively participated and asked questions. Afterwards, she was rumored by other women in attendance to actually have a sexually transmitted disease. Leticia has come to believe that activism in the zona would be futile: "It is better I don't go out and get myself involved in problems. I work for me and the world keeps turning, right? I can't get involved anymore. What I would like more than anything is that this [work] were something different, but it cannot be done. There are many problems here precisely because nobody wants to be ordered around. Nobody wants to have a boss."

There are many specific reasons why hardly any zona women become active in pursuing better working conditions in the Galáctica. Women come to the zona to earn money and many are simply unwilling to spend costly time engaging in organizing activities. Furthermore, women who work for pimps are less likely to participate in any form of collective action as their pimps will not let them. Other workers, like Liliana, seek to avoid any form of conflict or gossip. Undocumented workers are often inhibited from engaging in political activity due to their precarious immigration status.

Lorena often speaks out on behalf of other workers, though she rejects any leadership role at work, saying, "I don't want to be the representative of

the zona." Despite this claim, she is often one of the first workers to be involved in discussions of work issues with landlords or administrators, who describe her as "difficult." Lorena decries the high rents paid by workers to landlords, claiming, "The price of gas goes up, our rent goes up five pesos." She says that landlords try to quell any dissent by "running out" women who protest, particularly Central American women who are more vulnerable to exploitation. She is concerned about the elements of control and exploitation present in the zona: domineering police, exploitative landlords, an administrative and medical staff that judges and disciplines workers: "They call this place a tolerance zone? What do you think tolerance means? For me, tolerance means to put up with a lot and to permit a lot. But here they permit nothing." Of organizing, she says:

I would like to organize, but that is to complicate matters for no reason. A group came here to speak to us, talked to us about SEMEPO, the union of, one could say, *chicas elegantes* throughout the Republic in the Federal District. They already have a union, everything. They are better organized. So they tried to organize us too, but it was like I wanted to cross the river swimming without a life jacket or anything. Just me alone. Nobody got involved to support it. Those that are Mexican are the Poblanas and the Poblanas are pimped. So for them, cash, cash, cash.

It is the only thing that interests them. Their own well-being doesn't interest them - that in the future they are going to be old ladies. And if you want to find out more, or get organized, the landlord will squash you, the city will squash you, half the world will squash you in order to put out the blaze you want to ignite. This is why I say it is like complicating matters for no reason.

Furthering this lack of unity and cooperation among workers are the rivalries, gossip, and jealousies that arise while laboring under conditions of sometimes intense competition and pressure. The stigmatized nature of the job also inhibits collective action, as women are unlikely to publicly identify themselves as prostitutes and take their labor disputes beyond the walls of the Galáctica. While gender inequality is certain relevant in terms of affecting change in the zona (and researching prostitution), labor relations, though not frequently addressed by women in the Galáctica or researchers, are significant in women's experience of sex work.

THE RHYTHM OF WORK

Each morning before the zona is open to the public, workers come trickling in. Pepe is often there quite early, pants rolled up, throwing buckets of soapy water across the cement floor of his food stand. Gloria, the 88-year-

old woman who sells basil to ward off “bad vibrations” sits on a planter waiting for clients, long grey braids flowing down the back of her pink dress. Carlos, the young candy vendor removes his stand from storage and begins to set up outside the main gate, stopping only to wrestle with the teenaged Paco, who is readying to open his flavored ice cart. The workers arrive in small groups, exiting the bus or one of the pirate taxis. Some arrive empty-handed, others arrive with their work clothing, food, or comic books. One woman carries a large basket which holds a head of lettuce and a white rabbit with pink eyes. Some workers will not arrive until long after the zona has opened and others work only at night.

Work schedules are flexible: workers make their own hours, choose which days to work, and may come and go as they please. Sick children, dental appointments, vacations, and illness are easily accommodated. Some women, like Leticia, work the days so that they may be at home with their children during the evening. Women who live in the zona may work sporadically throughout the day and evening. Some workers stay home during their menstrual periods while others do not.⁴ Women often take extended leaves from the zona, going to visit family in other parts of Mexico or Central America. During Holy Week, many give up their rooms, put their

⁴ In her study of women and social change in Cuernavaca, Sarah Levine found that while many older informants, lacking information, were shocked when their periods arrived and believed they were ill, menstruation in Mexico today is more frequently discussed among daughters, female siblings, and mothers (Levine 1993:77). In the zona, some women, like Leticia, speak openly about menstruation and share information about sexuality with their daughters. Sex workers who work while they are menstruating must pay a fee, known as a “menstruation quota.” While Buckley and Gottlieb (1988), in their work on menstrual symbolism, make clear the nonexistence of a universal menstrual taboo and need for ethnographic specificity when discussing menstrual meaning, it would seem likely that the menstruation quota sex workers must pay surely has some basis in cultural beliefs about female pollution as well as gender and class oppression.

belongings into storage and leave Tuxtla for vacation, as do many other Tuxtlecos.

This flexibility of work is ultimately dependent upon one factor: clients. During slow periods, workers may leave the zona and when there are clients, they return. As the women say over and over, "*Hay que sacar ventaja.*" - "One must take advantage" of the opportunity to earn money. Few workers take time off during the quincena and the days following it when clients are more likely to arrive and spend money. Flor schedules her day off on Wednesdays, a slow day, making sure to be present on busier weekend days. Political demonstrations and marches bring more clients and workers to the zona.

Slow periods are often marked by boredom, anxiety, and sometimes increased tensions between workers as competition for clients is heightened. There are days when a worker will see perhaps two or three clients at most. A great deal of time is spent waiting. The women fill this time in a number of ways: eating, socializing, watching television, sleeping, and reading comics.

Because they have no access to cooking facilities, workers are dependent upon the vendors who sell food from one of the six food stalls. Many workers are loyal to particular vendors and run long tabs with them. Unpaid tabs may lead to the end of a worker-vendor relationship, as was the case with Pepe and Desiree. Pepe says she has owed him one hundred pesos (US\$11.75) for over a month, that she is sneaky and that he will not serve her. Jealousy and rivalry is common among food vendors who rely more upon zona staff and workers than upon clients, who generally buy inexpensive soft

drinks and rarely purchase meals. While I normally ate at Pepe's, on the day I bought shrimp cocktail from Doña Paula, Pepe told me I would surely become ill. Workers have little control over what they eat in the zona, as vendors serve only one meal, along with tacos, tortas, and quesadillas. One vendor serves only fruit. Coca-cola is the beverage of choice in the zona.

Women eat both at the food stalls and in their rooms. They lack control over food choices and often eat due to boredom or stress. Many workers are overweight, and for some, like Flor and Lina, this weight was gained in the ambiente. Being overweight is not simply an aesthetic issue but also an economic one, as cultural notions of beauty have changed and many clients prefer thinner women to the more fleshy ones. Flor is extremely unhappy about her weight gain, which is substantial. Sitting at Pepe's food stand with Mónica, she lifts her shirt to show up her amply belly and complains that she is "a little fatty." The pair are joined by Bárbara, who asks Pepe what he brought. Steak, he tells her. She eats three steak tacos and asks for two more. As she goes to the counter to pick up her food, Flor and Mónica exchange a look. Neither of them is fond of Bárbara.

Just as prostitution in the zona often cleanses sex of intimacy, so too are conversations cleansed of intimacy and exposure of one's self. Workers pass time socializing and gossiping while waiting for clients. Conversation is often related to work; despite the fact that they engage in work that can generate intense emotions, rarely is conversation intimate and personal. Few workers care to appear vulnerable in front of co-workers and often have stopped private conversations with me about family or other sensitive matters when

another worker appears. At Pepe's, Flor and Mónica complain about the lack of business: "Yesterday, nothing, and today, nothing." Their conversation, peppered with words like *verga* (dick) and *puta*, at times becomes so animated that the two women are nearly screaming at the same time in an effort to make themselves heard. They are anxious about the lack of work. Flor speaks of having worked in other places: Campeche, in Tabasco, and in a bar outside of San Cristóbal called Siberia. She says she would like to go back and earn "good money" since it is slow in the Galáctica, but that her boyfriend will not let her. Mónica says she would like to go for a week and make some money, bring with her the condoms she receives at the zona, since they don't give them out at Siberia.

Over in Veronica's room, Lorena lies on the bed in a tight yellow mini-dress, beneath a poster of Leonardo di Caprio and Kate Winslet embracing. Days before, Veronica took down the two large portraits of her daughters back in El Salvador. Lorena moans and slowly pours a bottle of water into her open mouth. She is suffering from a hangover, having spent a good deal of money at the Gitano and having consumed, she says, "four hundred beers." Marco, the ponytailed food vendor, enters in a huff. Feigning anger, he complains that *gringos* are *fríos* (frigid). He says he once had a *gringo* lover and he was not satisfied with him. He then abruptly leaves. Lorena proclaims she adores me and I jokingly tell her she is as bad as the men, maybe worse. She laughs. Conversations in the zona are like this: lots of complaining, some gossip, and lighthearted banter, a bit of camaraderie, but often a certain distance.

Workers spend a great deal of time alone in their small, dark rooms, waiting for clients, watching t.v., reading, or in Desirée's case, playing Tetris on her Gameboy (a handheld video game). From time to time clients will poke their heads into the room or enter, as the doors are left open while waiting. Negotiations may begin or a client may simply look and decide to move on. Sometimes, says Mónica, a client will first tell her she is too fat or too old, and then move on. The waiting causes workers a great deal of anxiety, particularly during the rainy season when fewer clients arrive in the zona. One worker says she needs to talk to a psychologist as she is very upset, sits in her room and worries. Mónica, who suffers from depression and alcoholism, says that she was doing fine until spending the night in her room at the zona. She has been unable to sleep and says, "It's this place, this room, that makes me sick." Lorena suggests that the workers "are going crazy in their rooms and the television is no good." She complains of the city's unkept promise of providing the women with a basketball net. The women, she says, need to get out, to jump, to scream; the rains, the lack of clients, and being trapped in their rooms is making them crazy.

And so the rhythm of work in the zona is marked less by flow than by discord. The zona promises little in the way of a stable income, as slow periods of little activity are common and anxiety-producing. There is a decided lack of privacy and boredom sometimes gives way to gossip and fighting. Though work hours are flexible, hours spent in the zona are not always productive. Furthermore, though they are regulated by the state, zona workers are considered entrepreneurs and receive none of the benefits

associated with being a state employee, such as health benefits and pensions.

MARIA DIDN'T WANT TO

Sitting in Pepe's food stand one morning, workers arrive and head towards the SMAV. Pepe is flitting about, wiping tables, preparing tacos, doing a little dance with a dingy grey dish rag that he embraces, holding it up to the side of his face. Every now and then he says a little rhyme out loud: *No quería María*. Maria didn't want to. He sits down at a table, dishrag in hand, and sighs, finishing the rhyme: "*No quería María, pero sus piernas abría* (Maria didn't want to but her legs opened).

Having sex with men for money is difficult and demanding work. Though all the workers experience commercial sex differently, few women want to do it. It was not the first job choice for any woman with whom I spoke. As Liliana describes it, working in the zona is less difficult than working in other sectors of the ambiente, such as the cabaret. "There you have to dance, talk with them, drink with them. Here it is much easier. They come in [she begins to make a rocking motion with her hips], *suki, suki, suki*, and it's all over!" And while they were more likely to complain about issues such as working conditions, expenses, and stigma, many zona workers, when pressed or during rare moments of openness when they are willing to express their vulnerability, will admit that the actual work, intercourse with men who are strangers can be emotionally challenging. Lorena says the work is not easy and that it "hurts" her; she closes her eyes when she is with a client in

order that “my eyes don’t record it in my brain.” Mónica agrees with Lorena and says that for many years she didn’t even think about it and drank heavily. It is not the actual physical act that is most challenging, though the number of acts performed in one day may be, especially when performed on the cheap mattresses sans box springs in the zona. It is the cultural attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and intimacy, the social context in which selling one’s body occurs, that make the work challenging.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: THE COMMODITIZATION OF SEX IN NEOLIBERAL CHIAPAS

The ability to try to understand existence, the ability to try to recognize the wonder and responsibility of one's own existence, the ability to know even fractionally the almost annihilating beauty, ambiguity, darkness, and horror which swarm every instance of consciousness, the ability to try to accept, or the ability to try to defend one's self, or the ability to dare to try to assist others; all such as these, of which most human beings are cheated of their potentials, are, in most of those who even begin to discern or wish for them, the gifts or thefts of economic privilege, and are available to members of these leanest classes only by the rare and irrelevant miracle of born and surviving 'talent.'

Or to say it another way: I believe that every human being is potentially capable, within his 'limits' of fully 'realizing' his potentialities; that this, his being cheated and choked of it, is infinitely the ghastliest, commonest, and most inclusive of all the crimes of which the human world can accuse itself; and that the discovery and use of 'consciousness,' which has always been and is our deadliest enemy and deceiver, is also the source and guide of all hope and cure, and the only one.

(Agee and Evans 1960 [1939]: 279)

The histories of the women of the Zona Galáctica provide a look into the lives of women workers made invisible as they are “cheated and choked” of their potentials by an economic system that exploits, a construction of gender that oppresses, and a moral order that demonizes. Yet their stories also offer insights into the faith, defiance, and dignity that endure in the midst of such extraordinarily constraining circumstances.

The lives of the women in the *ambiente* are filled with deep contradictions. Sex work offers them a decent living, but is accompanied by great emotional and physical risk. They often must lie about their work to the people to whom they are closest, while also feigning intimacy with total strangers. They must work to redefine sex as a money-making activity, while still maintaining a conceptualization of sex as a part of romantic love that they share with a partner. Each encounter with a client is marked by bodily danger, in the form of disease, physical abuse, and even murder.

Through prostitution, women gain some degree of personal and financial independence, while they still live within a larger framework of dependency and inequality. The economic crisis of the 1980s and the continuing impoverishment of the Mexican people resulting from the turn towards neoliberalism assure that most women and men will live lives characterized by economic hardship. For women this economic inequality is paired with gender inequality. While sex work reinforces a social construction of gender that separates and categorizes women, demonizing

some, while sanctifying others, it also frees sex workers from personal and financial reliance upon a male spouse or family members. Though they may rely on male clients for their earnings, the women of the Galáctica (the few obligadas excepted) find an independence from men as spouses and a wider cultural system that reinforces female dependency.

Defined as both essential and expendable by society, sex workers struggle not to internalize the stigma associated with prostitution, while demanding respect and asserting their value as human beings. Women who sell sex are currently considered necessary for the well-being of men whose physical “needs” must somehow be met; women who sell sex in a regulated zone are considered necessary for a modern, orderly, and safe city, free from the dangerous sexuality of the working classes. But despite the perception that prostitute women play an important role in society, they are also devalued. It is not unusual for street workers, more vulnerable to crime and abuse than Galáctica workers, to turn up dead.⁶⁵ Color photographs of the victims haunt the crime pages of the newspaper; their blood-stained bodies lying in the street or on the floor of a hotel room, twisted into unnatural positions that only the dead can maintain.

Regulated prostitution, though it provides women with a work environment relatively safe from the crime and violence of the streets (along with a safe leisure environment for clients), is of questionable value when it comes to diminishing the incidence of HIV both in the population at large

⁶⁵ When prostitution is criminalized, prostitutes often subject to greater risk of abuse, rape, violence and due to criminal status, cannot report these crimes or seek assistance from authorities without risk. Anne McClintock warns us that in the United States, where prostitution is criminalized in all states, with the exception of certain municipalities in Nevada, “more prostitutes are murdered per capita than anywhere else in the world.” (1993:3).

and among those women and men who engage in commercial sex in the zona. In creating an inexpensive market for working-class consumers seeking commercial sex, the state has in part attained its goal of cleansing the streets of dangerous sexualities, but has largely failed to protect public health, one of the main aims of the regulationist system. It is clear that focusing health efforts upon a narrow segment of the population does little to prevent the transmission of HIV and STDs. In addition, the zona, one of the cheapest brothels in Mexico, discourages condom use, as some women who earn so little may be more likely to work without a condom simply to earn enough to pay for meals and the daily room fee. Furthermore, clients, often lacking solid information on sexual health, believe that zona workers are free from disease simply because they work in a regulated zone where they receive medical examinations. Medical examinations do not in themselves prevent disease and, as Anne McClintock points out, "it is not the exchange of cash that transmits disease - high-risk behaviors do" (1993:5). And so, despite the workshops, health information, and condom distribution, the modern regulated brothel may be a safe place for sex, but is not necessarily a place for safe sex.

Ultimately, the lives of sex workers show that prostitution can neither be condemned as wholly oppressive nor liberating, as feminist theorists on either side of a highly polarized debate would assert. Rather, the work, performed within a broader system of unequal power relations and enveloped by the terrible burden of stigma, contains within it a complex blend of both exploitation and freedom. Entering sex work, women cross both

geographic and moral borders, doing a job that is, in Liliana's words, beyond the imaginations of most people. This work sometimes allows women a small degree of economic stability that by virtue of their class, gender, and education would normally be unavailable to them. As Magda said, "I made myself from nothing. Never did I think I would have a cassette player, or an air conditioner of two horsepower, or three pieces of property, thanks to God. I never imagined this..."

This history of the Zona Galáctica offers more than insights about the deep paradoxes of sex workers' lives. It also sheds light on the workings of modernity and the vexing contradictions of the zona as model of a modern brothel. It is a modern brothel that allows women who sell sex and other populations deemed deviant freedoms from cultural restrictions upon behavior, speech, and dress. Furthermore, they are service workers who are able, to a degree, to resist notions of servitude. But, despite its "modernity," it is also a space where traditional beliefs concerning sexuality and gender are enacted and reinforced: in the Galáctica men learn to be men, practicing male dominance and exercising their right to sex, while women, even within the confines of the zona, continue to be divided (and divide themselves) into "decent" sex workers, who out of need provide "normal" services with a degree of what Magda refers to as "shame," and "deviant" sex workers in the zona *por gusto* who provide special services.

The inequalities and ironies of the neoliberal agenda may also be seen in the history of the Galáctica. The conflict over the land beneath the zona (whatever the intentions of the parties involved) was a battle not simply for

land, but a symbolic struggle between *México profundo* and modernity, between the Mexico of collective landholding, cultural continuity, and community and the Mexico characterized by growing consumerism, individualism, and neoliberalism. The struggle reflects modern times in Mexico as the docile bodies of service sector sex workers who compete against one another are redefined in Tuxtla as an essential part of the social and economic order, while the ejidatarios and the system of communal landholding have become obsolete. The zona then is a modern way to reinforce deeply rooted systems of inequality. The state here is not inconsequential, but rather is fully present in assuring a social order that will let the so-called “invisible hand” of the market economy do its nasty work. Of particular interest in this study is the way in which state policy encourages the growth of a low-wage, exploitative service sector economy while eroding the support for subsistence and community-oriented economy activity. But, the state, it must be observed, is also composed of various sectors (local, state, federal) and different agencies which often have competing interests and are not always internally homogenous. Furthermore, the state is a group of human beings, some of them very likable.

The turn towards prostitution by the women of the Zona Galáctica is a testament to both the continuation of a lengthy history of inequality in Mexico and Central America and the tendency of neoliberalism to exacerbate rather than eradicate such inequality. The selling and buying of sexual services in the Galáctica is part of a broader contemporary trend towards increased consumption and commoditization of household activities, sex

included. The women of the Galáctica join the burgeoning ranks of poorly paid women, many of whom are the sole providers for their families, providing services such as cooking, cleaning, and sex. Domestic service and factory work are the sole employment options for many women with few skills or resources. The “modernization” of Chiapas offers little opportunity to poor *ladinos* and still less to indigenous peoples who struggle to enter into an increasingly global society on their own terms.

The loss of land in rural and Mayan communities, the militarization of the state in the wake of the 1994 Zapatista uprising, political tensions which sometimes erupt in violence, and the continuing impoverishment of women, children and men throughout Mexico and Central America as a result of advanced capitalism assure a continued flow of migrants to the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez. As the *ladino*, urban and relatively prosperous “other” Chiapas, Tuxtla is a city where migrants stop to earn money for a journey to the United States or settle and achieve a relative degree of economic well-being. These Mexican and Central American immigrants, of both rural and urban origin, are political-economic refugees fleeing the fallout of neoliberalism.

Tuxtla is another Chiapas, unlike the highlands, northern zone, and the Lacandón jungle to the east, where life is marked by the militarization of everyday life; where soldiers have replaced both the police and even, as June Nash observes, “social welfare agents” (Nash 1999); where extreme racism pervades social and economic relations. Yet though militarization and extreme racism are far less visible in Tuxtla (due less to progressive thought

than to the lack of a large, mobilized indigenous population), the city and its Zona Galáctica are not separate from the political-economic trends that gave birth to the Chiapas so well-documented by anthropologists. Increasing rural poverty generates urban expansion as immiserated populations converge upon cities seeking work. Campesinos become service sector or informal laborers. Women, often responsible for financially supporting their families as men are economically marginalized, increasingly enter the market economy on terms that lay bare the inequalities of class, gender, and ethnicity. Tuxtla's skyrocketing population growth, due primarily to immigration, worries public officials, as armies of the poor descend upon the city and threaten its hard-won modern reputation. Tuxtla is Chiapas, and Chiapas, as it has been said so many times since the Zapatista uprising, is Mexico.

The current social and political-economic context in which the prostitution of the women and men of Tuxtla Gutiérrez occurs makes their work far from easy. The liberties that sometimes accompany sex work are marred by both stigma and inequalities of class, gender, sexual orientation (and less frequently but not unimportantly) ethnicity that conspire to cause many workers to enter prostitution in the first place. But the social and economic context can be changed. Despite the demobilizing nature of neoliberalism, there is always space for collective movement, as the Zapatista uprising, ejidatario struggle and the sex workers' strike (however disappointing the outcome) prove. And there may come a time where the human majority that constitute the popular classes are no longer "cheated and choked" of their potentials and when work, no matter what it is, is done

with dignity.

EPILOGUE

Liliana and I were slowly climbing the stairs inside the Statue of Liberty, crowded in along with hundreds of other tourists. As we climbed higher, the steps narrowed to a small, single file staircase that spiraled up and up and up, seemingly endless though we knew we would eventually reach the crown and the tiny windows that would offer us a complete view of lower Manhattan. Though we were all there by choice, the other pilgrims surrounding us moaned and complained about the trek. One woman huffed about the physical effort required of her. Others cast anxious looks at their watches, worrying aloud about missing the Broadway show for which they had tickets. A few gave up shortly after beginning, and squeezed their way back down the steps, against the throngs pushing upwards. One guide book to New York City describes the journey of one hundred and fifty four steps as "excruciating."

Amidst the complaining crowds, Liliana recounted the story of how she came to the United States to find work. She, along with nearly thirty others, had paid a *pollero* to help them cross Mexico's northern border into the United States. Of the journey, Liliana, who has experienced a great deal of suffering in her thirty one years, said, "Never, Paty, never have I suffered like that." The group walked without pause for two and a half days. On the first day Liliana consumed all the water she had brought. By the second day, her dry lips began to crack open, spilling blood down her chin. Days were unbearably hot and nights painfully cold. Liliana's shoes were not made for

such a journey and one by one her toenails began to fall off. She wanted to stop, but she was encouraged to continue by other Salvadorans who were traveling along side her. She was the only woman among them. She wished that the *migra* would come along and send her back. A few elderly people unable to continue were left behind, alone. Liliana eventually made it to Los Angeles, but decided to travel to New Jersey to settle in a Latino immigrant community where she had an acquaintance - a woman who was the niece of her former landlady in the Galáctica.

Liliana has been living in the United States for nearly two years now, working first as a waitress and now in a fast food restaurant. She continues to send remittances to her family in El Salvador and at one point had 5,000 dollars in cash hidden in one of her pillows. We see each other every now and then and she speaks of bringing her son and mother to be with her.

It has been one year since I have been back to the Zona Galáctica. On that last visit, I learned that Lorena had temporarily left the ambiente to give birth to another child. Whether that child was conceived with a client or not I do not know. Leticia, often accompanied by her daughters, continues to work selling fish at a small stand in central Tuxtla. Desirée's sister Viviana had left the ambiente to give birth to a child fathered by her husband but was now back at work. Patricia, who had stopped working in the zona but continued to take adult education classes there during the period of fieldwork had graduated from a school where she received a certificate in early childhood education. She was lucklessly looking for work when I last saw her. Lina had become totally immersed in the ambiente. She had gained the weight that

many women do when living and eating in the zona and had begun to wear the specially-made revealing clothes and heavy make-up that some workers preferred. Jacobo and Flor are still together. Mónica, who had been intent upon leaving the Galáctica and opening a taco stand in her home state of Veracruz, had left the ambiente during my last month in the field. Little had been heard of her and rumor had it that she was not running a taco stand but doing sex work somewhere near the northern border. When I returned to the zona, I found that Mónica too had returned. She seemed deeply depressed and perhaps even embarrassed about her return. The close confidence that we once shared was gone. Pepe and Doña Paula still fed the women and staff of the SMAV. Dr. Ramos, thankfully, had been replaced. Magda, it was said, returned to her home in Tapachula after nearly three decades in prostitution. Three women tested HIV positive during my absence and were immediately and permanently suspended from work. Bárbara too left the zona, though nobody seems to know what became of her.

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