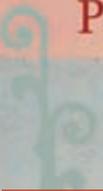


Lydia's Open Door

Inside Mexico's Most Modern Brothel



Patty Kelly



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Frontispiece: Tuxtla Needs You. Participate! (Entry ticket to the Galactic Zone.)

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ONE Modern Sex in a Modern City

Tuxtla is not a place for foreigners—the new ugly capital of Chiapas, without attractions. . . . It is like an unnecessary postscript to Chiapas, which should be all wild mountain and old churches and swallowed ruins and the Indians plodding by.

Graham Greene, 1939

Anthropologists and other social scientists have been at work in Chiapas for more than half a century. Most research has centered on the indigenous Maya peoples of the Highlands region; the Zapatista uprising in 1994 extended researchers' field of interest both thematically and geographically.¹ The rich work produced by scholars over the decades has generated a particular image of a Chiapas that is agricultural, indigenous, impoverished, and deeply conflicted over issues of ethnicity, land, class, and politics. Chiapas is all these things, but it is also urban, *ladino* (nonindigenous), 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 southern Mexico to study indigenous peoples.²

A VERY NEW CITY

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 Galactic Zone, is a city of nearly half a million people. If Chiapas is, as it came to be known after the uprising, “the other Mexico—backward and left behind,” then Tuxtla is, in many ways, the other Chiapas.³ 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,” turning it away from Guatemala—the state was a Guatemalan territory until 1824—and toward Mexico City.⁴ 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 to implement the very values (economic liberalism, modernization, and positivism) for which the Díaz regime stood. Rabasa played a key role in the political modernization of Chiapas.⁵

More than a century later, heavily touristed San Cristóbal, with its cobblestone streets and outdoor indigenous markets, is still plagued by a reputation of provincialism, while Tuxtla prides itself on its image as a modern city. Where San Cristóbal makes much of its colonial roots, Tuxtla showcases its modernity. 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 of which are considered distinctly premodern: “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.”⁶

Tuxtla is, in this account, cleansed of its colonial past and freed from its late-nineteenth-century reputation in San Cristóbal as a lowland back-

woods town lacking amenities. But in 1930, the capital of Chiapas still lacked both a drainage system and paved roads; only the central block had running water, and only four medical doctors were available to serve the entire population of Tuxtla and its hinterlands.⁷

Finally, in the 1940s the state intervened, augmenting Tuxtla's infrastructure "in order to consolidate it as the worthy capital of the state of Chiapas"; this coincided with the beginning of the state-led development of Mexico on a national scale.⁸ 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. The image of the city was changing. The state widened principal roads in order to accommodate automobiles, the "symbols of modernity."⁹ The construction of the Pan-American Highway was completed in 1942, facilitating Tuxtla's communication with Mexico City and its expansion, and new settlements sprang up in the east and west along the highway's edge.

Yet not until the middle of the twentieth century did Tuxtla truly begin to develop the infrastructure characteristic of a modern city. By the 1960s, the city had a new airport and its first automatic traffic lights. Fountains and monuments, symbols of the consolidation of state power, were built throughout the capital. Tuxtla's main thoroughfare, called Avenida Central in the eastern half of the city and Boulevard Belisario Domínguez in the west, was widened. New residential neighborhoods were constructed. Some of these neighborhoods were private *fraccionamientos* (subdivisions), while others, like Colonia Bienestar Social, were sites for state-sponsored 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) lived in eastern Tuxtla (also the location of 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 poorly maintained, cheaper theaters with sound systems that barely function.

Tuxtla's population surged during the 1970s 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 build the dam at nearby Chicoasén, part of a massive, state-sponsored hydroelectric complex. Between 1970 and 1980 the number of residents doubled, reaching nearly 167,000.¹⁰ Many of these new migrants settled on uncultivated lands in the foothills in the northern and southern sections of the city.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Tuxtla was one of Mexico's most rapidly growing cities. 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; and authorities jailed campesinos protesting the loss of lands, as the newly militarized state and judicial police repressed dissent. Nearly eighty thousand Guatemalan refugees poured into eastern Chiapas, fleeing the murderous military regime of General Efraín Ríos Montt. Government authorities worried about the possibility of insurrection in Chiapas.

During this period, despite austerity measures implemented throughout the nation, the state government in Tuxtla began a campaign to construct a new capital showcasing state power and advertising the successes of urbanization. Public funds were used to remodel the downtown center and construct the Unidad Administrativa, two massive buildings housing many of the offices of the state government. The Museum of Anthropology, the City Theater, and the Libramiento Sur, a wide highway that traverses the city's southern edge, were all built in this period of economic decline and social crisis. When seen in the context of demographic shifts, economic crisis, and political turmoil, it is little surprise that the idea for constructing a site for state-regulated prostitution that would control marginal populations emerged during this time.

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. Graham Greene's 1939 characterization of the "new ugly capital" still holds true for many tourists, social scientists, and Chiapanecos alike. Tuxtla has no ruins,

most of its churches are modern in design, and there is little indigenous presence in the city. Its high annual population growth rate of 7.3 percent, due largely to internal migration, worries public officials, who wring their hands as shanties continue to sprout in the southern hills overlooking the city. Unlike the whole of Chiapas, where some 60 percent of the economically active population is 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; only 4.3 percent are engaged in agriculture.¹¹ Some Tuxtlecos are still landholders, however: many of the city's wealthy families earn money from rural landholdings and maintain ranches in the countryside surrounding the city, a status symbol for local elites.

Consumer culture, much of it service based, thrives in Tuxtla more than anywhere else in the state. Middle- and upper-class consumers from San Cristóbal and throughout Chiapas come to Tuxtla to purchase items and receive services (particularly medical care) unavailable in their home communities. Tuxtla's western and wealthier half is home to American big-box stores like Office Depot and Blockbuster Video that reflect neoliberalism's reach into southern Mexico. U.S.-based fast-food chains such Domino's Pizza, McDonald's, and Kentucky Fried Chicken dot the landscape; the latter two have drive-through windows, making consumption as fast and easy as possible. U.S. influences permeate consumption in Tuxtla and elsewhere in Mexico. Some Mexican urban and suburban landscapes have changed so dramatically in recent years that they are nearly indistinguishable from their northern neighbors, at least to some. The author and activist John Ross writes of a group of undocumented workers who paid *polleros* (smugglers) in Tapachula, Chiapas, five thousand dollars apiece for passage to the United States. The migrants, mostly from Guatemala, were dropped off in front of a mall containing a "Wendy's, a KFC, even an Applebee's, and the ten-plex 'Hollywood Cinema' in suburban Chihuahua City, a good 100 miles from the U.S. border. The workers believed they had arrived in the U.S., as one worker told a local newspaper, 'It looked just like how it looked on television.'"¹²

American venues have made some concessions to local culture: the

[To view this image, refer to
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Figure 4. Tuxtla's newest shopping mall. Photo by Patty Kelly.

"No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service" mantra of U.S. fast food restaurants does not apply in Tuxtla's McDonald's; 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. At Kentucky Fried Chicken, now called KFC, the colonel, whose cultural symbolism would be lost on most Mexicans, has been replaced by a happy cartoon chicken with

robust pectoral muscles. Directly behind McDonald's is the newly opened Sam's Club, a Wal-Mart-affiliated price club. During the Christmas season, it offered shoppers pine trees shipped from the United States. The nonunion Wal-Mart currently owns 687 superstores and subsidiaries throughout Mexico (though they go by various names: Superama and Bodega Aurrera, to name two), including one built in central Mexico within sight of the two-thousand-year-old pyramids of Teotihuacán (dubbed Teotihualmart by writer and social critic Carlos Monsivais).¹³ A few blocks farther west is 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 Chedraui, the large modern supermarket that is one of the mall's anchor stores.

Increasing commoditization and United States 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 headquarters, daily newspapers that ten years ago had perhaps one or two small ads for *edecanes* (hostesses) who provide sexual services now contain pages and pages of such advertisements. The ads often picture blond Hollywood actresses (Mira Sorvino is a favorite) and thin Western fashion models, who have come to define new cultural standards of beauty and sexiness.

Before the arrival of the Spanish, what is now Tuxtla was sparsely populated by indigenous Zoque Maya, who cultivated corn and beans. Today, the city is primarily ladino. While more than 25 percent of all Chiapanecos over the age of five speak an indigenous language, in Tuxtla this figure is just 2 percent.¹⁴ Immigrant Tzotzil and Tzeltal speakers from indigenous Highland communities such as Chamula and Zinacantán now outnumber the few hundred Zoques remaining in Tuxtla. The three groups frequently work as day laborers, informal workers, service workers, and vendors 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.¹⁵ The distribution of wealth and misery in Chiapas and all of Mexico is complex and uneven, and marked by regional and ethnic differences. In Chiapas, indigenous residents of the Highlands and the selva suffer poverty the most. 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 as high as 16.8 percent.¹⁶ 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 one-third of all homes in Chiapas lack electricity, despite the continued operation of the massive hydroelectric complex mentioned earlier, in Tuxtla this figure is 3.2 percent; nationally, 12.5 percent of Mexican homes do not have access to electricity.¹⁷ And Tuxtla also boasts the Galactic Zone, considered by its administrators to be one of the most modern brothels in the nation.

And so, while Chiapas may be "the other Mexico," 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 international media since the EZLN uprising. Yet Tuxtla and its Zona Galáctica are not separate from the political economic trends that gave rise to the Chiapas that has become so well known, but rather were born from these same trends. The policies that contribute to rural poverty and underdevelopment also engender increasing urbanization. Nearly two-thirds of the high population growth in the city is a product of immigration from other parts of southern Mexico. Despite the city's prosperity, however, there are plenty of impoverished Tuxtlecos who are unemployed, or underemployed 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. In the city center below, hundreds of poor people line up each evening outside the public regional hospital, waiting for medical care. The police crime pages report stories of robbery and violence, and the private security guard industry flourishes. It may be the other Chiapas, but Tuxtla is still Mexico.

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

Figure 5. The road to the Zona Galáctica. Photo by Patty Kelly.

MODERN SEX

The Zona Galáctica lies four miles from Tuxtla's bustling city center, down a lonely, bumpy dirt road flanked by vibrant green vegetation, the *flamboyán* trees blooming bright orange in the springtime. One does not arrive at the zone by chance: one must seek it out. Its location is a testament to the current status of commercial sex throughout much of Mexico: available, yet, ideally, invisible.

The dirt road leads to the large, open, unpaved lot outside the main

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

Figure 6. A microbus. Photo by Patty Kelly.

gate to the zone. Directly in front of the visitor, behind a tall chain-link fence kept gated and locked during the day, is the King Kong, one of the area'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 is a line of microbuses and Volkswagen Beetles that provide transportation for zone clients, workers, and staff. (Most zone clients, working-class men, do not own their own transportation.) The *micros*, as they are called, cost four pesos (US\$0.47) and make many stops between downtown Tuxtla and

the zone. 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 zone once they are filled. This mode of transport is generally considered more desirable because it is a quicker and more discreet 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," decreasing the anonymity of both workers and clients riding in it.

Outside the main gate, on the large sign that reads Zona de Tolerancia, the Coca-Cola insignia that once appeared on each side of the sign has been spitefully painted over, following a dispute with the local Coca-Cola distributors over a monetary donation to the zone Christmas party (the distributors refused the request for funds). Beneath the large sign is a smaller hand-painted one stating the many rules of the zone. Lingering outside the gates are clients and workers who are waiting for transportation back to the city center. Female municipal staff rarely wait in this manner, remaining inside their offices, since they generally prefer not to interact with sex workers and clients. They usually exit their offices only when they hear the horn of the *pirata* or the nasal calls of the teenage boys who collect bus fares: "*Centro. Centro. There's still room!*" Carlos, a Tzeltal Mayan who looks to be only nine or ten years old, stands outside the main gate selling gum, candy, and cigarettes. I was shocked to find that he was actually fourteen; owing to poor nutrition, many indigenous people appear far younger than their actual age when they are children. As adults, hard work takes its toll, and they often appear older than their actual years. Javier, another teenager, sells flavored shaved ices from a bright blue wooden cart. Like the boys that they are, Carlos and Javier can often be found wrestling and play-fighting in the mornings as they ready their carts for a long day of work at the main gate.

The zone is open from nine o'clock in the morning until nine in the evening. The two clubs outside the main gate open only at night. The hours of the zone's operation reflect municipal concerns with social order and the zone as a place for contained and orderly sexual practice. As Héctor Carrillo writes in his study of sexual culture in Guadalajara, the

night is a transgressive time, one of diversion and sexuality.¹⁸ In the darkness, anything can happen. By keeping the zone open during regular and “respectable” business hours, it retains a symbolic sense of order and safety. Many zone women prefer to work only during the day; keeping “regular” working hours lends workers the sense that they are operating within cultural norms in some way, despite the stigmatized nature of the work.

Clients must purchase a ticket for three pesos (US\$0.35) at the main gate before entering. Clients who purchase sex in the Galactic Zone are doing their civic duty, consuming sexual services in the least transgressive and most orderly manner possible rather than contributing to the growth of the informal sexual economy found in Tuxtla’s streets. Municipal police briefly search the client at the entry gate, 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 zone, each unit is independently owned. Most owners come to the zone only to collect rents, preferring to leave the daily administration of their unit to a hired hand. A few, including the well-liked Doña Mari, prefer a more hands-on approach. Doña Mari’s *módulo* is clean, colorful, and filled with lush flowering plants.

The landlady Doña Esperanza actually lives in the Galáctica, although she is unpopular with many zone women; sex workers say that even Doña Esperanza’s own daughter hates her, and that she lives in the zone because she has nowhere else to go. With her curly gray hair, glasses, and housedress, Doña Esperanza putters around the zone in a seemingly perpetual state of grouchiness. The gossip about Doña Esperanza is revealing: it is not only sex workers who are stigmatized, but also women who do not maintain family ties. Single women, women living alone apart from family, prostitutes, young female anthropologists—all are subject to scrutiny.

The eighteen buildings are organized into three rows with 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

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Figure 7. Doña Mari's módulo. Photo by Patty Kelly.

stroll while "shopping." There are no dark corners or invisible spaces in the zone. Everything is within sight, within reach.

Just inside the main gate are two administrative buildings. The northernmost building houses the *Servicios Médicos Anti-Venereos* (Anti-Venereal Medical Service). It is staffed by three medical doctors, two nurses, a chemist, a cleaning lady, and a secretary. The interior of the building is spartan and has a bureaucratic feel to it: 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 and pedagogical diagrams 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 months, creating an atmosphere that was more

macabre than cheery. The zone administrator, El Contador (the Accountant—there is a great love for titles in Mexico) is the primary occupant of the other building. This building also contains a room where municipal police sometimes eat their lunch, and two small jail cells that are 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. Here we find a Foucauldian nightmare, a strange trio of disciplinary institutions: a brothel, a prison, a school, all in one.

Aside from prostitutes and municipal staff, many other Tuxtlecos earn their income in the zone. Scattered throughout the Galáctica are small stands where vendors sell food, refreshments, toilet paper, bleach, candles, and music cassettes. Nearly all the food vendors are gay men, who find that the Galáctica, being a tolerance zone where hegemonic norms of sexuality and gender may sometimes be challenged, is one of the few public spaces in the city where they can express their sexual orientation as they choose without fear of excessive harassment or abuse.¹⁹ Many of these workers wear earrings and aprons.

Others who earn income in the zone are the 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 zone’s municipal janitorial staff, and privately hired janitors who work for the owners of the buildings and perform errands for the workers. Roberto and an older man nicknamed Snub-nose for obvious reasons are two such privately hired janitors. Small and thin, dwarfed by the enormous T-shirts he tends to wear, the endearing Snub-nose has a disoriented, exhausted, disheveled look about him as though he had just washed ashore after days at sea. He is sometimes subject to teasing, and tricked into showering and shaving by being told the mayor will be making a rare visit to the zone.

While the ways in which the work of the female prostitutes of the zone supports their individual kin are readily apparent, less visible is the way the prostitution of zone women has become entrenched in the local economy, generating a flow of material resources that families throughout the city rely on for economic survival.²⁰ Though it represents only a small

part of the city's booming service sector, the economic opportunity offered by the zone 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 it is shaped by time, space, and culture. Prostitution becomes essentialized, inevitable, homogenous, and unchanging. While it has a long history in Mexico (historical evidence suggests that commercial sex existed in pre-Conquest times), how it has been practiced, regulated, and perceived has varied in space and time. It is constantly being shaped and reshaped by politics, economy, and culture.

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, its conservative views regarding sexuality, family, and alcohol consumption, and its embrace of science, positivism, and modernization. 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 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. Today compound zones, like the Zona Galáctica, are located far outside the periphery of the city, invisible to the citizenry. Compound zones began to appear as early as the 1940s as a response to resident and government concerns about social hygiene and public image in the eyes of tourists.²¹ As in Tuxtla, these zones often coexist with the clandestine, unregulated, and illicit prostitution that occurs in streets, hotels, bars, and private homes throughout urban Mexico. The existence of such zones depends on state and local politics, with zones opening and closing as local political conditions change.

The Zona Galáctica was an effort to materialize Governor González Garrido's dream of modernizing sex work in Chiapas. Women and men

still exchanged sex for money in bars and houses throughout Tuxtla, and the city's previous red-light district, El Cocal, was considered anything but modern. Located in southwestern Tuxtla, El Cocal had been operating informally since the early 1980s, when private landowners began 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. Landlords built poorly constructed rooms when finances permitted, and 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 zone, the clientele consisted mostly of men of the laboring classes, along with some lower- and middle-class white-collar workers and teenage boys from well-to-do families. There was no police presence and little municipal intervention in El Cocal; it functioned as a wholly private enterprise. Workers were supposed to register with the city's Department of Public Health and travel to the city center to receive medical examinations, but there was no on-site administration to enforce such rules.

With Tuxtla's rapid expansion, El Cocal was soon engulfed by urban growth. It became 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 González Garrido's priista state, expropriated the land beneath El Cocal, demolished the buildings, and created a new district. The new, municipally administered Zona Galáctica was discreetly 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 told me that the Galáctica was built in order to "decrease rape and street crime and to decrease the number of sexoservidoras in the city."

Sitting in Pepe's open-air food stand inside the zone one afternoon, Doña Blanca, a former landlady in El Cocal and current owner in the Galáctica, recalled the city's actions there, 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!" It

was true. Many times, I had passed by the vacant lot that was once El Cocal.

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 practice and profit from it. It also freed the city from accusations of *lenoncinio* (pimping). By maintaining private ownership of the buildings in which the women worked, the city was able to keep its distance from pimping, an activity considered deplorable by nearly all Tuxtlecos (while prostitution is not considered a crime, the pimping of sex 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 by collecting 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 and one peso (US\$0.12) for each automobile, and collects rents from vendors and worker payments for medical laboratory fees.

City officials claim the Galáctica is not a great source of revenue; the expenses of administering the zone, they say, are relatively high. Upon showing me their accounting books, one administrator was careful to tell me that under the PAN there was only one set of books in the zone. Under the PRI, he claimed, there was such corruption and graft that multiple sets of books were necessary. While I couldn't be sure about what happened under previous administrations, my own examinations of their accounting books, along with my calculations of incoming funds, seemed to support the claim that the zone did not generate large amounts of cash for the city. The benefits of the Galáctica for the city and state, then, relate less to revenue earned than to social hygiene and control of the poor and "deviant," providing a showcase for modernity and state power in the capital of one of Mexico's poorest states.

The site chosen for the Zona Galáctica was four hectares of land on the city's eastern edge, part of 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, the Comisariado Ejidal (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.”²³ Documents emanating from the Ejido Commission describe the deal as a donation of land to the *priista* municipal president Esquinca Méndez and Governor González Garrido. This land exchange plays a crucial role in understanding the Zona Galáctica and its place in modern Tuxtla (see chapter 4).

Though the city government is entirely responsible for the day-to-day operations and administration of the zone, the state played a crucial role in opening and naming the Galáctica. It is said that Governor González Garrido gave the Galactic Zone its name, and tales and jokes regarding his reasoning abound. One city official suggests to me that the name has something to do with women’s breasts: “Galactic. Lactic. Milk. Breast milk. Breasts. Get it?” I don’t—his logic is not convincing. A 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. Again, not very convincing. But the word *galactic* itself, with its futuristic sensibility, conveys a sense of the modern, conjuring up space-age imagery of futuristic worlds.

Whatever the reasoning, the name is fitting: the Galactic Zone is in many ways otherworldly. Like military bases, brothels are, as Cynthia Enloe suggests, “artificial societies created out of unequal relations.”²⁴ Upon entering the zone, one is struck by how sharply it contrasts not only with Tuxtla but also with Chiapas as a whole. There are elements in the zone that one would find in any Mexican city: street vendors, the occasional shoe-shine boy, a few stray, lactating dogs (though I never saw their puppies), men and women coming and going, music playing, and the scent of tacos in the air. But certain features are missing: the sight of ongoing construction projects—rusting rebar stretching hopefully skyward, so common in urban Mexico, is absent. Every building is painted: red, beige, light blue, bright blue, hot pink and red, yellow and green,

orange and black, or some equally unlikely combination of colors. This contrasts greatly with Tuxtla's poorer neighborhoods that are the grim gray 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 little stray garbage to be found anywhere. A "city" of sex run by the state, the zone, as a place, is 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 zone come to earn money while acting simultaneously within and outside the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

Yet despite the utopian tendencies and aspirations of the Galáctica, the zone is a real place troubled by real problems. During its first years (1992–1995), the Galáctica, administered by the *priista* municipal government, was plagued by problems. The atmosphere, in Bárbara's words, was "a drag." She tells me I would not have liked it and would have been unable to conduct my research unmolested, as I generally did. Perhaps these early years established the zone's reputation among city residents as an "ugly place," though I found the Galáctica could often be pleasant, particularly on slow, warm mornings when groups of us would gather at Pepe's food stand, sipping sugary-sweet black Nescafé and eating papaya freshly picked from one of the nearby trees.

During the *priista* period, alcohol was sold in the zone, which conflicted with the initial proposals of González Garrido's 1989 Zona Rosa Project. Some workers recall those days fondly, remembering how clients would often buy them drinks. Immediately after the Zapatista uprising, trucks full of soldiers sent to stop the insurrection would arrive with pesos to spend on drinks for both themselves and the workers. But some workers, along with landlords and zone administrators, felt the consumption of alcohol was excessive and that it often led to violence and arguments among and between both workers and clients. On April 7, 1994, Enrique López Peña, the zone administrator, 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.”²⁵ The city government did not consider the problems of the Galáctica a priority, and 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 initial efforts at making sex safer by providing condoms to clients, for example, were not terribly effective. In the early days, men received a condom at the main gate when purchasing their entry ticket. Clients were given neither instructions nor incentive to use the condoms, which often ended up unused in municipal garbage pails or were turned into toys, blown up like balloons.

Nor did the opening of the Galáctica 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 zone was insufficient to house all the displaced *cocalitas* (women who worked in El Cocal).²⁶ 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 me the work he did on her teeth), was eventually replaced by a medical doctor.

During the period of my fieldwork, the panista municipal government managed the zone, as it had since 1995. The administration entered office in 1998 and was led by a gynecologist, Dr. Paco Rojas. This administration, it would seem, was designed to run the zone. Many policy changes came with the conservative PAN: alcohol was banned entirely in the zone, and following a strike by sex workers (described in chapter 3), 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 cleanse and modernize the city) by constructing the Zona Galáctica, clandestine or unregulated sexual commerce continued 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 worked selling sex in Tuxtla Gutiérrez.