

ONE Introduction

“WORTH RISKING YOUR LIFE?”

THE ROAD FROM SAN MIGUEL¹

It is early April and our group is leaving the Triqui village of San Miguel in the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico,² each of us wearing dark-colored, long-sleeved clothes and carrying a small, dark-colored backpack with one change of clothes, a plastic bag with coyote fur and pine sap made by a Triqui healer for protection and called a suerte [luck], along with many totopos [smoked, handmade tortillas] and dried beans to eat. I was instructed by Macario to bring these things. Each of us carries between \$1,000 and \$2,000 to pay for the bus ride to the border, for food at the border, for rides on either side of the border, and some for the coyote [border-crossing guide].

Our journey begins with a two-hour trip in a Volkswagen van from San Miguel to the nearby mestizo³ town of Tlaxiaco. After buying our bus tickets, we walk around the town's market, buying food to share with each other on the bus. Joaquin chooses mangoes, Macario oranges and peanuts, and I miniature

sweet bananas. Macario buys a slingshot to use against rattlesnakes in the desert and asks if I want to carry one, but I don't have much experience with slingshots. When we return to the bus, the two nuns from San Miguel are waiting to wish us well as we board. The younger nun explains to me that they go there every weekend to pray for the border crossers.

The bus ride in itself is exhausting. The bus is packed with people, mostly men, all headed to the border except a half dozen who plan to go to Baja California to harvest tomatoes. We ride from 3:00 P.M. on Saturday until our arrival in Altar at 4:00 P.M. on Monday, a total of forty-nine hours. We pass through five army checkpoints between the state of Oaxaca and the border. The checkpoints all have signs that say in Spanish, "Permanent Campaign Against Narcotraffic." Before each checkpoint, the bus driver or his assistant announces loudly that all the bus riders should say that they are going to Baja California to work so that the stop would not take too much time with questions about crossing the border into the United States. Each time, the driver tells me to say that I was just hitchhiking to the next tourist town—Mazatlán, Hermosillo, Guadalajara, depending on where we are at the time. Before each checkpoint, the bus becomes quiet, and people seem nervous about the possibility of being interrogated or sent back south. Two or three soldiers board the bus each time in green army fatigues and ask a few seemingly random people for identification and search a few bags while other soldiers look through the windows with rifles over their shoulders.

Interestingly, there are three army soldiers riding the bus with us, going to their base in northern Mexico. They, as well as everyone else, play along with the story. The oldest of the soldiers, seated next to me, is convinced I am the coyote leading my friends to a job in the United States. He explains to me that these military checkpoints are paid for by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency in order to stop drug smuggling across the border and to stop undocumented immigration to the United States. He tells me to take the driver's assistant to "El Norte" for free since he is so nice to everyone on the bus. The driver's assistant—who collects fares from the passengers, enforces the schedule at the food stops, and makes sure everyone makes it back on board after meals—simply smiles in response. I reply that I am not a coyote. The soldier laughs and asks in Spanish, "Then why are you taking all these guys?"

FIELDWORK ON THE MOVE

For one and a half years full-time, followed by shorter field visits, I used the classic anthropological research method of participant observation in order to understand the complicated issues of immigration, social hierarchy, and health. This method involves long-term immersion in the everyday lives and practices of people while often including more specific tape-recorded conversations and interviews. Due to my interests in interactions and perceptions among different groups of people, I also collected media accounts of migration and reviewed clinical charts of migrant patients. This book corresponds to the “follow the people” multisited fieldwork outlined by George Marcus as one way to do ethnography that takes seriously the interconnections inherent in the contemporary world.⁴

For the first several years after 2000, I actively searched for an interesting and important ethnographic project to undertake. Given the critical social, political, and health issues related to U.S.-Mexico migration, I chose to work in this context. James, director of a nonprofit organization working with migrant laborers in the Skagit Valley of Washington State and an acquaintance through mountaineering networks, encouraged me to work with the Triqui people from San Miguel, Oaxaca. He explained that this group of people was especially interesting and important because they had only recently begun migrating to the United States, had a reputation for being violent, and lived and worked in unhealthy environments in Washington State and California.

In spring 2003, I decided to visit San Miguel, the rural hometown in the state of Oaxaca of many Triqui migrants in Washington and California. San Miguel is located at an elevation of almost nine thousand feet and has approximately three thousand inhabitants. During most of the year, however, almost half of them are in the United States, working. Upon arriving in Tlaxiaco, the nearest primarily mestizo city, I was told by several residents not to go to San Miguel. By long-term Protestant missionaries, waiters, and drivers of *suburbans* (eight-passenger vans providing rides between towns), I was told explicit and detailed stories of people being kicked out of San Miguel, being shot, or having their cars



Migration fieldwork beginning in 2003 in northwestern Washington State through central California to rural Oaxaca State in Mexico and back again in 2004.

stolen. After getting off the suburban and walking up the several-mile dirt road to San Miguel, I approached *la presidencia* (the town hall). I told the four men there that I was a friend of James, the social worker and chaplain in Washington State. I was greeted with cold silence, followed by the authorities speaking quickly in Triqui that I was not able to follow, and then one of them asked, “¿Cuál Jaime?” (Which James?). When they seemed convinced we knew the same James, the man with the white

plastic sombrero invited me to his house to eat. We walked up the dusty hill in silence, as I wondered what I had gotten myself into. I tried various questions like, "For how long have people from San Miguel been going to the U.S.?" "Have you heard of a social movement called the MULT here?"⁵ "When was the first time you went to the U.S.?" I was greeted with dusty wind and silence. The whole meal proceeded the same way, in silence. Afterward, I thanked the man and his wife for the food and returned to the main road, where I would catch the next passing suburban.

After returning to the United States and processing this experience, I remembered Eric Wolf's article describing "closed corporate communities" in Mesoamerica.⁶ According to Wolf, due to pressures from Spanish conquerors, indigenous groups separated themselves from each other in language, dress, and trust. Latin American indigenous communities became suspicious of all outsiders. I decided it would not be easy, perhaps impossible and even dangerous—as several people had suggested—to begin my fieldwork in San Miguel.

With the help of James and one of my childhood neighbors who now lived in the Skagit Valley, I began my fieldwork in northwestern Washington State. My childhood neighbor had become the pastor of the church attended by the president of one of the larger farms in the region. She helped me get permission from the farm's president to live and work on the berry farm. James and his coworkers introduced me to several families of Triqui, Mixtec, and mestizo Mexican migrants in the area. With this tenuous entrée, I moved into my one-room shack in the farm's largest migrant labor camp in early summer 2003. I lived there the rest of the summer and fall, surviving the labor camp conditions described by one close friend as "one inch above squalor," squatting down all day picking berries with the rest of the people from the camp, slowly getting to know migrant workers and other farm employees, and observing and interviewing migrant clinic workers and other area residents.

In November I accompanied an extended family of twenty-three Triqui people as they drove from Washington to the Central Valley of California. We drove below the speed limit in a caravan all night, eating

homemade tacos and napping at rest stops along the way. We spent a week homeless in Madera, California, sleeping in our cars and washing ourselves in city parks. Each day we drove the town's street grid looking for housing until we found a three-bedroom, one-bathroom slum apartment. That winter, nineteen of us shared this apartment, looked for work, visited the local migrant clinic and Department of Social and Health Services, and occasionally found work pruning grapevines.

I spent spring 2004 living in San Miguel, Mexico. I lived in a partially constructed house with the extended family of Samuel: his father, who did not know his exact age but considered himself old (*viejo*); his twenty-eight-year-old sister; and his nieces and nephews, who were considered too young to cross the border with their parents. The house was made of plain concrete slabs built piecemeal with money sent by Samuel, who remained working in California. Along with Samuel's family, I used the snake-inhabited latrine, visited the government health center when sick, carried water from the well, harvested and planted corn and beans, and took the bulls and sheep to pasture. During this time, I experienced more intimately the "closed corporate community" aspect of this town. This rural Triqui town proved to be very suspicious of and unfriendly to me early on. I was repeatedly warned about violence by townspeople themselves as well as accused of being a spy for the U.S. police. A handful of times, I was threatened with being kidnapped and put in jail explicitly because "*gabachos* [white Americans] should not be here."

In April 2004, I accompanied a group of nine young Triqui men from San Miguel as they prepared to cross the border (*la línea*), trekked across the desert into Arizona, and were apprehended by the Border Patrol and put in Border Patrol jail. They were deported back to Mexico, and I was eventually released with a civil offense and a fine. I spent the rest of the month conducting interviews with border activists, Border Patrol agents, border residents, and vigilante members. In May I met up with my Triqui companions in Madera, California, after all but one of them had successfully recrossed the border. I spent the rest of May living in Central California in another slum apartment with Samuel and his extended family, and then we all migrated back to Washington State. I spent that



The author, Macario, and their Triqui companions in the border desert. Photo courtesy of Seth M. Holmes.

summer living in the same shack in the same labor camp as the year before. As I continued in my medical training and worked on this book over the next several years, I returned to visit my Triqui companions in Washington, California, and Oaxaca on numerous short trips and kept in touch over the phone.

TRAVELING TO THE BORDER

Three times a day, the bus stops. Two stops a day for food, each time for thirty minutes at a roadside restaurant I would never choose to visit. The restaurants are dirty, with flies all over and a few workers trying frantically to get food for all of us. I begin feeling sick before I even eat the food because of the smells and unsanitary sights. There are two or three choices of food that all entail meat, rice, and soda. Each time, I eat with four of my Triqui companions from San Miguel, including Macario and Joaquin. We take turns buying