Spaces of Possibility? Networks of Transnationalism in Oaxaca, Mexico

Oaxaca, one of the most economically marginalized states in Mexico, has seen intensive outward migration throughout the past few decades. With one of the highest concentrations of diverse indigenous groups, the majority of Oaxaca is governed by a set of norms and practices known as *usos y costumbres*. These policies, implemented through the *Cargo System* of administrative positions, have traditionally defined the social, cultural, and economic structure of indigenous communities, which are based on notions of community service and reciprocity and include service to governing committees, voluntary communal labor, and cooperative monetary contributions to community projects (Cohen, 2000; Van Wey *et al.*, 2005). As a result of rapidly increased migration, community structure and membership has been dramatically redefined, adapting and responding to the emergence of transnational communities, broadly understood as groups of migrants in receiving nations with intimate connections to home states (Runsten & Kearney, 1994; Perry *et al.*, 2009). Thus, transnational migration influences religious, political, and economic conditions in both Oaxaca and the United States. But, in addition to being characterized as transnational, migration from Oaxaca is also transborder—a series of constant negotiations along ethnic, class, cultural, colonial, and state borders (Stephens, 2007). Accordingly, many groups have built robust social networks between sending and receiving communities, which coalesce around shared identities as indigenous people and Oaxaqueños and are organized to meet the urgent needs of members (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004, p. 14). These extensions of daily life—including social, economic, and cultural ties—have cultivated increasingly visible networks that extend between sites of transnational migration, such as the United States, and home communities in places like Oaxaca.

These specific connections and extensions between Oaxaca and the United States encompass both alternative economic activity and mutually dependent social relations. Alternative economic activity is present in the form of local bartering systems between community members and external communities and redistributed surpluses of remittances, which often fund community development projects (Cohen, 2001). Mutually dependent social relations are established as global, international relationships and mutual support systems between home and international communities, such as those described above. The economic and social activity that exists within the many networks of transnationalism in Oaxaca resonates strongly with new conceptualizations of alternative economies. More specifically, new emerging scholarship has challenged conventional understandings of the economy and capitalism, as a totalizing, singular, and impermeable entity. Instead, as Gibson-Graham (2006) has declared, a new ‘politics of possibility’ has emerged through *community economies*, defined as economic spaces of interdependency produced through ethical debates and decisions at the micro-level. Gibson-Graham (2006, p. 102) provide an already existing example in Mondragón, Spain. Here, and in several other places, a number of worker-owned industrial, retail, and service cooperatives have quickly appeared, which distribute monetary surpluses communally and increase social well-being through the expansion of a cooperative economy (Vargas-Cetina, 2005). What fresh insights or new possibilities might we uncover from integrating understandings of community economies, proposed by Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) and others, and networks of transnationalism that exist between specific Mixtec communities in Oaxaca and migrant communities in the United States?
The purpose and goals of my research project were numerous, but primarily included three major objectives. The first was to conduct a preliminary investigation into indigenous migration and transnational social networks in Mixtec communities throughout Oaxaca. This would provide a solid foundation for future research and aid in the eventual completion of my master’s degree. Second, I hoped to cultivate a working knowledge and proficiency of the Mixtec language and culture. Although I speak Spanish, communicating in Mixtec would allow me to converse more effectively and equitably with community members and participants, thus making future, long-term research more feasible. Additionally, a greater understanding of Mixtec society would allow for the possibility to establish mutual and healthy relationships between residents and myself. Finally, I intended to develop contacts and foster relationships for an anticipated return to Oaxaca. I expect to return to Oaxaca over the course of my career as an academic, especially as I pursue my doctorate.

In order to complete my proposed project, I employed a range of qualitative research methods. Methods included informal, semi-structured and conversational interviews, small focus groups, participant observation, and field notes. During my stay, I initiated interviews and conversations with community members, community leaders, and family members in Oaxaca. Rather than following a strict questionnaire, I utilized semi-structured yet informal and conversational interviews, which, in contrast to strict questionnaires or rigidly structured interviews, allowed for greater flexibility and opportunities to learn and engage more directly with participants. In addition, I also engaged in participant observation, where I observed and participated in cultural customs, fiestas, and daily processes such as local economic activity in markets.

Although my research project was largely successful, there were many barriers and challenges I encountered along the way. Initially, the sensitivity of information – including deportation, economic insecurity, and racism, among many others – proved to be a delicate and fragile obstacle. Often times, participants were reluctant to share stories and experiences with me. Likewise, at first, community and family members were hesitant to trust me or place confidence in me during my stay in Oaxaca. However, I attempted to anticipate these challenges and barriers throughout my proposed research. Consequently, carefully planned methodology and a cultivated knowledge of research ethics aided greatly in overcoming these issues. I hoped to reduce the distance between the researcher and the researched, acknowledging the intersubjectivity of social life – shared meanings and commonalities which suggest that the world is co-constituted – fostered through dialogue, transparency, and collaboration. Thus, reflexivity was central to my proposed fieldwork. Additionally, my approach to research was positional, where through acknowledging my own ‘position’ in relation to the study being conducted, I was able to establish a more complete understanding of myself, as it affected the outcomes of my research, as well as other participants.

As previously mentioned, my time spent in Oaxaca was extremely fruitful and worthwhile. I firmly believe that during my proposed research, I was able to achieve a proficient level of cultural competency in Mixtec communities while simultaneously acquiring a working knowledge of the Mixtec language. Furthermore, I was granted permission in a community to return to conduct future, long-term research. This was largely contingent upon the numerous relationships and contacts that I established, which will be essential as I progress in my career.
Finally, I was able to gather a wealth of preliminary information concerning migration and transnational social networks. While the barriers and challenges listed above undoubtedly still apply, I hope to return to Oaxaca several times in order to conduct a more detailed analysis of my proposed research project.