

*Fieldwork is a deeply emotional experience for those who undertake it ... (Wengle 1988: xiv)*

7/8/82: [First journal entry]

WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

Made it to Oaxaca. I'm sitting in a cafe drinking café con leche trying to calm down. I'm almost hysterical again. I feel so awful. I'm constantly on the verge of tears.

Why am I here? I don't want to be here. I don't want to do this. It's 6 weeks staring me in the face. Will I feel like this for 6 weeks? I'll die. If I still feel like this in 2 weeks I guess I could go home. I don't know quite what it is that's so awful. I just want to be home... Oh god. Six weeks. I can't do it.

This is unreal. How did this happen? How did I let this happen?

*Young women fieldworkers—and by young I mean women in their twenties—appear to have the most difficult time in the field. This is particularly so if they enter the field alone. (Wax 1979: 518)*

p. 460

## 20.2 'Monica, Hell'

I should preface the description of my first field trip with two points: first, I was quite fluent in Spanish, which I used as a contact language with the Mixtec speakers in Chalcatongo (virtually all of whom are bilingual). Second, I had spent a great deal of time in South America (a year and a half in Chile, with travels throughout most of the continent), and had made numerous trips to Mexico and Guatemala. So my problems were not due to any language barrier, nor to a general lack of knowledge about cultures south of the US border. My ignorance was far more specific than that.

*The so-called 'field manuals' that exist for the student are little more than vast recipe books, good on methodological concerns but nearly silent on matters of psychological adjustment. The student is also under tremendous pressure to justify his existence in the field—to the natives, to himself, and to the funding agencies and faculty judging his performance. His reputation and career are dependent, in some (probably large) measure, on his performance in the field. In all likelihood, the fieldworker is far less than fluent in the natives' language, and certainly he is ignorant about his place and behavioural responsibilities. (Wengle 1988: 9)*

I had decided to go to Mexico to do fieldwork on the Otomanguean language Mixtec after working on it for about two years with a speaker in Berkeley, California. As my departure date got closer, I began to have a sense that events were sweeping me along towards a trip I had never really intended to go on. Although I had been the one who made the plans, suddenly I realized that what had sounded good in theory was terrifying in fact.

When the day came, I got on the plane, in hysterics. I made it to Mexico, and I made it to Oaxaca City. Eventually I found the buses I needed to get to Chalcatongo. Upon arrival, I found myself deposited on a dusty, deserted street. I had been told that there was a house that rented rooms, and I managed to find it. I was in luck—they actually had a room available. I got inside, closed the door, and cried some more.