



**Transborder Lives. Indigenous Oaxacans
In Mexico, California, and Oregon**

Lynn Stephen

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We know that the only way of understanding globalization and macro-structures is by analyzing the local and micro-social spaces that directly affect subjects. For this reason, the best way to underline the creative responses of Oaxacan migrants for dealing with transborder life is by interweaving the narratives of Mixtec and Zapotec indigenous involved in the great economic and political orders that affect their daily lives.

This idea permeates the conceptual and methodological apparatus of *Transborder Lives. Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon*, which presents a detailed and sometimes intimate ethnographic description based on the stories of those who stay behind and those who leave to vividly recuperate the links between the communities, the rest of Mexico, and the United States. The central idea—beyond the idea of transnationalism that explains the crossing of national borders and the marked mingling of different nation-

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alities—is that the groups of Mexican indigenous migrants cross a great variety of frontiers and limits in their agitated existence: among the most visible are the ethnic, gender, generational, regional, and class borders. From here emerges the term “transborder,” a way of naming not only the migrant because of his/her condition, but also the ways of life in intercultural, international, and inter-ethnic contexts.

Transborder communities are thought about and recorded by those who live in them and in addition, they invite us to rethink our own way of life and the way in which we do ethnography and write (hi)stories. To understand this transborder historical context, the author proposed writing multiple descriptions in communities in Mexico and the United States, replacing a vision solely centered on each country as a separate entity and thinking of regions as a comprehensive whole.

The researcher’s challenge in this book was to conceptualize both the structural conditions that frame migration and labor relations (given the emergence of a consumer market for agricultural products in the United States), human relations, the experiences of workers, couples, and families that cross borders. The geographies of transborder migration are multidimensional, in accordance with structural issues like memories, narratives, and discourses.

This book is not just another study about migration. It goes beyond that to allow us to understand the tension between local histories experienced by specific subjects and global structures. This gives rise to a proposal coherent with the entire work: that of achieving “ethnographic collaborative, activist research” that the author constructs to conclude that it is necessary to pay attention to the research, the agenda, and the consequences for those participating, researchers and migrants alike.

This is a complex model of how to do anthropology that may take longer, but that goes way beyond the simple collection of data and their publication. If anthropologists cannot produce useful results for the people they work with and interest an audience of academics and students, their abil-

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ity to influence policy and public opinion will continue to decline.

Stephen’s study was carried out mainly in two Oaxacan transborder communities, whose residents have migrated internally and internationally for more than three generations: San Agustín Atenango, a town located in the Lower Mixtec region, and Teotitlán del Valle, in the central valleys. For their inhabitants, the norm has been to live in multiple economically, socially, and culturally discontinuous communities. The places inhabited and traveled through are united through individual and collective ritual ties, work cycles, and symbolic resources, through different forms of family and *compadrazgo*.¹ This is nothing new, unchangeable, or unidirectional, since the multiple connections among those who leave, those who stay, and those who return become central to understanding the development of these communities.

Without seeking a comparative perspective, the study of different cases makes it possible to look at a broad spectrum of practices that characterize transborder life, beginning with exploring the numerous dimensions of the lives of Mixtec and Zapotec indigenous who live and move through the different spaces where their communities have spread.

In the text, a theoretical discussion develops around the different perspectives used for the study of migrant indigenous communities. It underlines the limits and advantages of the transnational approach, which keeps the nation at the center of the discussion instead of the concept of “transborder” lives and communities, which refers to multiple borders. We can understand that communities crossing borders is not a new phenomenon; rather, “transborder” refers to the historicity of the migratory process, which transcends the existence of nations by creating a “social field” that makes it possible to visualize the simultaneity of the connections that transborder migrants have in more than one locale. It also makes it possible to understand how the social, the economic, the political, and the religious reach across space and borders, where many laws, institutions, values, and conventions

can interact, as well as the meshwork process, taken from Arturo Escobar,² that helps us observe how migrants are interconnected through family ties, *compadrazgos*, and transborder forms of association that link up with other organizations and networks in Mexico, in the United States, and in other latitudes across the globe.

In a historic and political context, the social fields of economics, politics, gender, and religion broadly embrace relations between migrants and people living in Mexico and the United States. This can be observed in the transborder communities of Oaxaca that have extended to California and Oregon, as well as the negative and positive impacts this has on the lives of the migrant subjects. This allows Stephen to suggest that Mexico is not only recreated from Mexico, but from the many communities where Mexican migrants have become territorialized, so that the country can be thought of beyond its national boundaries, through the emergence of transborder spaces.

This argument is based on the description of the different kinds of Mexican migrants who have settled in both states to underline the complexity of the places where more than half the inhabitants are of Mexican origin, inserted in relationships between the communities and the social fields of power, like commercial agriculture, migratory policies, hiring workers, transborder working lives in the harvest, domestic labor, gardening, and child care. All this has been documented in life histories of migrants who have been inserted into the labor structure of the United States in different ways: the Mixtec migrants through contractors in agriculture and the Zapotecs in the service sector in the cities.

This book analyzes Mexico’s structural economic adjustment and its impact on the economy in rural communities. The history of Mixtec migration is tied to government policies for the Mexican countryside after World War II, the importation of agricultural products, and the development of agricultural production in the north of the country. Understanding the economic history of Mexico after the 1980s is essential to be able to comprehend the acceleration of migration in the communities studied. The specificities of domestic labor done by Zapotec women migrants are related to the characteristics of global cities and the drastic increase in the female work force in the United States. There, for working U.S. American mothers who are professionals to be successful in their careers, they must leave their children in the care of Zapotec women and purchase agricultural products that have been harvested and processed by Mixtec migrants.

This creates a racially segmented labor structure, a racism that can be seen in two phenomena: the *invisibility* of the indigenous on the farms and as domestic workers, and the *illegal status* of the workers who have been inserted into the fields of power, like commercial agriculture. This gives rise to a huge paradox linked to recent ideas about immigration policies, which, together with the integration of the U.S. and Mexican economies, have impelled the increase in undocumented migrants.

The concept of “illegal Mexicans,” a historic construction, implies racial issues linked to surveillance of migrants and their position in the social structure of the United States, since it is taken for granted that these people are dark skinned and undocumented. When these categories are internalized, they give rise to migrants being treated according to their appearance and to surveillance mechanisms developing because it is presumed their status is illegal/criminal.

Stephen concludes that the border is present in migrants’ memories and identities regardless of where they are or their legal status. They cross the border, but they must remain invisible to seem like they have not. Alternative identities are created, fake documents, new names; they play other roles like gender roles; they resort to varied means of communication with their families of origin; social organizations are built. The border moves with people, and they move across the border.

To understand the contradictions of today’s globalization, Stephen reflects on the metaphor proposed by Homi Bhabha of the juxtaposition of the limits and possibilities generated by the globalization of capital, culture, migration, and politics.³ This can be understood as the co-existence of

- 1) the integration of the U.S. and Mexican economies, immigration, and other government and corporate policies that result in a significant stratification in both countries and increased poverty in the lowest sectors of society; and
- 2) the increase in the flow of persons in the borders and of their political and cultural presence manifested in social movements, cultural production, demands of citizenship, and an ethnic differentiation beleaguered on many sides in the transborder context.

Now is the moment in history to inter-relate the structural limits imposed by global relations of political and economic power with the possibilities created by the increased movement of persons within and across borders and the re-

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composition of the local, regional, national, bi-national, and transborder spaces that results from that. It is for this reason that in the generation of knowledge, people seek to avoid conceptual dichotomies by using integrating concepts that facilitate understanding —also of a transborder kind— of legality and citizenship; work, gender, and family relations; and ethnicity and grass roots organization. The concepts proposed in this book are transborder lives and communities, the meshwork, the social field, cultural citizenship, and ethnicity. They offer ways of understanding the significant social, economic, cultural and political relationships that migrants are building in the era of neoliberal globalization and the new imperialism.

In every study emerges a question. In this case, it is about the kind of emigration policy that will make the most sense for decreasing the risks migrants and transborder communities run, as well as the recognition and adjustment of the status of a large number of persons who are in the United States and contribute economically, socially, culturally, and politically in both countries. This implies rethinking the policies to militarize the border and paying attention to the criminal gangs who are the ones really controlling the main border points. ■■

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NOTES

¹ *Compadrazgo*, strictly speaking, is the institutional social relationship between godparents and parents; speaking more generally, it can refer to close ties of solidarity. [Translator’s Note.]

² Arturo Escobar, “Actors, Networks, and New Knowledge Producers: Social Movements and Paradigmatic Transition in the Sciences,” in Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed., *Conhecimento prudente para uma vida decente* (Porto, Portugal: Afrontamento, 2003), pp. 605-630.

³ Homi K. Bhabha, “Scrambled Eggs and a Dish of Rice: W.E.B. Du Bois’s ‘Dark Princess,’” in *A Global Measure* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).