I had passed by the road leading to the place dozens of times since my first stay in Chiapas in 1992. The sign said simply, Zona Galáctica. A large white arrow pointed south. I had thought the Galactic Zone, located in the bustling, lowland capital city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, was some kind of center for astronomical observation. Five years later I was again in southern Mexico, visiting relatives and rooting around for a dissertation topic. I went north to Tabasco and considered working there. But the state lived up to its name—it was really hot—and I soon returned to the cool mountains of Chiapas. There, a friend who knew of my interest in commercial sex told me about a man I should meet—a doctor who worked at the Comitán Center for Health Research. Days later I was sitting knee to knee with the doctor in his cramped, book-filled office. Dark eyes flashing and hands moving wildly, he spoke to me about sex work in Chiapas. To say he was enthusiastic would be an understatement. He leaned forward, put his hands on my knees, looked into my eyes and said, “For example, I am
a man and I want to have anal sex with you." He was speaking hypothetically, of course, about the difficulties and risks sex workers face concerning client desires and condom use. "Mujer," he said, giving my thigh a gentle slap, "There is someplace you have to see." The next day he brought me to the Galactic Zone.

It was a side of Chiapas I had never seen before. Orderly, clean, organized—it seemed that everything was in its place. Modern concrete buildings painted pink and blue and orange and yellow and green. Women of various ages and appearances lingered in doorways, strolled about, or sat and ate at one of the zone’s food stands. The Galactic Zone was not a planetarium but a brothel, and not just any brothel. It was a fairly new, legal, and state-regulated supermodern model brothel built with public funds and intended to transform commercial sex in the region from an uncontrolled, informal activity to a highly regulated form of formal service-sector employment. My decision was a visceral one, unmarked by thoughts about the realities of career, funding, and fieldwork. Something like love at first sight, it was deeply felt and not particularly logical. I had found my field site.

I returned to Chiapas to start fieldwork a year later. Beginning the project, I went to the Palacio Municipal to meet with Tuxtla’s director of public health, a panista (member of the conservative right-wing National Action Party, or PAN) and a gynecologist. He introduced me to the newly elected mayor, also a panista gynecologist. Young, good-looking, and charismatic, the mayor extended a hand to me and said in English, "It is a pleasure to meet you. I am the mayor." I liked him. My fears about working closely with members of a political party whose conservative views on sexuality, religion, and politics were so very different from my own all but vanished. Being a politician and gynecologist is not unusual in Mexico; in fact, the mayor’s father was Tuxtla’s first panista-gynecologist-mayor, back in the 1970s. As Maria Mies has observed, gynecologists, along with the state, are the "guardians of modern patriarchy." When gynecologists run the state, such guardianship is advanced. Doctors and public health specialists have long been involved in political affairs in Mexico—during the revolutionary period, such men (referred to as higienistas), along with criminologists and social workers, were at the
forefront of a “social hygiene” movement that sought to control, among other things, female prostitution and sexually transmitted illness.\(^2\)

Getting permission from municipal authorities to do ethnographic fieldwork in the Galactic Zone was easy enough. But how would things go inside the brothel? “This world [of commercial sex],” Ronald Weitzer notes, “does not offer easy access to the outsider, which helps to account for the paucity of research in many key areas; but gaining access should be viewed as a challenge rather than an insuperable barrier.”\(^3\) Once inside the zone, I found that access was not a problem.\(^4\) Populations who are institutionalized in some way (prisoners, the mentally ill, prostitutes, or students), who are scrutinized by others (guards, doctors, police, teachers, or the state), and who are subject to what Michel Foucault calls a “normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, to punish,” are, for better or worse, easily studied by social scientists.\(^5\) The women of the Galactic Zone were a discrete group, literally contained, and subject to question and examination by doctors, administrators, and municipal police. This disturbing fact lent a certain ease (and personal unease) to my entry into the zone as an anthropologist who would also question and scrutinize. Furthermore, given the local panista government’s policy of transparencia (transparency—clear actions and accountability intended to create distance from the ruling party’s history of corruption and impunity), along with their belief in the zone as a legitimate and important public works project, there was little reason to deny me access to the Galáctica, as it was sometimes called. They were proud of the place. I developed relationships, some casual, some close, fairly quickly and naturally with many women in the zone and with government officials. With certain others I was unable to form a relationship at all. I had concerns, stemming mostly from the potential contradictions between feminism and fieldwork and from the ways that the development of rapport in the field can, ironically, put research populations at “greater risk of exploitation, betrayal, and abandonment by the researcher.”\(^6\) Yet I found that many of the people in the zone wanted to talk and be heard. And I felt my own need to listen, to observe, to try to make some sense of what was going on in the Galactic Zone.

In the days following my introduction to the workers during a public
lecture on miscarriage, various women approached me. They introduced themselves, questioned me, and told me how to do my research. I couldn’t just go around asking a bunch of questions, they said. As Lorena told me, “I have something to say, and I hope it doesn’t make you mad, but if you go around asking questions like ‘How long have you worked here?’ ‘What do you earn?’ ‘How old are you?’ ‘Are you married?’ no one’s going to answer you.” Such things, said Lorena, were better learned through friendships. Lorena and Desirée cautioned me to be careful and hinted at the divisiveness that I would later find permeated relationships in the zone.

I kept regular working hours in the Zona Galáctica, though I did not live there as some women do. A zone administrator persuaded me to give English classes to a small group of interested workers, and I did so a few mornings every week. At first, I balked—I didn’t come to teach English, didn’t know how, and naively thought maybe the classes would be some kind of insult to Mexican sovereignty. But I soon became known as la maestra (the teacher), though I was sometimes also referred to as la güerita (a diminutive term denoting a fair-skinned person of any national origin). I purchased a white laboratory coat at the suggestion (almost insistence) of Edith, a zone secretary. All female municipal staff wore them, and, she said, it would help me evitar manos (literally, avoid hands) and discourage unwanted attention from clients. The lab coat helped to carve out my social role as a woman in the zone who did not sell sexual services. But I also feared it would cause workers to identify me with the staff of the zone’s Anti-Venereal Medical Service and distance me from workers, so I used it selectively. Sometimes I wore it just to please the medical service staff, who would occasionally cast disapproving looks my way if I walked about the zone without wearing the marker of my status as a “decent” woman. Sometimes I wore it grocery shopping. I liked the lab coat—it made me feel safe when I strolled through the rougher parts of downtown Tuxtla (I never felt unsafe in the zone) and gave me a sense of belonging. Following the purchase of the lab coat, some in the zone began to refer to me as la doctorcita. To most, I was simply Patty.

The women of the zone were generous. Often when I would attempt to pay my fare when arriving at the zone by pirate taxi, I would find that
one of the workers had already paid it. It was sometimes difficult to accept their generosity—I saw each meal they paid for as the equivalent of the hard work of sex with one client. I began to measure gifts, meals, drinks in terms of sex acts. Sex became currency. Rather than converting pesos into dollars, I began converting pesos into sex. A quick lunch was intercourse, an evening of cocktails, a blow job. The relationship between money and sex became clear for me, and sex took on a new and decidedly materialist meaning.

As an anthropologist, I am cognizant of the power dimensions of the discipline: class, gender, citizenship, ethnicity—our relationships in the field are marked through and through by inequalities. But for more than a year I was far from my Brooklyn home, and it felt good to be accepted and cared for. One warm morning in late April, I arrived to find that a surprise birthday party, the only one I have ever been given in my life, had been organized for me at Pepe’s food stand just inside the main gate. Pepe brought extra plates and plastic cups. Sex workers brought an
orange frosted cake decorated with the words Felicidades Patricia (Congratulations Patricia). Jesús, the leader of the pirate taxi drivers, brought a cake too. Juanita gave me a gold ring with a red stone, and Pepe gave me a heart-shaped ring. Viviana bought me a tank top and matching skirt that actually fit. Nobody had bought me clothes since I was a teenager. As I opened gifts, the zone’s janitorial staff and police gleefully set off loud fireworks in honor of the celebration. There was some heated discussion as to whether or not I should share the cake with the zone’s administrative staff; they never included sex workers in their celebrations. A group of us left the zone and spent the day drinking beer, napping, swimming, and eating botanas (small plates of cheese, grilled meats, and pickled vegetables) at a local balneario (bathing resort) along the muddy banks of the Río Grijalva. The women of the Zona Galáctica looked out for me. They kept me out of harm’s way, invited me into their homes, and gave me advice on love (some of it very sound). And, they brought me a serenade.

I sleep on the third floor of the modern concrete house on Avenue 14 Poniente Sur in the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, in a bright yellow room that would be the servant’s quarters, if I had a servant. I awaken to find the head of Paula peering through the window. A six-foot-tall, rail-thin, blond Canadian evangelical Christian in her late twenties, she makes an unlikely roommate, given the nature of my own work. “Do you hear ‘Las Mañanitas’?” she asks. “It’s for you.” I hear deep, resonant voices, maybe an accordion. “Las Mañanitas” is a song traditionally sung at birthdays and other celebrations. It is not quite 5:00 in the morning and still dark outside. I stumble out of bed (a twin mattress covered with a mosquito net and balanced precariously on old wooden crates) and reach for a bathrobe. Half asleep, I struggle to unlock the multiple locks on the giant metal front door. I can hear the musicians on the other side of it, and they are loud: “Éstas son las mañanitas... Inspiradas y bonitas, te las cantamos a tí...” [These are the songs of the dawn... Inspiring and delightful, we sing them just for you... ] It is my first serenade.
Outside is a group from the Galactic Zone, where I have been doing fieldwork for the past six months. Opening the door, I find Rafaela and Esperanza, who work as prostitutes; Roberto, a brothel janitor; a man I mistakenly assume to be Esperanza’s husband; and a guitar player and accordion player. All, hired musicians included, are drunk to some degree. The guitar player’s eyes are a deep sunset red. My friends hug me and tell me over and over, “¡Es tu día!” (It’s your day!). In our drunken, sleepy, dreamlike state, we sit in the darkness on the curb in front of my house, singing and swaying to the music. Someone requests “Cielito Lindo,” one of the few songs I know well enough to sing. Ay, ay, ay, ay, canta, no llorés. The song begs us to sing rather than cry. Every so often Roberto’s head drops, long black bangs falling over his closed eyes as he begins to nod off. Roberto came to Mexico from Guatemala several years ago, and came to Chiapas from Cancún, where he worked in the sex industry. The man I thought was Esperanza’s husband is actually a client from the brothel and a schoolteacher. He stands up slowly, readying to sing. He brushes off his khaki pants, clears his throat, and takes a moment to gain his composure as if living out some secret dream of stardom right there on the lonely sidewalk in the dark. He sings smoothly and sweetly. Rafaela belts out a few long, loud, plaintive ranchero-style laughs. Her sharp, strong voice cuts through the darkness. A few lone figures begin to emerge into the early morning, shadows passing us by on their way to work. Rafaela, who, like Esperanza and Roberto, is also an immigrant from Guatemala, tells me, “We want you to have good memories of Mexico.”

The sky is beginning to lighten. During a pause in the music, Roberto and the schoolteacher debate over the finale. Roberto, often melancholy, wants a sad song, while the teacher hopes for a happy ending. Happiness wins out, and then the birds begin to sing their morning songs. The musicians wander off up the hill on foot, guitar and accordion in hand, while we stay on the curb in the cool morning, chatting and laughing. Only then do I realize it is Teacher’s Day, a holiday celebrated quite seriously in Mexico (and what holiday isn’t?), and this is why they have brought the serenade. Giggling, Roberto says to me, “We are teachers too, but we teach sex.” It is nearing 7:00 A.M. Someone hails the next passing cab. We
all embrace and they are gone. I stand on the curb, clutching my robe to
my body and watch as one of the white Volkswagen Beetles that serve as
taxis throughout Mexico heads down the hill toward the city center. The
sun is up, the tortillería (tortilla shop) next door is now open and a line is
forming. Women, children, and a few men wait to buy breakfast, clutch-
ing in their hands the colorful cloths in which they’ll wrap their warm
tortillas.

For one year the women (and men) I met in the Galactic Zone were my
teachers. Few of them will ever get the opportunity to read these pages.
Since my initial stay in Tuxtla, I have returned to the zone each year. With
each new visit, I find fewer old friends. I’m never sure whether this is
good news or bad. Most have by now left the Galactic Zone, having gone
on to do sex work in other areas, or having left sex work behind, or in some cases, having died. Still, this book is for them, as well as for those who came before them and those who will follow. That more women will follow is not inevitable. As writer Derrick Jensen reminds us, “Things don’t have to be the way they are.”

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Chiapas