

A Pueblo

Homosexuality

My introduction to this culture, and its remarkable—perhaps unique—integration of homosexuality, was extraordinary.

BY DAVID THORSTAD

“**H**omosexuality is integrated into Zapotec culture,” explained my Mexico City friend Max, as he invited me to accompany him to a remote part of the state of Oaxaca. Could this be true? I wondered. Even if it were, would we be able to gain sufficient access to Zapotec society, without a lengthy stay in the region, to find out?

I was familiar with the city of Oaxaca, the state’s capital, having visited it twice. I’d found the inhabitants friendly and outgoing, but had not noticed an integration of homosexuality there. Now I was going to explore the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, off the beaten path for most tourists, where we each had contacts who would facilitate our abilities to gain insight into the local culture.

We went in December 1986. I had passed through the Isthmus once before, in 1965, traveling with my then girlfriend and her young daughter. I hadn’t yet moved onto a gay wavelength, so did not experience or observe any of the homoeroticism that more than twenty years later seemed omnipresent.

My introduction to this culture was extraordinary, and provided a stark contrast with the antisexual biases of American society. I shall not identify by name any of the towns or pueblos that I visited, but evidence suggests that they were not atypical.

“**T**he Zapotec tradition—which predominates in this region—is characterized by a human acceptance and tolerance of the gay condition,” noted Sebastian Fonseca in the Mexican gay magazine *Macho tips* (*Tradición Gay en Oaxaca*, No. 12, 1987). “In order to fully understand it, we have to recognize that it also grows out of the tradition of the ‘Zapotec matriarchy,’ whose typical expression we can find in the *tehuanas* of the Isthmus. *Tehuanas* are strong-tempered women who are their own boss, owners of their businesses, their homes and their men; true promoters of the richness of the Isthmus and of a remarkable activity in political and civic affairs.”

All Photographs by David Thorstad

Journal:

Among the Zapotecs



Without homosexuality, Zapotec society would feel itself to be incomplete.

How long had acceptance of homosexual behavior existed among the Zapotecs, the most numerous of Mexico's indigenous peoples? Everyone I asked said it had always been that way. Their attitude reflects the particular evolution of their society. It is not a matter of tolerating people who are "different," but rather that without homosexuality, Zapotec society would feel itself to be incomplete.

The richness of this tradition is evident from the variety of forms that the expression of homosexuality takes: drag; transvestism; openly gay-identified; active homosexuality but without a "gay identity"; a benign view of sex play among boys, and even between men and boys; occasionally, a "dykey" look adopted by short-haired women who do not wear the traditional long dress of the *tehuanas*.

It was easy to imagine lesbianism occurring among the *tehuanas*, who exude a strength and noble mien I have seen nowhere else. I was told that indeed it does occur, but it was a subject on which a male outsider could not gain direct insight. I met one lesbian in a small pueblo, who was wearing blue jeans and a shirt both times I saw her. Her gay-identified friend warned me before we were introduced that she would not want anyone to discuss her homosexuality. I found this frustrating, but of course took his advice. My observations will therefore be limited to male homosexuality, which I was able to observe and experience.

Nearly everyone speaks *castellano* with an outsider, but in the pueblos, and to a lesser degree in large towns, Zapotec is the preferred instrument of communication, among children and adults alike. My lack of knowledge of that tongue was a barrier to deeper penetration of the nuances of Zapotec culture, and I make no claim to having done a thorough anthropological study. On the other hand, unfamiliarity with the language was a

handicap readily overcome by the spontaneity and graciousness of the people themselves.

As our bus arrived in the small, dusty city in the Isthmus after an eleven-hour trip from Mexico City via Veracruz, I wondered aloud how this place could offer insights into homosexual culture and customs. "Well, let's stay a while and find out," Max responded. Sure enough, the moment we stepped off the bus, it seemed as if most of the males in town were flirting with us.

We took a room in a hotel on the outskirts of town. It resembled a setting from some Truman Capote novel, Max observed. The adjacent restaurant becomes a disco on the weekend, but like the hotel, it seemed deserted. As far as we could tell, we were the only guests. The wind whistled and howled through the lobby, where a lone man sat idly, sizing up the new arrivals. The area is known for its windy weather, called La Ventosa. These are the tropics, but the air is dry, the heat unoppressive. An ambiguous expectancy seemed to permeate the hotel. Later, we learned that the owner of the hotel is gay.

I soon began to wonder whether every male I encountered was homosexual—not in the sense that we use the term, of course, because homosexuality as it occurs in this region owes nothing to the historically specific features of homosexuality in gringo society, nor to the gay liberation movement in Mexico. It antedates both, and exists on its own terms.

Sex, we discovered, was not a particularly private matter, to be discussed in coded terms between like-minded men, but a legitimate topic of discussion, even among strangers. Max asked the young hotel desk clerk if he had sex with men. He said he did, and claimed that he was a good sex partner. For several days, this youth passed his time at his undemanding job reading a

Spanish version of the New Testament. The indigenous culture adapts Christianity, or ignores it, rather than adhering to antisexual proscriptions that run against the grain of Zapotec tradition.

"Cruisy" is not the word to describe the demeanor of Zapotec males. "Horny" doesn't fit the bill, either; "coquettish," perhaps. The desire to relate to other males sexually is a given, requiring no explanation or justification. Zapotec men seem "soft" (without being effeminate), gentle, generally lacking the aggressiveness of the machismo that often characterizes male attitudes toward homosexuality in Mexico. There was no hint of the potential violence against homosexuals that lies under the surface in many regions of Mexico, where gay men are often the victims of assault and assassination by these macho men and the police. The atmosphere in the Isthmus was friendly and reassuring. Enjoyment of male-male sexuality is the norm, not an aberration to be overcome through macho posturing, denial, or assault.

This is also one of the most politicized regions of Mexico. The local population is virtually split down the middle between supporters of the ruling PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) and the COCEI (Coalición Obrero Campesino Estudiantil del Istmo), a leftist coalition of peasant, worker, and student groups. At the end of 1986, after months of internecine warfare, both factions in town had agreed to a power-sharing arrangement in governing bodies. Such a thing is virtually unheard of in Mexico, where the PRI has for decades maintained a monopoly on power, both on the local and national levels, through intimidation, corruption, stolen elections, and violence.

We were invited to a traditional *oaxaqueña* wedding celebration—an affair that goes on for three days, fueled by vast quantities of food and beer. We each brought a carton of beer, which was sold



The village wedding

at the entrance to the party so you wouldn't have to carry it too far—a practical solution since men are expected to bring a carton of beer. Women offer the hostess a handkerchief wrapped around a token amount of money, the equivalent of about a dollar.

The festivities took up almost a block of the street in front of the house of the mother of the bride. The men sat in a special area—in this case, an outdoor corridor leading to the house and the bathroom. One man periodically made the rounds, offering the male guests a cup of brandy. A live band played. Some young women danced with young men or their husbands, but the older women (and some younger ones), dressed in their stunning hand-embroidered, flowery finery, danced with each other. Max danced with a young man. We were told later that it is unusual for two men to dance together at a wedding party, but nobody showed any sign of disapproval, or even curiosity. I thought how uncomfortable two men would be made to feel if they danced together at a wedding par-

ty in a small rural city in the United States.

The woman who was throwing the bash was a supporter of the COCEI. Max knew another of her daughters, which is how we got invited. When he told her that we had been spending time with local acquaintances in a nearby bar-restaurant, she pointed out that it was run by supporters of the PRI, and that no one from that faction would be welcome at her party. Since we were both leftists, she overlooked our frequenting of the pro-PRI establishment. Besides, she knew Max was a gay activist, and the PRI place was a kind of gay hangout.

The revelers were a blend of peasants, workers, professionals, and young people. Their articulateness and passion in discussing the social forces that impinged on their lives, apparent from conversations with younger and older people alike, revealed a pride in Zapotec culture and a surprising political sophistication. Of course, politics was not on the agenda, but rather drinking,

dancing, eating, and having fun. Never have I drunk so much beer as among the Zapotecs; before one beer was half empty, another would be placed in front of you. Interestingly, the Zapotec word for drunk (*xuch'ê*) is similar to a word for gay (*mux'h'é* or *mush'é*), which can generate puns.

Politics did intrude once during the occasion. Two peasant women, probably in their fifties and both active supporters of the leftist coalition, approached us. The older of the two asked, in Zapotec, who I was. Her friend translated into Spanish, and after a few minutes, the older woman switched to Spanish too. Since I was a gringo, she had assumed that, like "my" government, I must be a supporter of the PRI. "On the contrary," Max assured her, "we are both leftists and oppose the PRI."

She warmed up, and launched into an attack, full of colorful vulgarities, against the increasingly intolerable conditions of the indigenous peoples in the face of government collusion in the loss of land to capitalist exploiters, foreign

Of course, you don't have to go to a gay bar to meet men.

and Mexican, and the cultural encroachment of alien forces on the traditional way of life. "The rich are getting richer, the middle-class is a little better off, and the poor are poorer. There's hardly money for food, for necessities, and no money at all for clothes." She claimed that the leftist faction took credit for a split in the pro-PRI forces. "I hope they all kill each other off!" she exclaimed. I imagined that she must have been one of the women who, according to a queen I met in the pro-PRI bar, had marched through the streets shaking large metal containers filled with stones in rhythm to their chant: "*¡COCEI vencerá!*" (COCEI will win!). You have only to see *tehuanas*, strong from hard work and frequently corpulent, to realize how impressive such a demonstration must have been. Even the queen, a supporter of the PRI, was impressed.

In that highly politicized town, the gays too were split into two opposing camps. Curiously, it was the ruling party that had succeeded in organizing gays; the leftist coalition had decided to make no special effort to do so, though gays could participate in it as individuals. Consequently, the ruling party had a visible presence among homosexuals, and the leftists had none. The pro-PRI gays, known as *Las Intrépidas* (loosely, the intrepid girls), held periodic parties and demonstrations in support of the ruling party.

There are two gay *fiestas* every year here, with the main one lasting for two days in November. Called "*Fiesta de las Frutas*" (Festival of Fruits), around two hundred gay men, from drag queens and transvestites to men in ordinary attire, parade through the streets, tossing fruits to the admiring and cheering throngs who come from throughout the region to watch. This festival, according to locals, goes back more than 50 years.

The town's market spreads for blocks, and is a sea of color and bustle. Near the marketplace is Norma, the gay bar. It

looks no different from any other beer hall, but it didn't seem very active. Men gathered there to drink beer at tables, watch television, talk, and connect.

Of course, you don't have to go to a gay bar to meet men.

Our first evening in the area, Eli and Angel, two local acquaintances, drove us to a small pueblo about an hour away, where they knew the owner of a cantina. It was dark when we arrived in the pueblo. The door to the cantina was open, but the place looked deserted. The tables were covered with empty beer bottles, evidence that considerable sociability had taken place earlier in the evening. The owner, known as La Jarocha, is a flaming queen in his late thirties. He was sleeping with a friend in a hammock in the middle of the room when we came in. He roused himself, brought us beers, cleaned off a few tables, and joined us.

La Jarocha has lived in the pueblo his whole life, except for a brief stint in Veracruz. His parents and other family members also live there. He, too, is a *Priista* (a supporter of the ruling party). He claimed that his knowledge of the Zapotec language was limited to stock phrases and sexual innuendoes, but his Spanish was laced with Zapotec terms. His style was pure camp, his ebullient chatter punctuated by giggles and high-pitched shrieks. He was not in drag that Monday evening, but it was easy to imagine him in the drag shows that are a feature of the cantina, which he boasted is the most popular in town.

Within minutes, five *campesinos* came in and sat down at a nearby table. They had the muscular bodies of men who do physical labor and were all ruggedly handsome. One was in his twenties. The oldest, around sixty, wanted La Jarocha to have sex with him. For half an hour, in full view of everyone, he unabashedly pursued La Jarocha with hugs, kisses, and long embraces. He good-naturedly

played along, but was not in the mood to do anything. Later, he told me he has had sex with many of the men in town. Usually, he accepts any offer. Physical appearance and age are not important. Sexual desire is universal, and sexual pleasure something to be shared. "I've never done it with a gringo," La Jarocha claimed as he began a two-hour attempt to seduce me.

Most men who have sex with men in this region prefer to be the insertor in anal intercourse, or to be blown. They are known as *mayates*. Males who take the receptive role are known as *mampos* (or *mampitos*), a term of endearment and respect which may suggest a more public embrace of a "gay identity." (But in a society where homosexual sex is a major pastime, a concept like "gay identity" may be beside the point.) Even though a man or a boy may publicly express a preference for active insertion, in a private setting, he may enjoy being fucked. So the concept *mayate* has to be seen in its general (pro-homosexual) social context. It did not appear—at least, not to an outsider—to resemble the rigidity of, say, Arab males in such matters. But, as I later learned, the *mayate* could become violent if his self-image was challenged.

After a decent interval, Eli and Angel asked La Jarocha if he could arrange a party. He had rooms upstairs that could be used for sex. Meanwhile, we noticed that three teenaged youths had seated themselves on the ground across the street from the cantina. One of them was wearing robin's-egg blue pants, which shimmered in the street light. You could see that he had a hard on. They were La Jarocha's nephews, and were sitting in front of their own house. Here you had a popular homoerotic hangout—a fixture of the community—with relatives living right across the street.

La Jarocha went outside and invited them to come in and have sex with his guests. He returned to report that they



Miguel, Max, and Don Luis, Miguel's father

wanted to, but that their father had just walked past and they felt awkward since he knew what was going on. He laughed it off, saying that the father also does it with men (*también es así*). If we came back the following evening, we could have them.

Since the first tantalizing possibility had fallen through, Max and Angel took Eli's Volkswagen and drove around the pueblo to try to find five youths who would be interested in having sex. They returned after about ten minutes and reported success. Shortly, three young men walked in; two others failed to show up. More beers. More marijuana, conversation, and flirting across the table. "You have to move fast and decide which one you would like," Eli advised. The one I wanted was married, and proudly showed us a photo of his son. But it became apparent that he had assumed that his partner would be Angel, who had picked him up. Later Angel told me that the guy wanted to have sex with me, but that he did not wish to seem rude to Angel. Another

guy, who was sexy and was wearing a black leather cap and an earring in his left ear, showed strong interest in me, and offered me marijuana from his substantial stash, but I fussily felt he had been drinking a bit too much. He went upstairs with Max, who reported that he was very sensual and had enjoyed doing absolutely everything. The other two went off with Eli and Angel, which left me alone with La Jarocha. (His friend in the hammock slept throughout.)

I resisted his repeated entreaties. If this demonstrated a lack of appreciation for the omnivorous sexual appetites of the locals, he never suggested it. For two hours, our conversation was punctuated by caresses, kisses, and hugs. He graciously answered questions about sexual customs, but never really accepted my refusal to have sex.

"Since the age of consent in Mexico is 18," I wondered, "don't the authorities ever attempt to enforce it? Don't Catholic priests condemn homosexuality?" No, there is no opposition, he replied. "The church and the state have

no influence over sexual practices. Besides, most people are not religious." No Zapotec religion persists here, he explained, though I had observed mixtures of traditional practices and Roman Catholicism in the area around Oaxaca City. If people are aware of any legal restrictions or religious anathemas against homosexuality, they simply ignore them.

Around 11, we returned to town. The next day, we went to another small pueblo, where Max had a contact named Miguel, the brother of a friend of his who lives in Mexico City. Both brothers are gay, and we were interested in meeting the family to see close-up what life in a small pueblo was like. We had only Miguel's name and the name of the pueblo, no letter of introduction—the brother in Mexico City had recommended that he give us one, but there hadn't been time to pick it up.

After a 20-minute bus ride, we hailed a cab on the highway running through a small town near the pueblo. The cab



driver, a man in his forties, knew where Miguel lived and drove us there, winding his way through unmarked, bumpy, dusty paths. Our destination turned out to lie far from the main road, separated from the town by a stretch of trail that the uninitiated might never have found.

En route, Max casually asked the cabbie about Miguel: "He's the *mampo*, isn't he?" Was this an appropriate question? I wondered. Despite the events of the previous evening, I found it surprising that he would ask a complete stranger a question like that. I thought of all the stories I had heard about antigay violence in Mexico, and couldn't imagine a customer asking a cab driver in any small American village a question like that.

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"Yes, he is," the cabbie replied.

"You don't have any problem with that?" Max asked.

The reply not only surprised me, it aroused a sense of admiration: "We're all that way. We respect the human being." He expressed an acceptance of homosexuality that seemed to come from the heart.

Even though we were strangers and had arrived unannounced, we were welcomed warmly by Don Luis, Miguel's father, and his mother, who went about her household tasks while the men socialized. Miguel, a pudgy 28-year-old, arrived shortly. He is well-liked, and says people come from all over to local markets to buy his *quesillo*, a white cheese that is made daily by gentle

and repeated pressing of milk in a large tub to separate the liquids from the solid materials. Several months earlier, Miguel had been elected *capitán* of a local fiesta, and proudly displayed photos of himself on a horse leading the parade, surrounded by admiring villagers. He described his lover as "rich": "He has ten head of cattle."

We joined Miguel and Don Luis at a small table outside the entrance to their house. Beers were brought, and over the next few hours, periodic *botanas* (snacks) consisting of boiled pigs' feet with hot sauce; *totopos* (*guetaviade* in Zapotec), a kind of crunchy tortilla that resembled a large, round cracker, though it was made of wheat, not corn; black beans with cream; and peanuts.

I found it unusual that boys would discuss their desires so openly.



Peanuts are one of Don Luis's crops, along with sugar cane, wheat, cattle, pigs, and chickens.

Chickens and pigs scavenged in front of the house; dogs took refuge in the shade. A few yards away, cattle were being tended by Don Luis's nephew. He was about 20, and had come from Veracruz to recover after his fiancée broke off their engagement just before the marriage.

Don Luis has an extended family of around 150 people in the pueblo. We had barely arrived when a parade of family members, neighbors, and passers-by began to drop in to greet us. This friendly curiosity continued throughout the afternoon and into the evening. One *campesino*, around 60, told

me, in front of the others: *Tú eres muy guapo*. ("You're very handsome.") "So are you," I replied.

By now I was in a state of acute culture shock—but it was only the beginning. My shock began to wear off by late afternoon when I noticed that four teenaged boys had approached and were standing a few yards away, in full view of everyone, eyeing us with that look of anticipation and flirtatiousness that seemed to characterize the male locals. I decided to go over and talk with them. Was I violating some unfamiliar rule of hospitality? I had no idea. For all I knew, it might be considered rude to ignore them.

The first thing they brought up was sex. By now this did not exactly surprise me, but I still found it unusual that boys would discuss their homoerotic desires so openly, both among their peers and in front of adults, and with a complete stranger. They asked about AIDS, but didn't know much about it. I may have given them the first extended explanation of AIDS that they had heard. I found it odd—though at the same time

appropriate—that AIDS should be the first topic of conversation with underage males in such a remote place. We arranged to meet at 8 that evening in the main square, which, with its small church (unused since a Dutch priest left several months earlier), was right next door to the home we were visiting.

I told Max what I had arranged. He seemed pleased, though teenagers were not his preference. Miguel seemed more reticent. "They're too silly, and don't know what they're doing," he explained. He agreed to go along with the plan, though more out of hospitality than enthusiasm.

For several more hours, we were served *botanas* and beer—always a new bottle before the current one was half empty. There was a relentless rhythm to the beer-drinking, which I increasingly sought to stretch out as 8 o'clock approached, fearing that the effects of alcohol might interfere with anticipated pleasures. Curiously, although the beer was not weak, there was no discernible effect, perhaps because of the dry heat.

We felt a bit at sea in a place that em-

Don Luis has an extended family of about 150 people in the pueblo.



Miguel dancing with his sister

braced sexual pleasure with such gusto, so we took our cues from Miguel. At around 8 p.m. he finally agreed that we could begin heading toward the square. But it seems Don Luis—who of course knew what was going on—had expressed some unspecified concern. It was decided that the best solution would be for me to reassure him about our plans. “He doesn’t care, really, and he knows what we are planning to do,” Max explained. “It’s just that he needs to be reassured that we won’t do anything that might create problems.” I went over to his hammock and said: “Don’t be concerned, Don Luis, we just want to go for a walk, to get a view of the pueblo, and to look at the stars. I haven’t been able to look at the stars since I moved to New

York City. I’d like to see the constellations as they appear in this part of the hemisphere.” “Fine, no problem,” he said. “I’m not concerned. Have a good time.” We had been invited to spend the night as his guests, so without a worry we set out into the night.

Instead of stopping in the square—where, incidentally, we couldn’t see any of the youths who had agreed to meet us—Miguel took us past it, up a dark pathway. He did not think we should give our dates, who were undoubtedly watching us from the shadows, the idea that we were as interested in them as they hoped we were. Better to keep them waiting and guessing. He led us into the back yard of a family in whose house a brother of his was living. More beer!

There was no outright way to refuse a beer. Thoughts of horny youths kept me wishing the relentless hospitality would run out.

About an hour later, after close inspection of the constellations and three *more* beers, just as I thought we were finally about to head for our rendezvous, a young woman who lived in the house informed us that another young man who lives there, Miguel’s cousin, was inviting us to join him inside. Miguel’s brother was also awaiting us at the kitchen table. Nearly another hour of beer and conversation ensued. *Totopos* and tomato salad were brought. Did I dare to eat tomatoes? I had been sick before from eating unpeeled vegetables and fruit in Mexico. But it would have been rude to





refuse, and besides, tomato salad is a favorite of mine. I ate with abandon, and suffered no ill effects. Apparently, the water here is uncontaminated well water (in contrast to Mexico City, where water is held in open vats on the roofs of apartment buildings).

Finally, we made it back to the main square. About a dozen youths were hanging out, but not the one I was hoping to see. The square was in semidarkness. A single bright street lamp stood in the distance, and there was considerable moonlight. Still taking our cues from Miguel, we decided to wait a while and see what, if anything, happened.

After a while, Miguel told us to go into a secluded space between his father's

house and another one that was being built. It was dark there, and I felt strange hunting for an assignation so close to the sleeping members of my host family. Everyone was sleeping in hammocks or on makeshift cots in the open air, on the patio of their house. We had to walk past them to reach the indicated spot. It also seemed incongruous to be carrying on so surreptitiously about an activity that had generally been treated so openly.

Shortly, "Juan" appeared. (All the boys used phony names, or at least went by several different names.) He was about 18, wore an earring in his left ear, and had strong Indian features. He asked us for a small amount of money. We said no; we weren't there to exchange money for sexual favors. He didn't in-

sist, and said he would bring some of his friends there to meet us. After ten minutes, we gave up waiting and headed back to the square. The boys were still there. They were bantering and joking in Zapotec, and made no effort to acknowledge our presence. I summoned as much patience as I could, and tried to relax into an unfamiliar role of blond, gringo outsider.

Juan was waiting in the square. Without fully recognizing him, I mustered the courage to sit down next to him on the elevated concrete terrace adjoining the church. After a couple of minutes, I put my hand on his thigh, not knowing what reaction to expect. I was an intruder in a setting where the parameters were like nothing I had ever

“All the people who live around this square know what you are doing. . . .”

denly, he announced that he wanted to fuck me. I said I wasn't interested in being fucked, and returned to the others.

Meanwhile, I noticed that Max was having sex with another youth in a corner where the terrace joined the church wall.

None of the boys seemed overly anxious to have sex, at first. Later, I realized that they were just being cautious. They didn't know us, and had expressed a desire to have sex with Miguel, who had by now gone home to sleep, leaving us to our own devices. And they continued their banter in Zapotec.

Impatient after hours of expectation, I climbed up on the terrace and began to beat off in the moonlight. The boys gathered around. Nobody joined in, but they stuck around to watch. One youth urged me to come on Max and the several boys who were by now sucking and fucking him. Instead, I came on the terrace. Later, I was told that probably most of them had never actually had sex with a man. Apparently, most of the men in the pueblo spurned their entreaties.

As soon as I had come, the mood became more gregarious. One boy became talkative, friendly, even tender. “What does ‘gringo’ mean?” he asked, apparently assuming I would know the explanation. I didn't. I found his question touching and unjudgmental. He thought it might have something to do with the English words “green” and “go”—a farfetched link perhaps, but on the other hand, could I make a similarly educated guess about anything in his language? The usefulness of learning English must have seemed abstract to him in such a small pueblo, yet I was impressed that he knew enough to ask such an intelligent question.

Several other youths also warmed up and asked me to have sex with them. “No,” I said, “you were too slow, and now I'm not interested.” Even as I said it, I realized how stupid my statement

must have seemed. They had finally accepted me! Yet here I was, a gringo who should have been grateful that a cultural curtain had been swept aside, taking on airs! My impatience was inappropriate; I had not fully appreciated a fundamental element of the scenario: sex is play. Enjoy it, but don't take it too serious.

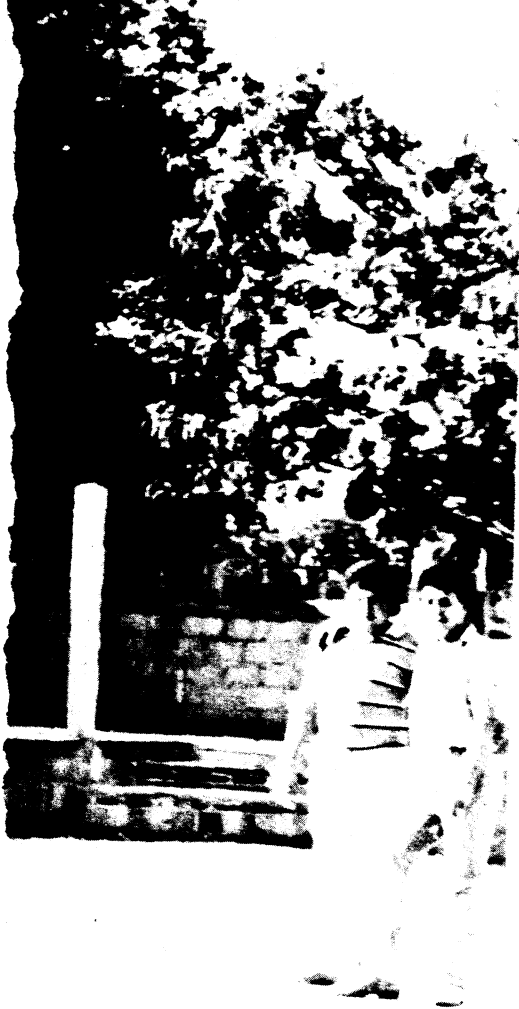
By now we had been joined by a 30-year-old man who lived nearby, and who was sharing his *mota*. “You may not realize it,” he said, “but all the people who live around the square know what you are doing here. No matter,” he reassured me. “Nobody cares.” Probably we were accepted so readily because we were friends of Miguel and guests of Don Luis. The man then offered to let us use his home for sexual trysts.

When I returned to Miguel's house, everyone was sleeping outdoors, and had left the light on inside, where two beds had been prepared for us. I found this overly hospitable, but the next morning was informed that the family had preferred to sleep outdoors where it was cooler.

I found it difficult to sleep. Not only was my head swimming with the day's events, but the mosquitoes and flies were aggressive. Besides, small lizards called *lagartijas* kept darting around the ceiling and walls, emitting a surprisingly loud, sharp squeak. When I woke up, my arms were covered with welts that did not go away for a month.

That day there was to be an election in the pueblo to select a mayor, after months of wrangling. Both candidates were supporters of the PRI—one official, the other unofficial. Program was irrelevant, although the challenger was said to be poor, and the official candidate well-off. Miguel's family was supporting the official candidate, and seemed confident that he would win.

We returned to our hotel to catch up on sleep. The next day, we went back to



experienced.

He immediately stood up and walked a few steps away. “*Guero* (blondie), come here!” he ordered, in full earshot of the other boys. I followed him. “But where are we going to do it?” I asked. “Right here,” he said as he unzipped his fly and lay down on the terrace, less than twenty feet from his observant companions.

I lay down next to him, and began to caress him. He cried out, in playful Spanish, that I wanted *carino*, affection. This wasn't what he had in mind, at least not in such a public setting. So I gave up the *carino* and went down on him. After a few moments, he calmed down. Had we been alone, I felt he would have been even more tender. Sud-

All this was happening in broad daylight, with adults walking past.

the pueblo. The official candidate had lost the election, by a count of 1600 to 1084. Miguel seemed dejected. He assured us that the election had been stolen, and insisted that this was the last time that he would get involved in politics. "What will happen to the newly elected mayor if so many people refuse to accept the results?" I asked. "They'll kill him," Miguel replied matter-of-factly.

As we talked in front of the house, groups of youths began to gather in the distance, hoping to prod us into making a move. After a while, a dozen of them walked past in a pack. A few made fuck signs with their hands as they headed toward the canal on the edge of the pueblo. We pretended to ignore them, and did not follow, to avoid giving them the impression that they were in control of the situation. Still, I admired their persistence.

Another Juan, a gay friend of the family, arrived. We walked the short distance to the home of Miguel's sister, Carmen, near the canal. We joined her husband and teenage son in separating dried kernels of corn into a big basket by vigorously rubbing the cobs together. The kernels would be used in planting. Everyone seemed pleased, if amused, to see a gringo pitching in on the work (which left me with two large blisters). Carmen offered us her house any time we wanted to stay there. She made her offer with a broad smile and, it appeared, genuine pleasure.

We decided to take a look at the canal. A half dozen boys, about 7 to 13 years old, were swimming there. As we stood on the bridge, they peppered us with questions, mostly about sex. "Can you get a girl pregnant before she bleeds?" one wondered. He claimed he had already done it with a girl. (All expressed a desire to have sex with girls.) "How do you say *verga* in English?" "Cock." "Do you like cocks?" I said I did. "What is it you like about them?"

One boy, a chubby 10-year-old who was swimming nude, was decidedly the most aggressive. "How do you say in English *Vamos al monte*?" he wanted to know, referring to the nearby hills and brush that afforded some privacy for sexual contacts. I translated the intent of his question as "Let's fuck." All triumphantly repeated the strange new words at near the top of their lungs, though their pronunciation quickly degenerated into "Flax-flax." By now the boy was grabbing my ass and pleading, "Please, David, flax-flax!" The other boys made fun of his dick, joking that it was too small. Hoping to discourage him gently, but without throwing cold water on his playful urges, I said that unfortunately he was too young for me.

This was all happening in broad daylight, with adults walking past, young girls coming to draw water from the canal, and boys returning from the fields with teams of oxen. It was also within sight of Carmen's house, and she knew we had gone to the canal. Everyone must have understood that the boys were trying to seduce us, but no one showed the slightest interest. I thought of the years in jail I could receive in the States for corrupting the morals of minors—just by talking to them. What if one of the passing adults is one of the boys' parents? I worried.

We were rescued by two teenagers. Both had been among the four that I had met in front of Don Luis's house the day we arrived in the pueblo. They asked us to go into the brush with them. We agreed. "But first," I insisted, "get rid of all these other boys." They shooed the younger boys away, and off we went.

On the way to a clearing in the brush, one asked us for 500 pesos—about 50 cents at the time. "No," we said, turning around to leave, "we're not interested in sex for money." "It's OK," he replied. "No matter." Apparently, he was operating on the assumption that it didn't hurt to ask.



It was the second time that the subject of money had come up in what had otherwise begun to look like a sexual paradise. Boys never used to ask for money in the pueblo, we were told. But some time previously, a man from a nearby city had come there and had offered a small amount of money for sex. Inevitably, the word spread. The boys are not hustlers, but the act of a single individual had begun a process of corruption that had not yet made many inroads.

As I was beginning to go down on one of the youths, I noticed that the bushes were jumping with boys. Suddenly, the 10-year-old ran up to me and pleaded with me to let him at least watch. I don't know what gave me the idea that it was possible to have sex in private, but an



unanticipated Victorian reaction swept over me, and off I stalked, muttering that I did not want to have sex in front of this gallery of onlookers.

As we headed back the thirty or so yards to the canal, I saw two men sitting on the bridge, looking in our direction. One was Carmen's husband. Had he come to spy on us? Or was he hoping to have sex with us too?

"Already finished?" he asked with a friendly smile as I approached. I felt relieved. Apparently, Carmen had sent him—not, as I first surmised, to "protect" the locals, but to keep an eye on us, to make sure that we were all right.

As we left the clearing, it was getting dark. Max discovered that he had lost one of his lenses during sex. Just as we

were about to go back to hunt for it, using matches as lanterns, the youth I had been with ran up holding the lens. Miraculously, he had spotted it in the rough terrain, even though he and I had been at least 30 feet away!

We went back to Carmen's house. She was smiling as broadly as ever. Several of the boys who had been spying on us from the bushes followed us into her house. Shamelessly, they stood around smiling and looking innocent, as though nothing had happened.

Later, Max asked a man from the pueblo what the adults thought about us having sex with local youths. "Well," he replied, "they were chasing *you*, weren't they? You weren't chasing them. If anything happens to them, it's their own fault."

We left the pueblo with plans to return the next evening. There was to be a big fiesta, and the whole pueblo would be there. At midnight, Eli and a feminist friend of his from Oaxaca City dropped by. We regaled them with stories of the day's events. Eli agreed to join us at the fiesta.

On the way to the pueblo, two young men got onto the bus and sat down in the seats in front of us. They did not seem particularly aware of our presence, but we definitely picked up on them. As they got up to get off at an intermediate stop (in another pueblo with a reputation for high levels of homosexual activity, but which we did not get a chance to explore) they beck-

In matters of sexual play and tolerance, Americans may have more to learn from these people than they do from us.

oned to us to follow. Their invitation was tempting, but we had other plans for the evening.

At 10 p.m., the fiesta was just getting underway. The public square had been corralled off, with a fence of boards about eight feet high that turned it into an open-air nightclub. Inside, tables and chairs had been set up, and a band was playing—to my amusement, on the very terrace where we had had sex two nights earlier. It cost about \$2 to get in, which kept a number of boys from getting in. They lined up outside the entrance, and made eyes at us as we went in. We sat at one of the tables taken over by members of Miguel's extended family. The *señoras* of the family, dressed in their *oaxaqueña* finery, sat together in the last row, as if presiding. It was an honor for a blond gringo to be accepted as a guest of the family in such a setting. The scene must have resembled the Wild West—with one salient difference: this time the Indians were on the *inside* of the corral.

Max and I bought a case of beer, and periodically served bottles to family members. After a while, one of the *señoras* offered us delicious homemade snacks that she had brought along. The symbolism of this act of hospitality was not lost on me: cultural and sexual barriers to which I had become accustomed by my own culture had dissolved.

Several of the youths we had had sex with were sitting at a table on the other side of the square. We waved to each other. Then we sent a bottle of Presidente brandy over to their table. This gesture would let them know that we had not come merely as takers—we had not offered money for any sexual encounters—and that we genuinely enjoyed their company. When the bottle was delivered, they waved back in thanks—all this under the benign gaze of the *señoras*. Shortly, they sent a bottle of beer over for each of us. More waving. I have never felt anything in a gay bar that compares to the sense of anticipation

and joy in homosexuality and male-bonding that I felt at that moment.

Suddenly, I was mortified. There was that 10-year-old walking back and forth in front of our table, grabbing his crotch! "What if he pulls down his pants?" I said, aware that the *señoras* had noticed him. Fortunately, he didn't.

The *señoras* danced with each other, gliding across the makeshift dance floor. They did not mingle with the other dancers, but kept to the side. No men danced with men here, though I felt that it would not be impossible. I exchanged smiling nods with the lesbian I had met two days earlier. She was dancing with a man, but she was the only female there who was wearing blue jeans and a shirt.

I went out to take a leak. The latrine was anywhere you wanted to piss along the outside of the corral. As I urinated, the boys hanging out outside the entrance came up to me. They were persistent seducers, though Miguel was right: they were sometimes rather silly. I went out again later and found all four hanging out alongside a house on the square. All pleaded with me to have sex with them.

Back inside, Max and I were joined by Eli and his boyfriend, who lived in a nearby town, and spoke excellent English.

I had agreed to meet one youth later, but as the fiesta began to wind down, Don Luis's nephew asked if he could speak to me outside. Until now he had been merely polite with me, and had kept to himself doing chores around the farm. I also knew he had told Max that he wanted to have sex with him later that night.

To my surprise, he threw himself at me, hugging and even kissing me passionately behind the corral, in full view of onlookers, including the one I had agreed to meet. "Ever since the first moment, I have been in love with you," he gushed. Just as we started to make out, he began a sob story: his uncle didn't

like him, he needed money, couldn't I stay longer? He was on the verge of tears. "Why don't you discuss this with Max when you see him?" I asked, gracelessly perhaps, and hurried over to where my "date" and the others were watching us. I asked him if it was going to be him alone, or the entire group of half a dozen. He said it would be with all of them, so I said goodbye. I did not feel I could face the chaotic challenge of a group scene.

As I was standing talking to Max near the entrance to the fiesta, Eli, who had agreed to drive me back to town, came running out, followed by his boyfriend. "Let's go!" he announced, urgently. We jumped into his VW and sped off as a group of youths started running toward us. It seems one had approached Eli and offered to have sex with him for 5,000 pesos (about \$5 then). Eli had agreed, but said that in that case the boy would have to let him fuck him, since he would be just like a prostitute. At that point, the boy threatened to kill Eli and looked like he might try to make good on the threat. "We know these people," Eli said, "and they really can become violent if you challenge their self-image as *mayates*."

Evidently, as a foreigner and as a guest of a respected family in the pueblo, I was treated differently by the locals than they would treat a Mexican who lived in the area but was an outsider. This little incident suggested a darker side to the sexual dynamics that I had experienced as consistently playful and joyful.

As I left the pueblo that night for the last time, I wondered how long that remote pocket of Zapotec culture would be able to withstand the inevitable encroachments of consumer society. They had managed to survive the antisexual strictures of Catholicism, so maybe there was hope. For the moment, in matters of sexual play and tolerance, we may have more to learn from them than they do from us. □

