

Mixtecs in 2000: Life in Oaxacalifornia

“Oaxacalifornia” (coined from the combination of “Oaxaca” and “California”) is a term for a transnational space of economic, social, and cultural ties that link communities in Oaxaca with communities in California. Two geographically separated areas -- California and Oaxaca -- are interconnected and integrated through a variety of connections, communications, objects, routes: by the travels of men, women, and children, by phone calls, by mailed packages, by wired money. Men, women, and children from a number of indigenous backgrounds -- including Mixtec, Zapotec, Trique, Chatino, Huave, Mazatec, Amusgo -- have been traveling north to work in the United States for decades, and especially since the 1980s. As many as 40,000 Mixtecs currently reside in California, and over 100,000 California residents come from indigenous Oaxacan backgrounds. Many work as field laborers (in California as well as throughout the United States and Canada) in low-paying agribusiness jobs; others work in meat packing plants, factories, and restaurants. Due to increased government efforts to keep out migrant workers, crossing the US-Mexico border is increasingly dangerous and expensive, often making it difficult for migrants to return to, and even stay in touch with, their families and friends in Mexico. And when in the United States, migrants (who may speak only Mixtec, and not Spanish or English) face prejudice, unhealthy working environments, impoverished living conditions, the threat of deportation, and low pay.

The following autobiography by Ernesto Reyes provides one first-hand account of life growing up as a student and agribusiness worker in California. For more information on “Life in Oaxacalifornia,” consult Bonnie Bade’s 1990 “Mixtec Farm Workers in California: Close-Up on Living Conditions” (*Rural California Report* [2(3) July 1990]) and her 1997 “‘The dead are coming’: Mixtec day of the dead and the cultivation of community” (In *Death, Burial, and the Afterlife/Landscapes and Mindscapes of the Ancient Maya*, edited by Alana Cordy-Collins and Grace Johnson, San Diego Museum Papers No. 34, San Diego: San Diego Museum of Man), Michael Kearney’s 1995 “The Effects of Transnational Culture, Economy, and Migration on Mixtec Identity in Oaxacalifornia” (In *The Bubbling Cauldron: Race, Ethnicity, and the Urban Crisis*, edited by Michael Peter Smith and Joe R. Feagin, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), and David Runsten and Michael Kearney’s 1994 *A Survey of Oaxacan Village Networks in California Agriculture* (Davis: California Institute for Rural Studies).

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Autobiographical Essay

My name is Ernesto Reyes. I was born in a small town called Santiago Asunción, which belongs to the district of Silacayoapan. I grew up speaking my native language, Mixteco, and started going to primary school at the age of six years old. I learned Spanish and became fluent. I couldn’t continue my education because of my family’s economical problem, so I stopped my schooling after I graduated from Primary School. I started *a cuidar animales*; I was eleven years old by then.⁽¹⁾ My father had been here in California before and had legal documents. So, he went back to Santiago Asunción and brought the whole family here in the U.S. to work so we could “*ganar muchos dólares*.”⁽²⁾

I still remember when I crossed the border in Tijuana illegally with my older brother, who helped me. Once my mom and I crossed to the other side, we quickly headed to Oxnard for *la fresa*.⁽³⁾ I was thirteen when I first began to work in the strawberry fields along with my family. From Oxnard, we moved to Oregon for another *pisca de fresa*, blueberries and raspberries.⁽⁴⁾ Once the job was over, we moved back to Fresno, Ca. where we worked *en la uva* (I have to tell you, it was unbelievably hard and hot).⁽⁵⁾ After the picking of grapes, we then headed to Red Bluff where we worked *en la planta de fresa*.⁽⁶⁾ After the trimming of strawberry plants was over, we put everything we earned for that year together and sent it to *el pueblo* in advance (for safety reasons with the police in Mexico), then we headed back to Santiago Asunción knowing that our money was going to be there.⁽⁷⁾

We did the same cycle over again the following year: we “jumped over the fences” around February and headed to Oxnard -- Oregon -- Fresno -- Red Bluff, and by October, we finally went back to Santiago Asunción. We did this cycle for three consecutive years, then, everything changed when I mentioned to my parents that I wanted to go to school to learn English (I was about sixteen years old or so). They were opposed to my decision because they were afraid that I would hang out with “*cholos*” at school, and perhaps become one of them. I did not blame them for it, for I understood their concern but I knew that if I wanted to help them, I needed to help myself by getting an education first. I felt sad because I was separated from them for quite a bit. They went back to Santiago Asunción, and I stayed with an uncle in Santa Maria working in the strawberry fields. I struggled a lot working and trying to go to school at the same time, so I moved with my sister who lived in Fresno. There, I started as a sophomore in a public high school because of my age. I did my best to overcome all the barriers that I confronted during those three years in high school. I worked really hard to graduate in three years and graduated with honors. Now, I am 21 and I am attending the University of California. I am a second year math major and I still speak Mixteco.

P.S. My experience was not intended to glorify me, but was meant to encourage migrant students to continue their education, especially people from Oaxaca -- to let them know that they can do it.

Notes

1. a cuidar animales (Spanish) to look after animals.
2. ganar muchos dólares (Spanish) to earn a lot of money.
3. la fresa (Spanish) strawberries.
4. pisca de fresa (Spanish) harvest of strawberries.
5. en la uva (Spanish) in the grapes.
6. en la planta de fresa (Spanish) in the strawberry fields.
7. el pueblo (Spanish) the town, here referring to Santiago Asunción.