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Anthropology Department Funding Grant – Final Report

This winter, I traveled to the southern Mexican state of Chiapas to research the lives and practices of indigenous corn farmers for my thesis. I used the money I received from the Anthropology Department to cover my flights to and from my research site. Without this funding, I would not have been able to conduct fieldwork. I had a challenging yet very fruitful experience that allowed me to connect more deeply with the places and people I had already begun writing about, and drastically altered the shape the rest of my research took after returning home.

For the duration of my fieldwork, I stayed in the Lacandon Jungle region of Chiapas, at a hotel called Finca Vallescondido. Each day, I met with a man named Saúl, a colleague of Alejandra Roche Recinos, that effectively served as my guide. He would pick me up on the back of his motorcycle and we would travel to different *ejidos* and *milpas* to find farmers to interview about corn agriculture. In my time in the field, I conducted a total of 17 interviews, 15 of which were with farmers. Five were women, and five were self-identified members of the Zapatista Liberation Army. In addition to these interviews, I took detailed natural history notes on the local ecology and documented farming practices as I observed them in the field. I wrote formal field notes each night after dinner.

My ethnographic research would become the basis of my third thesis chapter. My most important revelation in the jungle was that news of Mexico's GM corn controversy (which began in the early 2000s after evidence of transgenic contamination was discovered in Landrace corn varieties in Oaxaca) had not reached many of the farmers in the valley where I was conducting interviews. There was no unified political project to make native corn into a symbol of anti-capitalist, anti-government resistance. I had become convinced that this narrative, a product of the Mother Seeds in Resistance Project in the highland Zapatista Stronghold of Oventic, was more widespread throughout the state. My interviews revealed a contested legacy of the Zapatista rebellion, a complex patchwork of contradictory agricultural projects, and multiple, disjointed meanings for corn in the valley.

After returning from Mexico, my research became much more focused on the meaning-making processes that produce meanings for corn both in the Chiapas highlands and in the Lacandon Jungle. Through observing sites of global encounter in the field, I began to see how these meanings are always shaped in dialogue with landscapes and meaning-making projects elsewhere. Using my notes on the physical landscape, and the material qualities of corn varieties I encountered, I attended to the ways meanings are shaped by non-human agencies, and specifically corn as a material-semiotic actor.

It is difficult to imagine what path my research would have taken had I not been able to conduct fieldwork this year. It forced me to confront my own biases (both personal and academic), challenged my language abilities, and pushed me to find inner strength and confidence in an unfamiliar environment. More than anything, it made my project and its stakes feel very real. I am deeply grateful to have had this opportunity, made possible in part by the generosity of the Anthropology Department.