PART II

WEAVERS
CHAPTER THREE

‘YA GOTTA KNOW WHEN TO HOLD ’EM’:
REFLECTIONS ON FIELDWORK IN THE
ZONA DE CONFLICTO (CONFLICT ZONE)

Reading Cosmic Signs

As the cab drove through the outskirts of Tuxtla Gutiérrez and began its ascent into the mountains toward San Cristóbal, I looked up in the clear night sky. This was 1999, my spring break and also the occasion of the Zapatista—sponsored referendum on Indigenous rights. This time, I was to meet with members of the women’s co-op with whom I had been in correspondence during 1998–1999.

The night air was chilly and the stars were brilliant across the top of the expansive valley. At first, the mountains, back—lit with storm—inspired magenta, caught my eye. Then, I noticed a pattern of stars in the sky—a pattern that I had never seen before. It was a question mark—a huge question mark curled across the night. I had no idea what this was—not did I ponder a deep interpretation, but I did think it was curious and I noted it in my journal when I got to the room.

I was to learn that this question mark was the constellation of Scorpio. At the time, had I been open to Mayan conceptions of the cosmos, I could have read this constellation as portending my travel into the path of awe, of the unknown and unconscious, and into a confrontation with hubris. The Scorpion snake forewarned my tumble into the Chiapas, Mexican, underworld “place of fear” (Tedlock 1985: 34) that I had yet to experience. My consciousness of the layers of unseen and unpredictable forms of power and control that exist in conflict zones was changed by conditions of military scrutiny and control of travel, immigration policies of monitoring and surveillance, and low intensity warfare carried out by paramilitary organizations.

MineFieldwork—Working in Conflict Zones

During the early years of work in Chiapas, internal religious and political battles made some of the villages off limits at various times.