

THE ORGANIC BOOK IN THE CONTINENT IN MOVEMENT

IT WAS still light out, late in the afternoon, and the line stretched down the block. Hundreds of young people, mostly teenagers from neighborhoods in the peripheries of the city, had traveled by some combination of foot, bus, and subway to make their way to the Colonia Roma in the center of Mexico City for a hip-hop show. The entrance to the venue, a steel roll-up door no wider than any other storefront on the block, was crowded with people waiting to pay their hundred pesos to get in the door. A “laboratorio de culturas subterráneas” (laboratory of underground cultures),¹ the Multiforo Alicia is a legendary venue for the underground Mexican rock and punk scene with an overtly radical political identity.² It borrows its name from *Alice in Wonderland* and adopted the Cheshire Cat as its logo. As I was pushed through the entrance and up the narrow stairs to the main auditorium, it almost felt like an inverted trip up the rabbit hole, and my senses were immediately scrambled as I made the abrupt transition from daylight to darkness, with little more illumination than the black lights picking up the graffiti-style mural covering an entire wall. For the next three hours, the space pulsed with the energy of the hundreds of bodies packed into the hot space—hands in the air (many holding camera phones), as the young fans recited the lyrics they had committed to memory of each and every song and spoken word piece. The organizers en-

sured the show wrapped up early so that the crowd would be able to get home before the subway stopped running at midnight. As I made my way back out to the street, I paused at the merchandise stand, where the most popular item being sold was not the usual CD or T-shirt, but rather a book.

The cover of the small book, *Imaginación* by Aldo Villegas (also known as Bocafoja), features a well-known graffiti piece attributed to Banksy, “Kid Cowboy Brick Wall,” on a weathered gray-green background.³ Considered one of the forerunners of underground hip-hop in Mexico, Bocafoja has earned a broad international following through his collaborations with artists across the Americas. I had met Bocafoja in Chiapas the year before during the tour promoting his independently produced album *El manual de la otredad* (The Manual of Otherness). In the “Intro” to the album, he announces that this “manual de la otredad en este tiempo posmoderno” (manual of otherness in these postmodern times) reflects a “debate personal conmigo mismo” (personal debate with myself; Bocafoja 2007).⁴ The rest of the album, like much of his discography, is laden with references to radical intellectuals from the Global South, so it came as no surprise to me when he told me of his plans to publish a manuscript. But I had no idea then that his book would eventually entangle me in the networks of writers, presses, and autonomous movements that would become the focus of this book.⁵ I open with this story because I first dove into the underground worlds of books through the networks opened up to me by Bocafoja’s book in Mexico City. In the four years that followed, I traveled further and further south, following a map that appeared to me as I moved across the continent—a map made of books.

The Book in Movement is about the print book in the networks of autonomous movements that zigzag across Latin America today. It follows the production and distribution practices of underground political publishing networks that accompany these current movements as they create and disseminate a new body of political theory articulated by and with the generation politicized at the turn of the twenty-first century. An integral part of the autonomous movements’ conceptual production is their dialogical connection with experiences and struggles beyond their own local realities. As the ideas generated from the movements travel in unprecedented ways, multidimensional networks are multiplying across the continent. But in a historical moment constantly described with abstract concepts like *globalized* and *networked*, important questions arise about the concrete dimensions of such connectedness. This is why *The Book in Movement* asks the following questions: what is the stuff—the materiality—of these networks? What are the durable tools and technologies that make these connections persist, enabling the politics to expand and reproduce? To explore these questions, I focus on a specific material practice in the autonomous networks: the print book.

“SOMOS VOCEROS DE NUESTRA PROPIA EXISTENCIA”

The summer after *ImaRginación* was published, I was back in Mexico City where I met the publishers of the book: an anticapitalist youth collective that had recently started a small press.⁶ I was intrigued by the apparent anachronism of the production of print books, not only in the context of such a digitally oriented medium like hip-hop but also in the young activist scene that the publishers are a part of. The collective is made up of young people who, like me, were politicized at the turn of the twenty-first century and cite the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas and the broader transnational alterglobalization movement as formative influences.⁷ Indeed, as Argentine militant theorist Verónica Gago writes, “la insurgencia Zapatista . . . marca a toda una generación militante a escala planetaria” (2017a, 1; the Zapatista insurgence . . . frames an entire generation of activists at the planetary scale [2017b, 4]). The Zapatistas, like other autonomous movements, make strategic use of the internet and other digital technologies not just as propaganda tools but as fundamental axes of their anticapitalist praxis.

I use the term “autonomous” to refer to movements that, distinct from their leftist revolutionary antecedents, are not defined by any ostensive category, like class, party, or identity. Rather, these popular movements and experiments with autonomous politics are defined by their practices, including self-organization, horizontalism, cooperativism, and mutual aid. In this way, the twenty-first century movements, which as many have said are everywhere,⁸ are characterized by their shift away from programmatic and top-down approaches to political organizing and privilege dialogue and communication as their basic modes while working from the everyday to build prefigurative politics.⁹ While there is a significant body of scholarship dedicated to analyzing the new Latin American movements, this North-South attention has replicated the kind of intellectual imperialism that the region’s scholars so poignantly denounce. Gago writes:

Y justo cuando América Latina devenía una suerte de escena de vanguardia de la insurgencia, parecía quedar minorizada su producción conceptual, que no se podía ver sino como siempre tutelada. Como si no pudiese pensarse lo que aquí sucede más que como un aderezo experiencial para una adecuación bibliográfica que sigue el ritmo de ‘modas’ o teorías dominantes. (2017a, 2)

And precisely when Latin America was becoming a sort of vanguard scene of insurgency, its conceptual production remained marginalized and was only ever seen as in need of tutelage. As if what happens here in Latin America could not be understood as anything more than the experiential dressing for a bibliographical adaptation that follows the rhythm of “fashions” or dominant theories (2017b, 5).