Love and Rage
Kelley Tatro  Photographs by Yaz “Punk” Núñez

LOVE & RAGE

Autonomy in Mexico City’s Punk Scene

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It was such a privilege to be able to live for almost four years in Mexico City, an experience shaped especially by the time I spent in the punk scene. In the text, I embrace the practice of anonymity to honor my friends’ privacy and confidentiality, but also their fierce desire for self-representation. To accord with that practice, I won’t single out individuals here to thank them by name, but that does not diminish the huge sense of gratitude I feel in thinking about their many kindnesses to me over the years. I thank them all for sharing their time and ideas in a variety of thoughtful, illuminating ways, opening a fascinating world to me and fostering a deeply engaging learning process that will continue to compel me even when this project is finished. For those who really made it a point to express their respect and friendship, I hope that my deep regard and warm feelings have been and will continue to be evident as well.

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Finally, while this book is about big feelings and big ideas, it’s also very much about learning. So it seems appropriate to take this moment to thank the many teachers who have guided or partnered with me, whether formally or informally. Thanks especially to my mother, Jeanne Tatro, for fostering my love of language and reading at an early age, and my late grandfather, Ralph Souza, for encouraging me to be curious about the world around me. I was almost always fortunate to find skilled, enthusiastic teachers and professors in the many classrooms, rehearsal halls, and libraries I’ve frequented over the years, but I’ve also learned enormously from people around me, such as those who were eager to show me what life was like for them in Mexico City. During the long period of researching and writing this book, I lost one particularly treasured mentor and friend, Kató Havas, whose sharp intelligence, fluent musicianship, and absolute ardor for life remain deeply inspiring. I remember Kató especially, while extending heartfelt gratitude to all my teachers. Thank you for demonstrating how to move through the world in the best way I’ve yet encountered—with the curiosity, open-mindedness, passion, and tenacity of the lifelong learner.

A NOTE ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Filmmaker and photographer Yaz “Punk” Núñez is a graduate of the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos of Mexico’s Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). As she says of her fascination with the visual,
“Si pudiera contar lo con palabras, no necesitaría cargar con una cámara.” (“If I could say it in words, I would not have to carry a camera.”) I find that her photos do say a lot about life in Mexico City through her arresting and sometimes surprising observations.

I have been enjoying Yaz’s photos for years on Facebook and Instagram, and we began speaking informally about a collaboration for my book project a long time ago. However, some obstacles presented themselves. Until more recently, Yaz did not own a decent camera, but was snapping pictures on a cheap cell phone. As a result, most of the images she provided for this book date from 2017 to 2020, which means that many are newer than the fieldwork experiences I describe in the text. Certainly, the cityscape has changed over time. Our approaches are also different. Yaz doesn’t shy away from capturing people’s faces in her images, while I prefer to keep people anonymous in my writing. In the captions to her photos, however, Yaz also refrained from naming people, not wanting—as she put it—to cast any individual in the role of protagonist.

Ultimately, Yaz’s photographs are not meant to illustrate the text, but provide her own perspectives on life in the city and its punk scene. She has drawn the photos from a collection she calls “Crónicas de Ozías” (Chronicles of Uzziah), an obscure figure from the Old Testament, a king who was punished for disregarding God’s will.
Love and Rage
PROLOGUE

Anarchist punks from the country and city
Anarko punks searching for equality
Anarchist punks from the country and city
Anarko punks sowing liberty

*Desobediencia Civil, "Anarko Punks" from their album
No hay libertad sin desobediencia
(There is no liberty without disobedience), 2001*

While singing about the seemingly bucolic agricultural metaphor of sowing, the four musicians of Desobediencia Civil create an intensely distorted sound that conveys an incandescent energy. This happens despite the song’s relatively slow pace and its unusual verse-chorus format, which includes a surprisingly catchy, anthem-like chorus with repeated lines and internal rhymes. The vocalist screams the awkward lyrics in a hoarse, gravelly voice that occasionally breaks at strategic points, a delivery that underscores the difficulty and emotion of his task. Supporting his message, the guitarist, bass guitarist, and drummer generate a harsh, powerful, static-filled sound, which challenges but ultimately doesn’t overpower the voice. Together, they paint an image of a hardworking “anarcopunk,” alloying punk sounds to historical anarchist iconography of *tierra y libertad:* “land and liberty.”

Delivering politicized language and imagery through ear-splitting, body-pounding sonic intensity is key to the process of “sowing liberty” in the context of Mexico City’s punk scene. However, many people I met in the scene, whether musicians or not, talked more about their politics than about music. Clearly, music was important to everyone, as punk shows were highly anticipated social events; bands were always in formation and re-formation; punk recordings formed the
soundtrack to many everyday activities; and groups of scene participants might burst into impromptu street sing-alongs when together, demonstrating an impressive repertoire of songs. But often, people emphasized that punk was more than music, a lifestyle choice—a common view in punk scenes globally (Dunn 2016; Bestley et al. 2019).

I first experienced the song “Anarko Punks” through a home-burned CD recording that I bought from a band member at one of Mexico City’s many street markets. My own handwriting identifies the band’s name in red marker on its surface. Previously, the blank CD-R disc had been wrapped simply in a slip of photocopied paper with the album’s cover art, featuring an eerily anonymous person in a gas mask ready to throw a Molotov cocktail, along with the barest of information about the recording and the band, tucked into a cheap, crinkly plastic sleeve. I had been told that this humble object was a key recording in

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Mexican punk, something I needed to acquire if I was to learn about the local scene. Learning more about street vending would also turn out to be essential to my understanding.

You can buy virtually anything in Mexico City’s street markets, from everyday necessities to specialized items to black-market goods. Some offer an overwhelming mix of everything all together, perhaps internally cordoned off into sections, while others are exclusively themed by the type of products offered within them—markets dedicated to flowers, clothes, or even musical instruments. Not only does street vending provide a hardscrabble livelihood for millions in Mexico’s tough, inequitable economy, but it’s also a link to the past, a tool of cultural expression and exchange. Crowded, colorful, open-air markets have existed in some form since pre-Hispanic days, when the city was known as Tenochtitlán, a stronghold of the Mexica people, established around 1325. The street markets are still called *tianguis* today, the word derived from the Indigenous Nahuatl term. The markets are not only open-air but also mobile, set up and torn down once per week. The tianguis where I bought the Desobediencia Civil CD and made my first contact with Mexico City’s punk scene was a particularly distinctive one, called the Tianguis Cultural del Chopo (Chopo Cultural Market). Enjoying a hard-won longevity, it was founded in 1980 following a period of especially intense repression of youth culture.

Because of its contested history and continued significance for the social and artistic life of Mexico City, el Chopo (as it’s more informally called) is more than just a marketplace. It’s a centrally located cultural institution where people go on Saturdays, not only to buy music paraphernalia and to hear live bands but also to socialize, plan, and organize. Located in the Colonia Guerrero neighborhood, not far from Mexico City’s central plaza, the market is a weekly gathering place for people from all over the city and its vast metropolitan zone. Linked historically to rock music in particular, the tianguis also draws plenty of tourists looking to spend a bit of cash in its *puestos* (booths). Each week, certain vendors, who have been granted a fixed spot in the exclusive ranks of Chopo merchants, construct and later deconstruct their booths from metal rods, stretching colorful tarps over and weaving electrical wires into their skeletal frames. Inside these small, shady spaces, vendors usually display a riot of merchandise.

Entering the street where the market begins, at the spot where the puestos start to dot its edges, there is often a small visual arts exhibition or a workshop in progress in the so-called “cultural corridor.” A permanent brick-and-mortar shop at the side of the road often places its speakers at the entrance of the build-
ing, pumping classic rock outside and in. Several people station themselves just past this juncture to give out fanzines or fliers for events, clubs, and music lessons. Others chant their offerings of food and drink for sale. “Güerita!” several vendors cry out to me, cozying up “white girl” with its diminutive form, glossing my fair skin and foreign appearance as clues that I in particular have come with money to burn.²

Sometimes I would heed their calls and give over some coins in exchange for a print or a fanzine. But as a regular market attendee for a time, I often continued doggedly along, making my way slowly through the tight crowd, working my way to the very back of the market space. As I moved purposefully through the market, the street became ever more crammed with an unbroken string of puestos selling everything from Doors compilations to handbags made of old records and fake fur. Among the many LPs, compact discs, cassettes, musical instruments, and band T-shirts, there are also a great many things for sale that help people maintain their alternative identities, from clothing to piercing services to a variety of knickknacks for the home. Some vendors advertise their wares aurally, playing metal or ska or various other genres from small speakers wired up in their booths, adding another layer to the dense sonic texture of a busy city overlaid with the sounds of a busy marketplace.

At the back of the market, there is an open space for musical performance off to the left. Toward the right of the live music area, another small space fills with dozens of people participating in the time-honored Chopo tradition of trueque, swapping their unwanted goods for the cast-off treasures of others. Here, too, at the very back of the tianguis, in raggle-taggle rows on the asphalt, sometimes snuggled right up against the one portable toilet that serves the entire market, is the Espacio Anarcopunk (Anarcopunk Space). Unlike the majority of authorized market vendors with shaded booths, the people in this section arrange their merchandise on blankets on the ground. Through concerted collective effort that took a few years to accomplish—gathering first the will, then the funds, settling logistics—they now have a communally owned tarp that they stretch overhead, eliminating a previous need to bring umbrellas or wear broad-brimmed hats. The tarp is useful to ward off both the searing afternoon sun, which feels particularly powerful at the city’s high altitude, and the torrential rains that quickly soak through clothing in the afternoon showers of the rainy season.

Many of the people who participate in Mexico City’s punk scene also participate in markets like these, or even more informal ones, during the weekday. Street vending is for some their primary occupation, or it’s one among several
jobs that they do to get by. My friends in the punk scene like the Chopo market because it can be more lucrative than other tianguis, even if it’s also more restrictive and, some allege, more disorganized. However, not only must people who participate in Mexico City’s punk scene hustle to get by in a difficult economy, but they also disapprove of the economic system, with most identifying as anarchists and anti-capitalists.

And yet the Chopo is not just a hustle, even if a pervasive punk cynicism may sometimes make it seem so. Browse the merchandise available for sale here in the Espacio Anarcopunk, and you’ll find many affordable used books, documentaries on DVD, fanzines, and, of course, recordings of punk, both of local and international bands on CD, sometimes on cassette, and occasionally on vinyl. Though an item of dress may find its way into the mix—patches for sewing onto clothes are the most popular, though maybe a set of spikes for a jacket or a belt might appear—there is generally less cháchara (junk) than you’ll find in the rest of the market. Many people who participate in the punk scene like to make use of the knowledge they’ve worked hard to gather, trying to do good as they get by, sharing what they believe to be important information through the stuff they sell or trade. This forms part of a belief enacted through a constellation of practices referred to as auto-gestión, an important term in local leftist politics.

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that signifies—for lack of a better English-language term—“self-management.”

One day in the Chopo market, I received a welcome lesson on the term auto-
gestión when someone handed me a small pamphlet. The tiny, black-and-white
photocopied booklet, measuring about a quarter of a book page with only four
pages of text, has no overtly punk imagery. Titled “Autogestion [sic]: Un proyecto
de practica cotidiana” (Autogestion [sic]: A project of everyday practice), the
pamphlet attempts to lay out a working definition of autogestión as the “func-
tional mechanism” of anarchism:

We understand as autogestión all the options for social and community self-
organization, where the community itself, whether it be syndical, cooperative,
campesinos [farmworkers], women, retired people, marginalized people, or
whatever other oppressed social sector in our society takes in its own hands
the task of assuring its necessities.

The pamphlet’s anonymous authors, identified only as members of the col-
lective organization Acción Libertaria (Libertarian Action), then continue on
to group several key practices within the rubric of autogestión, including direct
democracy, direct action, mutual aid, outreach, and training. According to
members of the collective—a locally preferred form of social organization—tens
of thousands of these pamphlets have been freely distributed over the years since
it was first produced in the early 1990s, educating many about how to understand
the all-important concept of autogestión in local anarchist thought. Some anar-
chists insist that anarchism is about order, not chaos. It’s about imagining new,
better ways to organize social and political life. The practices of autogestión are
the tools for preparing individuals and, through them, groups of people to do
that everyday, painstaking reorganizational work.

This emphasis on everyday effort might come as a surprise for people who are
unaware of anarchism as a diverse body of political thought and practice—who,
moreover, tend to associate “anarchy” with chaos or violent revolution, a ques-
tional popular usage of the term. An old chestnut in local and global anarchist
political thought and writing is encapsulated in the phrase “propaganda of the
deed,” highlighting an emphasis on action and a fundamental belief in the insepa-
rability of theory and practice. While in recent decades, the international news
media has contributed to stereotypes that link anarchist action with spectacular
acts, like black blocs and Antifa tactics, the slow, mundane, uncertain processes
of autogestión count as propaganda of the deed. As much as anarchism is about

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taking action, this may include unremarkable but important everyday actions, including generating new thought: stimulating new ideas, nurturing them into life.

An attitude shaped by the practices of autogestión was evident even on my first visit to the Espacio Anarcopunk. Here, vendors pressed me to take, not buy, material: a free broadsheet, fliers for punk shows, and a DVD documentary that I was exhorted to watch and return another week. In fact, the broadsheet, titled *La revancha del ahuizote* (The revenge of the ahuizote, from the *ahuizotl*, a fierce mythological creature from Mexica lore), should have been available for *coóperación voluntaria*, for whatever contribution I wanted to make. However, in this case, the paper and other materials were simply pressed on me, without anyone asking for a donation.

Despite having no previous experience with punk scenes in Mexico or elsewhere, I was intrigued enough to keep going back to the Espacio Anarcopunk, initially with the pretense that I needed to return the DVD. But really, I wanted to learn more about how people in the local punk scene imagined the link between their music and their politics. Having written previously about experimentalism in music, performance art, and education, I was soon fascinated by how local punk-scene participants invoked autogestión within and beyond the context
of musical performance, framing it in a way that resonated with my love for experimental practice while emphasizing its more overtly political ends. I had also done previous fieldwork with Mexican migrant communities, and indeed had grown up in and around a port city in the United States with a rich history of migration, fostering my deep interest in the entanglements of class, gender, migration, and acculturation. These themes, combined with my healthy appreciation for unusual and strident sounds, coalesced in Mexico City’s punk scene. Soon, I was going to punk shows, attending meetings, tagging along at protests, reading at fanzinotecas (libraries of zines), checking out squats, and otherwise learning about Mexico City’s punk scene, about Mexican politics through my new friends’ eyes, about anarchism, and many other topics of significance to them—and, increasingly, to me. Emphasizing the importance of the small document on autogestión in my experience, I call it a “seed,” invoking a powerful body of metaphors—semillas (seeds), sembrar (to sow), and the sembrador (the sower)—that circulates in Mexico City’s punk scene, as well as among leftists and anarchists in Mexico and in Latin America more broadly. I use the seed metaphor to highlight key events, objects, sounds, or interactions that contributed greatly to my learning. Still, despite many pleasant experiences I had during my ethnography, the seeds I provide from my time in Mexico City’s punk scene are not soft, fluffy spores alighting peacefully on the rich loam of consciousness. Instead, many have impenetrably hard shells, burrs, and sharp edges. They may have arrived in the form of distorted, powerful, high-decibel sounds. Or perhaps they were communicated through disturbing, confrontational, crude black-and-white imagery. Some seeds may be intense, brusque, even aggressive interpersonal encounters. Participants in the punk scene are not necessarily the easiest people to get to know. And often, seeds in Mexico City’s punk scene are sown with rabia, with the rage of a consciousness awakened to myriad violations of social justice, by sowers who may willfully attempt to provoke an intensity of anger equal to their own. In the process, some speak of simultaneously igniting the love of friendship and solidarity, tying together amor y rabia: love and rage. This is a tough kind of love. And sometimes, participants in the punk scene appear to forget about the love side of the amor-y-rabia equation, letting their anger flame out of control. Malicious gossip in the scene is rampant. Feuds between collectives and individuals are common. Punk shows and sleepy hangouts alike become theaters for street fighting. But how can people successfully combine a feeling as potentially destructive as rage with a broad, generous love that seeks to
create a new model of liberty for all people? How should they collectively create
better, more equitable relationships among themselves? This is particularly hard
to imagine in the context of Mexico City today, still struggling with the legacy of
colonialism and decades of ruinous neoliberal economic policies. Add to those
problems the ravages of emigration and the so-called “drug war” on the fabric
of Mexican society everywhere.

But what is important is their aspiration to radical change, which entails a sig-
nificant amount of discussion, experiment, and debate. In this, they are inspired
not only by witnessing struggles of punk-scene participants in other parts of the
world but also by global and local histories of anarchist politics and by their own
activity in various social networks, including social movement networks. The no-
tion that feelings of love and rage together may motivate meaningful, grassroots
political action is not unique to Mexico City’s punk scene. It’s an idea that has
been embraced by various activists addressing diverse causes globally, as well
as by anarchists in Mexico City specifically. But in Mexico City’s punk scene,
this key pairing is understood to occur at least in part through participation in
punk music and performance. Punk aesthetics and practices are fundamental
aspects of the autogestión that occurs in Mexico City’s punk scene, stimulating
affective practices and networking behaviors that may also extend beyond it.

In this book, I reimagine the metaphor of sowing as a method for ethnographic
writing, symbolizing the intense learning process I underwent while spending
time in Mexico City’s punk scene. Highlighting the key anecdotes and other
materials that germinated my process of understanding, in each chapter I offer
seeds to guide the discussion, delving into their genetic material while also pro-
viding further support as to why they have the power to propagate new ways of
thinking. Though the metaphor of sowing is unavoidably pastoral, I emphasize
the grit that is the medium for germination, the uncertainty of that process, and
the unflagging care needed to realize it.

I also recognize and value the contradictions within this metaphor, tensions
that were less apparent in the conversations of my punk-scene friends. Among
other things, the seed metaphor reproduces a traditionally gendered view of the
learning process, with a sower, usually imagined as a male farmer, tilling ready,
if inert and passive, soil. The figure of the sembrador is also typically a solitary
one, reinscribing not only conventional binaries between masculine activity
and feminine passivity but also the hierarchical relationships of patriarchy. A
common complaint among friends in the punk scene is that any one person is
attempting to protagonizarse—to paint himself as the protagonist of what is actu-
ally a shared story. Yet the rugged individual sembrador, no matter how humble a peasant figure he may appear, is still a hero of sorts. As I have indicated, there are many contradictions at work in Mexico City’s punk scene. The hierarchical, gendered nature of the seed metaphor is entirely of a piece with these dynamics.

However, the embrace of autogestión also requires that people see themselves as active learners, contradicting the passivity inherent in the seed-and-soil metaphor. While providing the high points of my ethnographic learning process, I intend that the “seeds” will also serve as a consistent, if subtly ironic, reminder of the contested nature of punk-scene sociability. And to begin, I flip the script to play the sembradora myself, recalling the key moments, objects, and sounds that I shared with participants in Mexico City’s punk scene as they worked hard, in places directly understood as informal workplaces like tianguis, but also in punk shows, in collective organizations, and in various other attempts to power the processes of autogestión.