From the Barrio to the Barricades: 
Grafiteros, Punks, and the Remapping of Urban Space

Maurice Rafael Magaña

On a Friday afternoon in February of 2011, I sat down with Silvia in the courtyard of the house she and other youth activists had converted into a political and cultural center in downtown Oaxaca City. The youth in her collective met through their participation in a social movement that took grassroots control of the city for six months in 2006. In fact, many met while guarding a network of self-defense barricades that were erected throughout the city to help prevent paramilitaries and the police from targeting key movement installations and neighborhoods. After the federal police brutally retook physical control of the city, youth from the social movement held a series of meetings to discuss how best to keep alive the hope and momentum created during the six months of popular rule.

One of the tangible results of these meetings was the creation of a whole network of youth-run collectives and spaces throughout Oaxaca. One of these collectives formed around the creation of a cultural and political center meant to provide the social movement with a central space in downtown Oaxaca City. Five years after the social movement emerged, I asked Silvia how long she planned on participating in the center:

However long the project lasts. It’s a rented house but we can’t just think about material things. Instead, we have to think about what it is that has been achieved. For example, the barricades are no longer in the streets, but the barricades weren’t just the physical space. They are also the deep transformation that they produced, the social relations, the everyday interactions. So these things will be in my heart, whether I am here in the house or in another space, that spirit doesn’t die. It’s alive. I mean that, truly alive.

Even though most of the physical spaces produced by the 2006 social movement no longer existed, Silvia refocuses our attention to the cultural and social importance that those spaces continued to have for those who created them. In doing so, she captures quite eloquently what social movement scholars have difficulty explaining: the impacts that social movements can have on the subjectivities of local actors and an everyday social change. I argue that these less tangible changes can be made visible if we focus on the physical and social constitution of space as a window into the multiple ways that power and counterpower are enacted, contested, and negotiated. It is on these spaces that I will focus in this article.

There are many enduring images of the Oaxacan social movement of 2006: scenes of rebellious youth hurling rocks at the police and launching firecrackers using homemade bazookas, or of elderly women marching alongside children, doctors and nurses, youth, teachers from the powerful teachers’ union, peasants from the countryside, and working-class urban people. Many also remember images of street art and graffiti covering every last square inch of downtown Oaxaca, or the burnt buses and makeshift barricades. Others remember the brutal police and paramilitary violence that left at least 26 people dead and hundreds arrested and tortured (CCIODH 2008; LASA 2007). However, images are not all that is left from the social movement.

Many attribute to the social movement the apparent end of the hegemony of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) over Oaxacan state politics, as represented most visibly by the ascent of an opposition candidate to the governorship in 2010. But that is not the only impact the movement has had on Oaxacan politics. Inspired by Foucault’s conceptualization of power, I take into account in my understanding of politics not just the mechanisms and institutions of the state, but also a broader terrain that includes the practices, discourses, and extra-institutional spaces where power is exercised and contested. As such, I argue that the impact of the social movement of 2006 actually permeates a much broader sector of Oaxacan society, to the extent that new political cultures and subjectivities have been radically shaped by the collective experiences from 2006. This article focuses on how participation in the social movement has affected the youth’s political subjectivities and the ways in which youth from marginalized communities or barrios have reimagined and reconfigured urban space and the social fabric of their city.

Youth Cultural and Political Participation in Urban Oaxaca

The social movement in Oaxaca originally formed in June of 2006 following the violent eviction of striking teachers from their labor union’s annual encampment in the zócalo (main square) of Oaxaca City. PRI Governor Ulises Ruiz’s plan to intimidate the teachers quickly backfired, however. Popular outrage propelled
thousands of Oaxacans to the city center in support of the teachers and against police brutality. Anti-authoritarian sentiment galvanized a wide cross-section of Oaxacan society to mobilize, forcing the police to retreat as the people reclaimed the symbolic and material center of the city: the zócalo. Soon after reclaiming this key space, organizations and individuals with varied grievances against the government held a series of public meetings where they decided to unite over 300 organizations and existing social movements to form a broad-based movement they called The Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca, or APPO after its initials in Spanish.¹

The APPO, as the name implies, sought to extend the assembly-style governing structure found in many of Oaxaca’s indigenous communities, as well as in the teacher’s union, to the greater civil society. The movement’s main demands were the immediate ouster of the governor from office, a new state constitution, and an end to the government repression of dissent (Martínez Vásquez 2007). The growing social movement, which was able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people in the city center, soon forced state and local government off the city. The movement filled the political void by establishing its own grassroots institutions providing services ranging from trash collection, policing, medical care, and governance to news, educational, and entertainment media in Spanish and various indigenous languages (Stephen 2013). This experiment with participatory democracy and grass-roots governance did not go uncontested, however, as a combination of paramilitary convoys and the Mexican federal police violently repressed the movement, leaving a death toll of at least 26 people in the last six months of 2006 and hundreds more arrested and tortured (Martínez Vásquez 2007).²

As the movement and the repression of it evolved, the social movement networks grew more decentralized and came to include many Oaxacans who did not identify with the APPO but became involved in the larger social movement. Youth were visible participants in some of the most important spaces of resistance, especially those that were organized explicitly around horizontal decision making and autonomous and anti-authoritarian principles (Magana 2014).³ These spaces included a series of occupied radio stations taken over by women from the movement (Poole 2007; Stephen 2013), a citywide network of barricades, and a series of occupied buildings (Esteve 2010). The collective experience of participating in the creation and development of these spaces has also greatly informed the political subjectivities and projects of autonomous youth activists in Oaxaca, particularly in regards to how they network and build relationships and how they understand, use, and reconfigure public space.

Youth Spaces 2006: Barricades, Radio, and Insurgent Identities

The nearly 1,500 barricades were originally raised as part of a strategy of self-defense and protection of the antennas of the occupied radio and television stations against paramilitary attacks. They were erected every night and most were removed in the morning at 6 a.m. to allow traffic to circulate, although some were more permanent because of security concerns. This was especially true after the Federal Preventative Police (PFP) were sent by the federal government to retake the city and disarticulate the movement in late October. Neighbors gathered rocks, tires, felled trees, cars, commandeered buses, semitrailers, or whatever objects they could acquire to build the barricades.

The barricades quickly became community spaces where neighbors who may have never spoken before would spend all night drinking coffee, eating, dancing, and talking while reclaiming the streets, their barrios, the historic city center, and their right to be free from violence. Given that the street is a basic unit of public life, an everyday public space where people are brought together to interact (Tonkiss 2005), it is not surprising that the reclaiming and reconfiguring of Oaxaca’s streets in 2006 proved to be a transformative experience for the countless people who participated. The raising and guarding of the barricades “turned strangers into comrades” (Dzenovska and Arenas 2012, 646), and it transformed residents from Oaxaca’s urban colonias from a population to be governed into active participants in an experiment with radical direct democracy.

Graffiti artist and rapper Serckas Fontseka participated in various barricades in 2006. Six years later, he explained to me the experience of guarding the barricades as follows:

On the one hand it was hanging out with the rest of the banda [crew], you tried to be cool during tense moments. On the other hand, it’s being with people in an unconventional way. People became great friends immediately because you shared in the struggle. Also you become aware that there are all kinds of people, with different goals. And also [people] that you would have never come into contact with otherwise. For example, you would see rukos [older people] that in other times didn’t even come out of their homes, and now they were out defending and socializing with you.

Serckas’s account of the barricades as a point of encounter and interaction for otherwise disparate sectors of society speaks to the creation of novel social relations fostered by the emergent social space of the barricades. It is significant here that the space Serckas is referring to is not public space in the sense imagined by the state, urban developers, and tourism interests: This is not space produced and defined from above. Instead, the barricades represent a radical grassroots space produced from below, by thousands of Oaxacans, through collective struggle and resistance. The social relations produced in these emergent social movement spaces formed a vital part of the social movement network of 2006 and provided a sense of collective identity for participants, especially those who did not belong to a formal organization.

For many youth from popular neighborhoods, the sense of social belonging created through the barricades was rare. The current generation of youth in Mexico
carry with them the stigma of being referred to as the generation of “NiNis—ni estudian, ni trabajan” (they neither study nor work). The implication is that the marginalization of Mexican youth is a result of their own laziness and complacency rather than the effect of global economic restructuring and neoliberal policies. For poor and working-class youth in Oaxaca there were (and continue to be) very few spaces where they could feel their participation was legitimized by larger Oaxacan society. In this social milieu, people began to identify as being from Barricade X or Barricade Y, and among youth we saw the emergence of an identity as barricader@s, or participants in the barricades, which continues to carry significant social capital.

When I asked members of two local street art crews about their participation in the barricades, several mentioned being asked by their neighbors to contribute artwork to their barricades. One of the artists who lives in a colonia called Pueblo Nuevo remembers painting a piece at his neighborhood barricade:

I was at the barricade the first day of the desmadre [PFP repression], there I painted a semitrailer, it was for the people of my barrio because they asked me, “Why don’t you paint something over here, in the barrio?” I said “Of course!” [It read] ¡Viva Pueblo Nuevo! Oaxaca, Mexico.... I remember it vividly.

Many grafiteros were active in the social movement as artists, barricader@s, and in confrontations with the police. The social space of the barricade, where community elders validated youth participation, was vital in fostering among the youth a sense of ownership of the movement, their neighborhoods, and the city. This collective experience and sense of belonging for otherwise marginalized youth proved to be transformative not only for the youth themselves, but also for the expansion of the social movement beyond the more formal spaces of the teacher’s union and the APPO.

In addition to identifying as barricader@s, many movement youth began challenging state-designated notions of indigeneity by identifying as urban indigenos. The following excerpt from a document crafted by VOCAL (Oaxacan Voices Constructing Autonomy and Liberty), a youth collective that emerged from the movement, offers a compelling window into how urban youth challenge state-defined notions of indigeneity and create emergent subjectivities based on an inheritance of indigenous struggle:

We come from below, from the streets of the rebel city, from the barricades, the pueblos originarios (first nations), from the migrants, from those who are discriminated against for being different..... In 2006, the year of the insurrection, in the barricades, we happily realized the 500-year colonialist war had not completely torn our indigenous roots from us, as in those nights of struggle, of unpunished murders, of caravans of death, the values from our indigenous origins that had apparently been lost powerfully manifested themselves among us.

Fraternity, solidarity, mutual aid, tequio, and guelaguetza came down from our pueblos of origin and settled once again between us, the urban indigenos.4

Up until the 2012 national census, the National Institute of Geography and Statistics (INEGI) determined indigeneity based purely on language. In the above document, youth claim a collective identity as urban indigenos, which in this instance is an insurgent identity (Gould 1995; Holston 2008) constructed in the context of “those nights of struggle” along the barricades and streets of Oaxaca. Here, it is the very act of resisting injustice and belonging to a collective struggle that connects youth to the rich history, and present, of indigenous resistance and community. For these youth, social movement participation is an essential element that informs the construction of indigenous identities, regardless of official indicators imposed by the government such as language, dress, or residence (Aquino Moreschi 2012). Importantly, the emergent indigenities (Fortun, Fortun, and Rubenstein 2010) being constructed by urban youth in Oaxaca parallel in many ways the urban and diasporic indigeneities constructed by children of the Oaxacan diaspora in Los Angeles, Mexico City, and throughout the United States and Mexico. In this way, these emergent identities connect communities across space—be it rural/urban space in Oaxaca or the space that scholars refer to as Oaxacalifornia, which spans Oaxaca, Baja California, and California (Kearney 1995; Rivera-Salgado 1999).5

Punks and Anarchists as a Popular Security Force

In 2013, I interviewed a longtime member of the punk movement in his home in the outskirts of the city about his participation in the social movement. He asked to be cited as Mentes Liberales (Liberated Minds). He participated in the initial battle to retake the zócalo. He talked about helping the teachers fight off the police and reclaim the space out of desperation from being victimized by the police over the years. Several punks I have spoken with in Oaxaca have shared their stories of being regular targets of police brutality because of the way they dress and look. Mentes Liberales discussed the validation that the punk movement earned following confrontations with the police in the context of the social movement:

So once we built our encampment and began to organize ourselves internally, we told the teachers and the people from the organizations that they were not alone, that we were there with them. All of the teachers in the state were there, all 70,000 of them, so we talked to them and explained to them what our movement was about, what we were doing and why we were there. We did this in part because they would stare at us at first asking themselves “What’s up with those vándalos [vandals]? And before
the movement everyone looked at us like, "¿Qué onda con esos bueyes? [What's up with those fools?]" But since the battles with the police they saw that the ones who didn't think twice about jumping into the confrontations were the youth. After that it was like we earned some respect. The movement earned the respect of the teachers and the people that were there, from the organizations. They thanked us for having helped them. And once we had our encampment, they would come around and ask us if they could come to us if something happened, if we could support them with that part, with security.

As occurred with barricader@s later in the movement, the youth who participated in the initial battle with the police to reclaim the zócalo earned a newfound respect among their elders by being viewed as a popular security force. Moreover, this acceptance and validation of youth by teachers is significant given the role of educators in regulating youth behavior and as gatekeepers of societal acceptance. In this case, as described by Mentes Liberadas, these social processes are reproduced in the open (extra-institutional) space created by the social movement—not in the classroom. This is especially pertinent when it comes to punks, graffiti artists, and other youth whom I worked with in Oaxaca. Few of them studied beyond high school and some had not even completed high school. They were used to being criminalized by the police and by society in general. Although many were only teenagers in 2006, they were already accustomed to being on the receiving end of police violence. They were not, however, used to having these confrontations be a reason for validation and legitimation by teachers and other elders.

The social validation of youth that stems from their role as a popular security force can be problematic, however, since it reinforces a form of masculinity within the movement that values youth in general, and young men in particular, for their willingness to place their bodies in violent situations. This should not gloss over the reality that young women also put their bodies on the frontlines in confrontations with the police, although their defensive labor is seldom recognized in this or other social movement contexts. On the one hand, the pride with which youth like Mentes Liberadas shared their stories of earning the respect of teachers and other elders has certainly had a transformative impact on how they understand their collective agency as urban youth; on the other hand, this sends a troubling message to marginalized youth about the dangerous and often gendered channels available to them for participation.

Punks and other libertarian and anarchist youth groups formed a collective in 2006 to help give coherence to their participation in the social movement. They called their collective Bloque Autónomo de Resistencia Libertaria (Autonomous Block of Liberationist Resistance), within Bloque Autónomo. The use of "liberationist" in this study reflects my translation of activists' own identification as libertarios. Significantly, this use does not coincide with libertarianism as found in the Libertarian Party in the United States or certain sectors of the Tea Party, which emphasizes the rights of the individual and fiscal conservatism. Rather, liberationists in this study are more in line with libertarian socialism, and in some cases they use the labels "liberationist" and "anarchist" interchangeably.

The newly organized collective formed part of the larger encampment's security unit, and they were given official teachers' union ID badges identifying them as security. This facilitated their movement to and from the encampment, as well as their participation in regular rounds of security checks of the barricades throughout the city as well as of the main movement radio station at the time, Radio Universidad, located on the university campus. Their new status as card-carrying members of the security team opened other doors as well. Mentes Liberadas recalled that once his collective had ID badges, they gained access to more spaces. They asked those running the radio station for airtime and were given two hours a day for their new radio program.

Another punk who was present during the interview proudly told me how older people would call in and request certain punk songs because they liked the socially themed message. In addition to the music, youth used their airtime to speak about issues such as discrimination against punks, racism, and women's rights. Mentes Liberadas said they received a lot of calls from people who wanted to discuss these issues and to give the youth words of support. In this way, the physical space of the movement radio stations as well as the space occupied by the airwaves constituted important countercultures produced by the social movement. Much like the barricades, the radios brought together previously disparate sectors of Oaxacan society, such as punk youth, professionals, and rural farmworkers.

The physical and strategic overlap of the occupied radio stations and the barricades fostered a rich cross-fertilization between these social movement spaces. These spaces provided youth, women, indigenous, urban poor, and other marginalized sectors of Oaxacan society important venues for participation and visibility. In 2010, I sat down with a young woman named Rosalía in a downtown café and discussed her memories of participating in the social movement. She explained the dynamic between youth participation, radio, and barricade spaces as follows:

I didn't know how to do too many things at the time…. I mean, it was difficult, I was only 16. But there were a lot of us young people that had been guarding the barricades, many of us came from being grijteros, from being skaters, others were street kids. We ended up saying, "We need to ask for a space on the radio and tell them what the situation is like for the youth, since we are also supporting the movement by being at the barricade." And they did give us the space, because we were part of the university barricade.

Rosalía explained to me that at first she felt intimidated by the political rhetoric and knowledge of older activists, but that she and her friends found confidence and
a sense of belonging within the larger social movement through their contributions as barricader@s, which some of them parlayed into participation in other aspects of the movement such as the radio.

Tied to their radio show, punk youth organized a music concert on campus where they collected a cover charge of one kilo of food. After the show they took the donated food to the zócalo and gave it to one of the delegations of teachers from one of the more remote and marginalized areas in the state, the Sierra Mixe. Mentes Liberadas explained:

So we went, we gave them the food, we explained what organization we were with and how we had collected all the food. They thanked us but it also gave us a connection with them. Committees would come from their communities and bring them 500 tamales; they would come in a truck and say, “Here are 500 tamales from Ayutla. Here are two boxes of bananas from such and such place.” They would send them various things and then they would say, “Go send 20 tamales to the muchachos [youngsters] from the collective,” “Send them some fruit.” So it was like a connection, a relationship we developed with them.

Mentes Liberadas told me that they have maintained these ties with the communities from the Sierra Mixe that came to support the teachers in the city. Through these novel relationships, youth participated in a collective remapping of Oaxacan society that challenged existing patterns of segregation and fragmentation. Although some of the relationships proved to be temporary, others have endured. For example, youth collectives offer free art and community radio workshops in indigenous communities that have reached out to them after mobilizing together in 2006. In addition to remapping social relations, these exchanges between urban youth and rural communities have also reconfigured physical space, because they connect rural Oaxaca with urban Oaxaca.

Youth Spaces 2006: Okupa

Shortly after the appearance of the citywide network of barricades, a diverse group of youth who participated in various collectives and barricades took over an abandoned police station near the zócalo and created a youth-run social center. The space served as a parallel yet autonomous space to the encampment in the zócalo and gave youth a more stable place to experiment with the politics and modes of socialization that were emerging in the barricades. This space proved to be a prototype for collectives and spaces that opened in Oaxaca after 2006—both in terms of the spatial layout and use of space and in terms of the political culture they experimented with. The Bloque Autónomo and other punk, anarchist, and liberationist groups and individuals were prominent protagonists in the creation and maintenance of this new space.

According to a statement released by the new group, the objective of their new space was to “create an alternative, cultural, autonomous, self-organized space” for youth. They called their new space the Okupa, thus positioning their project within the global context of the Okupa movement, which is what the squatting movement is called in Spain and Latin America. The desire among Oaxacan youth for spaces such as the Okupa should be recognized as occurring several years before the Occupy movement in the United States, and as stemming in large part from their experiences of marginalization and criminalization. In their 2006 manifesto, they described the space they chose as follows:

We chose an abandoned building that for many years served as the municipal police station. Arrested in the streets, in raids at music concerts, only because of our way of dressing, our age, and our rebelliousness, many of us were arrested and beaten by the Municipal Police who were stationed here in this space.

As with youth participation in the barricades and during confrontations with the police, we see the strong impact that being harassed by police can have in shaping the political subjectivities of young people. The fact that they were able to reclaim and redefine the very space where many of them had been beaten and humiliated by the police into a space of hope and possibility in the context of the broader social movement emboldened these youths to believe in their collective agency.

Soon after the occupation of the building, they held an assembly where they discussed what each room and space was going to be used for. They established a surprisingly large number of projects as part of the Okupa. An anarchist collective that predated the social movement set up a popular library, mostly containing anarchist texts and zines. A group of punks set up a silk-screening workshop where they produced stickers, patches, posters, and flyers. They also set up a popular food kitchen where anyone could eat for free. Youth would go to the local markets and collect donations from vendors, usually produce that was bruised or overly ripe but could still be cooked. The central patio was used for holding a flea market where people would barter items and sell crafts made by political prisoners. The patio was also used for concerts. Artisans set up a workshop where they made Oaxacan folk art figures called alebrijes out of recycled materials. There was also a sound room for recording music or other audio for alternative media projects. The space was also used as a dormitory for people visiting from rural communities, for the homeless, and for anyone else seeking shelter.

Mentes Liberadas participated in the Okupa and told me that once their center became fully functional, they organized an event to introduce people from the surrounding barricades and encampments to the new space. The event was a calendario, which is a traditional Oaxacan procession with music, dancing, and fireworks that usually leads people through local streets to the site of a party. He recalled:
At that time we already had the popular kitchen running, so as a way to introduce everyone to it, we organized a dinner for all of the raza [the people].... So the calenda arrives to the space, we feed everyone, including people from the colonias, from organizations, from the encampment, teachers.... We gave them a tour of the space. We said “Look, here is the workshop where the artisans will make alebrijes [figurines] out of wire,” and days beforehand the artisans had made two or three things to show the people what we were going to do.... Other folks had set up a garden and they had already sowed two or three plants so there was something to show the people, to show them, “Here are the fruits [of our labor].” To show them that we were working towards something.

He went on to tell me that the next day local children began showing up for the free workshops offered by the artisans. Seeing the kids participate in the new space was the moment they realized that the space was functioning. The pride with which Mentes Liberadas spoke about showing the fruits of their labor to community members during the tour was palpable, as was the joy of having children involved through art workshops.

Ultimately, the large-scale deployment of the federal police in late October forced the youth to abandon the Okupa in favor of reinforcing the barricades guarding the university radio station, which were essential logistic installations. Although relatively short lived, the experience of running the Okupa proved to be a formative one, as participants of the Okupa went on to form several autonomous cultural and political projects. The popular library that was set up would be expanded in subsequent years and re-opened as a used bookstore in downtown Oaxaca—one of the few places where inexpensive books are available in the city. Other participants went on to form or join prominent youth collectives that are still active today. One of these collectives established the cultural and political center that Silvia described at the opening of this article. This space housed many of the projects established through the Okupa, like the urban garden, silk-screening workshops, sound room, and popular kitchen. Still others went on to open a communal house for self-described anarcho-punks.

Rethinking Social Movements’ Temporality and Spatiality

The social movement of 2006 created many novel spaces like the Okupa, the barricades, and the occupied radio stations, where novel relationships were made. Many of these relationships have continued to be expanded and strengthened through a network of autonomous youth collectives that emerged within the movement. They regularly collaborate across space and difference, building on relationships that were forged in 2006. Moreover, participation in emergent social spaces during 2006 continues to greatly inform the political subjectivities of the youth. The horizontal political culture that was being experimented with in the barricades permeates current youth projects. For example, we can return to the vignette I opened the article with involving Silvia and the politico-cultural space she helped form. That space, called CASOTA (Autonomous Oaxacaan Solidarity House for Self-Managed Work), was a direct outgrowth of the experience of the barricader@s and other youth participants in the social movement of 2006.

One of the lessons young activists learned from their participation in the movement was the power of radical space—in this case, centrally located social space that acts as a laboratory for alternative politics and sociality. Although the very economic and social forces that had prevented many of the youth from accessing meaningful space in the city before the social movement led to the closing of CASOTA in 2011, from 2008 to 2011 the space served as a hub for cultural and political organizing in Oaxaca. Here we would do well to remember Silvia’s words: “The barricades are no longer in the streets, but the barricades weren’t just the physical space. They are also the deep transformation that they produced, the social relations, the everyday interactions.”

Acknowledgments: I was afforded the time, space, and intellectual support to write this article thanks to an Institute of American Cultures Postdoctoral Fellowship through the Chicano Studies Research Center at the University of California, Los Angeles. Thanks to Lynn Stephen, Nancy Postero, Ramona Perez, Juan Herrera, Abel Valenzuela, and Lorenzo Perillo for their feedback on previous versions of this work. A special thank you to Maylei Blackwell and Edward McCaughan for their close readings and valuable insights.

NOTES

1. Initially they called themselves The Popular Assembly of the People (Pueblo) of Oaxaca, but soon chose to change to Peoples (Pueblos) after some members of the assembly voiced concern over the erasure produced by the use of a singular noun, which implied a unified subject. This is especially pertinent in Oaxaca, which is the most ethnically diverse state in Mexico with 16 different indigenous groups, each with its own language and culture.
2. See also CCIDOD (2008) and LASA (2007).
3. In this study, youth is understood as a social identity and not a biological or demographic category. I understand youth to be a relational, dynamic, and heterogeneous identity (Urteaga 2011), as overtly political identity that often says as much about one’s politics as it does about one’s age.
4. Teqio refers to communal labor, and gweleguetza refers to the reciprocal exchange of goods. Both are vital elements of indigenous communal life in Oaxaca as theorized by indigenous intellectuals such as Jaime Martínez Luna (2010) and Floriberto Díaz (see Robles Hernández and Cardoso Jiménez 2007).
6. This young man and his peers do not refer to themselves as belonging to the punk scene, but rather as belonging to the punk movement. This distinction captures their emphasis on cultural activism and anarchist organizing.
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