

Notes on ‘organic IP’ and underground publishing

Alternative book worlds in Latin America

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The print book today, far from being dead, is an ‘old’ medium being made anew. In Latin America – a context virtually invisible in book studies – the remaking of the print book is most evident in the explosion of small alternative presses that have multiplied over the last two decades, accompanying a massive wave of popular mobilizations. Alternative presses are contributing to a remaking of the print book, materially and politically, as a tool for theorizing and promoting emergent political practices among autonomous and anti-capitalist movements. The presses – which are part of a broader trend of alternative political-economic projects aimed at developing non-capitalist modes of production and social relations – produce books that are not intended to be commercial products and that are meant to be as open and accessible as possible.

Networking disorder

It belongs to everyone and no one...²

A member of the organizing assembly of the FLIA-Buenos Aires

Following a trip in 2011 to the FLIA-Sur³, an alternative book fair held in the southern periphery of Buenos Aires, I sit down to take stock of what I bought with my \$30 budget. Of the 10 books spread out on my desk, I notice that only one is marked with the © of copyright. The others all bear some combination of ‘copyleft’.⁴ Creative Commons, original statements urging readers to copy and share the text, or nothing at all. One note appears to have been lifted from the internet, likely the result of a quick Google search: the grainy, low-resolution image says ‘Copyleft. Creation is protected through sharing’. Others simply bear the reversed ©: one is tiny and easy to miss, another is hyperbolic in its dimensions.

The ‘copyright page’⁵ of one book is filled with a lengthy treatise on the topic of intellectual property that includes the following statements: ‘We reject all forms of the State... and we shit on Copyright, the law 11.723, ISBN, taxes, and reserved rights... The reproduction of the text in these books is not only permitted, it is *necessary*’.⁶ Another press’s statement declares more succinctly: ‘The total or partial reproduction of this book is *encouraged*; no authorization is necessary. Intellectual property does not exist’.⁷

My research confirms my suspicion that this text – a translation of a well-known work by an Italian theorist – was previously published with a formal intellectual property (IP) licence: a version of Creative Commons that requires that the same licence appear with all subsequent reproductions. So in the edition I’m holding, with its bold denial of the existence of intellectual property, the press is not only breaking with dominant IP conventions, but also with formal alternative IP practices.

I turn to examine another title in my stack, which I know has also been published elsewhere and is definitely protected by copyright. Interestingly, this is also the only book that is marked by a copyright symbol: © No te tomes tan enserio, 2007. The name of the press (which literally translates as ‘Don’t take yourself so seriously’) in combination with the profile of the author suggests that it is unlikely that anyone paid for the rights to reprint these works. The ‘copyright’ paired with the press’s ‘name’ (which I later confirmed to be fictitious) essentially says ‘to hell with copyright’.

In the books I collected at the FLIA-Sur, there is no consistency among the IP practices. From the range of copyleft logos to the ‘fake’ copyright, these books represent more than simply an ‘alternative’ approach to copyright. While this inconsistency could be attributed to the differences between the various presses who produce the books, a distinctive characteristic of this particular book fair is the continuous interaction and exchange that occurs between the presses, authors, and consumers who create and sustain the autonomous project that is the FLIA. Often called ‘*La FLIA infinita*’ (the infinite FLIA) to recognize its semi-permanent status, this event is held more frequently than most book fairs.⁸ To a certain degree, it could be said that the presses that make up this fair do not operate as discrete projects, but rather as a fluid network of collaborators.⁹ Borrowing from Annelise Riles (2001), I use the term ‘network’ to refer to connections that extend beyond just human actors to include knowledge practices and objects. She asserts that the network is not a fixed instrumental structure; it is a generative and self-generating set of relations. In the case of the FLIA, what appears is a network that is both made of *and* making relations.¹⁰

The FLIA presses are part of a recent explosion of small, alternative publishing projects that accompany the diverse networks of autonomous social movements that have emerged in the last two decades across Latin America.¹¹ Grassroots

theorists whose works are published by these presses have described this context as one of ‘wild politics’ (Tapia 2008) or of ‘disordering’ (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2008a).

In this context, I am conceptualizing the emergence of a different book-object, which I call the ‘organic book’, borrowing from Gramsci’s concept of the organic intellectual. The organic book emerges from, and in turn generates, the very politics and contexts it engages, describes, and theorizes, not just in its content but also its process and materiality. It is produced by the very actors whose practices are theorized in its pages; and those who make it also count among its consumers. The organic book is neither academic nor commercial, neither elite nor private – as it travels and gets reproduced it is at once the same and changing. It is, in the words of the FLIA assembly member quoted in the opening, ‘everyone’s and no one’s’.

Since the FLIA project, which dates back to 2006, is one of the most visible expressions of the booming *cultura libre* (free culture) movement in Argentina,¹² it is not surprising that such an array of alternative IP practices would be found there. As I pore over the books I’ve gathered, I’m left thinking that the kind of adaptation and remixing of existing alternative IP practices I found here, as well as the invention of new ones, could also be described as *organic*.

There is, without a doubt, a kind of ‘hacking’ or what Christopher Kelty calls ‘modulation’ at play here. These ‘organic IP’ practices are a product of the unique environment – the political and social ecologies – from which they emerge, rather than an importation or application of something external or institutionalized. Organic IP is distinct from the various alternative IP practices that appear and clash and overlap in the books I brought home from the FLIA-Sur. It is distinct because, unlike Creative Commons,¹³ or even copyleft, it is not only open and non-institutionalized – it is intentionally *messy*, like the political networks from which it emerges.¹⁴ There are no clear boundaries between the alternative (copyleft) and the dominant (copyright), and the remixes, crossings, and clashes that organic IP generates as it disorganizes both orders.

I am interested in mapping organic IP practices to explore processes that are somewhat akin to what Christopher Kelty, in his discussion of free software, has called ‘distributed collective creation’ (2008: 2), or what Ian Condry, in the context of anime production in Japan, calls ‘collaborative creativity’ (2013). As I examine how books travel and are shared between presses, I want to attend to the ways that organic books are not only opened up for what Chris Atton (1999) has called ‘distributive use’, but also for what we might call ‘distributive production’. Organic books, in various formats both print and digital, often move beyond the context of their first publication.

They travel through improvised and continuously shifting transnational networks that are characterized by their relative disregard for capitalist principles like ownership and property, and their distinctly multi-directional and multi-dimensional form, which could be described as *transversal*. Neither vertical nor horizontal, transversal networks cut across layers and dimensions, and intersect and take flight. A militant research collective from Buenos Aires that participates in the FLIA, the Colectivo Situaciones describes transversality as ‘de-centering the networks’, ‘open[ing]...towards stretches of the network that have not been *made explicit*’ (emphasis in the original, 2007: 92). What is key here is the idea that the network is not already made, it is continually expanding – not necessarily in size, but rather *in what it reaches*.

The tensions that emerge when commonality seems to have reached its limit are precisely the moments that allow new nodes to form. In discussing the difficulties social scientists have faced in trying to account for such dynamism, Knox et al. assert that ‘the network’s power and importance is tied to its mutability and shifting form’ (2006: 131). As Jeffrey Juris (2008) has argued, a ‘practice-based approach’ to the study of networks is necessary to account for the ways that these rhizomatic webs of relations are made through the everyday practices of the actors and objects that constitute them.

As the books travel through transversal networks, as objects and practices, they become unbounded¹⁵ in multiple senses: taken up by different actors in different contexts, they are modified materially and politically. And the possibilities for what they can do are not limited by the conditions of their initial production. There is no central root defining subsequent editions; no unitary reference point for a book’s trajectory. The organic IP practices are a point of entry for understanding the organic books’ transversal networks. In the next section, I zoom in on a specific title – which also appeared at the FLIA-Sur – whose production and reproduction I have followed across the continent.

Rhythms of commonality in difference

Unusually wide and hefty in weight, the first edition of *Los ritmos del Pachakuti* (The rhythms of Pachakuti)¹⁶ by Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar was published in Bolivia – the site of the popular rebellions it analyzes. On the copyright page, a single © appears next to the author’s – not the press’s – name. The next edition was published just a few months later in Buenos Aires. On the copyright page, the words ‘Rights reserved’ appear followed by © 2008 Tinta Limón. The final edition was released about six months later in Mexico City. As I flip through the first pages of the Mexican edition, I notice that the copyright page more closely resembles the Argentine edition than the original Bolivian edition. Though in place of one copyright symbol, there are three.

As *Los ritmos del Pachakuti* moves swiftly across the continent, getting picked up, re-edited, and modified by different presses, the IP licensing seems to get progressively more restrictive, with the most recent edition from Mexico bearing not only multiple copyright notices, but also a formal statement threatening legal sanctions against anyone violating the law. Of

the three presses that have published this book, the group in Mexico, Bajo Tierra (which literally means ‘underground’), is the one I’m closest to and know best. It is also the press that most explicitly self-identifies as anti-capitalist and ‘autonomist’ out of all those I’ve encountered in my research. So what happened here? How did an anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist youth collective end up in this position – reinforcing the very structures of capitalism and state power that they so compellingly denounce and critique in their writings and activities?

I look back over the list of copyright notices. The first belongs to the author and the second to the press. The third copyright holder is where I suspect the restrictive language and licensing originated: the University of Puebla (BUAP) where Gutiérrez Aguilar completed the doctoral thesis that would later become this book. But I know from conversations with Bajo Tierra that this relationship is far from symmetrical. While the labour of editing, designing, and getting the book printed lay wholly in the hands of Bajo Tierra, the BUAP’s participation was exclusively financial. Yet as the more powerful (economically, politically, bureaucratically) agent in this transaction, BUAP’s will to not only copyright the work but mark it with such restrictive and imposing legalistic terms, trumps the political desire of the small youth collective who – together with the author they identify as a ‘comrade’ – are the true architects of this book. But to paint the collective as a passive actor in this transaction would be too simple – and this is confirmed through my conversations with them. They explain that they agree to the terms of the copyright because the collaboration with the BUAP is useful in other ways. And rather than see the copyrighting of one of their books as a political contradiction, they acknowledge it as a bureaucratic detail with little, if any, actual legal or material impact on the circulation of this work. They insist, after all, that they are not ‘istas’ – that is, they are not dogmatic in their politics: they adapt their practices to meet their current needs and possibilities.

My impression of the print editions of this book is quickly complicated by a simple Google search for the title. Among the first results is the Tinta Limón website, where I notice a bit of text accompanying the description of *Pachakuti*: ‘Some of the rights of this work have been liberated by the authors and/or editors for free and public, non-commercial, use. Click here for the details of this license’. The link leads to a description of the ‘Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives’ Creative Commons licence. So this book, while ‘copyrighted’ in its print edition, has been ‘liberated’ in its digital form: a PDF file is available for free download. Why they have not chosen to use the same licence in the print edition is unclear, but this ‘partial liberation’ of the digital file has the effect of complicating their otherwise ‘usual’ IP approach.

The Bajo Tierra website, in contrast, does not offer any downloadable files, or even any view of the contents of their books. Yet within the results of my web search I notice a PDF of the Bajo Tierra edition of *Los ritmos del Pachakuti*. The link takes me to a website I know well: Scribd, ‘the world’s largest digital library’ which purports to only host ‘legitimately’ sourced texts – that is, in no violation of copyright. However, like any Scribd user, I know the reality to be quite different, as there is little enforcement of this policy. The only way users can download files for free is by uploading a file in exchange and this is how the archive grows. Anyone can upload just about any file – and many scanned books, and surely leaked PDFs of copyrighted books, appear on Scribd.¹⁷

The link I click on takes me directly to the Scribd page where a full PDF of all 288 pages of the Bajo Tierra edition has been uploaded by a user in Mexico City who I know is *not* a member of this press. I expect it to be a scan of the print book, but the sharpness of the title page tells me otherwise – this is an original PDF. And what I see as I scroll down to the second page looks quite different from the print book I’m holding next to my computer screen. There is no mention of the BUAP and the ISBN is incomplete. But the most significant difference is the conspicuous absence of the ©. In its place is a Creative Commons licence: ‘Attribution-No Derivatives 2.5 Mexico’.

How did this PDF end up on Scribd? It appears that this file is an early proof of the book, compiled before the legal and technical details – including the copyright licensing and ISBN – had been negotiated and finalized. But this file is not just incomplete. The differences between this page and its analogue in print are more than mere technical details. They suggest that Bajo Tierra’s (as well as perhaps the author’s) desire may have been to publish the book with a less restrictive IP license. But with the involvement of the BUAP – a major academic institution with proprietary claims to both the published book and the research contained in it – this became impossible. Both the Tinta Limón and Bajo Tierra digital files appear to me as something like the freer, more open and mobile sisters of the print editions. Or, better yet, something like the digital alter-egos of the print book – like an alternate persona, with its own set of ethical engagements.

Dispersing authority

Los ritmos del Pachakuti was written in dialogue with an earlier work on the Bolivian rebellions that has had a similarly complex life as it has been re-edited across the Americas and Europe: *Dispersing power* by Raúl Zibechi. Both trajectories convey a sense of how the book gets unbound as different presses share the text and reprint their own editions across different territories. But their *pages* offer us ideas that push us to think about power – which is after all the overarching concept that connects authorship, property, and the law – and the subversion, or reconstitution, of power in different ways.

In describing this process as the unbounding of the book, my intention is not to suggest that the book is necessarily becoming more and more ‘free’. Rather, it can be thought of as an instance of power being dispersed – to borrow Zibechi’s idea. He explains that, ‘During moments of insurrection, mobilizations dissolve both state and social movement institutions.

Societies in movement, articulated from within quotidian patterns, open fissures in the mechanisms of domination, shred the fabric of social control, and disperse institutions' (Zibechi 2010: 11). These moments of what he calls 'societal movement' produce a disordering of *everything*, not just the dominant, but also the 'alternative'. He clarifies that, ideally, the dispersion of power is accompanied by a degree of social cooperation, not fragmentation. But that cooperation may not be as clearly legible as following a unified and collectively determined path. Rather, the social cooperation at play in the dispersion of power may simply be an expression of what Gutiérrez Aguilar calls a 'collective horizon of desire' (2009).

But, desire for what specifically? She does not name anything in particular, suggesting that what is important is the collective effort of disordering, with a new order only emerging through practice, not design. In the words of her comrades in the Colectivo Situaciones, 'commonality emerges in (and from) difference' (2007: 88). Whether the presses are modifying the books' content or form, or modifying the alternative IP licences that help them to travel, the lack of concern for any centralization of control over the sharing of these books is significant. The presses exercise something like the 'productive freedom' that Gabriella Coleman (2012) describes in her ethnography of hackers. Organic books do not follow set paths. Their transversal networks are made as they shift and stretch.

One of Gutiérrez Aguilar's co-thinkers, Bolivian theorist Luis Tapia, calls this the realm of 'wild politics'. And the presses, with their messy organic IP, engage in this as they disorganize the logic of intellectual property not only by disregarding the conventional mechanisms, but also – and perhaps more interestingly – by using them inconsistently, or 'organically' as they arise from specific social and political contexts. The results are spatially – and politically – distributed modes of production and consumption. And this complexity is apparent in the case of the books I discussed here.

Clearly, the 'dispersion of power' cannot be romanticized and ascribed some telos of progressive radicalization. In the case of organic books, what emerges from this dispersion of power is an expression of editorial autonomy. There is no centre in the life of this book – except for the author. And even the author sometimes slips out of the equation, becoming yet another decentred actor in the process. What the underground worlds of organic books reveal is not the consolidation of alternative IP models or institutions. Rather, organic IP practices come into view, dispersing modes of attribution through decentralized practices of production, distribution, and consumption. In this way, while acting as neither pirates nor owners, the underground presses and writers contribute to the emergent alternative political-economic praxis being built by the movements across the continent whose stories appear in the pages of the books.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers who provided valuable feedback and suggestions on an earlier version of this piece.

2. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

3. FLIA is the acronym for Feria del Libro Independiente y Alternativa (Independent and Alternative Book Fair). Here, I am referring to the FLIA organized in the southern zone (hence 'FLIA-Sur') of the Buenos Aires area. The FLIA is held several times a year in different cities across Argentina, and has recently spread to other countries in South America as well. There is no central organization or coordination of the many FLIAs – there is only a general agreement to not schedule simultaneous FLIAs, recognizing that many of the same vendors travel to participate in FLIAs in different cities. The FLIA is free to anyone who wants to participate – be it as a vendor or as a consumer – and is organized by open assemblies of volunteers.

4. The concept of 'copyleft' was first introduced in the 1980s by Richard Stallman and the Free Software movement. It is a broad term that includes a wide range of alternative licensing practices that share the common characteristic of permitting the free reproduction of a work (software, a publication, etc.), for non-commercial use (Wu Ming 1 2003).

5. The 'copyright page' is the page that usually bears the legal and cataloguing information for a book. In the case of many of the books I analyze, this is a misnomer, given the absence of copyrights or the presence of anti-copyright terms and statements.

6. This is a standard statement appearing in all publications from Editora Vomitarte (Buenos Aires, Argentina).

7. This is a standard statement appearing in all publications from Editorial Kuruf (Neuquén, Argentina).

8. The FLIA is held 3-4 times a year in Buenos Aires proper, and at least monthly counting the fairs held across the country.

9. The informality and intimacy of the FLIA is often explained by participants through reference to the acronym's homonym: the Argentine slang term 'flia' which means 'family'.

10. See Juris (2008) for an important discussion of the distinctions between various approaches to the analysis and theorization of networks.

11. I use the term 'autonomous' to refer to the current social movements that, distinct from their leftist revolutionary antecedents, are not defined by any ostensive category like class, party, or identity. Rather, these popular movements are defined by their practices, including self-organization, cooperativism, and mutual aid. For an overview of this recent history, see: Zibechi (2012); Ross & Rein (2013).

12. For a discussion of the various manifestations of cultura libre in Argentina see Busaniche (2010).

13. As a formalized alternative to copyright that offers a range of licences with varying degrees of 'openness', Creative Commons has been critiqued by free culture and open software activists, most prominently Richard Stallman, for its failure to fully contest the basic tenets of intellectual property (Nimus 2006).

14. In working through the mess of organic IP, I take methodological inspiration from John Law, who asserts 'that ethnography lets us see the relative messiness of practice' (2004: 18).

15. Gary Hall has written about the 'unbound book', focusing on the transformations generated by electronic publishing. I am interested in some of the same themes raised by Hall, particularly those related to the management of intellectual property and the 'defamiliarization effect produced by the change in material support' (2013: 32), as I explore what happens to books as they are opened up through alternative copyright practices and moved across territories.

16. Pachakuti is an Aymara term that refers to a non-linear cyclical time-space, and with her analysis of the mobilizations which shook Bolivia from 2000-2005, Gutiérrez Aguilar asserts that a new era of Pachakuti has been opened.

17. As one reviewer brought to my attention, recently, Scribd has shifted its operations to act much more explicitly as an eBook subscription service. This further distances it from the ethics of openness and accessibility of alternative IP practices.

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