

# **Gossip as Direct Action**

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*Ring the bells that still can ring,  
Forget your perfect offering,  
There is a crack in everything,  
That's how the light gets in.*

(Leonard Cohen)

My generation of anti-capitalist activists insists that revolution must grow out of the concrete realities of people's day-to-day lives, speak to the particularities of their situations and decentralize governing power. We feel that political activities must provide ways for people to get in touch with their own powers and capacities, to name themselves and their experiences instead of forming lobby groups or arranging spectacles to gain the favour of powerful agencies – what we call 'direct action'. These activities, in and of themselves, are meant to create and constitute an alternative set of social relations that prefigure a new social order on a larger scale, aligning means and ends – prefigurative politics. Anarchist social movements seek to effect social change through developing alternative ethics, affects and forms of 'counterpower' (Graeber 2004) within collective relationships which will spread rhizomatically and virally – 'seeds' of a new social order within the shell of the old (see Graeber 2009; Juris 2008; Maeckelbergh 2009).

The following ethnography of a Zapatista solidarity collective based in Montreal, of which I was a member, proceeds by considering our activity on these terms, that is, precisely with an eye for decentralized direct action, prefigurative politics and 'seeds' of a new social order within existing formations. I 'speak nearby' (Chen 1992; Trinh 1992) the activists in question for multiple reasons. I use a conceptual framework that is familiar to them and that they respect; it helps them to hear me. Speaking nearby also helps all of us 'find the movement' differently (see Enke 2007), to 'decentre the movement', perceive its 'ripple effects' beyond where we would otherwise delimit it in social space (Nelson 2003). By doing so, perhaps we may productively decentre common understandings of 'social movements'.

Although social movements have often been ontologized as 'civil society' and seen through the lens of particular 'organizations', they involve various scales of social activity, rely on 'backstage' interaction and confound boundaries of 'public' and 'private'. As ethnographic research necessarily concerns itself with everyday life, I investigated the Zapatista solidarity collective beyond its formal meetings and specifically considered the 'backstage' – the private – activity that defined the collective's work and trajectory. This methodology is well-suited to observing and documenting women's activities, including the ways women in our collective agitated to advance our specific concerns as women and feminists. We faced many challenges and did not have much room to manoeuvre, but we found a crack or two.

By 'speaking nearby' we may also achieve a certain understanding and intervention foreclosed by merely 'speaking about' in a foreign vocabulary. Activist and non-activist readers alike will appreciate the irony of anarchist men criticizing women's action to subvert their power on the basis that it is decentralized and autonomous. In this chapter, I invite us to look at a 'backstage activity' that anarchist men pejoratively dismiss as 'gossip' and to analyse it not only as a form of everyday resistance by women but as direct action. Considering the movement – a political space that Cole and Phillips might consider an emerging public (see chapter 1) – on its own terms, then, does not mean foregoing criticism. In this essay I illustrate disjunctures between ideals and practice within the movement, particularly male activists' aversion to challenging gendered power. This is where women's direct action comes in. Women's conversations in 'private' homes about

‘personal’ relationships embodied attempts to steer the movement in a feminist direction and to call male power into question. While this activity was maligned by many male comrades as ‘gossip’ and ‘conspiracy’, anarchist women were doing no more and no less than practising the direct-action political philosophy as expounded by anarchist men themselves. They took back the power to name their experiences, and cooperated autonomously outside of the hierarchical institutions biased against them – in this case the anarchist collective, as well as the state – and they planted ‘seeds’ of a new social order within the shell of the old.

## Historical and Ethnographic Context

The Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, which began in 1994, might arguably mark the inception of the ‘alter-globalization’ movement. The Zapatistas’ use of internet media to make their struggle known and call for a global mobilization against neoliberalism resonated strongly among diverse activist groups all over the world (Khasnabish 2008). The Zapatistas’ engagement with the racialized, gendered and capitalist logic of neoliberal globalization resonated with many anti-capitalists who had become disillusioned with ‘old’ class-based politics yet who saw the limits of ‘new’ rights-based identity movements (Day 2005; Graeber 2009). The Zapatistas’ particular autonomist approach also signalled a new anti-capitalist relationship to the (Mexican) state: As opposed to the ‘old’ anti-capitalists who sought a dictatorship of the proletariat, the Zapatistas sought to ‘change the world without taking power’ (Holloway 2005).

All of these aspects particularly appealed to autonomist, anarchist and anti-authoritarian movements all over the world that, by nominal definition, are against all forms of domination. These movements critique the state form as oppressive, unnecessary and part of the world capitalist system. For this reason, when the Zapatistas organized the Second International *Encuentro* (Gathering) for Humanity and against Neoliberalism in Barcelona in 1998, more than 3,000 activists from 50 countries arrived, a significant portion of whom identified as autonomist or anarchist (Juris 2008). Many of these people were North American and European activists whose movements combined the ideals and rhetoric of the western anarchist traditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the organizational forms of feminist movements responding to the authoritarian New Left. Their ideals included prefigurative politics (means matching ends), consensus decision-making and participatory rather than representative democracy (Katsiaficas 2001; Lamoureux 2004). At this Zapatista *encuentro* the activists syncretised these ideals with those of the Zapatista movement when they organized the People’s Global Action (PGA) network.

The PGA network, born at this meeting, proliferated into many regional direct action networks that in turn coordinated the series of large-scale mobilizations against the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and other neoliberal initiatives, the first of which took place in Seattle in 1999. It was the regional PGA network in Montreal that organized the demonstration against the Free Trade Area of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001 (see Graeber 2009). Approximately half of the activists in our Zapatista solidarity collective were politicized in this context or shortly after. The others had arrived in Montreal more recently from Mexico, bringing with them experience in anarchist collectives, Zapatista solidarity campaigns and student movements in Mexico (for example, the student strike at UNAM in 1998–1999). All identi-

fied as ‘anarchist’ or ‘autonomist’ anti-capitalists, and shared the ideals of means matching ends, consensus decision-making, and autonomous direct action.

Our collective had a shifting core of a dozen people, with another few dozen rotating in and out of meetings and events. We formed in 2005 in Montreal, concurrent to *La Otra Campaña* (the Other Campaign) in Mexico. *La Otra Campaña* was the Zapatistas’ campaign organized parallel to the Mexican federal election campaign of 2006 to build a broad national movement against neoliberalism ‘from below and to the Left’ (*desde abajo y a la izquierda*). Following the EZLN’s (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) call in their Sixth Declaration from the Lacondon Jungle, transnational activists organized collectives and adapted this programme to a variety of contexts.<sup>1</sup> In Montreal, our collective organized demonstrations to raise awareness of social movements and their repression in Mexico, held film screenings and speaking events on related topics and organized benefits to support political prisoners in Chiapas and Oaxaca.

## Methodology

My decision to research my peers’ and my own activism was inspired by my familiarity with both the compelling and problematic aspects of our praxis, and my desire to articulate constructive critique in this regard. I knew that turning my ‘home’ into the ‘field’ would involve both psychological and ethical challenges (Dyck 2000), but I also knew that my insider/outsider positionality as both activist and researcher would allow a unique opportunity to critically reflect on this activism. I proceeded according to the tenets of feminist participatory research methodology put forth by Maguire: ‘development of critical consciousness of both researcher and participants; improvement of the lives of those involved in the research process; and transformation of fundamental societal structures and relationships’ (2008: 418). During the research process I worked to identify participants’ own perceptions of significant problems in our activist practice (2008: 422), and ultimately I concentrated on the themes that I did based on the fact that many of my peers – granted, mostly women – felt it was important to do so.

Beyond one year’s participant-observation (2006–2007) within meetings, public events and informal gatherings, I conducted informal interviews with activists in our collective, activists who attended the larger events and activists in collectives with whom we often collaborated. I mention the broader scope of my research here because, although this ethnography focuses specifically on gender dynamics within the Zapatista solidarity collective, the reader may keep in mind that the patterns I present here are not idiosyncratic (Lagalis 2010).

The quotations I offer in this discussion all come from my field notes rather than recordings. They were either collected during the course of my participant-observation and written down the same day, or scribbled down during conversations and interviews. One of the challenges in researching anarchist, anti-capitalist movements is activists’ wariness that recordings and photographs proving their participation may be used against them if they were to fall into the wrong hands. Thus, although audio recordings, videos and photographs can bestow certain legitimacy to research, the fact that they do constitute indisputable ‘evidence’ is the reason I could not and would not pressure activists to offer them. For the same reasons, pseudonyms are used for the names of individual activists and collectives that appear here. In any case, names are irrelevant

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<sup>1</sup> A full English version of the Sixth Declaration of the Lacondon Jungle (*La Sexta Declaración de la Selva Lacondona*) is available at: <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/especiales/2> (accessed 26 February 2009).

as the purpose of my research is not to critique any particular person or collective's practice, but to speak to certain discourses, logics and practices common among them. I call our collective *La Otra Campaña* (The Other Campaign), or simply *La Otra*, as it was inspired by the Zapatista initiative that went by this name, and note for my readers that this collective no longer exists at the time of writing.

As a final point regarding my method, I would like to mention a way in which I 'write and speak nearby' my ethnographic subject and feminism at once: the reader will find that throughout this chapter I am transparent within the ethnography as a participant. After all, I came to do this research through my previous and ongoing participation as an activist. In the same gesture, I also respond to the feminist challenge to ethnography – often neutered as 'the reflexive turn' – to be transparent as a researcher as well as a participant.<sup>2</sup> I bring the reader into the story of my fieldwork, explaining how my research focus developed, the dilemmas I experienced due to my dual roles and why I decided to spread the gossip I do.

## **The Honeymoon: Summer 2006**

I joined *La Otra* collective in 2006 shortly after the brutal repression of activists, including a *La Otra Campaña* delegation, in Atenco, Mexico. They had been occupying the flower market in solidarity with the vendors who did not want to see it destroyed by the building of a shopping mall. The police attacked the camp (*plantón*), and widespread reports of rape and other prisoner abuse among the arrestees proliferated. *La Otra* collective in Montreal organized in response to the violence in Mexico. The actions were creative – artistic and colourful, involving flowers, music and puppets; the preparatory art sessions were as much fun as the actions themselves. I was happy to be part of this group of a dozen activists who were all friendly with each other and carried out their collective work seriously but with a good dose of humour. Indeed the informality and convivial nature of our collective work was more like the activist culture in Mexico than in Montreal, and it was refreshing.

Over the course of the summer, we organized parties to fundraise for political prisoners, arranged political art installations all over town, participated in 'No One Is Illegal' demonstrations and planned a speaking tour of two activists from Oaxaca for fall 2006. Meanwhile, I became better friends with the collective members and even found myself a lover in the group.<sup>3</sup> My fieldwork came to focus more specifically on *La Otra* collective as opposed to other initial leads simply because I liked them so much and ended up spending the most time with them. I also found the collective especially interesting because it embodied such a diversity of encounters: it involved men and women, Francophones and Anglophones, bilingual and monolingual Spanish speakers from Mexico, some with legal immigration papers and some without, straight and queer members.<sup>4</sup> It was an ideal site to witness the coalition politics that were the professed foundation of our activism. And as the months wore on, I was feeling more and more satisfied that I would be able to report that, notwithstanding minor conflicts, these coalition politics were realized in practice.

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<sup>2</sup> See Behar and Gordon (1995) on the relationship of feminism to anthropology's 'reflexive turn'.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion surrounding the ethics of romantic and/or sexual involvement 'in the field' see Kulick and Wilson (1995).

<sup>4</sup> Montreal is a bilingual city; however, the Francophone and Anglophone activist scenes are somewhat segregated.

In fact what was happening was that I was so eager to render this activist space in a good light that I kept discounting an emergent pattern of problems as ‘exceptions’. One strength of ethnographic fieldwork is that one can read one’s notes later in order to cross-check oneself to preclude this sort of filtering. A series of events during a speaking tour in the fall of 2006 forced me to re-orient myself in precisely this way.

I was forced to concede to myself that there was a gendered division of labour in our collective whereby women performed the operational tasks without equal power in decision-making. These tasks included taking the minutes of meetings, email communication, translation, layout of flyers and posters and the social labour of facilitating meetings, mediating conflict and welcoming new members. Women were more likely to volunteer for such tasks. New female members were particularly keen to take on such responsibilities in order to gain the respect of the group.

During the summer a few women collective members stopped coming around. At the time I attributed this to reasons extraneous to the collective itself. One woman, Elizabeth, confronted Carlo about patronizing women in the collective and treating them like sex objects, and Carlo accused her of being ‘a white feminist and imperialist’. Elizabeth left the collective in tears. Other collective members, both men and women, attributed the dispute to a ‘crush’ Elizabeth had on Carlo. This encounter I had also stubbornly marked up as an exception. In retrospect there was a clear pattern. Young women between the ages of 20 and 25 consistently joined and participated only to burn out a few months later and be replaced by new enthusiastic peers. Meanwhile, the same group of men would remain in the collective, adding to their gender privilege the prerogative of seniority. Many of the women who left did so due to a variety of gender-related problems within the collective. These were rendered ‘private’ issues (such as Elizabeth’s ‘crush’) to be dealt with on an individual rather than collective basis. These gendered patterns of recruitment and seniority curiously resemble those that second-wave feminists – *las viejas* – report as prevailing in leftist movements in the 1960s and 1970s.

As I said, I did not begin to put this together until the fall of 2006. A series of overtly sexist comments and acts, and some crucially important ‘gossip’ afterwards, brought me to consciousness as to what had been going on.

## The Speaking Tour: Fall 2006

In October 2006 several anarchist collectives in Montreal, including our *La Otra Campaña* collective, collaborated in organizing a speaking tour of two indigenous activists, Juan and Magdalena, from Oaxaca who had been involved in the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (*Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca* – APPO).<sup>5</sup>

The month-long tour involved events at universities, community centres, union offices and the indigenous communities of Kahnawake, Six Nations and Kanehsatake. Juan spoke of union movements, the formation of the APPO, and the state repression of his people. He spoke in the third-person, assuming the objective voice of a generalized ‘other’. Magdalena spoke in the first-person, and about specific people who were tortured and why, and what they told her afterwards. She recounted stories from her experience as a community health worker (*promotora*), and described how government representatives attempted to persuade her to promote sterilization among indigenous women.

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<sup>5</sup> For description of the APPO movement, see Sánchez (2008) and Vásquez (2007).

The audiences as well as the organizers responded much more enthusiastically to Juan: 'Remember when that guy asked why the APPO is against political parties and Juan answered 'Because we are *indigenous*'? Wasn't that *awesome*?' Magdalena, however, inspired much less discussion. In the second week of the tour, a shift was perceptible: whereas at the beginning of the month Juan and Magdalena shared the speaking time at public events, gradually Juan was occupying the microphone for longer periods of time. He would pass the microphone to Magdalena to introduce herself in Zapotec (an indigenous language in Oaxaca, her first language) and then take it back, speak for an hour, and pass it back to her to thank the crowd and say good night. While one could partially attribute this to disrespect on the part of Juan, the situation was clearly more complicated; a dialectic between Juan, the audience and the organizers was encouraging his speech at the expense of Magdalena's. Some women activists noticed this and were troubled.

We approached the collective members who were to form the next relay of accompaniment during the tour and suggested we discuss the situation. One of the men replied, 'Magdalena doesn't want to talk, she's very shy, and we have to respect cultural differences. We shouldn't force her to do something she does not want to do.' Other men echoed the need to respect 'cultural norms', citing anti-racism as an important collective value. Yet another said it was important to keep our 'white feminism' to ourselves, as it was not appropriate to 'impose our personal politics'. One of the women responded by asking if any of them had actually asked Magdalena how *she* feels, including whether she would like to be speaking more. The first man shrugged while another replied, 'Let's face it, Juan has more of an analysis, he is more articulate, educated, and he's had more experience in politics and the union movements.'

During the same week another incident occurred which riled some of the women in the collective. While I and the three main male members of the collective were at Six Nations, Ontario, accompanying Juan and Magdalena on the speaking tour, three people involved in the APPO, including an American journalist, were killed by paramilitaries in Oaxaca. It was 27 October, a few days before the Day of the Dead in Mexico. We decided it would be powerful to organize a demonstration to coincide with the holiday. But that did not leave us much time. We would have to start working that very night. As I had done all of the driving that day (about 12 hours) I went to sleep, while the three men stayed up to mobilize the event over email and cellphones. Instead of getting in touch with the women collective members back in Montreal according to the 'telephone tree' we had previously established, the men called other activist men, a *Chavista* group (supporters of Hugo Chávez, the socialist president of Venezuela). The next morning I asked them why they had not contacted the rest of the collective, and one of the men responded 'Because we are all here!'

Meanwhile the women collective members back in Montreal had also heard the news from Oaxaca. When they could not get in touch with us, they began on their own to organize a demonstration on the Day of the Dead, having had the very same idea. It didn't take them long to hear that the *Chavistas* had announced an Oaxaca solidarity demonstration they were organizing 'in cooperation with *La Otra* collective'. The women confronted the *Chavistas* about adding *La Otra* to their flyers without the collective's permission, at which point they realized that Carlo, Ricardo and Stephane had contacted the *Chavistas* and not them.



## Mid-fieldwork (Re)assessment: November 2006

All of this got me thinking. I mulled over the conversation about Magdalena during the speaking tour, and remembered the dispute between Carlo and Elizabeth. I thought back to times during the summer when I suggested we collaborate with some other collectives on various projects but men in the collective said that some women in these groups were *hembristas* (an inverse of *machista*, whose operative meaning was something in the vein of ‘man-hating separatist feminists’). Carlo in particular was concerned about women ex-members who had ‘personal’ grievances against him and had maliciously spread ‘gossip’ (*chismes*) about him in the past. At one point he called one of these women a *manzana de discordia*; literally, ‘apple of discord’, an (ironic) derogatory reference to Eve (eating the Fruit of Knowledge!). At other times, men in the group referred to local feminist activists as ‘racists that hate Mexicans’ or ‘lesbians that hate men’ or some combination of the two. Racist man-hating lesbians were so ubiquitous that our group had to eschew contact with almost every other activist collective in the city. I had somehow managed to bracket all of this.

I considered how some women in our group had participated in insulting these women, and wondered if they actually knew them or if they were taking the men at their word. I made inquiries. Some women in the group had indeed had negative experiences interacting with local anarchists; anarchist men and anarcho-feminist women had alienated at least one Mexican woman in our collective by patronizing her, apparently because of her feminine gender presentation – many women in the anarchist scene adopt an androgynous ‘punkesque’ style. Most collective members didn’t know any of these women, however, and didn’t know what had transpired between them and the men in our collective. Neither did I, but I began to think that there may be something to all this ‘gossip’, given our own recent, frustrating experiences.

I also wondered whether the men were purposely pre-empting contact between current and past collective members by casting them in a negative light, an activity facilitated by language barriers: at least half the collective were monolingual Spanish speakers, most others were Mexicans who spoke Spanish and French, and most of the rejected women – ex-members or otherwise – were bilingual Anglophones. Perhaps this dividing line indicated a series of schisms defined by racism or cultural differences, perhaps not. Either way, language divides almost exactly overlapped racial divides and made characterizing past conflicts as due to race, separatist lesbianism or personal hatred very easy indeed, as it was unlikely that new collective members would hear any other version.

I was one of the few trilingual speakers in the collective, the only Anglophone at the time, and I knew many of the rejected women personally from past experience in the activist scene. I realized I was in a unique position to investigate this situation, but was conflicted in my dual roles as participant and researcher: as an activist I felt a responsibility to my collective to find out what had been going on, but was troubled by the fact that it was only due to my writing field notes that I had come to consider all of this. I decided to wait and see if other women in the collective themselves felt that there was a problem with the gender dynamics within the collective. I didn’t have to wait long.

## Negotiating the *agenda De Resistencia*: December 2006

In early December 2006 we met to discuss amendments to the Zapatista *agenda de resistencia*, including the proposition to add 'patriarchy' to the *agenda*. Adherents of Zapatista collectives both in Mexico and beyond had suggested that patriarchy should be on the agenda. So all Zapatista collectives in Mexico and elsewhere in the world were to discuss this proposal and weigh in, either in person or by email, during the upcoming Zapatista *encuentro* in Chiapas that winter.

We discussed all the other pre-*encuentro* questions for discussion first. Where should the 2010 *Intergalactico* be held? How can we learn from the successes and failures of the Peoples Global Action network? Can one be a pothead and a Zapatista at the same time? What does it mean to be a leftist? I don't think the word 'procrastination' would be an exaggeration here. Valeria, one of the few self-identified feminists in the collective (and the only one who was Mexican, and therefore partially shielded from attacks of 'white feminism') finally said:

The other thing put forth is that patriarchy be included as an axis of struggle. We are explicitly anti-capitalist, but we have to clarify that you can be anti-capitalist without being anti-patriarchal and this has been a fault in the movement.

And so it began.

Some women in our collective insisted a critique of patriarchy should definitely be integrated. The men generally disagreed. One man called it 'a first world issue', the concern of 'imperialist *hembristas*', and referenced the egalitarian nature of indigenous communities. Some women in the collective took issue with this argument and countered that indigenous women also experience male domination and critique gender relations in their communities, albeit not always using the word 'patriarchy'.

At this point a different man countered that 'patriarchy existed before capitalism so it's a separate issue', seeming to contradict the first man, but nonetheless putting the women back on the defensive. Some women, including myself, then attempted to explain how the dispossession of women figures in 'primitive accumulation', how neoliberalism relies on racialized women's underpaid labour and how profit is created in the domestic sphere. This political economic analysis is well-substantiated and appeared a useful rhetorical response. But then we were back at square one: 'You see? The problem is capitalism not patriarchy.'

Valeria and I then took turns trying to explain that 'neither capitalism nor patriarchy can be seen as first cause'; that 'male domination often emerges in non-capitalist societies, although not necessarily'; that 'regardless of the initial gender system, capitalist colonialism has most often resulted in increasing male dominance due to the gendered organization of capitalist economies'. But a man interrupted us and summarily redirected the conversation to concentrate on feminism as imperialist. He said he just did not want to be 'part of a social movement [that is, feminism] that supported rich white women just so they could have poor indigenous women working for them'.

To dispel the rising tension, some men and women suggested settling on a phrasing whereby capitalism 'preys on the marginalized' (who was marginalized in the first place, and why, would be left unspoken). Some women, however, continued to argue that women are oppressed 'in a particular way', this time making specific reference to the triple burdens of poor indigenous women. 'Yes, but that's because they are *indigenous*' was the response. At this point we were all

quite exhausted. No one seemed to remember the earlier argument that indigenous communities are egalitarian and harmonious, or, if they did, they weren't prepared to argue about it any more.

We went back and forth a while longer, and managed to settle on the phrase 'patriarchy is a form of exploitation within capitalism and it is urgent that we recognize it' – not bad. I read off our response to this and other questions at the *encuentro* in Chiapas later that month, and we never broached the subject again.

## Backstage 'gossip': The Same Night

Despite the tense evening, or perhaps because of it, we decided to go to a restaurant afterwards to relax and hang out. The conversation was dominated by the women discussing a collective member's abusive ex-boyfriend. Rather than sit silently and listen to our conversation (which is what we women usually did when the men spoke of something that did not interest us enormously), the four men began to have their own conversation and then declared they were bored and were going to leave. This stirred us all to get up – we had finished our food after all. Three women including myself went back to Valeria's house and continued our discussion. The conversation expanded to each of us sharing similar stories, which ultimately led into us debriefing our earlier collective meeting. I paraphrase our conversation, originally in Spanish and much, much longer:

'It's so delicate, I mean you never want to fight with your collective, or with your partner for that matter, not with anyone you are close to...So you end up not saying anything! And, then what? I mean if it takes a two-hour meeting just to establish that patriarchy is a problem then we obviously have a lot of work to do!'

'Yeah, to think that it's that hard just to mention the fucking problem, imagine trying to actually *organize* around it?'

'Yeah, every time I mention gender they start complaining about the *hembristas* in D.F. [*Distrito Federal*, that is, Mexico City].'

'What really enraged me [*me dió coraje*] was when I had to justify that the oppression of women exists by using the example of indigenous women.'

'No shit! That was really horrific!'

'Yeah. Then they just say "yeah, but it's because they're *indigenous*" after all.'

'Yeah and it makes it hard, y'know, if within your own group you can't even talk about the things that are so real in your life. If it's not even accepted by the group, what are you supposed to do? Have a separate group where you have to deal with women's stuff? And have twice the work?!'

'If *La Otra* is about solidarity and being "from below and to the Left" ... there's no fucking way that we should have to organize around patriarchy *outside* of *La Otra*. The whole point is that it's supposed to be inclusive of everyone and about a convergence of struggles. We even said that earlier, we defined the Left as *convergencias* and *pluralidad*.'

'Yes we say we want to have our politics and our daily lives match up, meanwhile in our relationships there's all this abuse and men are continually taking up more space and never admitting that ...'

'I mean things in this group have been a *little* better recently but, I dunno, Stephane calling the *Chavistas* instead of you, Valeria ... that was *bad*. You were there Erica, how did *that* happen?'

'I was sleeping at the time, and when I found out the next day I was really not impressed and I told Carlo and Ricardo so. They said it was all Stephane, that it was he who made the call, and said "Oh man *las viejas* [roughly, 'the old ladies', in the sense of 'the ol' ball and chain'] are going to kill us, they gotta know it wasn't our fault!"'

*Las viejas?'*

'Yeah I know, but at least they seemed to notice it was wrong that he didn't call you ... which is better than usual. But then I suggested that we talk to Stephane about it and they started finding all sorts of reasons not to!'

'Sometimes they say stuff, like how it should be one guy and one girl to do some task, and I mean that's something but it's not enough. Just because there is a woman there, doesn't mean there is no power imbalance at play.'

'It's a representation game!'

'Like how they recruited us to their soccer team for the anarchist soccer tournament 'cause the team had to be gender equal, but then wouldn't let us on the field!'

'Remember how proud they were of themselves that they invited a *compañero* and a *compañera* from Oaxaca – 'cause at first it was just *dos compañeros* ...'

'And then they think that they have done their good deed or whatever and pay no attention to what actually unfolds during the tour!'

'Y'know once we were leaving an event, and I was talking about where to park the car, and Juan proceeded to repeat everything for Magdalena as if she hadn't understood! And she was obviously getting fed up with him at times. She even asked to stay in a different house from him at one point, remember?'

'Yeah, and yet when we try to talk to the guys about it, they say ...'

'Yeah they don't give a shit [*les vale madre*].'

'And they think they treat her with such respect ...'

'But the kind you give a fragile little flower. They all fuss over her and get delighted when she laughs and plays in the snow ...'

'Totally infantilizing her! When in reality she's ...'

'... tougher than all of us put together!'

Towards the end of the conversation, I mentioned that I suspected many of the women activists whom the guys complain about had had similar frustrations. Perhaps what the men called their 'malicious gossip' was no more than complaining like we are now? And maybe the women had had reason to? Perhaps, Valeria and the others agreed. In any case, this evening of 'gossip' marked a turning point of sorts. Up until that point, the men had always been the core group of friends and we women had connected mostly through our mutual friendships with the men.

## ***Encuentros and Encounters in Mexico: Winter 2006–2007***

Valeria, Carlo and I went to Mexico that winter. Carlo and Valeria went to visit their friends and families; I went to visit friends and do fieldwork. Part of my original research idea was to investigate both sides of transnational anarchist/indigenous movements' collaborations. In doing so, I ended up discovering that some of our collaborators' agendas and our own were possibly operating at cross-purposes. This was interesting in terms of my research. But, as a member of our collective, it was my responsibility to 'report back' to my group. So I emailed my collective

with the information for them to discuss and come to a decision by consensus as to what to do, if anything. At this point, before meeting with the collective, Stephane (who was the one who had originally forged links with the group in question) forwarded my email to some of the implicated people. I can only imagine that he felt threatened, worried that this development would reflect negatively on his own integrity (although there was no way he could have known the information beforehand). In any case, the battle-lines had been drawn: a polemical Internet War ensued from London to Argentina. The stakes were so high (at some point I was accused of being a spy for the Mexican government) and the intrigue so impenetrable, that I abandoned the possibility of incorporating any substantive account into my ethnography. And I only recount as much as I do now because this conflict had the effect of throwing into relief the gendered divides in our collective.

The women and one man (my boyfriend – coincidence?) pointed out that if it had been one of the men who sent back such information, he would have been seen as fulfilling his responsibility as a member of the collective, rather than being charged with spreading ‘calumnious gossip’, of which various men had accused me. Also, it was oft-repeated that a reference to ‘domestic abuse’ in my email was what made it gossip. That this interpretation of my email constituted major ammunition in the Internet War was ‘sexist’, said some in my defence. I tried to stay focused on my projects in Mexico as my inbox filled up with escalating arguments.

Both Carlo and I were in Mexico City at Christmas time. We got along well those weeks in D.F. and I even spent Christmas with his family. Soon afterwards Valeria, Carlo and I all went to the Zapatista *encuentro* together. Valeria and I chatted constantly in between the plenaries and many, many dances. We discussed our collective, how our dissertations were shaping up and shared many personal stories. Our friendship was further strengthened when we got into a bus accident on the way home that almost sent us over a cliff and stranded us on the highway, building bonfires as flares all night long – a perilous experience we still joke about today.

Valeria and I were particularly inspired by the women’s plenary session (*Mesa de Mujeres*) – the first of its kind. A dozen Zapatista women emphasized that there is much work that remains to be done, but that the organization of women within the EZLN, thanks to a few original women militants, has inspired unprecedented advances. During the question-and-answer period, one question in particular caused Valeria and I to look at each other and smile:

Do you think it would be good to have a meeting with all the Zapatista women with other women of the world, without men? Or do you not think it necessary?

Two Zapatista women answered in turn:

I think it’s necessary to have a meeting with all the women to raise ideas and strategies of resistance, to go forth organizing all together. That’s all. *Gracias compañeras*.

The second woman said:

I think it’s very important, women *compañeras*, to make a meeting among all the women because there are women *compañeras* who don’t speak up, who don’t get up and participate [*que no se animen*] in the presence of the men *compañeros*. Among women, more ideas would come forth about how to strengthen and widen the struggle.

## **‘La Otra Otra’: Spring 2007**

When the collective reconvened in Montreal in February, the group was different. Whether due to conflicts the previous autumn, the polarizing effect of the Internet War, my reflections and Valeria’s on the Zapatista *encuentro*, new friendships among women in the collective, or some constellation of all the above, certain things began to change. Women members began to meet separately in order to plan events about Zapatista and APPO activist women while also continuing to meet as *La Otra* (we never adopted a name; *La Otra Otra* is my twist on the pseudonym).

The first time this happened was leading up to 8 March, International Women’s Day. Valeria had been invited to participate at an event organized by the Chavistas, and in turn invited the collective to present something together. Most members were non-committal. Some men said no because Women’s Day was not ‘for them’. Valeria and I decided to do the presentation together; she would take care of an introduction and I would follow by reading the Zapatista women’s speeches from the *encuentro* I had just finished transcribing. After our presentation, some women came up to us and asked if we would host a workshop at the *Centre de Femmes d’Ici et d’Ailleurs* (a community centre in Montreal for women ‘from here and abroad’) in a month’s time. Perhaps we could discuss women’s role in the APPO? Organize some participatory activity? Valeria and I said yes. We invited the collective to participate, at which point two other women joined, making us a group of four.

We met three times leading up to the event, during which time we divided the presentation into four parts, 15 minutes for each of us. We chose some YouTube videos to show about the APPO women who occupied the national television network Canal 9, managing to hold it and broadcast themselves for three weeks (see Stephen 2007). We remarked how each of us completed the tasks we took on in between each meeting, and how smooth our meetings were. We self-facilitated, took minutes and integrated our ideas such that the workshop was truly a collective product. We noted how different this experience was from our experience in *La Otra*.

The workshop itself was also a success, and the women who attended were so inspired by the women of Oaxaca that they asked us to come back in April and help them put together a radio clip of their own to honour the Oaxacan women for CKUT, a Montreal community radio station.

## **The Beginning of the End: Spring 2007**

All was not well in *La Otra*. There was an increasing polarization and animosity among certain collective members, largely but not exclusively along lines of gender.

Upon my return from Mexico in February 2007, I decided to speak to various women ex-participants about their experiences in our collective, as well as women activists in the other collectives who had participated in organizing the speaking tour. I took advantage of many parties and social events to strike up such conversations. One woman explained to me that she and Carlo had been good friends but a rupture occurred when she confronted him about manipulating young women to do all the leg-work in the collective while he acted as ideas-man. He responded by accusing her of being a ‘white feminist’, which especially provoked her, she said, because she is not white! She said he proceeded to ‘trash’ her to activists in both Montreal and Mexico, effectively cutting her off from many projects. While this was all in the past, as she told the story it was clear this experience still hurt and frustrated her.

Someone apparently told Carlo I had been talking to these women, because within a week Carlo had told some collective members that I was ‘conspiring’ against him. The week following, my boyfriend accused me of having another lover in Mexico and not telling him. Carlo had told him, he said. My soon-to-be-ex also said that my new activist women friends in other collectives were ‘racist *hembristas*’ and ‘lesbians’ who only want to hang out with me ‘in order to seduce me’. This information also apparently came from Carlo.

It occurred to me that I was in danger of becoming the next pariah. While I had some good friendships with some women in the collective, most men and women respected the men to such a degree that their analysis would prevail – if Carlo had it in for me, I was probably doomed, especially if my ex ‘switched sides’. The collective members would not side with me or give me the benefit of the doubt, just as I had not supported Elizabeth ten months before.

Meanwhile, *La Otra* continued to meet. Our main project now was to forge ties with native youth at the Montreal Native Friendship Centre and to fundraise to help send those interested to the *Encuentro de Pueblos Indigenas de America* the next year. At the Zapatista *encuentro*, activists had problematized the fact that the Montreal participants were largely privileged middle-class students rather than people from indigenous communities that had most in common with the Zapatistas themselves. This *Encuentro Indigena* was then convened and we decided to mobilize resources to facilitate others’ travel instead of our own.

After shooting pool at the Native Friendship Centre for a few weeks, we were invited to bring a movie about the Zapatistas and do an informal workshop about the struggle of indigenous peoples in Mexico. When the day arrived, Carlo, who had taken on the task of bringing the video, was nowhere to be found. A phone call to Carlo yielded the information that he did not recall that this had been his responsibility. We thus had no movie on hand and our collective looked incompetent as a consequence.

This ‘misunderstanding’ appeared disingenuous to me. Carlo liked to be the nexus of our contact with other groups. Most of the links suggested by other members were rejected. If these initiatives ever did come to fruition (helping out with the drive to unionize Mexican migrant workers or giving a presentation on International Women’s Day), it was because the people who had suggested the idea in the first place ended up doing it by themselves. The only projects we would take on as a ‘collective’ were projects that Carlo suggested or strongly supported. Attempts to point this out earlier were dismissed not only by Carlo but by other male members of the collective.

The phenomenon was subtle. Each time a project was not followed through, another explanation was easily found. A look at the big picture clearly evinced a pattern, but very few members at any given time had the big picture at their disposal. The women members who had tried to point out the problem a few months before had since left the collective and new members had joined. Only a few of us retained an ‘institutional memory’ of the collective during the past year. And I had not wanted to challenge the collective on this point because, as I’ve mentioned, I was on thin ice. I did not want a campaign against me to escalate, forcing me to break ties with the group. At the time they were my closest group of friends.

But this act of ‘forgetting’ the movie for the Native Friendship Centre was, for me, the last straw. At the next collective meeting I challenged Carlo about his selective memory. I suggested that perhaps he was not interested in following through with our project with the Native Friendship Centre because, unlike most other social milieus we operated in, the centre was an Anglo-phone environment. This meant that the three English speakers of the collective – *all of whom*

were women – would be privileged nodes in the project network. We would have unmediated contact with our collaborators, whereas his contact would be mediated by us. In other words, he would not be able to control the project. Carlo said that this was not so. In his defence he offered an alternate explanation: he had trouble socializing with indigenous people, he said, as he can't help but see them as 'backward'. He admitted this was a problematic prejudice, but could not seem to work through it, and so thought it best to remove himself from the situation. This comment was followed by an awkward silence, and a few, rather measured, sympathetic responses – at least he was honest, being reflective, it was said. I did not particularly believe Carlo (at first he said he 'forgot', and now this?). And even if it were true, I thought it an unacceptable excuse. I ventured the observation that if any of the white women of the collective had said something in such a vein, he and others would spare no time in denouncing their unacceptable racism.

'Are you not conscious of this double-standard?' I asked. A messy, heated discussion ensued which I cannot render exactly here. Basically, the remaining women in the collective piped up about all the women who had left, and conjectured the reasons why, directing their criticism to all the men in the collective. This line of questioning was then overshadowed by a diatribe by my ex-boyfriend, who began to lay into Carlo viciously and relentlessly, blaming him for a litany of our collective's problems.

Carlo, rather uncharacteristically, began to cry. Also uncharacteristically, he suggested he leave the collective as a solution. Was he showing remorse? Was he having a revelation? Or was this a devious manoeuvre? After all, perhaps it was easier to drop out than to assume responsibility. And he was smart enough to know that, faced with the choice to either continue the collective without him or disband the collective, we would feel compelled, by either guilt or integrity (depending on how you look at it), to choose the latter. (This is, indeed, what happened.) Furthermore, Carlo was one of the few collective members with enough social and symbolic capital in the activist scene to be able to create a new collective later, with new members, so this could be simply a way of getting rid of us. But maybe he was being sincere. It was impossible to tell, and I don't think I will ever know for sure.

The collective never met again. *La Otra Otra* continued to organize the events at the women's centre, but once we no longer had this immediate purpose, we too stopped meeting. During the summer of 2007, some former collective members left the country for Mexico or elsewhere. Some didn't, and I heard through mutual friends that some considered me a divisive white feminist who also had some sort of grudge against Carlo and that I, single-handedly, broke up the collective to 'get at him'. The people saying these things were mostly women. These outcomes depressed me, but I tried to put it out of my mind and turn my attention to writing my thesis.

There continue to be friendships among many of the ex-members, but also fault-lines that have prevented us from getting together as a group. Those of us from *La Otra Otra* have stayed in touch, on and off, although we all live in different countries now. We have each moved on to new anarchist collectives, jobs in NGOs and further academic degrees. While the dramatic end of our collective saddened us, those I have spoken to have said in retrospect that we learned from and value our experience – both the fun and difficult parts. Most agree that ending the collective was the best thing we could have done – besides, no one 'collective' is 'the movement', we are. The movement has moved on. We bring our experience to bear on the next project. I'm sure that we learned a thing or two about the need to talk to one another, the value of working together as women, and the importance of backing each other up. At least I certainly did.



There are many lessons to be drawn from this story. We may observe, for example, how contemporary anarchists continue to characterize feminism as ‘single-issue’, reflecting the classic argument between Marxist and anarchist women and their male comrades since the turn of the twentieth century (Chinchilla 1992; Moya 2002). On the other hand, we may note a change on the Left whereby the economic reductionism that romanticized the working class is in some ways replaced by an ethnic reductionism that romanticizes the indigenous as the new revolutionary subject (and yet, notably, still marginalizes gender). I have explored these questions elsewhere (Lagalis 2010, 2011). What I want to focus on in the following section is the question of gendered communication dynamics and their intersections with the ‘micro-political and quotidian elements’ (Osterweil 2004: 185) of oppositional publics through a persistent conceptual public:private divide in activists’ ‘revolution of everyday life’.

## Gender, Communication and the Public:private Divide

Despite our collective’s espousal of prefigurative politics and a ‘revolution of everyday life’, an insidious public:private dynamic informed what the collective considered ‘political’. ‘Consensus’ governed (public) meetings of the collective, but outside of meetings (‘in private’) informal hierarchies – including relations of power based on gender – governed social relations. Activists’ comments suggesting that communication on the internal dynamics of the collective should only take place within official collective meetings reflects their construction of the meeting as *the* public space, that is, the (only) legitimate sphere of political dissent. When men complained of ‘gossip’, their strategy of criticism centred on its *form*: ‘conspiring’ (in private) – rather than on its content. Given that collective meetings were often hostile to gender concerns, and given that this appears to be why women members aired their thoughts and feelings in women-only spaces, such a citation of the ‘public’ must be seen as serving specifically to de-legitimize discussion of gender politics within the collective – thus creating a situation that called for direct action.

One challenge to solidarity among women in our collective was our own relatively uncritical acceptance of the discourses of public and private. Women too participated in the criticism of ‘gossip’. As noted above, ‘gossip’ was criticized in terms of its form (communication ‘behind someone’s back’), rather than its content, notwithstanding the fact that if the content had been anything but gendered grievances, it would not have been marked as ‘gossip’ – but simply as ‘conversation’ – in the first place. In fact, what marked the communication as gossip was not only its gendered content but the simple fact that women were the ones communicating it: when men discussed my supposed sexual adventures in Mexico or maligned my electronic report back from Mexico behind my back, no one ventured to call *their* speech gossip. Women in our collective largely failed to notice this.

Indeed the word ‘gossip’ has a gendered valence broadly speaking. In English it is rarely used to refer to talk among men, which is usually rendered instead as ‘shop talk’, ‘shooting the breeze’, etc., and if they are said to be gossiping, it carries the connotation – a derogatory one at that – that they were acting like women (Rysman 1977). The adjective we used in Spanish may be rendered masculine as well as feminine (*chismoso/a*) and can be used in reference to men, but this usage was a rare occurrence in our collective (and continued to be rare during my subsequent fieldwork in Mexico City). Based on its use in context it is clear that *chisme* carries some of the same gendered baggage of ‘gossip’ in English. But why should women’s talk be maligned as

‘gossip’, whether in the collective or the world at large? In English the etymology of the word and the history of its changing meaning suggest an increasing sanction against communication and friendship among women related to the consolidation of collective male power (Federici 2004; Rysman 1977). Indeed the story of our collective, like other ethnographic work on narratives (for example, Cole, this volume; Fonseca 2003), shows precisely how talking among women can challenge and mediate male power.

The critique of gossip as a form of communication was effective in part because women collective members, myself included, agreed with the principle that criticism should be ‘to one’s face’ versus ‘behind one’s back’. Of course, if the activist praxis of our collective matched our ideals, then there would be no problem with upholding this virtuous principle. However, given that our meetings did not, in fact, exemplify a democratic, anti-authoritarian space, autonomous direct action – gossip – became necessary. When we did not act autonomously we merely buttressed the existing gendered power hierarchy within the collective. The failure of the women, myself included, to effectively analyse this pattern, and to reconcile our need to communicate ‘privately’ with our political values, worked to divide us.

Besides not ‘talking behind people’s backs’, the other shared collective value that appeared to define ‘gossip’ was the principle that one not repeat second-hand information. This principle serves a righteous end in most cases. However, consider its implications in terms of how the negotiation of the relationship between ‘public’ and ‘private’ collides with the logistical realities of public and private space: when information concerns comportment in intimate relationships, especially regarding sexual activity, it is often the case that there simply are no ‘witnesses’; the comportment is ‘private’ practically speaking. Any rule against hearsay thus becomes a rule against discussing a large swath of women’s experience and problems. And, any call to refrain from hearsay lines up (rather perfectly) with the imperative to ‘protect’ the private sphere as an unpoliticized space. In other words, when anyone discusses the private sphere (outside the private sphere), subversion is seen to reside in both the form and content of the discussion.

Communication must be seen, then, as crucial to the constitution, creation or consolidation of the power of publics. Consider how this was the case in both the node (the collective) and the network (of collectives). The men who dismissed our concerns about Magdalena during the speaking tour were the two ‘contact persons’ of the collectives most involved, which made it difficult to cross them. When Stephane called the *Chavistas* instead of Valeria to organize the demonstration, there wasn’t much we could do about it once it was done. The fact that the men in each collective were in closer contact with each other (either as ‘contact persons’ or due to informal – ‘private’ – ties among them) than they were with the women meant that women’s attempts at intervention were less successful than they might have been.

A particularity of our situation was the fact that the communicative power of men in our collective was partially contingent on their transnational contacts. The longest-standing members in the collective were those (men) with contacts with social movement organizations and activists in Mexico, which made others disinclined to cross them. Carlo’s high standing on this basis was a factor that made me hesitate to side with Elizabeth early on, and this same phenomenon appeared to be at work when I found myself in Elizabeth’s position later that year.

Why male activists enjoy the privileged position of formal or informal ‘contact person’ in the first place requires further ethnographic research. Initial observations suggest that men enjoy these positions due to a higher level of confidence in public-speaking (both ‘live’ and on the internet); a greater inclination towards self-promotion and ‘representing’ others (in Mexico one

would say *protagonismo*); and having more free time and energy because they are relieved (by women) from doing much social, emotional and imaginative labour in a variety of social fields. Once in the position of 'contact person', men attempt to retain such power in various ways. I am still quite certain that Carlo's sabotage of the Native Friendship Centre event falls into this category. Also consider, for example, what transpired – the Internet War – when I reported back to my collective from Mexico. The man who was the original link between the two groups became agitated and – ego and/or control thus compromised – he retaliated by gossiping about how I was a gossip. The extent to which this initiative was successful – despite its inherent irony – was due to male members of various collectives recognizing each other as authorities and treating each other as such, thus manifesting that very authority.

## **Agitating the Node, the Network**

Anarchists do not respect borders in practice or in theory. Thinking nearby those involved in *La Otra*, it is clear that the collective's identification as a 'Canadian', 'Quebecois', 'Latin American' or 'transnational' movement is immaterial to them. If there is an anarchist 'public', it is certainly not a nation-based 'sphere' or an 'audience' – national or otherwise. Rather it is a transnational network that publicizes certain issues, organizes certain public events and honours certain space as 'public' (for example meetings, *encuentros*) – versus (the bracketed) 'private' that serves to constitute the public.

Considering *La Otra* as a window into a rhizomatic 'movement public', one that spans the Americas, raises a variety of theoretical, methodological and political challenges. How may we discern one collective's relationship to – and influence on – a larger, unbounded network, and vice versa? And, for the purposes of this chapter, how can gender change occur, given a collective's embedded relationships with other nodes and networks?

Scholars of contemporary anarchism (Juris 2008) and historians of classical anarchist movements (Turcato 2007) have found the node/network framework most appropriate for understanding anarchism. Turcato notes that, since anarchism does not propagate itself through formal institutions in which 'an impersonal structure exists, with roles in which actors are mutually substitutable' (2007: 411), we must consider anarchism in terms of a 'network', that is, 'a set of nodes (i.e. its militants or groups), and links between such nodes (i.e. contacts, correspondence, resource exchanges, etc.)' (2007: 414). While we can expect patterns at one scale to be partially replicated at another in perpetual feedback loops (so that the interaction of individuals will affect interaction between activist collectives, which will affect regional networks, transnational networks, and vice versa), it would be a mistake to render the relationship of the 'macro' (network) to the 'micro' (node) as linear. Their relationship is not linear or binary (local/global) but rather contingent on many messy pathways. Within non-linear systems, small disturbances may have large effects, and vice versa. Relations of *scale* in such a network are constituted of 'partial' repetitions and connections (Strathern 2004).

So many drops in the sea make up an ocean, and in a non-linear system, one drop may create an ocean. As a transnational solidarity collective, we fundraised thousands of dollars and sent the money to various organizations in Mexico –and not others; we sent money to some political prisoners – and not others; we politicized certain assassinations of political activists – and not others; we organized demonstrations in response to some events – and not others. In all of our

work, we privileged solidarity with activists and organizations that did not engage seriously with gender as a system of domination. And we systematically sidelined gender as an axis of struggle – we did not integrate solidarity with women’s movements in Latin America into our transnational solidarity work and women who attempted to do otherwise were largely eliminated from the collective. If a fraction of the collectives in this transnational movement network failed to engage with gender dynamics in local and global contexts, from the smallest to the largest scale, this no doubt affected the network itself.

In 2011, I attended an anarchist *encuentro* in Mexico City – after the first draft of this chapter had been written – and participated in its anarcha-feminist caucus. While Mexico City and Montreal are different contexts in important ways, the women activists present voiced many of the same problems discussed here (and more). They were also worried that when we presented our summary (*relatoria*) in the plenary session, we would be accused of ‘divisive gossip’, and indeed some men later ventured to use these words. I think it highly likely that there are anarchist women all over facing similar challenges, and yet we do not necessarily realize it because this is not the kind of information that tends to ‘flow’ through the network; rather it gets locked ‘in place’ at the level of the collective. After all, there are all sorts of links between the anarchist movements in Mexico City and Montreal (and elsewhere), but the books, zines and information that circulate along the chain are largely written and circulated by male anarchists, who themselves appear to travel and circulate more often than the women. Some gossip on a continental scale is in order here. It now occurs to me that I could compile a veritable *anthology* of gossip to circulate to anarchists elsewhere and to which they could contribute their stories.

One could argue that, in forcing the private into the cracks of the public of one collective, the women of the *La Otra* had a small impact. But, while our women’s meetings and workshops – as well as what we learned about feminist solidarity through all that transpired – were just drops in an ocean, they caused some big waves that continue to ripple. May the gossip spread like ‘seeds’ that germinate and grow where one most or least expects. May the weeds force open more cracks.

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