

FOR A QUICK READ ON THE TRAIN

by Emily Schmall

It's a humid, quiet Sunday evening in Mexico City. I silently count the images and colors that symbolize each train stop until I reach mine—a blue cathedral on the yellow line. Even if I could not read Spanish, I would still be able to navigate my way home in Mexico's capital. From the Aztecs, whose painted empire is their finest legacy, to Diego Rivera, David Siquieros, and Jose Clemente Orozco, whose Communist project was articulated best in public murals, messages and meanings are still made and codified in pictures today. What Mexico City is lacking is a written story.

Recently, there has been greater initiative to give one. *Para leer de boleto en el metro*, or according to one translation, *For a Quick Read on the Train*, is a two-year, six volume anthology featuring one hundred and four of Latin America's most important contemporary authors, including Mexican critic and short story writer Carlos Monsivaís, Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, and Mexican poet and philosopher Octavio Paz. For the cost of a ticket, a passenger of the city's metro can borrow a slick black book of essays, poems, and a play.

Over the course of two years, Metro passengers will have the opportunity to read nearly one-thousand pages of critical and literary works, for free, as part of an effort to cultivate a "culture" of reading. How can a society be self-critical, reflective, or discursive if no one reads? This was the question perturbing Paloma Saíz, under-secretary of literature in Mexico City. "I think for a democratic government, it is absolutely fundamental," Saíz said referring to the metro library project. It complements the Zócalo program, which promotes the free circulation of new literature by distributing 7,000 books every fifteen days, and also the numerous book clubs who



Books in front of the Gandhi bookstore on Avenida de la Paz in Mexico City, Mexico. Photo © E. Schmall.

meet all around the city. “I was worried by the fact that people in Mexico read so seldom, and that those who do read, rarely do it in a quotidian manner. We want to change the way people read, because I truly believe that reading can eventually change the way people think. We should try to instill in the people a vice for books.”

Throughout Mexico’s modern history, political parties have always used the “problem of literacy” as a stage for debate. It is not that the general public cannot read: 90% of the nation is literate, and thousands of its readers subscribe to soap opera digests and to *Esto*, a newspaper with more graphics than text. But literacy is not simply the capacity to read, but also its application. The Department of Culture, which is sponsoring the project, is not concerned with whether or not people can read, but what they choose to do with this skill, and how.

The media immediately framed *Para leer de boleto* as the Department of Culture’s solution to the endemic crime that brought international attention to the burgeoning modern city. The fare is two pesos—exactly twenty cents of the U.S. dollar—less than a taco sold from a *canasta* on the street. It is cheap when compared to most things; even the poorest can usually afford a ride. And for this price, travelers are free to take an anthology. Kids in bright orange t-shirts stand at the turnstiles where police once stood, anxious to answer the puzzled expressions of passengers. Are they actually free? They’re not religious tracts, or advertisements, or political propaganda? These kids, called *Ola Naranja* (the Orange Wave), come from at-risk homes, and are commonly out of work and school. They are paid a small stipend by the Secretary of Social Development to orient passengers with the metro library. Having been trained at a literature seminar taught by the authors themselves, the Orange Wave knowledgeably deals with these books the way any self-assured businessperson would, with clarity and conviction. The kids are not there, however, simply to distribute.

They are also there to divert. “What this city doesn’t need is more repressive-

ness” explains Saíz, “but rather a friendly face.” A face that will relieve people, that will assure them that the government doesn’t suspect them all—a face unlike one might see in New York City, for example. When former mayor of New York Rudy Giuliani came as a consultant in the fall of 2003, his ideas were dismissed as too draconian, which was when the metro director proposed hiring juveniles to change the metro’s sometimes-stark atmosphere.

Public transportation in Mexico City—and specifically the Metro subway system—was to make economic expansion possible, facilitate an increase in production, and ultimately advance capital. In 1969, when the first line was built, the city boasted 4 million inhabitants; that number seems modest compared to the current 20 million. A bridge between outlying suburban regions and residential neighborhoods, the Metro barrels beneath the museums, the markets, the cathedrals, the drone of traffic, and the daunting concentration of pedestrians—the largest in the world. Historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch observed in his classic, *The Railway Journey*, “Motion is no longer dependent on the condition of natural space, but on a mechanical power that creates its own new spatiality.” Here, the ‘motion’ described not only details a rapidity in movement, or even a capability of traversing space, but also the motion of the market—to proceed or regress depending on the working of such mechanical power.

At one time, the Northeastern Rail crossed the desert land of Chihuahua, the

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region just south of Arizona, to the shores of Veracruz. People recall it with an equal amount of pride and dismay. The Mexico Railway was among the world’s finest, an Orient Express through Mexico’s diverse landscapes. During the Ernesto Zedillo administration, the last of the seventy-year PRI strong-hold, and after a dragging but inevitable process of privatization, the line was sold to a U.S. business, and today only carries freight. The Northeast Railway is operated as *Transportación Ferroviaria Mexicana* (TFM), a key component of Kansas City Southern’s NAFTA Railway. Today, the greatest people mover in Mexico is the city’s metro system, carrying its 7 million riders per day over two-hundred kilometers and eleven rubber-tired lines.

That which has historically been seen as dynamic about the Metro is what early progressives deemed its class-dissolving character. But what many feared—and what seemed and still seems reasonable—was the train station’s potential to serve as a scene of crime. In optical and acoustic isolation from the world above, civil etiquette conforms to its surroundings. The space is crowded, hot, and often uncomfortably intimate. Most people spend four to six hours daily this way. While the space is indeed unavoidably awkward, most crimes fall into the category of petty theft. Yet when crim-

inal inclinations and bodies cross, it results in unguarded indiscretion; hands move shamelessly and eyes cannot penetrate beneath the dense pool of bodies. But for the same reason that certain crimes can be anticipated in a space utilized by many, the Metro is also ideal for literacy efforts, or so believes Paloma Saiz. And this idea, that literature distracts criminals from their crime, might be fairly characterized as Shakespearian, that is, if we take a lead from *The Merchant of Venice*, Act V, Scene 1.

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, strategems, and spoils

It is this line of logic—the humanizing property of art—that moved a coalition of Metro employees, security personnel, and government bureaucrats to look to literature as a way to combat crime. Saiz has organized and edited an anthology of contemporary authors whose understanding of Mexico City, and discussion of modern urban life, is the common strand among them. The texts narrate a history that had, for many, only ever been told through speech and imagery. Saiz contends that habitual reading—the objective of this program—will not only deter crime by keeping the hands of criminals occupied, but also might encourage strangers to behave with more civility to one another.

While President Vicente Fox has announced the imminent construction of a mega-library of over one million volumes in the city's center, the leftist city government rejects this proposal, arguing that a building few have time to frequent will hardly entice those who live underground. Instead, it supports localized efforts reaching below—reaching into the space where working and traveling people spend all of their “free” time, ensuring that the benefits of reading are met by the right hands.

A good book is more convincing than twenty political platforms. It seems prescient to quote Soviet critic and writer Victor Serge, who wrote, “We will found and defend a proletarian literature, for this is the only way to continue our party's glorious tradition.” In Mexico, modern history speaks of much the same thing.

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