

“Exile & Utopia”

A Reading and Exhibit of the Illustrated Book by Aaron Johnson-Ortiz

Background:

The ampersand between the words “exile” and “utopia” transforms the feeling of loss of home into a hope for a better world. This is the trajectory of the exhibited book, which traces a group of exiled Mexicans led by Ricardo Flores Magon in the early twentieth century as they flee repression and surveillance through the US and Canada, connect with North American anarchists and socialists, and attempt to organize a revolution in Mexico. In the centennial of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the author/artist retraced this failed precursor movement, photographed the erased historic sites where the group hid and worked, assembled a narrative based on intercepted correspondence and detective notes, and composed abstract drawings that chart the growth and/or constriction of the movement.

Biography

Aaron Johnson-Ortiz’s background has involved shuttling between southern Mexico, where he worked as a volunteer artist with Zapatista cooperatives, and the American Midwest, where he participated in immigrant rights’ movements. His work retracing the exiled precursors of the Mexican Revolution in the United States was born of a desire to retell and reactivate the long but erased history of solidarity and common struggle between the two regions. “Exile & Utopia” was Aaron’s thesis work as a Masters of Fine Arts student at the University of Michigan, from where he graduated in April.