



**Cultural Shape Shifters:  
Cartonera Publishers**

**AMONG THE NEIGHBORS**

**Ksenija Bilbija**

**Cultural Shape-Shifters:**  
*Cartonera Publishers*

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## I

There is no doubt that good ideas resonate—and not many would disagree that the idea that led to the creation of the first *cartonera* publisher was a great one. Eloísa Cartonera, as it was named, came into being in 2003 as a direct product of the postMenem economic crisis of 2001 in Argentina, when many small and mid-sized businesses went bankrupt and hundreds of thousands of workers lost their source of income, thereby losing their place in the system of production. The combination of nearly one-fifth of the citizens of Buenos Aires living below the poverty line together with an explosive increase in the price of paper gave birth to a new occupation: *cartoneros*, or cardboard pickers. Humans were literally turned into “trash”—a disposable biological material for which the neoliberal society no longer had any use. In the country where recycling was neither mandatory nor expected, they made their living by collecting cardboard from garbage and selling it to recycling companies on the outskirts of this metropolis of some 14 million people. This social transformation brought change within the cultural landscape as well. Since the price of paper increased, small, independent presses vanished because they lacked the resources to financially sustain their book production. Also lost with them was the impulse to experiment with literary forms and to push artistic expression into uncharted territory. Consequently, big profit-oriented multinational publishers took over the market and—by proxy—literary tastes through the sale of mainstream bestsellers. Working in partnership with *cartoneros*, Eloísa Cartonera started publishing books with four main objectives:

- 1) the restoration of dignity and cultural authority to working people;

- 2) the dissemination of works by a mix of emerging and recognized writers pushing the limits of narrative and poetic experimentation;
- 3) the creation of a new praxis drawn on political empowerment through literacy workshops, advocacy, and political activism;
- 4) the exploration of new means of sustainability in the free market economy.

But would the idea of making books by hand out of recycled cardboard (bought at five times the market price from those whose daily survival depended on its collection, thereby creating jobs for their family members) resonate beyond the Argentine capital? One can safely imagine that in 2003 Buenos Aires, none of the cofounders of Eloísa Cartonera—Washington Cucurto, Fernanda Laguna, or Javier Barilaro—thought for a second about the value of their idea for posterity. They were living in the present moment and saw the social tissue of the once-rich society crumbling in front of their eyes. They were not entrepreneurs but poets and visual artists. And yet, the fact that only five years later there were eight *cartonera* publishers in seven Latin American countries—and since then some 300 new ones were founded and are making books in Europe, North America, Africa, and Asia—indicates that the idea was brilliant and resonated around the world. The imagination of Eloísa’s founders proved to be contagious and produced a whole range of new harmonies.

Eloísa Cartonera is a nonprofit, self-governing cooperative that buys cardboard from street collectors and uses it to make covers for the photocopied pages of poetry and fiction books. At first, the *cartoneros* were paid 1.50 pesos for two pounds of cardboard, while the usual “market” price was 30 cents. In addition,

children who would otherwise collect cardboard from the streets of Buenos Aires were employed to cut and paint the book covers for 3 pesos per hour. Their books were sold for 5 pesos. Eloísa Cartonera was—and still is—adamant about not creating fetishes out of books. Cardboard is for them only a symbolic capital. In order to be solvent and pay the rent and full-time workers, they needed to sell around 400 books a month—which they did! In 2003, the very year Eloísa Cartonera was founded, they were recognized as the biggest cultural revelation of its time.<sup>1</sup>

What is the mysterious, powerful algorithm that guides the spread of *cartonera* publishing? Each *cartonera* is unique in its role as a cultural agent of very distinct communities, ranging from virtually illiterate to artistic and academic populations. But Eloísa Cartonera was also not a panacea nor a recipe for success; instead, Eloísa brought older technology and familiar tools back to the practice of bookmaking: cardboard, cutting knives, paint, brushes, and stencils. Then it handed those tools to the casualties of the new neoliberal market of the economically devastated country, and opened doors to other members of the community sensitive to social (in)justice and willing to participate in a bookmaking project. Technology with personality is relational—we can relate to it; it creates relationships and emotional meanings. To this texture/canvas were added words that were neither formulaic nor predictable. Words were combined in such a way that they could only chart new territories. Well known writers like Ricardo Piglia, César Aira, Martín Adán, Haroldo de Campos, among others (those whose names resonated and who were willing to enter into a

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<sup>1</sup> *Página 12*, Domingo, 28 de diciembre de 2003, [pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/index-2003-12-28.html](http://pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/index-2003-12-28.html). Accessed on October 20, 2018.

kind of social contract that did not bring money but an identity as a promoter of a worthwhile cause) started giving their unpublished manuscripts to Eloísa Cartonera. Books were sold for the equivalent of 1 U.S. dollar on the streets of Buenos Aires, at art fairs, as well as during public demonstrations and protests. At the same time, bookstores were selling *other* books, profitable and marketable, for 30 U.S. dollars or more. Soon Eloísa opened their handmade cover-making to lesser known and emerging writers who were otherwise of no interest to the mainstream, multinational book publishing industry. (Only time will tell how many of those names will be remembered, but Washington Cucurto, Fernanda Laguna, Gabriela Bejerman, Fabian Casas, Francisco Garamona, and Dany Umpi seem to be shaping the current Argentine literary scene.)

Eloísa Cartonera tapped into a new demand of its cultural moment, a demand diametrically opposed to the alleged—and definitely fleeting—pleasures advertised by the neoliberal market and inscribed on the faces of mall shoppers in perpetual search of an ever-better value. This demand is the need to create a work-related community based on sharing subjective and affective relational experiences. In other words, creating memorable and pleasurable times while showing that jobs could be created and books could be made, one by one. Relational art invites the audience to participate in the art production and not just consume it, thus turning art into collective exercise. *Cartoneras* have created spaces that offer the experience of memorable time that is not shopping related. This means an interactive, participatory experience where the “visitor” is invited to become part of both the bookmaking process and the local community; in other words, to actively engage in the creative economy that surrounds *cartonera* publishing. The right to work, Eloísa’s principal imperative, is complemented by the

libidinal value imbedded in the books they produce: “our biggest discovery was that work can be pleasurable and fun [...] Literature becomes an excuse for creating experiences of affective relationships,” says María Gómez in her undergraduate thesis about Eloísa Cartonera.<sup>2</sup> Now *flaneurs* roaming the street of Buenos Aires (foreign as well as local), living through yet another economic crisis, are welcome to join the publishing cooperative Eloísa Cartonera in their workshop. The sound of a *cumbia*, smell of paint, hot *mate* passing from hand to hand, clamor of many interwoven conversations, and laughter of bookmakers will undoubtedly make the first-time visitor feel welcome and among friends. “Cooperativism showed us our strength. That was how we learned everything we now know, and we remain eager to learn more,” declares Eloísa Cartonera’s manifesto.<sup>3</sup>

The proletarian community that Eloísa Cartonera created appeals mostly, but not exclusively, to local and global middleclass consumers interested in social justice. Their contributions to iconoclastic Argentine bookmaking cooperatives consist not only of buying their books and attending workshops, but also in giving verbal support expressed through frequent blogs and other internet postings. The visual style of Eloísa’s books, along with the phrasing used in their advertising, invokes popular culture and kitsch (“the most colorful publisher in the world”), rather than the high

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<sup>2</sup> María Gómez, *Políticas de la palabra, políticas de la amistad*. Tesina de licenciatura, Carrera de ciencias de la Comunicación, Facultad de ciencias sociales, Universidad de Buenos Aires, February 2017.

<sup>3</sup> “Eloísa Cartonera” in *Akademia Cartonera: A Primer of Latin American Cartonera Publishers*, eds. Ksenija Bilbija and Paloma Célis Carbajal (Madison: Parallel Press, 2009), pp. 57-66.

culture of the intellectuals and writers who were their first published names and supporters.

The libidinal value associated with the pleasure and passion for book production was added to Eloísa Cartonera's principal imperative: the right to work. Its vision translated into the creation of jobs in the fragile Argentine economy and showed that with a bit of goodwill and lots of ingenuity some of the casualties of the neoliberal market could be spared. Nobody ever thought that buying a few sheets of cardboard from *cartoneros*—giving jobs to those interested in making roughly 400 books a month—would turn the Argentine economic crisis around! A few of those iconoclastic books changed the lives of some of the workers, as other books travelled abroad and inspired their readers to start their own rebellious *cartonera* publishing. They opened a horizon of possible identities for those most affected by the economic crisis by sidestepping the publishing industry and entering the neoliberal market economy through a lateral door. The brilliance behind Eloísa Cartonera is in showing that the garbage that *cartoneros* collected— technically the product from which all the value has been used up—actually does have worth, just like the *cartoneros* themselves; people who have value despite the fact that they have been relegated to the status of societal detritus. As for Eloísa Cartonera, after almost a decade of culture shifting, its work was recognized by the 2012 Prince Claus Award in the Netherlands—an award of 100,000 euros (approximately 113,500 U.S. dollars). Always in search of new territories, the collective bought an acre of land, rebuilt a rundown house in greater Buenos Aires, and is learning how to cultivate an organic garden—all while continuing to make cardboard books.

## II

In post-Menem Argentina, cardboard once used for shipment of goods to be sold in supermarkets was transformed into book covers, and the inversion—if not alchemy—meant that the dignity of workers who facilitated the transformation was preserved. In the Bolivia of Evo Morales, the Chile of Ricardo Lagos, and the Peru of Alejandro Toledo, books made out of cardboard resonated; but these societies lived differing moments and required alternative, unique kinds of engagement from their cultural proxies. What endured most from Eloísa Cartonera throughout this cultural translation across Latin American countries (and later within Europe) was the *cartón* [cardboard] itself, used in the making of books, and the sense of shared social purpose—spiced with activism—among participants. Cardboard, hand-painted covers, and solidarity seem to be stable parts of the innovative publishing algorithm that continues to echo around the globe.

Each one of the newly created *cartonera* publishers has its own social initiative, creative poetics, and firm footing in the local cultural scene. Adhering to the copyleft etiquette and creative commons license, they freely adopted the bookmaking methodology—the use of hand-painted recycled cardboard for the covers—while modifying the “source code.” In other words, they ignored the idea of intellectual property and recycled it for their own local needs and wants. While it is hard to say how many *cartonera* publishers operate in the world today, it is safe to estimate that some 300 were founded since 2003, the year Eloísa was founded. (Because of their fleeting and ephemeral existence, they may function only for a few years and then disappear; also, they may not have a strong presence on the internet.) Their spread is not only related to post-book

technology, such as the development and accessibility of digital and social media platforms, but also to pre-book “technologies” such as oral tradition and word-of-mouth.

Sarita Cartonera from Lima, Peru, is precisely one of those examples: its founding in 2004 is tied to the discovery of an Eloísa book during a trip to Santiago, brought there by a friend of a friend after a trip to Buenos Aires. This first Peruvian *cartonera* publisher added a literacy campaign to their book production, as well as the goal of accumulating readers instead of capital. Like the *cartonera* publishers that followed in the first wave, they debunked the high art associated with elitist notions of literary production and amalgamated it with a craftsmanship that recalls “low culture.” Symbolic and material value seemed to reconcile between the cardboard covers. Sarita Cartonera’s manifesto claims that reading should be a daily act for all—and they put their words into deeds.

Animita Cartonera is a Chilean publisher founded in 2005 in Santiago. Given the laws of the country—and unlike the two previously founded *cartoneras*—it had to register with the government, acquire International Standard Book Numbers (ISBNs), and constitute itself as a (very small) profit-making enterprise. While it could appear that, 15 years after the military dictatorship (1973-1990), book production needed to be under the control of the state, the new democratic Chile actually offered help to publishers in disseminating national cultural values. They paid for housing the press and financially supported some of the publications. Like its Argentine and Peruvian predecessors, Animita’s editors challenged the imposition of neoliberal norms as the only viable means of book production—but Chilean publishers did it from within the system. They continued the practice of buying cardboard from

*cartoneros* and added an additional layer of social engagement by working with at-risk youth and housewives, organizing writing workshops, and inaugurating a series of children's books. The communal philosophies of the democratization of culture and the construction of social meaning are still central to their book production, and they use the power of local resources to create the community necessary for social change. By being a legally registered business, Animita's book production is regulated and controlled by the state, thus placing it in a different position than the previous two *cartonera* publishers.

Bolivia was the next Latin American country to see the birth of a *cartonera* press. It is a country where cardboard is hard to find, even in garbage, because there is always some use for it in the home. Mandragora Cartonera was founded in 2005 in the academic circles of the city of Cochabamba. The principal goal was to disseminate Bolivian authors along with Spanishspeaking writers from the rest of the continent, as well as to make theoretical texts accessible to university students. It also conducted bookmaking workshops at Cochabamba's center for deaf children. Somewhat differently from the other Bolivian publisher (Yerba Mala Cartonera, founded in 2006 in El Alto, the second biggest city and the poorest in the nation), Mandragora Cartonera also emphasized its distance from the Marxist and socialist ideology. The belief that bookmaking will bring a better future to the victims of neoliberalism was for Mandragora a chimera not worth pursuing; therefore, it focused on the diffusion and democratization of literature. In 2012, after producing some 55 titles in editions of 100-150 copies, it stopped making books wrapped in cardboard covers and—under the name Mandragora publicaciones—began the production of very affordable, conventionally produced books.

Yerba Mala Cartonera, on the other hand, inspired by Argentine and Peruvian *cartoneras*, sees its foundation as a direct result of several factors: the Bolivian Gas War that culminated in 2003; the discriminatory and violent politics of former president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (recently found by a U.S. court responsible for civilian deaths during the 2003 protests); and the ultimate rise to power of indigenous leader Evo Morales in 2005. At a moment when one book costs 20% of the average monthly salary, Yerba Mala Cartonera wanted to make literature accessible to those who could not afford it. Yerba Mala's name ["Bad Weed"] echoes a belief that the poor, just like weeds, always sprout back, and its goal is to rescue marginal writing and eliminate illiteracy (12% of the population), so that Bolivia can become the third completely literate country in Latin America.

Brazilian Dulcinéia Catadora (2007) is a collective of people "united by their differences: people with diverse ethnic heritage, diverse creeds, background and ways of life."<sup>4</sup> It is based on a non-pyramidal structure that believes in building knowledge and meaning collectively, and not in transferring it only by way of those who happen to possess it. For Dulcinéia Catadora, the aesthetic experience is a collective act: one composed of writers, artists, journalists, young children of recyclers, and formerly homeless adults attracted by the art of writing. They don't believe in the autonomy of art disconnected from life and human relationships, or from social, political, and economic context. Their guiding principal is to dignify street collectors of recyclables (who carry up to five hundred kilos in their carts up and down the steep streets of São Paulo) by paying them five times more for cardboard than what so-called "socially

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<sup>4</sup> "Dulcinéia Catadora" in *Akademia Cartonera: A Primer of Latin American Cartonera Publishers*, eds. Ksenija Bilbija and Paloma Célis Carbajal (Madison: Parallel Press, 2009), p. 32.

responsible recyclers” pay—whose earnings don’t allow them to have a dignified life or build self-esteem. Their work goes beyond charity and communitarianism and is centered around sustainability. Furthermore, they are not a legally constituted entity; they don’t operate according to the Brazilian trade laws, and they are not producing for the marketplace. Dulcinéia Catadora, just like Argentine Eloísa Cartonera, is not about fetishizing books but changing the means of their production. In 2008 they started organizing urban interventions to take art outside of the private realm, extending it throughout public spaces where recyclers work. Dressed in an original and colorful sandwich-board type “coat” made out of painted *cartonera* books and amplified by a megaphone, they “spread literature outloud,” reciting the poetry of their collaborators and consequently altering the routine of the city—thereby calling attention to people and books that would otherwise remain invisible. Dulcinéia Catadora publishes not only works by wellknown Brazilian writers but also poems by recyclers; as a matter of fact, their first publication was *Sarau da Cooperifa*, a collection of poems by those who gather at Bar do Zé Batidão at São Paulo’s periphery.<sup>5</sup>

Yiyi-Jambo (2007), from Paraguay, kept the tradition of buying directly from street cardboard collectors and paying them more than official recycling factories, keeping the cost of books low and democratizing the practice of reading. It also enriched the *cartonera* impulse by creating an innovative hybrid poetic language, *portunbol selvagem*, a configuration of Spanish, Portuguese, Guarani, and some English. It strives to overcome geographical and mental borders, declaring in one of its

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<sup>5</sup> Nina Longinovic, “Dulcinéia Catadora” Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2018 in [ervantesvirtual dot com/obra/dulcineia-catadora-sao-paulo-2007--semblanza-931450](http://ervantesvirtual.com/obra/dulcineia-catadora-sao-paulo-2007--semblanza-931450). Accessed on June 10, 2019.

manifestoes: “Kontraband into the Vatikan and the rest of Globoland the sincerely sincere kisses that not even the loverboys and priciest hookers from the Sãopaulandese River will sell...” Another: “Books by Yiyi Jambo Cartonera have eyes, lips, nose, sex and legs, they speak for themselves like little posthuman animals, but...have no fear of books by Yiyi Jambo, they don’t bite...” Or another: “Turn cardboard into books into life into art into bread.”<sup>6</sup> It still acts on the original impulses of redefining globalization, annulling borders of all kinds, creating books one at a time, and uniting people with diverse ethnic heritages, creeds, and backgrounds.

The *cartonera* spirit reached the furthest edges of the Spanishspeaking world in Latin America when in 2008 two new *cartonera* publishers were founded in Mexico: La Cartonera and Santa Muerte Cartonera (which lasted only two years before entering the world of digital publishing). Their primary focus was the aesthetics of cover design, with each book produced by a visual artist in a numbered edition just like an art print. Since they come from the cities where there are no *cartoneros* roaming the streets in search of recyclables to be sold, their names instead refer to the cardboard used for their book covers. La Cartonera was the first Latin American *cartonera* to emphasize the aesthetic value of the cover, and its books—designed by visual artists—are seen as art objects. Consequently, they are also sold for more money than the publications of previous *cartonera* publishers.

In November of 2008, La Cartonera coordinated a unique collaborative book project in which six different *cartoneras*—

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<sup>6</sup> “Yiyi-Jambo” in *Akademia Cartonera: A Primer of Latin American Cartonera Publishers*, eds. Ksenija Bilbija and Paloma Célis Carbajal (Madison: Parallel Press, 2009), pp. 161-170.

from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Bolivia, and Paraguay—simultaneously published the unedited collection *Labyrinth Breath* by the Mexican poet and founder of Infra-realism (a revolutionary poetry movement of the mid-seventies) Mario Santiago Papasquiaro (1953-1998). (Santiago Papasquiaro is also known as Ulises Lima in Roberto Bolaño's novel *The Savage Detectives*). While the poems in each *cartonera* edition are the same, each publisher supplied a different prologue for their national readers, thus contextualizing Infra-realism and Santiago Papasquiaro's poetics.

There was something nomadic about this new *cartonera* sociability created by the intersection of reused cardboard boxes, garbage pickers, and books. It was a dual voyage of the traveller and the travelled, a journey marked by physical and symbolic mobility, one that originated from the Argentine *cartoneros*—victims of transnational capitalism who travelled nightly the length of their mega-city in search of recyclables—and stretched to Mexico in the shape of an art book with cardboard covers. *Cartoneros* defied urban limits and deterritorialized city spaces once they descended into the middle-class neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires. What began as a local action had achieved global identity.

*Cartonera* publishers believe in unfixed identities that surpass the notion of national borders: “It is a collective of people united by their differences; people with a diverse ethnic heritage as well as diverse creeds, backgrounds and ways of life,” the Brazilian Dulcinéia Catadora says in its manifesto. Sustainability and not-for-profit production are essential to all of them. “The diversity among its members encourages discussion and respect of difference, which are recognized, though not considered inequalities, opening room for an intense sharing of experience

and establishing a string of effects,” explains the Brazilian publisher.<sup>7</sup>

In 2003 Eloísa Cartonera’s gesture of buying cardboard from impoverished citizens, paying them more than recycling factories, and making books was political in the sense that it wanted to show that capitalism brought repression to multiple spheres of life and had altered many human communities in Latin America. The *cartonera* publishers share Washington Cucurto’s view of social recomposition:



*Dulcinéia Catadora*



*La Cartonera*

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<sup>7</sup> “Dulcinéia Catadora” in *Akademia Cartonera: A Primer of Latin American Cartonera Publishers*, eds. Ksenija Bilbija and Paloma Célis Carbajal (Madison: Parallel Press, 2009), pp. 145-160.





Bottom left and above: *cartonera* books on display.

[All images courtesy of Ksenija Bilbija]

If we can do it, a bunch of *cartoneros*—six of one, a half dozen of the other—why can't the State, which has everything, which has presses, and which could sell books at half price because they could produce 20 thousand in one run? With zero investment you could change the culture of Argentina. Who is not going to buy a book at a peso and a half in the street? It is just a matter of not making a profit. And you change everything.<sup>8</sup>

This is precisely what Rosi Braidotti, the theorist who postulated the term “nomadic subject,” suggests: “[I]n order to revisit the imaginary and to transform it, we need to be many. If the vision is that these many who are together are, each one of them, subdivided, nomadic [...] then we do not need fifty million to bring about a change.”<sup>9</sup>

Books fell into the neoliberal minefield, where the market had determined their value solely in economic terms. What mattered at the turn of the century (and still does) was that books were consumable. In a way—a somewhat romantic way—by hand painting each recycled cover, one by one, books made from cardboard recovered an “auratic” quality lost by mechanical reproduction, as remarked by Walter Benjamin. The social relationship *cartonera* books establish is determined not only by the casualties of neoliberal capitalism who collect cardboard

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<sup>8</sup> Guerrero, Pedro Pablo, cited in *Akademia Cartonera: A Primer of Latin American Cartonera Publishers*, eds. Ksenija Bilbija and Paloma Célis Carbajal (Madison: Parallel Press, 2009), p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> Rutvica Andrijašević, “Europe Does Not Make Us Dream: An Interview with Rosi Braidotti,” <http://translate.eipcp.net/strands/02/andrijasevicbraidotti-strands01en>. Accessed on November 13, 2018.

from urban garbage containers, but also from those who participate in their creation, and by those who later buy them. The newly acquired aura is mediating closeness—is creating the sense of collective and configuring a progressive relationship with a book by giving primacy to the people surrounding it, and not to its value as a fetish.

*Cartonera* publishing can't be analyzed from any fixed point because it is a kind of system that evades the notion of unity. It is not a controlled system. It is marked by discontinuities and contradictions: some last a very short time, while others have remained strong since 2003; some revolve around a small community, while others strive to achieve a global reach. Even if we were to look at the use of the term *cartonera*—sometimes referring to the person from whom the cardboard is bought, other times denoting the hand painted book cover—and see it as a mark of a family, a last name that unites all the publishers, we would soon realize that *cartonera* always implies more than the simple sum of meanings.

*Cartonera* books accumulate resilience and resonate with different kinds of citizenship and readership. In that sense, they are in the forefront of the sustainability challenge that our society faces, not only in terms of environmental aspects and the recycling that *cartoneros* do, but also in their role of cultivating and sustaining the practice of reading—as well as sustaining those writers willing to experiment and engage with the unknown possibilities that language and imagination offer. Furthermore, they foster and disseminate ethical and social qualities of diverse cultural communities while engaging the aesthetic mandates of our century. *Cartonera* books radiate the aura of resistance and action; coming from the margin, they are bound to unsettle accounts with colonial history and neoliberal

economy. However, their trajectory remains all but straightforward and predictable.

### III

It was hard to imagine in 2003—when the first *cartonera* publisher was constituted—that six years later there would be eight *cartonera* publishers in seven Latin American countries, and that the first meeting of all these publishers would happen in the center of an empire, the United States of America. At that point, the library of the University of Wisconsin-Madison already had in its Special Collections—alongside Bibles and other sacred and unique volumes from past centuries—some 360 *cartonera* books. A number of scholars and their graduate and undergraduate students were aware of the existence of *cartonera* books. Coinciding with the Wisconsin Book Festival in October of 2009, Paloma Célis Carbajal, the librarian in charge of the collection, and I, a professor of Latin American literatures, secured the funding for and organized the first Cartonera Publishers Conference, *Recycling Latin American Bookscapes*. The purpose of the conference and several workshops was twofold: to connect the members of different *cartonera* initiatives who came from Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, Peru, and Mexico, who in most cases did not know each other; and to bring together members of the community of scholars, faculty, graduate as well as undergraduate students, who were already working on research projects related to this iconoclastic paradigm along with members of the local community, public schools, and environmental agencies.

The simultaneous publication of the volume of bilingual manifestoes, *Akademia cartonera: A Primer of Latin American Cartonera Publishers* (Parallel Press, 2009) marked the first wave

of the *cartonera* publishing phenomenon. The volume also included a compact disc with nine academic articles. The entire content of the book was also made available online, and each of the publishers was given 100 copies of the volume so that they could enclose them in recycled, hand-painted cardboard covers and sell them in their respective cities. The Memorial Library of the University of Wisconsin-Madison keeps acquiring *cartonera* volumes and maintains a digital collection of covers as well as a database (<https://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/arts/eloisacart>) and research guide.

Later that year, in November of 2009, the *cartonera* publishing model crossed the Atlantic Ocean and reached Europe. The founding of the first Spanish *cartoneras* in Madrid and Seville marks, in my view, the beginning of the second wave of their global journey. Given the colonial past of Latin American space and its thorny relationship with the Old World, the fact that their ideas were spreading to Europe was not a small deed! The last time that happened was half a century earlier: It was in the late 1950s and early 1960s when novels and short stories by Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, José Donoso, and Manuel Puig awakened the interest of Spanish publishers and turned into an explosion of Latin American literature. The first world seemed thirsty and eager to immerse itself in what became known as magic realism.

The North's taste for the ethnic others and their way of questioning the nature of reality, fantasies, and myths brought Latin America into the English-speaking world. Bookstores could not supply sufficient copies of these novels, with their endless leaps and loops through time, dreamlike landscapes, and beautiful virginal women capable of rising into the sky while

hanging laundry (as in the Colombian Nobel Prize winner *One Hundred Years of Solitude*). These images were conveyed through dispassionate narrative voices capable of encompassing centuries of logic that was not Cartesian; and the magic also served to disguise the sociopolitical problems caused by the colonial and neocolonial spread of capitalism. Given that the term Third World was coined around the same time Europe and the United States were enjoying stories of the *magical* Latin America, it is clear that the literary industry is not devoid of international banks. With the *cartonera* incursion into the First World imagination, a new publishing paradigm was addressing the issues of sustainability, viable economic models, recycling of resources, and—most importantly—access to voices of marginalized writers and neoliberal interests. Showing that books could be produced *differently*, and sustained through communities of readers and bookmakers without depending on any kind of aid, is the kind of freedom that the “free” market economy does not deliver.

Both Meninas Cartoneras in Madrid and Ultramarina Cartonera in Seville had to translate the publishing model coming from Latin America and adjust it to their socioeconomic reality. What is interesting, however, is that the 2009 founding of the first Spanish *cartonera* publishers coincided with the Great Recession in Spain, a financial crisis that started a year earlier and—just like the 2001 Argentine crisis—increased poverty and the national debt. The unemployment rate reached 18.7% in 2009, and the end to job and salary cuts (along with reductions in pensions and benefits) was nowhere in sight. By the beginning of 2012 the unemployment rate was double that of the European Union’s average, with 24.4% of the active population being unemployed. Given that rummaging through garbage in Spain carries a fine of close to 1,000 U.S. dollars, cardboard

could not be collected from the trash, and consequently cardboard pickers never descended on the streets in order to collect it for daily sustenance. European *cartonera* publishers, like those in Mexican cities, owe their name to hand-painted cardboard covers made in workshops.

The first two *cartoneras* founded in the Old World have an interesting history because their founders are immigrants from Chile and Mexico who settled in Madrid and Seville. They maintain contacts with their countries of birth and organize transatlantic cultural bridges between their two homes. Las Meninas Cartoneras organizes “workshops on wheels” and, in addition to publishing poetry, fiction, and children’s literature, also produces *cartoMemoria* ([www.meninascartoneras.com/cartohistoria.html](http://www.meninascartoneras.com/cartohistoria.html)), a series of historically important texts; these include the last speech of Chilean president Salvador Allende, delivered on September 11, 1973, during Pinochet’s military coup, as well as the poetry of Marcos Ana, the longest incarcerated political prisoner of Franco’s regime. The Ultramarina Cartonera offers readers digital content for free, but charges a fairly high price for the hard copy of a book. Its covers are a visual feast, imaginative and beautifully illustrated—all on cardboard that in another life was a box. However, in trying to continue with the social commitment of Latin American *cartoneras*, they are willing to give their books for free to anyone who is not able to buy them. Their goal is not to make a profit but to create points of contact and collaboration.

In addition to crossing the Atlantic Ocean, the year 2009 marks a new moment in the constitution of the *cartonera* model because that very year, 35 new *cartonera* publishers were founded in sixteen countries; and two years later, a further 29 new cardboard bookmakers appeared on the global *cartonera* map. I contend that the second wave culminated in 2012 when Eloísa

Cartonera was internationally recognized with the Principal Prince Claus Award in the Netherlands for its engagement with art, community, and democratization of literature. The collective decided to put the ~113,500 U.S. dollars toward exploring new sustainability ideas while maintaining book production.

The third impulse in the spread of *cartonera* publishing begins in 2013 with the celebration of the tenth anniversary of Eloísa Cartonera, organized by the Casa de América in Madrid and an upsurge that saw 40 new *cartoneras* established. Indeed, the Old World seemed so enchanted by the new publishing concept that they organized their own meeting of European *cartoneras*. And in Chile, the City Library of Santiago established the First International Meeting of Cartonera Publishers, now in its sixth year. *Cartonera* books continue to resonate around the globe in the most unpredictable ways, and in 2016 this iconoclastic model reached China with the founding of Feng Cartonera.

All *cartoneras* have two things in common: pages of their books are wrapped in recycled, hand-painted cardboard; and they support social equality and egalitarianism. They are committed to criticizing and resisting the exploitation brought by neoliberal capitalism. In terms of book culture, they strive to decommodify literacy and make literature accessible to underprivileged readers.

Inspired by the way roots spread underground, French cultural critic and promoter of relational aesthetics in the arts Nicolas Bourriaud coined the concept of the *radicant*, defining it as an entity that spreads through the roots, growing new ones as it

evolves: “To be *radicant* means setting one’s roots in motion, staging them in heterogeneous contexts and formats, denying them the power to completely define one’s identity, translating ideas, transcoding images, transplanting behaviors, exchanging rather than imposing.”<sup>10</sup> It abolishes the idea of a solid center, of a need for “master” narrative; rather, it stresses the fluidity of relational aesthetics including social interaction as a *sine qua non* in the production of art. While the concept of *radicant* might bring to mind the economic model of a franchise—a practice in which a profitable business product or service that operates under the guidance of a franchisor is sold for a fee—Eloísa Cartonera never entered that kind of profit-related relationship with any of the *cartonera* publishing companies that came into existence in the past decade, in spite of the obvious marketability of its publishing model. Nevertheless, it did create a specific, recognizable name, a unique identity associated with social commitment that entered into the global public consciousness—a brand that is now identifiable and that does not belong to anyone, yet is shared by many.<sup>1112</sup>

#### IV

So, what is between the cardboard covers of the rebellious *cartonera* books and who are their makers and readers?

*Cartonera* publishers see themselves as local cultural agents who are playing off of neoliberal market logic. They are not only

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<sup>10</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, trans. James Gussen and Lili Porten (New York: Sternberg Press, 2009), p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Ksenija Bilbija, “Borrón y cuento nuevo: Las editoriales cartoneras latinoamericanas” *Nueva Sociedad*, No. 230 (noviembre-diciembre 2010), pp.

<sup>12</sup> -114.

recycling cardboard in a literal sense, but also using the same transformative logic to create a viable economic alternative that prevents manual workers from being exploited, while helping to create innovative, sustainable, socioeconomic relations. In that sense, all the *cartonera* publishers are progressive and committed to ideals of equality and civil rights in their respective societies, as well as globally. The clear commitment of Eloísa Cartonera towards defending the rights of workers (and subsequent publishers' literary practices intended to mediate the excesses of neoliberal capitalism and income inequality) reflects priorities such as fighting discrimination in racial, ethnic, and gender terms, and protecting the rights of the disabled and immigrants. Some of them also focus on environmental issues that go beyond the recycling of cardboard.

In order to contest the multinational publishing agenda oriented towards making profits and bestsellers, *cartonera* publishers look to their own community as a source of inspiration. In that sense, some—like Argentine Eloísa Cartonera, Peruvian Sarita Cartonera, and Brazilian Dulcinéia Catadora—focused on emerging writers whose names weren't as familiar among readers, as well as writers from other Latin American countries who were unknown to their particular public. Eloísa created an anti-canon catalogue of rescue, including Peruvians Carmen Ollé, Martín Adán, Luis Hernández y Oswaldo Reynoso, Chileans Gonzalo Millán, Enrique Lihn, Mexican Gonzalo Millán, and Brazilians Glauco Matosso and Haroldo de Campos. Bolivian Yerba Mala Cartonera brought to its readers writing by Mexicans Ingrid Bringas and Joaquín Guerrero Casasola. Eloísa Cartonera also initiated the literary competition *Nueva narrativa y poesía sudaca border*. The title of the competition purposefully incorporates the derogatory term *sudaca*, which Spaniards apply to Latin American immigrants, as well as the English word

*border*, which references immigration problems between the United States and its neighbors to the South. The jury was made of those who worked in the press, including former cardboard pickers, emphasizing the publisher's idea that readers from all social spheres should determine the value of competing texts. A number of *cartonera* publishers publish bilingual editions of poetry and fiction. Such is the case of Iguanazul cartonera (2010) from Zongolica in the Highlands of Veracruz in Mexico, whose members incorporated Nahuatl and Spanish into their special collection *Nawatlahuolli Anthology*, dedicated to the preservation of oral memory. Their books are distinguished by the application of different artistic techniques typical of the local community, such as specially processed cardboard that is immersed in water and later sun-dried, thus achieving different tonalities. Retazos Cartonera (2010), also founded in the Argentine capital, focuses on Bolivian immigrants who, often illegally, come to work as cheap labor in the textile industry. Their name ["Remnants"] references not only the remnants of fabric that they incorporate in the production of book covers, but also the fact that they are treated as societal leftovers, exiled and excluded from the rest of society. Matapalo Cartonera (2009), from Ecuador, started its work with low-income youth in an attempt to teach them about the book trade. Its goal is both to disseminate Latin American authors whose work doesn't reach the Ecuadorian provinces and to promote local writers who are not known in the capital. The Puerto Rican Atrarraya Cartonera (2009) came into existence as a protest against Borders bookstore, which—in the Commonwealth's capital—had a section called "authors of local interest" for all the writers of Puerto Rico. Their first project was to make 300 books out of Borders boxes.

*Cartonera* publishers also call attention to the gender imbalance prevalent in patriarchal societies. While all *cartoneras* repeat the same name in their appellation (thus signaling their communitarian instead of patrilineal filiation), the vast majority of them also incorporates a female name in their title. Women participate in all levels of production—from picking up the cardboard to cutting it to designing the covers and selling the books. Qinti Qartunira (2011) from the Peruvian Amazon not only publishes in the Quechua language but also uses a tradition associated with feminine cosmovision, in which cardboard is covered by cotton with incrustations of seeds and embroidered by Kichwa-Lamistas women. Sofía Cartonera (2012), from Córdoba in Argentina, develops book-making projects with sex workers; and Felicita Cartonera (2008), from the Paraguayan capital Asunción, published in 2011 the anthology *Korazón sin control* [*Heart Without Control*] composed by women prisoners. Although some *cartoneras*, such as Animita Cartonera from Chile and Meninas Cartoneras from Spain, are entirely organized by women, their editorial platforms don't emphasize gender exclusivity. Along with Pachuk Cartonera (2012) from Chiapas in Mexico, Cieneguita Cartonera (2011) from Mendoza, Argentina, and Pirata Cartonera (2011) from El Salvador (among many others), they try to make women's culture and contributions to society visible.

Several *cartonera* publishers have been working with prison populations. Canita Cartonera (2009), from northern Chile, like Aida Cartonera (2013) from Spain, both collaborate with prisoners who design books and also publish their own writing. The collection that Aida Cartonera produced between the walls of the Segovia prison features a cover with carved-out bars resembling a jail window, behind which lies a short story titled “Carrot, bread and onion”:

The title of this tale accounts for the fact that all these months that I have been incarcerated the only food I am getting is three carrots and three onions a week, plus a daily piece of bread. I won't mention the potato because it is usually rotten. Well, as one of my uncles used to say, you've got to take it easy, and look at the bright side of things: carrots are good for your eyes, as my grandma would say, but actually I see less and less every day, in fact, I see less than my grandfather who can't see shit two meters away. Onions are good for your head or your brain and for thinking but I barely have enough of it left to put these brief lines together. Bread arrives at noon but it is for next day's breakfast, although when the next day comes it is harder than my head. The bright side would be that here I am, still alive, in this prison of this third world of ours.

The author, Erwin Vivas, told me that he wrote it while he was still in prison in the south of Argentina, before being transferred to a Spanish prison.

As left-oriented, progressive entities, *cartonera* publishers share an anti-imperialist imaginary. For example, one of the first titles that Eloísa Cartonera brought to their readers was a bilingual, Spanish/Portuguese poetry collection by the Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos (1929-2003) entitled *The Left-Winged Angel of History*, later reprinted by Sarita, Dulcinéia, and Yerba Mala Cartoneras. Washington Cucurto's writing also fits into the antiU.S. perspective, in particular his 2005 novel *Hasta quitarle Panamá a los Yanquis* [*Until We Take Panama Away from the Yankees*], where he cynically describes the changes in Argentina since its president Carlos Menem opened it to multinationals, selling off the telecommunication industry, the national airline, and banks. The same theme is also worked through in Héctor

Collado's collection of stories *Para salvarnos del olvido: 20 de diciembre 1989* [*Saving Us From Oblivion: December 20, 1989*] published by the Panamanian Pelo ~~Malo~~ Cartonera [~~Bad~~ Hair Cartonera], directly referencing the day the United States invaded the country. (The publisher strikes out the word "bad" in its name in order to call attention to afro hair, and to the racism embedded in the idea that it is undesirable and hard to manage.)

The Bolivian Yerba Mala Cartonera was founded in El Alto, the second biggest city in the country, with the largest indigenous population. The creation of the city itself is related to the economy: those who were heading towards the capital of La Paz in search of a better life were not allowed to settle there, but were instead made to live in the adjacent highlands. One of its bestsellers is by a local writer, Crispín Portugal Chávez (19752007), also one of the cofounders of the press. It is a story titled *Almba La Vengadora* [*Almba the Avenger*] (2006), featuring an indigenous female freestyle wrestler. The story brings to the forefront many of the aspects of a colonial and sexist society through the imported British combat sport of catch-as-catchcan, as adopted by Aymara women dressed in traditional costumes, called *cachascán*. This text—in which women fight each other, as well as entering into fights with male combatants—encompasses gender empowerment while also tackling sexual and racial exploitation in a not-always parodic spectacle.

*Cartonera* publishers share a common interest in social justice, communitarianism, recycling, power sharing, literacy, and reading. Since 2003 in Argentina they have spread through the Americas, as well as to Europe and some Asian and African countries, showing that it is possible to alter ways of thinking about reading and book-making. Innovative and contagious,

irreverent and iconoclastic, it seems that these cultural shapeshifters have created a new bookscape and are here to stay.

*This consciousness within her  
uncurled itself upon the rollers of objective experience  
printing impressions  
vaguely and variedly upon  
Ova  
in place of the more formulate education  
coming naturally  
to the units of a national instigation*

—Mina Loy  
*from "Ova, Among the Neighbors"*

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