



Latin American politics underground: Networks, rhizomes and resistance in cartonera publishing

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Abstract

Cartonera publishing emerged in post-crisis Buenos Aires with the birth of Eloísa cartonera (2003), whose founders proposed a radically new model of making books out of recycled cardboard, purchased from, and made with, *cartoneros* (waste-pickers). Since then, this model has been adapted across Latin America by an ever-growing number of collectives (currently around 250). In this article we ask: What relations and/or networks have enabled this model of underground cultural production to grow on such a scale? What modalities of resistance do they enable? Our contention is that Deleuze and Guattari's theory of rhizomes helps in understanding the ways in which *cartoneras* work, network and spread. Examining texts and practices across Argentina, Mexico and Brazil through literary analysis and ethnography, we make a case for the political significance of cartonera networks and, more broadly, the possibilities afforded by rhizomatic formations for emerging modes of micro-political action and transnational cultural activism.

Keywords

activism, affect, cultural production, dispersion, *editoriales cartoneras*, horizontality, Latin America, publishing, resistance, rhizome

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Introduction

It all began with the crisis of 2001 [. . .] Some say 'we are a product of the crisis,' or that we 'aestheticized misery'. Actually, it was nothing like that. We were a group of people who came together to work in a different way, to learn new things through work, to build a cooperative, to learn how to subsist and manage ourselves, to work towards a common good. We were like many of the movements and collectives born from those insane times, who organized into a cooperative or a small assembly group, into neighborhood and community groups, all sorts of social movements. (Eloísa Cartonera, n.d.)

Eloísa Cartonera was dreamed up in Buenos Aires in 2003 by a group of young artists and writers: Washington Cucurto, Fernanda Laguna and Javier Barilaro. Together, they proposed a radically new model of making books out of recycled cardboard, purchased from *cartoneros* (waste-pickers) at five times the market value, and set up a productive workshop that has since published over 200 titles, specializing in Latin American literature, and sold at their workshop in Abasto, and international book fairs. The above collective autobiography suggests an ambivalent relationship to the economic crisis. On the one hand, it 'catalysed the process of shifting the aesthetic in a more collective direction' (Epplin, 2014: 61). On the other hand, Eloísa was conceived in relation to, and in dialogue with, a multiplicity of other aesthetic, social and political movements. Indeed, as scholars like Bielsa et al. (2002), Svampa and Pereyra (2003) and Triguboff (2015) have demonstrated, the 2001 crisis produced a revolution of social citizenship, and a range of social mobilizations, from the Movement of the Unemployed and the *piquetero* movement to smaller-scale neighbourhood assemblies. As Sitrin argues, these must be regarded as 'politics in a different way' (2012: 85), a politics of community activism and 'direct democracy' (2012: 8) that stands in contrast to more traditional forms of party politics and labour unions. Eloísa, as a socio-artistic proposition, was part of that political sea-change.

Eloísa did not emerge in a cultural vacuum, however. Fernanda Laguna had, since the 1990s, been publishing texts in the form of stapled photocopies with her writer-friend Cecilia Pavón as part of their publishing house and gallery Belleza y Felicidad (Palmeiro, 2011). At the time, the collective was subject to much criticism by the previous generation of Argentine writers and artists, who had been involved in head-on conflict with the dictatorship and its aftermath: to them, its material, corporeal, erotic and perverse aesthetics were linked with a 'soft politics' that failed to engage with the 'hard' questions that still haunted post-dictatorship Argentina (Palmeiro, 2011). Yet the issues with which they engaged – from LGBT subjectivities to social exclusion – prefigured many of the debates that, with the global rise of the far right, are now at the forefront of Latin American politics. Other connections can be traced to groups like Colectivo Situaciones, which emerged in the same post-crisis context and put forward the notion of research militancy as a means of exploring 'various processes of interaction, collective valorization and productive compatibilities' (Shukaitis, 2009: 19). Colectivo Situaciones, like Eloísa, offered a different way of 'doing politics', under the conviction that 'power – the state, understood as a privileged locus of change – is not the site, par excellence, of the political' (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003).

It is in relation to these shifting modes of activism that the cartonera model has spread transnationally since 2003, with an ever-growing number of collectives across and beyond Latin America. These collectives seek to flee state power, and to ‘renounce instituting any centre or centrality’ (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003). Some, like Dulcinéia Catadora in São Paulo, retain strong links to waste-pickers. Yet cartonera has come to signify much more than this productive and transgressive relationship between waste-pickers, writers and artists. Dulcinéia itself has engaged in a range of minoritarian struggles, from work in one of Brazil’s most famous informal settlements, Morro da Providencia in 2012 to a residency in the Hotel Cambridge Occupation (2017) and, more recently, their work on access to housing with the Frente de Luta por Moradia, the largest housing movement active in central São Paulo. In other cases, cartoneras engage with their local communities in relation to indigenous rights and plurilingualism (Jiji Jambo Cartonera; La Cartonera Cuernavaca), while La Rueda Cartonera in Guadalajara ‘aims to oppose government cultural policy and resist the homogenising ideology and (dis)information propagated by public institutions and the mass media’ (Fong, 2018) through counter-cultural activism (de)centred around its literary café, community radio station and more mobile public interventions. Together, this loose network, composed of over 250 collectives, has opened up new spaces for cultural production by marginal groups who have often been denied a voice, from women writers and indigenous communities to refugees and prisoners.

In this article, we ask: What kinds of relations/networks have enabled cartoneras to travel across such a vast geo-political area? What do these relations/networks *do* on a socio-political level, both within and across different cartonera groups, and what modalities of resistance do they enable? Our contention is that, although the family tree is the principal form through which cartonera communities have been theorized to date, Deleuze and Guattari’s non-linear notion of rhizomes might serve as a productive theoretical counterpoint through which to understand how cartonera practices have spread so far and so quickly; how they have united around shared ‘planes of consistency’ while asserting multiple subjectivities and affirming their singular visions in wide-ranging contexts. Bringing concepts of (de)territorialization, lines of articulation/flight, and affect in dialogue with cartonera texts and practices, we argue that cartoneras propose new ways of ‘doing politics’ beyond party politics and social movements.

We thus disagree with Cala Buendía (2014: 134), who argues that ‘all these spin-offs [of Eloísa] are highly localized and in no way function as a network’. While cartoneras operate independently and respond to local interests and needs, our research suggests that rhizomatic, decentralized networks are crucial both in the way that cartoneras operate internally, and in the way that they relate to one another. When we discussed this article with Lúcia Rosa (founder of Dulcinéia Catadora; hereafter, Lúcia), she affirmed: ‘of course, it’s all about networks’ (interview with Bell, 2019). Likewise, Sergio Fong (La Rueda Cartonera; hereafter, Sergio) insists that ‘all those who take part in the cartonera movement are interconnected. The network enables us to know, and inform one another, about what’s going on in the cartonera world. It allows us to support one another in a brotherly way [*con sentido fraterno*]’ (Fong, 2018). Here, Sergio offers an insight into the complexities of the cartonera network: it is composed of a multiplicity of alliances that connects ‘all’ cartoneras; it is a tool for socio-artistic collectives; it is a goal, the aspiration towards an ‘affective politics’ (Sitrin, 2012). Like the new social

movement actors discussed by Sitrin, cartoneras 'are affective in the sense of creating affection, creating a base that is loving and supportive'; they engage in a 'politics of social relationships and love' (Sitrin, 2012: vii). Yet the metaphor Sergio chooses for this 'love' is, pertinently, one of kinship – thus connecting the concept of networks to that of family trees.

We begin by presenting two models through which cartonera publishers have explained the relations between the multiple collectives that constitute this emerging cultural panorama – family trees and rhizomes – before outlining the broader theoretical concepts and methodological tools that will be used in this article to delve further into the political possibilities of cartonera networks. We then move on to discuss modes of resistance, from horizontality to dispersion, through two case studies. First, we examine La Rueda Cartonera (Guadalajara, Mexico) through its texts and practices. Second, we offer an analysis of an *encontro* (gathering) organized by our project team in São Paulo (November 2018), and the collection *BR* (Rosa, 2019) that emerged spontaneously out of that event in the wake of the presidential elections.

Family trees and rhizomes

Genealogies have often been used to lend unity to the otherwise loose meshwork (Ingold 2010) of actors, texts and contexts that together comprise cartonera publishing networks. Kunin (2009: 36) refers to cartoneras as 'family members' with a shared surname. Meza (2014) expands this idea of a cartonera family through the Bourdieusian notion of a hierarchical 'field', where participants are unequal 'siblings'. Cucurto (n.d.) playfully 'invents a little family tree' of Argentine writers who constitute predecessors for Eloísa, with Roberto Arlt as great-great-grandfather. Throughout our ethnographic fieldwork, we have often encountered such metaphors in cartoneras' autobiographical constructions. Jesus and Paulina, the young publishers of the cartonera Pato con Canclas, say that they are the children of Israel Soberanes (Viento Cartonero; hereafter, Israel) and thus the grandchildren of Sergio. Sergio and Israel refer to other cartoneras as '*hermanos*' ('brothers and sisters'), and Israel describes his project as La Rueda's progeny. Dulcinéa Catadora see themselves as the 'sister' of Douglas Diegues' Paraguayan Yiyi Jambo, and the 'daughter' of Eloísa. Cartonera texts often reinforce this unity by including lists of other cartoneras, as in La Cartonera's ever-evolving lists entitled 'Some sister cartonera publishers' that follow their publications.

However, working intensively with cartoneras across Argentina, Brazil and Mexico over a two-year period (2017–19), we have gained new insights into the broad and complex networks that, we argue, render the genealogical model insufficient as a mode of encompassing the complexity of the transnational cartonera community. In dialogue with our cartonera partners, we advance Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the rhizome as a framework through which to understand cartoneras not against or instead of that of the family, but in an ever-unfolding relationship with it. The rhizome – the subterranean stem of a plant that grows through a system of roots and shoots extending out of its nodes – is employed by Deleuze and Guattari as a metaphor for knowledge, thought, culture and history that defiantly escapes from linear narrative structures. They define the rhizomatic model in contrast to the arborescent model:

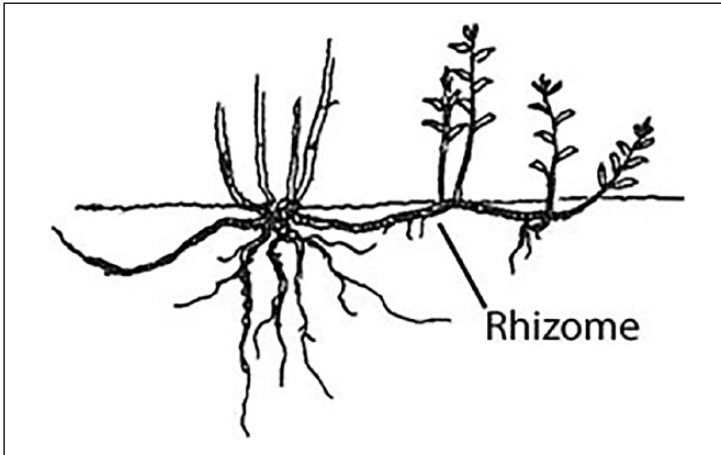


Figure 1. Illustration of a rhizome.

Source: <https://www.florasuculenta.com/actualites/plante-rhizomateuse/>.

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb 'to be' but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and . . . and . . . and . . .' This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb 'to be'. (1987: 27)

The rhizome thus constitutes a model of forms, formations and systems – material, social, cultural, political, economic, historical, intellectual – based on dynamic processes rather than fixed origins, the multiple rather than the one, fluid conjunctions rather than solid identities (Figure 1).

Instead of regarding the rhizome and the genealogy as mutually exclusive ways of understanding social life, however, our contention is that cartoneras mobilize them simultaneously as heuristic tools and modes of socialization.

This choice of theoretical framework derives from our ethnographic work with a range of cartonera actors in Brazil, Argentina and Mexico. In São Paulo, the artist/academic Thais Graciotti uses Guattarian-Deleuzian concepts to explain her collaborative *Arquipélago* project with Dulcinéia Catadora, which resulted in a series of six collage-accordion books by members of the waste-picking collective (Graciotti and Dulcinéia Catadora, 2018). She writes that the 'maps' constructed by the waste-pickers out of discarded postcards and photographs 'inscribe territories of resistance, which assert their place-island through the invention of a dialogue with the city constructed upon fragments of discarded materials. [. . .] These helmswomen transform this cartography into a multiplicity that produces new territories' (Graciotti and Dulcinéia Catadora, 2018). As we argue below, such concepts of (de)territorialization and multiplicity as modes of resistance and (self-)construction resonate through the texts/art/practices of cartoneras.

In Buenos Aires, the rhizome was advanced by Javier Barilaro to explain the spread of cartoneras across Latin America (Kunin, 2009: 46). In pointing to the rhizome as a

useful heuristic tool, Barilaro was not drawing on Deleuze – whom he admits he had not read at the time – but on a naturalistic metaphor premised on the idea of fertile soil:

I think that Eloísa Cartonera reproduced itself the way it did because it is biologically suited to the Latin American environment. Since I work with plants, I tend to make analogies and comparisons with them, and so [cartonera] reproduced itself because it was able to, in analogous projects that are independent, but similar. The rhizome seemed an aptly graphic analogy, but we might also think of the dispersion of seeds that flew and were able to grow because they found similar conditions. (interview with O'Hare, 2019)

In Guadalajara, Israel is also fascinated by the broader, underground publishing networks with which his own cartonera practices connect. When we arrived there for our fieldwork in 2017, he rushed us to the Hispano-American Library to show us the cardboard books by the Cuban publisher Editorial Vigía that had been left as a donation after the 1996 edition of Guadalajara's huge Feria Internacional del Libro (FIL), at which Cuba was a special guest. These books, made in precarious circumstances with ephemeral materials (Gordon-Burroughs, 2017), were an important precursor for Guadalajara-based publishers like Viento Cartonero.

Theories and methods

To understand how cartoneras form local and transnational networks to 'do politics underground', we dialogue not only with the above theoretical and practical conceptions of rhizomes, but also with a broader body of work in Latin American Studies, Cultural Studies and Media Studies. In what follows, we build on existing work on cartoneras by the likes of Bilbija and Carbajal (2009), Epplin (2009, 2014), Palmeiro (2011), Schwartz (2018) and Rabasa (2019), delving further into Epplin's question: 'what are the possible, and what are better, ways of doing and making assemblages of social life today?' (2009: 68–9). Beyond cartoneras, Rabasa (2017: 36), in the context of grassroots presses in Argentina and Bolivia, asks: 'what is the potential of the rhizomatic networks of grassroots presses – and the broader political circuits they emerge from and engage – to disrupt or even destabilize existing hierarchies of power and knowledge in the continent?' In the Brazilian context of the *sem-teto* squatters' movement, Melo (2010: 8) argues that 'the multiplicity of tactics that constituted this transversal practice [. . .] combined a territory engaged in resistance with a rhizomatic and temporary network of actions and nomadic occupations across various physical, social, virtual and ideological sites'. The above authors thus gesture toward the potential of rhizomatic networks to dislocate politics from more established sites of power.

In what follows, we explore the role played by rhizomatic networks of power in the generation and fomentation of alternative political practices in the socio-material context of cartonera production. This will help unpack both the political significance of cartonera networks and, more broadly, the possibilities afforded by rhizomes for emerging forms of micro-political action and cultural activism. In doing so, we dialogue with Lim's work on rhizomatic assemblages in social media activism and contemporary mass movements (Lim, 2014 and 2017 respectively). In particular, we build on her

argument, in the context of the Bersih Rallies in Malaysia, that the rhizomatic model ‘explains the multiplicities (spatially) and the heterogeneity of events that occur on a “plane of consistency” to form a single narrative, a unified purpose, and a sense of community (whether imagined or corporeal)’ (Lim, 2017: 211). Though cartoneras differ substantially from such mass movements in their small scale and micro-political actions, we argue that similar rhizomatic forms underpin their growth and strength as a transnational community. Furthermore, we engage with two other global underground phenomena – zine publishing and punk culture – that have much in common with cartoneras, particularly in their DIY modes of production (Dunn, 2016) and their resistance to corporate culture (Duncombe, 1997; Piepmeier, 2009). Punk culture and zine production have both been prominent counter-cultural forms in Latin America since the 1970s and 1980s, and have strong connections with cartonera production and politics. In the case of La Rueda Cartonera, both have been highly influential. Some cartoneras, like A My Me Vale Verga (I Don’t Give a Fuck) based in Mexico City and run by Temok Saucedo, are explicitly punk in their direct-action politics and in their production methods involving both recovered cardboard and recycled clothes. In addition, cartonera books are often sold alongside zines in alternative book fairs and counter-cultural spaces.

Without making the claim that cartoneras constitute a social movement, we borrow from broader social movement scholarship, with a focus on key concepts that help in understanding the forms of resistance, activism and counter-culture in which cartoneras engage. Sitrin, in relation to new social movement politics in Argentina in the aftermath of the 2001 crisis, refers to a dramatic change in ‘how politics is done’. Unlike past movements, she explains, these new social movements were ‘prefigurative’ (Sitrin, 2012), seeking to enact change in the present, to ‘change the world without taking power’ (Holloway, 2002). Cartoneras are linked to these prefigurative movements through shared anti-state and anti-capitalist ideologies, as well as common *modus operandi*, particularly horizontal modes of organization. As Sitrin explains, *horizontalidad* (horizontality) is a key lexical reference in contemporary Latin American activism, not simply referring to ‘a flat plane for organizing, or non-hierarchical relationships’ but also to the ‘use of direct democracy and the striving for consensus, processes, in which everyone is heard and new relationships are created’ (Sitrin, 2012: vi). This ‘horizontal networking logic’ (Juris, 2008) is at the heart of what Schwartz (2018: 152), in relation to cartoneras, calls a ‘new ecology of reading’, which disrupts the traditional relationships ‘among the reader, the text, the market, and modes of circulation’. It is also present across broader autonomous, radical, and underground book cultures in Latin America, whose academics and ‘organic intellectuals’ ‘deterritorialize their practices as they engage in intellectual work that seeks to build horizontal and dialogical relations’ (Rabasa, 2019: 44). The socio-material practices of cartonera publishers, we suggest, also help to horizontalize relationships between actors and institutions traditionally endowed with unequal power: readers and writers, consumers and producers, waste-pickers and waste-producers.

Another important concept is that of dispersion. In a study of new social movements in Bolivia that Rabasa (2019) finds in various editions throughout Latin American autonomous movements, Zibechi (2010) defends the practice of dispersion as a tool for decolonizing political processes in the context of the Aymara communities of El Alto.

Dispersion, in Zibechi's thought, is a mode of opposing accumulation and concentration (state/capitalist forms). *Colectivo Situaciones*, in a response that supplements Zibechi's monograph, celebrates 'dispersion as a transversal connection, as an increase in cooperation', where 'community subjectivity emerges as a rupture of any disciplinarian rules about cooperation, about the base of the dispersion of power' (in Zibechi, 2010: 138). In what follows, we argue that this notion of dispersion as a paradoxical means of linkage (including traditional family units as well as broader alliances), or *alliance through dispersion*, is crucial in understanding the different genealogical and rhizomatic structures that operate in cartonera publishing communities.

Methodologically, we work 'trans-formally' across the literary forms they produce and the social formations in which they participate (see Bell et al., forthcoming). Close readings of two cartonera texts – Sergio's 'Tarde de sole' (Fong, 2017) and the *BR* collection (Rosa, 2019) – reveal the rhizomatic forms that underpin cartonera practices. These readings are further informed by ethnographic data and semi-structured interviews collected through action-based research in Cuernavaca, Guadalajara and São Paulo between July 2017 and April 2019. The broader Cartonera Publishing research project, guided by our cartonera partners, who at every stage of the process invited and encouraged us to get involved in the processes under examination, has involved hands-on, collaborative work which has led us to accompanying and leading community workshops; assisting with and co-curating displays and exhibitions (Hay-on-Wye, May 2018, São Paulo October 2018–February 2019); and, most relevantly to this article, organizing our own *encuentros* (gatherings) in Cuernavaca (April 2018) and São Paulo (November 2018).

Our participatory methods challenge the classical research scenario, in which the subject of research is a passive object from which the researcher is detached through distance and objectivity (Wakeford and Sanchez Rodriguez 2018). Such impossible claims of objectivity – based upon colonial and extractivist power dynamics, and used as means of constructing, validating and legitimating 'scientific' research – have been widely critiqued by the likes of Donna Haraway (1988), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and Makere Stewart-Harawira (2013). As anthropologists, cultural researchers and Latin Americanists, our participatory methods seek to decolonize relations between researcher and practitioner, guided by the belief that ethnographic research inevitably alters the field of research in which we operate (Bell et al., forthcoming). In this way, we subscribe to Tim Ingold's (2010) position that anthropological research implies a generative process of moving through the world and making it in collaboration with others. By treating cartonera publishers as research partners rather than research objects, we adopt a post-critical approach to literary and cultural production, allowing us to make necessary steps towards 'forging stronger links between intellectual life and the non-academic world' (Anker and Felski, 2017) – a move that is true to the cartonera community, whose collectives (from Eloísa in Buenos Aires to Malha Fina in São Paulo) have often sustained direct or indirect links to academia. Through participatory methods and co-production, we place ourselves as researchers at the heart of the tensions and seeming contradictions that underpin cartonera networks: filial ties and rhizomatic networks, unity and dispersion, hierarchy and horizontality.

Embodied communities in La Rueda Cartonera

Dialoguing with the concepts of horizontality and dispersion, this section explores the rhizomatic networks that underpin the texts, everyday practices and publishing processes of La Rueda, one of Mexico's longest-established cartonera publishers. We do this through close readings of a short story by Sergio from his *Cuentos de Varro* collection (Fong, 2017), in dialogue with our ethnography. 'Tarde de sole' is a snapshot of life in a punk *banda* in Guadalajara, providing a window into a conjuncture of stale conservatism, *mexicanismo* and state repression which its characters and author alike resist. The story comes close to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987: 10) 'ideal for a book', with everything laid out on a 'plane of exteriority', a single sheet of paper: 'lived events, historical determinations, concepts, individuals, groups, social formations'. In the four pages of this *cuento*, we encounter Sergio's lived experience of the *bandas* in Guadalajara; the relationships between different punk groups and individuals; the workings of the repressive police apparatus; and broader concepts of territory and flow, power and dispersion, state violence and personal subjectivity. Sergio depicts the participation of his protagonists – El Roger and his punk girlfriend – in the gang's Sunday ritual, starting with a gathering at El Baratillo street market and ending with a (temporary) dispersal from an underground nightclub. His depiction of El Baratillo might be read as a rhizomatic map in itself:

Sunday was the best, the day to commune with the gang, utterly sacred. They got up super early, half-hungover, half-stoned. The bash started at El Baratillo, the legendary *tianguis* where you gather for gossip, trained fleas, unread old books, second-world-war clothes, third and fourth-hand clothes, endangered animals, dissected animals, dried and canned animals, good and bad herbs that kill or cure, clocks, jewels, car parts and bike parts gone missing in the early hours of the morning, and all sorts of local delicacies: *tortas ahogadas* (Guadalajaran sloppy sandwich), *birria* (goat or mutton stew), liver and pork stomach tacos, chorizo with potatoes, fruit drinks, *pulque* (fermented cactus drink), *tejuino* (fermented corn drink), *tepache* (pineapple peel drink) and sorbets, among yells from the non-marching merchants and a cocktail of aromas with background music playing on every block, *cumbias*, *sones*, *boleros*, *guaracha*, rock, *punchis punchis*, even Chente and his fledglings. (Fong, 2017: 28)

On the one hand, the list generates what Deleuze calls 'lines of articulation', or 'territorialization', gesturing at the embeddedness of the social relations of the *raza* (the people) in determinate places, customs and practices: the market itself, in a northern neighbourhood of Guadalajara, and the social practice of gathering there on a Sunday to chat, eat, drink and buy local food. On the other hand, Sergio's humorous style highlights the chaotic heterogeneity of the marketplace, where second-hand clothes are sold alongside stolen car parts, 'endangered' living animals alongside 'dissected' and 'dried' ones, medicinal herbs alongside lethal drugs. Crucially, the book-object ('unread old books') sold on the market is placed on a plane of horizontality with other (legal and illegal) commodities.

It is this horizontality that cartoneras foreground both in their participative production methods and in their distribution methods, by selling books at cheap rates, or giving them away for free, at markets, on buses, in public squares, and so on, stepping away from 'capitalocentric' forms of economic exchange (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Rabasa, 2019). In

the first workshop that we participated in with La Rueda, we travelled to the poor rural village of Ixtlahuacán del Río, on the outskirts of Guadalajara. Although the village was only 30 kilometres away, it took us two buses and two hours to arrive for the small book festival where we were due to give a cartonera workshop in a local primary school. Horizontality in this case meant bridging an urban–rural divide, and experiencing the long, hot, uncomfortable commute to the city that villagers had to undertake – whether to go to work or to get hold of a book. It was thanks to Alba, a friend of Sergio's, that they could make a book themselves, as well as peruse Israel and Sergio's cartonera collections. Sergio and Israel also decided to donate five of their books to a raffle that Alba was running to raise funds for next year's festival. Such attempts at horizontality and inclusiveness contribute to what the Cuernavaca publishers of La Cartonera refer to as the 'desacralization of literature', which is crucial in countries like Mexico where a book like *The Routledge Companion to Media and Activism* costs over a month's minimum wage.

Returning to 'Tarde de sole', the punk *banda* stands for counter-cultural resistance against state politics (one of La Rueda's core principles). As Dunn (2016: 16) puts it, DIY punk foregrounds the 'politics of everyday life', as punk actors find 'myriad ways of occupy[ing], construct[ing] and negotiat[ing] the social, political, and economic contexts of their immediate surroundings'. Yet these occupations are shown to be dangerous, precarious ones in Sergio's story, whose finale is a scene of escalating violence, as a skirmish starts, the *banda* panics and runs, and the police arrive to repress the crowd:

One stoned guy lit up some rags with booze and threw them at the crowd in the exit tunnel [. . .] Everyone wanted to get out [. . .] El Roger and his girl started to run. The ones who got caught were sent to police cars, and some were pacified with two or three beatings [. . .] The traffic was chaotic, the cars were singing to the beat of the sirens, accompanying the screams of pain. [. . .] A fat cop went after them and, attempting to flee, they crossed the road without looking, and a lorry hit the punk girl badly, el Roger didn't let go of her hand and the girl pulled him along for one or two metres. (Fong, 2017: 30)

On one level, the *cuento*'s climax constitutes a critique of the police repression of punk and counter-cultural movements in Mexico (Tatro, 2018) and the broader state repression that has led to thousands of disappearances across Mexico since the 1960s (O'Hare and Bell, forthcoming; Pensado and Ochoa, 2018). On another level, this scene of flight points to the power of dispersion in contemporary forms of activism: the physical dispersion of bodies from the closed space of the nightclub to the (more) open space of the city is a micro-representation of the 'itinerant mutations (migrations and re-localizations)' described by Zibechi (2010: 138). In the case of cartonera publishers, dispersion allows them to maintain micro-political power and a degree of protection against (more repressive) state and corporate powers, since the underground network cannot be easily mapped out or contained. Indeed, La Rueda bookshop/café has occupied six different spaces in the city, sometimes moving because of an altercation with the police. Most often, in fact, cartonera collectives have no fixed workshop studio or shop, but rather move between places or set up in makeshift arrangements where and when they can. Even Eloísa, the longest-established cartonera, has moved several times, from the Abasto neighbourhood to La Boca and more recently to a kiosk on Avenida Corrientes complemented with a workshop space in Boedo.

Finally, the story gestures towards an ‘affective politics’ based not on violence and power, but on solidarity, friendship and love. The last lines of the story, less than an overt political message, convey Roger’s affective response to his girlfriend’s tragic death: ‘Roger tripped when he woke, he went crazy, completely unhinged. They say that his soul also separated from his body and went after her. That he is empty. They say so many things’ (Fong, 2017: 30). His emotional state, brought upon by the sudden experience of loss, reflects the ‘affective relations [that] are at the heart of the cartonera movement’ (Barilaro, in Brant, 2019) – whether through common experiences of grief and anger or joy and hope. Indeed, cartoneras form what Piepmeier (2009), in her brilliant work on girl zines in the USA, terms ‘embodied communities’, which are produced by the intimate content of the zines (2009: 72) and fostered by ‘the physical efforts that go into creating zines and that are often made visible in the finished product, along with the recipient’s physical interactions with the zine’ (2009: 78).

Similarly, affective relations sustain La Rueda’s internal production processes, which rely on diverse figures bound as much by serendipitous connections as by family ties. During our fieldwork (2017–18), Jacobo was a key figure, a polyvalent assistant to Sergio who had initially asked if he could give tarot readings at the café-bookshop and ended up doing a bit of everything: designing book covers, editing the books, broadcasting the online cartonera radio station,¹ crafting cartoneras, selling second-hand books, chatting with customers, and making coffee. Sergio was a sort of surrogate father to Jacobo, and indeed they later found out that they are distantly related; Pavel is Sergio’s biological son, and often works with Jacobo on radiocartón and in a related publishing endeavour, Varrío Xino. Celia used the bookshop as a drop-off point for artists’ renderings of clay pigs that she sells at a charity auction every year; Juanito worked in the print and design shop next door; Noe was a young, charismatic ex-evangelical preacher and now practitioner of indigenous and alternative medicine who initially came into the bookshop looking for Carlos Castañeda’s works; Ángel was a retired businessman who wandered in one day and now attends regularly. Such diversity recalls the kind of ‘networked community’ illustrated on the cover of one of the zines studied by Duncombe (Factsheet Five), in which:

a punk with spiked hair hands a comic to a young black man, a bearded hippie picks up a poetry zine from a soldier in uniform, an older beatnik gets an album from a straight-looking young woman, an older Gypsy passes a zine to a trendy girl, and a businessman with a tie shares a film with a space alien. (1997: 56)

In the case of La Rueda, the café-bookshop provided a setting for diverse and unexpected encounters, as well as a space for respite and resistance in the often unforgiving city. Sergio often used the expression *los locos que llegan solos* (‘the crazies who turn up uninvited’) to describe the colourful characters who would inevitably find their own way into the bookshop, and Jacobo and Pavel launched a fanzine with the same name that collected contributions from the regulars – including us – regardless of their literary merits. This curious network is made up of tightly bound relations and ephemeral contacts, people who might walk in one day and stay in touch for a year, only to drop away the next. These comings and goings force La Rueda to reinvent itself perpetually, as

demonstrated by the fact that it has had many previous incarnations, and two of its key founding members now live in Mexico City and only participate intermittently.²

Unlikely ties are forged in La Rueda through conversation, affective conviviality and, crucially, the 'doing together' (Álvarez, 2016) involved in the making of cartonera books. Despite the respect that Sergio enjoyed, he was in many ways an anti-authority, an anarchist who shunned the imposition of order and encouraged diversity in the styles used to bind and decorate cartonera titles. This cultural anarchy is materialized in the messy multiplicity of the printed books themselves – a messiness much celebrated by La Rueda's founding members, whose phrase *si no es chueco, no es cartonero* ('if it's not wonky, it's not cartonera') turns imperfection into a defining feature of cartonera production. In this way, La Rueda, like Eloisa, offers 'a work environment without (many) constraints, directives, or hierarchies', and subscribes to 'a conception of labor that recasts it as a privileged site for socialization' (Cala Buendía, 2014: 120). As Cala Buendía argues, the affective labour communities that characterize the work of Eloisa constitute a mode of resistance against the alienated and disaffected labour relations that had emerged from Argentina's neoliberal economic reforms. During our fieldwork in Mexico and Brazil, we inevitably became part of such affective communities, in a process of increasing involvement and participation that, we argue, is entirely in keeping with cartoneras' participatory practices and decolonial modes of knowledge(s) co-production.

Working in La Rueda café, we shared the same sensorial space, characterized by strong black coffee and under-the-counter mezcal, the burning heat of the sun, and the regular shudder of the coffee machine and the 'moto-tool' used to drill holes in the books. On top of this, we were united by the repetitive actions of painting, perforating, and stitching that left us with blistered hands, feelings of satisfaction following the completion of a print run, and excitement at the idea of new projects and collaborations.

Such affective and material processes could not be disentangled from the political actions taking place in La Rueda café, ranging from the obvious to the subtle, the instinctive to the organized. During our fieldwork, the space has served as a site to coordinate public protests against violence (O'Hare and Bell, forthcoming). It was also the base for their publishing project at the women's prison of Puente Grande, which led to a collection entitled *Espejo y viento (Wind and Mirrors)*, whose nine authors denounce abuse and state corruption as well as articulating the fears of prison life and their hopes of being reunited with family members (Cortés Cárdenas et al., 2019). As well as these organized, overtly political activities, the café has provided a regular refuge for a woman and her paraplegic son, and a place where Sergio's friend Joaquín, a tireless defender of Huichol indigenous rights, was honoured on the Day of the Dead with a crafted altar.

La Rueda thus operates through a malleable socio-artistic model that fosters participation, collaboration, and embodied networks, and through horizontal working relations between Sergio, his close friends and more distant collaborators. As Sergio's son Pavel writes in a postscript to *50 años de contracultura en México (50 Years of Counter-Culture in Mexico)*, whose initial print-run of 120 we helped to bind in a spontaneous workshop in April 2019,

As a group, [counter-cultural collectives] must avoid establishing relations that subordinate their own activities to the economic-political agenda of an external actor, and if they do, it

would only be in solidarity with other groups that recognize themselves as their equals but never as their superiors. Internally, these groups can't take decisions vertically and the efforts made together must be attributed to the collective rather than the leadership of an individual. (Neikame, 2019: 73–4)

Horizontality, then, functions simultaneously as mode of networking, a work model, and a political goal for cartoneras as counter-cultural collectives.

Encounters and affects

In this section, we move from a focus on a single Mexican cartonera and single-authored text to an international cartonera gathering in Brazil and the publication *BR* (Rosa, 2019) that resulted from it, allowing us to explore the ways in which cartoneras come together through affective encounters and collective publications. As we argue below, rhizomatic networks and horizontal practices are found both in the compiled texts and in the encounters that spawn them, prefiguring autonomous ways of organizing that themselves have long histories but that are being reconfigured in the face of new threats to democracy and diversity in the region.

At a Latin American level, cartonera networks have been sustained and extended through physical encounters (*encuentros/encontros*), often supported by universities and libraries. Since 2012, a yearly 'Encuentro Internacional de Editoriales Cartoneras' has taken place in the Biblioteca de Santiago (Chile), and more ad hoc gatherings have been held in Bochum (Germany), Madison-Wisconsin (United States) and Pachuca (Mexico). We decided to organize such an event to stimulate knowledge exchanges and new cartonera connections, collections and projects. In organizing the event, we were faced with a dilemma: how to materialize an ethos of horizontality valued by the research team as much as the cardboard publishers with whom we worked? Part of this involved encouraging spaces of open dialogue and debate, despite the fair critique – voiced by *Pensaré Cartoneras* at the same event – of the obvious power imbalances between universities and funding bodies from the Global North and cash-strapped cartoneras from the Global South. The discursive basis of the event programme, structured as it was around a series of round-table discussions, was itself open to the possibility of subversion, with the continuous sawing of cardboard a reminder that shared material craft defines cartonera as much as the spoken word with which it competed for attention. Even the layout of the room was quickly rethought: the chairs arranged by the organizers in classroom format were quickly rearranged to form a circle during the first round-table discussion to invite more open dialogue (Figure 2).

The São Paulo location, home to one of our key research partners, Dulcinéia Catadora, was granted further relevance following the election of far-right Jair Bolsonaro to the Presidency of Brazil just a few weeks earlier. After weeks of furious campaigning, a dull calm reigned in a city that was still coming to terms with the formerly unthinkable result. It was impossible to extricate the cartonera discussions and displays, proposals and projects, from the fearful atmosphere that reigned in Brazil at that time. The encounter was held in the space of the cartonera exhibition curated by Alex Flynn, a member of our research team, and artist/curator Bia Lemos, who inaugurated another exhibition during



Figure 2. International cartonera gathering, São Paulo, November 2018

our visit, at the Sexual Diversity Museum located inside one of São Paulo's central metro stations. At the vernissage of the latter, a celebratory, joyful dynamic could not fully eclipse fears – including the fear that Bolsonaro's flamboyantly anti-gay rhetoric might lead to policies forcing such celebrations of diversity literally underground in the future.

The transversal and intersectional nature of cartonera forms of aesthetic resistance exemplified in the activity of Bia Lemos could also be found in the participation of cardboard publishers in the event launching the book of the black, lesbian, socialist councillor Marielle Franco, who was brutally assassinated in Rio de Janeiro in March 2018. The event to mark the publication of Marielle's Master's thesis was held in *Aparelha Luzia*, an 'urban quilombo' and black cultural centre initiated by Erica Malunghinho, a São Paulo state deputy who is also an Afro-Brazilian trans woman. A group of researchers and cartoneras left the encontro to attend the event, including prominent *Ni Una Menos* activist and literary scholar Cecilia Palmeiro and cartonera publishers like Israel. Having never left Mexico, Israel and was only then becoming acquainted with black, feminist politics in Brazil, and the risks that such activists ran, a fact embodied by the burly security guards who kept watch over impassioned speeches, tearful rallying calls, and the regular choruses of 'Marielle Presente!'

Many of the encontro participants, whether they were well-travelled activists or had sought a passport for the first time to attend, spoke of how the physical co-presence of collectives from across the Americas has sparked new projects and deepen existing collaborations. To give just a few examples, Palmeiro was able to meet up with Brazilian feminist Suely Rolnik at the Marielle Franco presentation and subsequently helped to translate her 'Spheres of insurrection' into Spanish for an edition by the independent

Buenos Aires-based publisher Tinta de Limón; Israel (Viento Cartonero) is exploring the possibility of a collaboration between with Brazil-based publisher Vento Norte Cartonera; and Lúcia is now planning several collaborations with other publishers from Brazil, Argentina and Mexico. The event, was a chance to ‘strengthen the network’ (Hurpin, La Cartonera, Cuernavaca, in Brant, 2018), or in Lúcia’s words, ‘to increase their productive capacity and widen their possible social relations’ (Rosa, 2018).

This encontro inspired the spontaneous production of a new literary-political collection entitled. Though it was coordinated by Lúcia, the only stipulation was that participants were to contribute a piece around the theme of resistance in the context of the recent elections. The book that resulted from this open-ended proposition is a fascinating set of essays, poems and narratives by both cartonera and non-cartonera actors, a collaboration that points to the rhizomatic network of this underground publishing world, which is far broader and more dispersed than Eloísa’s ‘close-knit’ cartonera family. As Lúcia puts it in her opening statement, ‘the intention is that, as it is made available digitally, *BR* may reach cartoneras across the world, who were not present at the *encontro* [. . .] *We cartoneras* must organize ourselves and, beyond one-off initiatives restricted to our small circles of readers, act as a great and true movement, capable of forceful action’ (Rosa, 2019: 2). In this vein, *BR* constitutes a call by Lúcia to transform this loose rhizomatic network into a more organized and unified movement capable of resistance in the face of the critical political situation faced by Brazil and other countries in and beyond Latin America.

Though the collection is principally text-based, it features a photographic reproduction of a powerful artwork by Rio-based artist Adrianna Eu. It is one of several previously published visual and textual works selected by Lúcia to complement the contributions of the cartoneras and researchers present at the event, through her broader networks of friends and collaborators.³ ‘Pure Heart’ (Figure 3) was sent to Lúcia by friend and former Dulcinéia member Ana d’Angelo – a friend of Adrianna’s – alongside her own text for *BR*. The sculpture is a heart constructed out of entangled strings that rise up, down and across from the central piece. It materializes the metaphor of ‘heart strings’, embodies the affective basis that connects all human lives, and provides a visual image of interrelationality and interdependency. For Lúcia, this rhizomatic string-heart, with its veins reaching out to other (imagined) hearts, ‘means the heart of all Brazilians’ (interview with Bell, 2019).

This heart beats throughout the collection, particularly in an article from the Argentinian newspaper *Página 12* (29 October 2018) by Marta Dillon, a journalist from Cecilia Palmeiro’s social circle. Reproduced in *BR*, this article proposes a model of feminist resistance based on what Dillon terms ‘transversal relations’:

Against domestic incarceration where violence seeks to discipline us, we open our doors . . . we turn [. . .] diverse desires into sites of exploration of other alliances. [. . .] This last week, in Brazil, the opposition to the future government woke up, militants took to the streets to dispute votes body to body. (Rosa, 2019: 29)

The form of this piece reinforces the affective alliances that it depicts: though it is a newspaper article, it takes the form of a poem – or a protest song – with an opening/closing verse about Brazil as a ‘warning for all genders’, who ‘today stand together in a tight embrace’ to ‘resist against oppression of any form’ (2019: 29). An affective politics

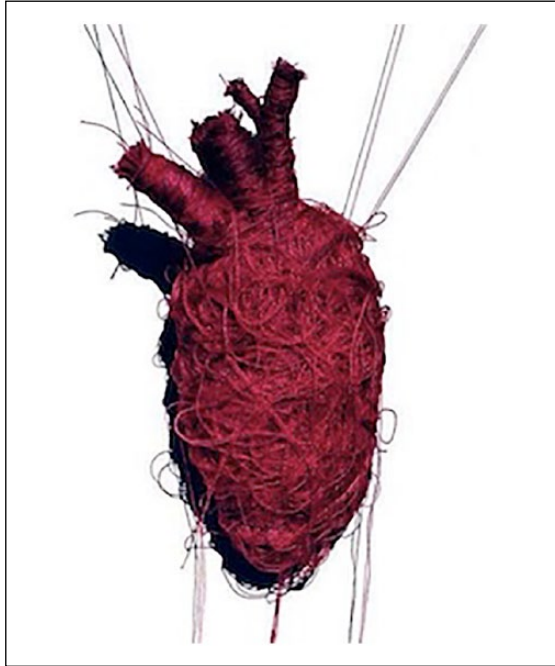


Figure 3. 'Pure Heart', by Adrianna Eu (photographic reproduction)

(Sitrin, 2012), in this sense, involves a multitude of militants, with diverse subjectivities and desires, who mobilize horizontal relationality (embodied physically in their co-presence on the street) as both a tool and an objective of political intervention.

In the context of *BR*, Dillon's transversal, embodied relations come to represent the *encontro* itself and the participatory workshop at which the book was constructed, which for Lúcia constituted 'an act of resistance' (Rosa, 2019: 2). This *encontro*, motivated by a desire to be, learn and work together – horizontally – acquires new meaning in a poem by Wellington de Melo (Mariposa Cartonera). The untitled poem, like Dillon's article, opens and closes with a repeated verse: 'we have wings, my friends' (Rosa, 2019: 38–9) – an image of 'small gods' used to contrast the 'terrestrial beings' that are 'so afraid to look at the sky,/ their heads always screaming and/ staring at the asphalt'. The climax of the poem proposes 'compassion' with these wingless beings:

let's make a deal: let's cut our wings

don't worry, they don't depend on us

after the first incision there will be a drop of blood

at most

and then we will have peace and we will mix with the multitude

we will look around and see terrestrial animals

their screams and their fury still there

‘Cutting (y)our wings’ thus stands as an affective, bodily image of horizontalization that places all humans among a ‘multitude’ of (human or other-than-human) animals. The struggle for horizontality, represented by the drop of blood resulting from the incision, is outweighed by its use as a tool in achieving an ultimate, utopic goal: peace. Wellington’s ‘multitude’ recalls that of Hardt and Negri, ‘the living alternative that grows within Empire’ (2004: xiii). Just as Empire ‘spreads globally its network of hierarchies and divisions that maintain order through new mechanisms of control and constant conflict’, the multitude belongs to ‘new circuits of cooperation and collaboration that stretch across nations and continents and allow an unlimited number of encounters’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: xiii). Indeed, the cartonera rhizome-cum-movement (as modelled by the *BR* collection), is an example of such circuits of collaboration that produce new transnational encounters and new possibilities for resistance.

In a ‘Manifesto-letter for democracy’ signed by a group of artists including Lúcia (*ArtReview*, 2017), reprinted here in *BR*, the *pelademocracia* collective argues that, in the context of ‘a wave of hatred, intolerance and violence against women, homosexuals, black people and indigenous people’:

we need to broaden all democratic forces as widely as possible – beyond party-political, ideological and religious differences – to face, on the streets, in the courts, and in all available media, the concrete threats to the social freedoms for which we have fought so hard. (in Rosa, 2019: 12–13)

In this call for a rhizomatic web of connections that produces transversal alliances *pelademocracia* argues for alliance through dispersion across geographical, political, ideological and religious divisions. And as in Zibechi’s thought, the family ‘unit’ is included in this process of dispersion as a tool for democracy, among and in relation to other forms of alliance, from friendships to digital networks (in Rosa, 2019: 13).

In her ethnography on autonomous publishing in Latin America, Rabasa (2019: 24) argues that ‘the organic book’, a concept she uses in contrast to the commercial book, materializes relations and ethics of horizontality and autonomy. Here we find something similar: the *BR* collection materializes a rhizomatic network that brings together activism of all different kinds, from evangelical (Vitor Queiroz de Medeiros) to LGBTQ+ (Thais Graciotti), from fourth-wave feminism (Dillon) to the black movement (Achille Mbembe). This plurality of struggles is evident in the poem by the Dulcinéia author Felipe Marcondes da Costa: ‘I write this text because I trust in the existence of Marielles Herzogs Dandaras’ (in Rosa, 2019: 19). This poem powerfully breaks down the dialectics of individual/collective, dispersion/unity, through the pluralization of activists who have fallen victim to intolerance and violence: Marielle Franco; Vladimir Herzog, the journalist, director of TV Cultura, defender of human rights, and member of the Brazilian Communist Party, who was arrested, tortured and killed in 1975; and Dandara dos Santos, the transgender woman who was brutally murdered in 2018:

I am whole divided Marielle Herzog Dandara are not alone

I am dispersed whole. (in Rosa, 2019: 19)

The same pluralization takes place in the 'Manifesto Herzog Lives!' by Judeus pela democracia, a 'horizontal and autonomous' collective born in São Paulo during the 2018 elections in an act of homage to Vladimir Herzog and all those he represents:

We are jews and non-jews

Women and men,

Black and white,

Indigenous and non-indigenous,

Homosexual and heterosexual,

Trangender and no-gender.

We are those women and men who died to defend ideas of freedom. [. . .]

Today, remember!

We are Herzog.

Herzog? *Presente!* (in Rosa, 2019: 25–6)

Again, Herzog is connected to Marielle, and to global activist communities, through the adaptation of the well-known #mariellepresente. The use of 'we' not only refers to the collective, but also interpellates the reader, who becomes connected to an affective network that derives its strength from its intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). The poem is a forceful intervention in a collection that serves both as a '*registro*' (a term used by Lúcia in her opening statement, meaning a record or 'testimonial') and as a call to collective action and intersectional activism. Considered alongside the other texts in this collection, this poem can be read as a performative gesture connecting all its authors and readers to a rhizomatic network of resistance against fascism, censorship, intolerance and state-fuelled violence.

Conclusion

In this article, we have offered new insights into the aesthetic modalities, material practices and social structures that have enabled cartoneras to spread and multiply across and beyond Latin America. By engaging with the collectives' own self-reflections and theorizations, in dialogue with Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of rhizomes (and trees) and a broader body of scholarship on new social movements and underground print cultures, we have argued that much of the political force of cartoneras derives from their

mobilization of rhizomatic networks. While intersecting with the more hierarchical and ‘vertical’ family trees upon which cartoneras draw to foster a sense of belonging and unity across a transnational community, these networks allow these geographically dispersed groups to model alternative, ‘horizontal’ ways of being and making. Grossberg (2014: 20), in an article that synthesizes the value of Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy for cultural studies, insists that:

rather than assuming that there is a singular dimension or crisis constituting the line across which resistance is defined, we need to articulate the multiplicity of crises, contradictions, struggles and emergent settlements that organize a complex field of forces.

This rings true in relation to cartonera publishing, which was not born of a single crisis, but of multiple local and global crises. To name a few, the cartoneras with whom we have worked act in resistance defined around crises of unemployment; crises of identity and representation; the global environmental crisis; the crisis of minority language loss and extinction; and the crisis of the left and of democracy embodied by the currently imprisoned former Brazilian president Lula. In response to these multiple crises, cartoneras are forging new ways of doing politics through networks which grow stronger through movement, horizontality, dispersion and affective alliances.

In the broader Cartonera Publishing project of which this article is part, we have taken on the challenge articulated by Grossberg: to work out ‘new kinds of intellectual and political labour, and new kinds of cooperation and conversation, which embrace multiplicities, not as the other of structure, but as the contingency or openness of the processes and practices of configuration’ (Grossberg, 2014: 20). Each of the ‘readings’ (whether close analysis or ethnographies) presented above emerge from conversation and cooperation – from working directly, throughout the project, with our cartonera partners, through participative, processual research, in a spirit of openness and horizontality. By combining literary analysis and participatory research, we have inserted ourselves into the embodied network of cartoneras, networks that include individuals and collectives, aesthetic forms and social formations, texts and objects, common experiences and public spaces. These rhizomatic networks enable cartoneras to thrive underground, while shooting up – and therefore becoming visible – across and beyond Latin America.

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Notes

1. <http://radiocarton.com/>
2. A comparison can be drawn here with Eloísa: ‘As a living entity, Eloísa has substantially transformed over time – as people come and go, as old projects are replaced with new ones, as new paths are chosen over current ones’ (Cala Buendía, 2014: 121).
3. As well as exemplifying the ways in which cartonera actors draw on wide, transnational networks of friends – and friends of friends – to put together high-quality literary and artistic

publications, this reflects the broader cartonera practice of 'recycling' (and in some cases, pirating) previously published works as a means of reviving them and/or disseminating them in new, often marginalized contexts.

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