

RESEÑA

***Taking Form, Making Worlds: Cartonera Publishers in Latin America* by Lucy Bell, Alex Ungprateeb Flynn and Patrick O'Hare. University of Texas Press, 2022**

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Cartoneras or cardboard publishing houses have been a presence in Latin America for twenty years, using discarded cardboard to make books in a variety of ways that fall outside of mainstream publishing efforts. At the end of *Taking Form, Making Worlds: Cartonera Publishers in Latin America*, the authors settle on a very convincing explanation of what makes these cardboard publishers special that distills years of cartonera practice and critical responses to it:

What makes cartoneras unique is the particular way in which they act, work, and live through forms, modes and gestures that cannot be extricated from the day-to-day gesture of artistic practice, a practice that is stubbornly community based, joyfully collective, and irreverently autonomous (266).

This book does an admirable job of looking back at the last two decades and, more importantly, of thinking carefully through the ways in which the cartonera phenomenon has evolved. Beyond that, the authors make a solid case for the fact that the ways in which we theorize the phenomenon must evolve as well. They repeatedly stress the centrality of collaboration to cartoneras, with examples ranging from the work done by both inmates and editors in a book-making workshop in the Puente Grande Prison in Jalisco, Mexico, to formal academic conferences attended by numerous cartonera publishers from several corners of Latin America. This emphasis on collaboration would seem to be a necessary characteristic of a work that aims to theorize the multiple practices of cartonera publishers. Furthermore, it is a potential outgrowth of the fact that the book itself was penned by three authors working together. Namely, they are Lucy Bell, a scholar with a background in literary studies, Alex Ungprateeb Flynn, whose training is in anthropology and contemporary art, and Patrick O'Hare, who researches the anthropology of waste. All three authors make great use of their disciplinary expertise and personal experience interacting with cartonera publishers throughout the book. At every turn, the text performs a delicate and thought-provoking balancing act between the practical and the theoretical, and between the personal and the historical, which synthesizes the considerable body of work on cartoneras written up until now. More importantly, this book also offers up its own grounded and original reading of this important and widespread publishing phenomenon.

As they move through their careful interpretations of the cartonera phenomenon, the authors discuss their theoretical framework at length, always with an evident care and devotion for the topic they study. They point out the ways in which the phenomenon resists reduction to a simple definition or point of comparison. For example, while they consider the merits and limits of anthropological, ethnographic, literary and aesthetic theoretical frameworks, they comment on the ways in which cartoneras have unsettled the critical landscape in a fashion that invites comparison to the eruption of the Latin American testimonio in the literary landscape in years past. They write, "the overwhelming diversity of publications dislocates and resituates our notion of literature" (124) and present a very well-constructed argument demonstrating that it is precisely through this diversity of material and aesthetic approaches that the cartonera phenomenon is markedly distinct from the disruptive nature of the testimonio in earlier decades.

While much of the theoretical consideration presented in the book is very effective, occasionally it might have benefited from more concision and a greater integration with the matters of the cartonera publishing itself. A central idea that is brought up frequently in the book is the idea of the "double fold" between the aesthetic and the social, the inseparability of art and politics, buttressed by the ideas of Jacques Rancière, Caroline Levine and Néstor García Canclini, particularly the latter's idea of post-autonomy in the art world. When the authors cleave to close to an engagement with these ideas, their writing is most effective and allows them to come to powerful moments of insight about the tension between the marginality of the cartonera publishers to mainstream culture and the

surprising power of their communal endeavors. When they move farther afield from the material reality their theorizations are meant to help illuminate, one gets the impression that they want to make certain that no potentially useful theoretical approach goes untouched and, as a consequence of this, at a few moments their writing becomes somewhat less effective. This is relatively infrequent and seems to be a result of the authors' desire to produce a work that does theoretical justice to the complex and nuanced cultural phenomenon of cartonera publishing. In fact, they go so far as to acknowledge a moment in 2016 when a member of a cartonera directly called out a member of this research team by name on social media to question the adequacy of their theoretical approach as academics from the Global North engaging with work produced in the Global South. This led the research team to be acutely aware of "the notion of power through position" (172), in other words, to consider the nature of their privilege as institutionally embedded academics. For the most part, their thoroughness in terms of considerations of their theoretical approach reads as an earnest attempt to make sure that they treat their object of study with the greatest care possible.

In addition to the well executed and thoroughly supported analysis, the book is very well organized. It begins with an introduction that situates the researchers and their theoretical approaches, informed by Walter Mignolo, Anibal Quijano and Jean-Francois Lyotard, among several others, in relation to the cartonera publishers themselves, making note of the multiple points of contact the researchers themselves have had with cartonera publishers on numerous occasions, often even remarking on the food and drink that they associate with those meetings, be it coffee, mezcal, empanadas or tacos. They effectively explain their choice to primarily focus on a limited number of cartoneras from only Mexico and Brazil as a means of producing a narrower case study from which to draw sturdier conclusions, and it seems that this was a wise decision. While cartoneras can be estimated to number in the hundreds, focusing primarily on four cartoneras that have been around for several years, namely, Dulcinea Catadora and Catapoesía from Brazil, and La Rueda Cartonera and La Cartonera from Mexico, allows them to look at distinct approaches to the material and aesthetic realities of these projects.

Chapter 1 pulls the camera back from these four cartonera projects and outlines the history of the cartoneras from their inception. The well-paced historical overview starts with the work of Washington Cucurto and Javier Barilaro in Buenos Aires as founders of what would come to be known as Eloísa Cartonera in 2003, before moving on to the quickly ensuing work of Sarita Cartonera, Animita Cartonera and Yerba Mala in Peru, Chile and Bolivia respectively. It considers some of the first cartoneras' early encounters with the academic world, including the founding of the cartonera collection and the first cartonera conference at University of Wisconsin in 2009 and the annual encounters of cartonera practitioners held every year at the Biblioteca de Santiago in Chile. The chapter sets the table for subsequent theoretical interventions about the idea of cartonera publishing as resistance, an idea the text continually grapples with and approaches from multiple directions in different chapters. Here, the authors nuance and complicate the idea of resistance in the work of cartoneras, cautioning against characterizing them as a social movement since they do not constitute an "organized body with a predetermined aim" (65).

In chapter 2, titled "Methods: Trans-Formal Research for Transformational Practice," the authors explore the tension between anthropological, literary and cultural studies approaches to their object of study. Grounded in the work of La Rueda Cartonera with inmates in Puente Grande Prison, the chapter is effective at cutting through the potentially over-romanticizing rhetoric of resistance with reference to cartonera publishing while looking at how these publishing practices lead the researchers toward finding the most appropriate theoretical approach to the topic. The ethnographic account of the prison workshop gets into the gritty details of process, materiality, collaboration, and the real-world

consequences that can arise from the intentionally limited sphere of influence of cartonera projects (in this case, it included the potential for reduced sentences for inmates who successfully participated in the workshop).

Given that there have been hundreds of cartonera publishers in virtually every corner of the Spanish-speaking world and beyond, the idea of trying to account for the content of their publications would seem to be a nearly impossible challenge. After acknowledging the work of scholars who have attempted to do so, particularly that of Latin American literature scholar Marcy Schwartz in her book *Public Voices*, the third chapter of the book aims to set up some broad parameters around the question of what these publishers have actually been publishing. After looking at the way that cartoneras resist definition (this is the chapter that has a compelling account of cartoneras as distinct from testimonios), the authors look at some of the actual work that the four cartoneras they selected have published in recent years, including work by famous writers and emerging authors on the very margins of Brazilian society, bilingual Nahuatl-Spanish poetry collections and the countercultural fictional stylings of Sergio Fong set in Guadalajara that aim to resist state repression. The commonality that the authors locate across these heterogenous texts and contexts is the idea of inclusivity in action, and the analysis of these texts is detailed, convincing and very insightful.

Chapter 4 uses the concept of the encounter as its launching point. At the outset of the chapter, it seems the word “encounter” is so open that, like the word “cartonera” itself, it resists an easy definition, but the authors quickly find their footing with the term. They look at ways at which cartoneras facilitate many types of encounters, ranging from readings to conferences and numerous possibilities in between, often in unpredictable fashion “in public spaces and on the street” (154). It is in this chapter that authors most painstakingly look at their own encounters with cartoneras, including one in particular that was mentioned earlier in this review with someone who questioned their motives and techniques. The authors’ reflection on this encounter is extremely thoughtful and useful for all Latin Americanist scholars working from positions of institutional privilege to think about. In this same chapter, the book also makes its timeliness apparent as it looks at the plight of cultural workers in the context of populist regimes by providing a detailed account of how Dulcinea Catadora reconsidered how to carry out one of their events in the wake of Jair Bolsonaro’s election and his record of “openly homophobic and racist posturing” (178).

Chapter 5 is dedicated to a sort of encounter that is so important to cartonera endeavors that it deserves its own treatment: the workshop. While the authors note how the work and structure of “cartonera workshops are fluid, not fixed” (205), they detail the material and social considerations of several workshops in which they themselves were promptly put to work cutting cardboard for book covers. Among these workshops they give an account of the francachela, a party-like book making event held as part of La Otra FIL, the cartonera alternative book fair run during the Feria Internacional del Libro in Guadalajara in late November every year. Established by La Rueda Cartonera as a space for countercultural activities that had been squeezed out of the increasingly corporate-oriented massive Guadalajara book fair, the authors make an important observation about this activity that would not have been so easily articulated even a few years ago. They write:

There is not, then, a strictly oppositional model between the FIL and the francachela; some cartoneras are present at the FIL alongside other independent publishers, and, over the years, many writers and publishers have presented at both the FIL and its alternative (210).

In this chapter, the authors help bring clarity to the cartonera activities as not merely a reaction to the dominance of mainstream publishing paradigms in the neoliberal moment, but as a complex cultural

phenomenon that has branched off in ways that may have seemed inconceivable when the first libros cartoneros were put together in 2003.

The concluding chapter looks at exhibitions and the ways in which cartoneras open up the possibilities of what an exhibition can be, inviting participation of both publishers and public, encouraging what the authors call “artistic practice with social connotations” (225). The chapter affords the authors an opportunity to bring some of their narratives full circle, looking at the way the exhibitions can function as a protest against Bolsonaro or incorporate the work of the inmates from Puente Grande Prison.

In the end, *Taking Form, Making Worlds* provides a careful reading of a surprisingly complex cultural phenomenon which is passing through a prolonged moment of expansion and diversification. They do so by looking in detail and in a collaborative spirit at four instances of cartoneras within the context of two decades of day-to-day irreverent, autonomous and artistic gestures. They pose and answer complex questions about matters of resistance, modernity and coloniality all the while insistently coming back to the material realities of exhibitions, book-making workshops, and, most importantly, cardboard itself. As such, this is a book that can be highly recommended to experts in as well as newcomers to the topic as well as scholars of Latin American culture or print culture more broadly.