

# Cultural Responses to the War on Drugs: Writing, Occupying, and 'Public-ing' in the Mexican City

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## Abstract

*Cardboard publishers (editoriales cartoneras) are small, independent publishers linked by the recovered cardboard that covers their books, a commitment to the promotion of local authors, and a drive to make literature accessible. This cultural movement, whose actors often form part of broader social movements, has spread across Latin America and beyond, with other 250 active collectives. Drawing on ethnography conducted with some of Mexico's thirty cartoneras, and literary analysis of their texts, this paper contributes to debates on violence and public space in the context of the brutal Mexican "war on drugs". Dialoguing with a body of scholarship spanning from Setha Low's pioneering urban anthropology to Jacques Rancière's art theory, we argue that cartoneras might be considered "public-ers", in that their book-making labor involves the production not just of books, but of new social relations, communities, and publics. By analyzing aesthetic materials in relation to the social contexts in which they are embedded, we demonstrate that decisions to denounce violence and perform its alternatives on the written page, and in the public plaza, are inseparable and intertwined cultural forms of action that create affective encounters, contact zones, and spaces of dissensus in the city. [cardboard publishing; social movements; urban space; dissensus; violence]*

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## Introduction

In the Indigenous village of Xoxocotla, Morelos, a group of children are gathered around a table in the middle of the busy central square (Figure 1). All around them, a buzz of activity can be seen and heard: market sellers hawking their wares in the Nahuatl language, health food entrepreneurs selling fresh stevia, a hip-hop group performing in native languages, a wedding procession led by a brass band parading down the street. Yet amidst the bustle and stimulation, and under a stretched cloth providing shade from the hot sun, the children are focused on the task at hand: ordering, perforating, and stitching together the pages of a book, then painting the cardboard covers with a diverse array of colors and styles.

The children are participating in a cardboard book-making workshop delivered by the independent publisher La Cartonera as part of a



Figure 1. A boy holds up his cardboard book in Xoxocotla (Photo: Patrick O'Hare). [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

festival celebrating Mexico's "mother tongues." Xoxocotla, with its large Indigenous population and history of resistance, has hosted the festival for the last decade. In 1989, villagers disputed the results of a local election, alleging electoral fraud, and in the ensuing protests several demonstrators were killed by security forces. Then, in the 2000s, residents successfully campaigned against a new airport that would have evicted local farmers from their lands. The book-making workshop is an important chapter in this story of struggle, with children collating a Spanish-Nahuatl edition of stories, poems, and recipes. As night falls and we pack up, the crowd grows and residents join us for a carnival of participative democracy, an event where village leaders explain and discuss imminent changes to local municipal voting wards. A statue of Emiliano Zapata looks down approvingly.

Much recent literature has addressed how neoliberalization, gentrification, and austerity have limited public space—themes that, despite being relevant to many cities in the Global South, often emerge from research in the Global North (Parnell & Robinson 2012). As Bodnar (2015) suggests, the hubristic pronouncement of the "death of public space" (Sorkin 1992) was premature and influenced by the bias toward US scholarship. Yet while urban public space may be alive outside North America, it is not always well—death and public space are often entangled in more violent and morbid formations elsewhere. In Mexico, alongside slower processes of gentrification (Jones & Varley 1999; Delgadillo 2016), public space has been the scene both of horrific acts of violence and of the responses to violence that have emerged from civil society. This article centers on the way that cultural groups, in particular "cardboard publishers," have been involved in reclaiming urban space in response to violence.

The lethal nature of the Mexican war on drugs, launched by President Felipe Calderón in 2006, is borne out by recent statistics (BBC 2019), which in 2018 placed Mexico seventh in Latin America and the Caribbean for its murder rates, above other notoriously violent countries like Brazil and Colombia (Dalby & Carranza 2019). A number of key points can be made about the relation between public space and narco-violence in Mexico. First, violence has made public space more dangerous and less transited (Villareal 2015; Dunckel Graglia 2016), leading to what some have called a national epidemic of “agoraphobia” (Polgovsky p.c., drawing on Deutsche 1996): broadly, a fear of going outside, but etymologically a fear of the public plaza, or the *agora*. Second, public spaces have become sites where violence is committed and where the consequences of violence are grotesquely displayed. When not buried in mass graves, mutilated bodies of narco-violence victims are regularly dumped as warnings at plazas and roundabouts (Williams 2012; Dieguez 2015; Valencia 2018). Those traversing the city thus run a dual risk of becoming victims of violence, and bearing witness to violence and its consequences.

Finally, acts of violence have led to the reclaiming of public space through occupations, demonstrations, and cultural appropriations (Celentani 2014; Reyes 2016). This article centers on the latter, demonstrating how even in spaces permeated with violence, “small acts allow life to be knitted pair by pair” (Das 2012, 139). As Kilanski and Auyero note, “even a cursory look at many areas of contemporary Mexico would reveal that drug violence unravels everyday routines,” but we should not overlook “the plethora of ‘ravelling’ practices that exist alongside destructive violence” (2015, 12).

There are at least 250 cardboard publishers across Latin America—the same number of imprints as Penguin Random House—each with their own social, literary, and aesthetic characteristics (Bilbija and Celis Carbajal 2009; Epplin 2014; Bell 2017a). The first recognized cardboard publisher is Buenos Aires-based Eloísa Cartonera, which emerged as a collaboration between waste-pickers, writers, and publishers in the wake of the 2001 economic crisis. The broader Latin American context for the growth of *cartoneras* was a shift toward neoliberal socioeconomic models. Three main “neoliberalizations” inspired *cartonera* actors to turn to alternative models of production: the neoliberalization of the publishing landscape in the continent, which concentrated publishing in the hands of a small number of risk-averse transnational corporations (Pohl 2001; Bell 2017b); the neoliberalization of state cultural policies, which led to budget cuts and privatization (Bordat-Chauvin 2016); and the economic crises of the early 2000s, starting with Argentina in 2001, which led to “a crisis in neoliberal models of producing subjectivities” (Palmeiro 2011, 190). One of the subjectivities that fractured was that of the individual private sector worker: with thousands made unemployed in Argentina, many workers took over their factories, transforming them into collectives and cooperatives—others became *cartoneros*, waste-pickers who

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collected materials on the streets. As Palmeiro (2011, 200) describes, the model of Eloisa Cartonera drew on both of these developments: it involved and bought cardboard from cartoneros, and it championed cooperative working practices focused as much on process as product.

In Mexico, cartonera publishing has swelled since 2008, and there are now around thirty such publishers across the country. This article centers on two Mexican cartoneras: La Cartonera (Cuernavaca) and La Rueda (Guadalajara). These publishers are community-based collectives that make artisanal books with small print runs of 100–120 copies. They use mass-produced, recycled paper, and print their texts in local photocopier shops. The cardboard tends to be collected by the community rather than purchased from waste-pickers or larger suppliers. In both cases, the assembled pages are stitched to the cardboard covers, but whilst La Cartonera's covers are hand-painted individually, La Rueda increasingly uses replicated screen prints. As with the zines studied by Piepmeier (2009) and the chapbooks studied by Craig (2011), the distribution of cartonera books is split between sale, gift, and exchange.

Given their number, social orientation, and counter-cultural background, it was perhaps inevitable that cartoneras would come to play an active role in the civil societies and social movements of their respective cities. Cartonera workshops have been held both on *vías recreativas* (temporary recreation zones) and in collaboration with Bordados por la Paz (Embroidery for Peace), two “raveling” initiatives that Villareal (2015) cites as examples of the way that Mexican communities “regroup” in response to increased threats of violence. Yet whereas Villareal uses a martial typology of armoring, camouflaging, caravanning, and regrouping to categorize such responses, we use the language and practice of stitching, binding, sticking, perforating, painting, and intervening that is materialized by cartonera activities.

What makes cartoneras particularly intriguing in this context is that the publishers' responses to violence involve at once the creation, promotion, and distribution of texts, and interventions in public spaces. In this paper, we argue that cartoneras might be considered “public-ers” as well as publishers, in that their book-making labor involves the production not only of books but also new social relations, communities, and publics. Therefore, in order to understand this sociocultural movement, both ethnography and literary analysis are necessary. By analyzing aesthetic materials in relation to the social contexts in which they are embedded, we demonstrate that decisions to denounce violence and perform its alternatives on the written page and in the public plaza—which might elsewhere be divided into “imagined” and “real” engagements with the city, or, to use Levine's (2015) formalist perspective, social and aesthetic forms—are in fact inseparable and intertwined cultural forms of action.

Below, we draw on ethnographic research conducted in 2017–2018 with La Cartonera and La Rueda to analyze how they respond to urban

violence, alienation, and disconnection through interventions and activities in the public spaces of their respective cities (Cuernavaca and Guadalajara). First, we focus on La Cartonera, Mexico's first cardboard publisher, examining two texts—*La Caravana del Consuelo* (2012) and Óscar Menéndez's *Memoria del 68* (2018b)—that shed light on their social commitment and activism around themes of memory and peace. We then turn to La Rueda, interspersing ethnographic description and analysis of their activity with textual analysis of *Trazos de Resistencia* (2018) to highlight the ways in which they create contact zones and dissensus in public space.

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Forms of Memory and Peace

When they killed Juan Francisco, his father wasn't actually in Cuernavaca, so a group of us who knew him started to contact each other, and we decided to all meet up in the Zócalo [central square], a place of protest, in order to be present, and to create a display. In fact, the first picture that Javier sees of the movement, before it became a large movement of course, was a group of us together in the Zócalo.” (Bablot 2018).

La Cartonera's participation in organized actions against violence came to a head in 2011, after the assassination of Juan Francisco Sicilia, the son of Javier Sicilia, a Cuernavaca-based poet and journalist whose work La Cartonera has published. The death prompted the creation of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad) that, from its spontaneous origins, managed to spur on the largest demonstration ever held in Cuernavaca. Its first *caravana*, or long march, was from Cuernavaca to Mexico City. The organizational form of the *caravana* soon became the movement's preferred method of protest, and much longer marches took place across the whole country, with public meetings with families of the disappeared held along the way.

While Sicilia was the figurehead of the movement—nicknamed El Movimiento Sicilia—*cartonera* publisher Rocato was, from early on, its official spokesperson. Perhaps most representative of Rocato's social, political, and artistic work at the time is *The Caravan of Solace: Between Pain and Love* (*La Caravana del Consuelo: Entre el Dolor y el Amor*, 2011). This book weaves together narrative, interviews, poetry, street art, and photographs that document the movement, and the violence, impunity, and corruption that impelled it. The first text, a brief poem by Juan Gelman entitled “Javier,” sets the tone:

El poeta que abandona la Poesía.  
Será castigada por Ella:  
Volverá.

The Poet who abandons Poetry  
Will be punished by Her:  
Will return.

The poem alludes to Sicilia's vocation as a poet, from which he turned upon his son's disappearance, only to find it reappearing in every part of his new journey but in the more collective, embodied form of the eponymous Caravana, whose affective power is derived from its insistent rhythms, multiple voices, and corporeal presence.

The second text, by Celia Guerrero, reflects on the disappearance of the street artist known as the "galactic cowboy"—a reference to the silver costumes and woven sombreros worn for his performances in public squares. In search of this disappeared family member, Melchor Flores joined the march from Morelos to Mexico City:

I was surprised, because people received me with open arms [. . .] From day one, when we left Cuernavaca for Coajomulco, I saw people's sympathy [afecto] for my problem. Throughout the march, the affection [afecto] they showed me was constant . . . [This makes] you feel more secure. You breathe in the tranquillity and the brotherhood of all your comrades. The protest slogan of the Caravan—"You're not alone, you're not alone"—demonstrates that. (16)

Melchor thus describes the process through which his individual search became tied to the struggle of the collective. The *afecto*, translated here as sympathy/affection, refers at once to an emotional bond, and to the power of the Caravana to be affected, moved, or transformed by a string of individual tragedies—and to affect others, from local communities to international organizations. As demonstrated by the equation of the *manifestación* (demonstration) with the refrain "You're not alone, you're not alone," this strength stems from the collective voice of the marchers; from public performance and lyrical poetry; and from a combination of bodily experiences ("open arms," "breathing" in tranquility) and ideological notions of brotherhood and solidarity. This sets the reader up for what is to follow: a series of textual and visual performative acts that together lie at the intersection of social action and artistic intervention, political statement and aesthetic affect, modes of grief and forms of recovery.

These raveling acts are represented self-consciously throughout the collection of texts that foreground the material and relational dimensions of reparative gestures. Adriana Malvido's "On the Caravan of Solace," for example, connects the "thousands of stories" gathered by the peace movement with the necessity of

Rebuilding the social fabric with new thread, with strong thread, with thread resistant to corruption, to impunity and to violence [. . .] It's clear that to weave a reality and a future horizon that supports life, we need to create spaces for citizen participation to take the helm. (18)

The image of "threading" together a new social fabric through citizen participation goes beyond the metaphorical: La Cartonera, described only a page later, belongs to a publishing movement built on the material

process of stitching together books in workshops often held in public spaces and community settings.

Considered as a whole, the collection militates against the form of the clandestine grave to which its authors repeatedly refer, which are hidden across Mexico and occasionally uncovered—like a recent grave in Veracruz that included over thirty burial pits containing 166 skulls (Associated Press 2018b). The strategy used to fill in the voids that such graves represent is the foregrounding—and insistent repetition—of names and details of victims, as well as locations and times of their disappearance, and (where known) the places and dates they were found. Resisting the government’s treatment of victims as “nameless criminals,” the authors of this book present and make present disappeared victims, from Cuernavaca to the “epicentre of suffering” Ciudad Juárez, passing through Morelia, San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Durango, Monterrey, Torreón, and Chihuahua (61). Against mass graves as sites of oblivion and isolation, the book foregrounds the role of the street and the public square as spaces of encounter, solidarity, and denunciation. As Ángel Álvarez puts it in a text entitled “Public Squares,” the Peace Movement “meant that every public square visited turned into a space of solace and denunciation of the cases that have gone unpunished” (116).

Setha Low’s pioneering work in urban anthropology (2000; 2015) is a key point of reference in seeking to understand the role of public spaces, like squares and parks, as physical forms in which social, political, and economic relations are encoded within the city. For her, plazas are “spatial representations of Latin American society and social hierarchy” (2000, 33). She sets out on what she calls an attempt to “spatialize culture” (36), and analytically separates the production of space from its representation. Devoting a chapter of *On the Plaza* to Costa Rican authors’ fictional depiction of plazas, she argues that since “‘imagined places’ become ‘real’ each time the author’s description is added to a reader’s own social construction of the place... fictional accounts have an impact on the social construction of the material world” (208). Yet within this schema, literary engagements find themselves cut off from the social constructions of space that emerge from ethnography, and the production of space from historical research.

We build on Low’s work but seek to avoid disentangling material engagements with public space from “imaginary” ones. We do so by bringing together literary analysis of cartonera texts where public space (squares) and material practice (threading) appear with ethnographic analysis of cartonera book-making in public spaces. The work of cartoneras, we suggest, goes beyond representation toward the experiential, affective, and material dimensions that emerge from the creation of books in public space. By focusing on the forms—books, exhibitions, workshops—that move between the social and the aesthetic, we take seriously Biron’s argument that “it is impossible to separate objective definitions, descriptions, and explanations of cities from questions of perception, value, and meaning” (2009, 15).

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solidarity, and  
denunciation*

La Cartonera's activities, occupying squares and streets and co-producing social artworks with the general public, contribute to this reconfiguration of public space. The current editorial team, Nayeli Sánchez and Dany Hurpin, participated directly in the Movement for Peace through an "occupation" of Cuernavaca's Zócalo involving the construction of a large cardboard placard onto which artists and members of the public painted visual and textual messages of solidarity, memory, and protest. As Rocato explained, "when we occupied the Zócalo, we did cartonera workshops, and we made a mega-cardboard canvas that was the work of many, the work of all of us" (Bablot 2018, Figure 2).

In the Zócalo, La Cartonera effectively reproduced the dynamic from their regular Saturday workshops, where friends, artists, and members of the public come together to paint the covers of cartonera books and converse over coffee and mezcal. These activities have now been taking place for over ten years, and for the last five have been hosted at the Casona Spencer, the former home of the English sculptor and artist John Spencer, now converted into a gallery and theater. The workshops are one of the key identifying features, motors, and achievements of La Cartonera, and involve the creation of an artistic community and the facilitation of a space for social gatherings and creative expression. During the weeks of protest in the Zócalo, La Cartonera's activities moved to a public square, taking on a more political, denunciatory accent. The resulting canvas suffered as the cardboard protest display was later destroyed by security forces in anticipation of a visit from the state governor. Yet as important as the product was the process: the coming together in raveling craft and political denunciation.

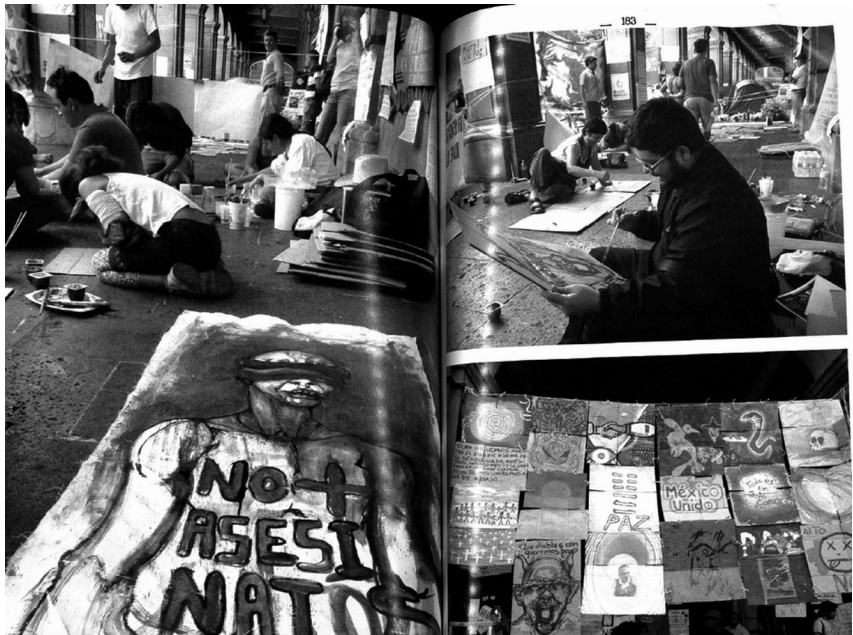


Figure 2. Members of La Cartonera make cardboard signs and covers as part of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (Bablot 2011: 182-183).



## Affective Encounters

Unlike the ethnographic research on the plaza carried out by Low (2000), which involved studying different groups that move through the same space, our ethnographic research with cartoneras was mobile, as we followed publishers through a range of different public, semi-public, and private spaces. Like the Sicilia Movement, which with its caravanas raised awareness and created publics “on the road,” La Cartonera editors lacked a permanent space and carried their books and book-making kit with them, from their homes to the Casona Spencer, indigenous villages, public parks, and book fairs. It is no surprise then that the peace movement emerged out of this publishing movement, which is premised on ephemeral, processual forms of expression, solidarity, and community. Effectively, both La Cartonera and the social movement in which they took part were made up of a series of micro-movements, which included not only geographical displacements but also the embodied movements involved in making protest signs and books by hand.

During our fieldwork period, La Cartonera transferred its workshops to Cuernavaca’s Parque Chapultepec, accompanying an exhibition celebrating the publisher’s ten-year anniversary. Among covers made by the public in the park were those for the re-issue of a collection of photographs of the 1968 movement taken by the photographer and filmmaker Óscar Menéndez. This was timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the events of 1968 in Mexico, during which a powerful student movement was brutally repressed by the police and army, culminating on October 2 in a massacre of 200–300 demonstrators in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco, Mexico City. Many of the artists who painted covers for Menéndez’s book focused on the events of that day. Juan, an art student and graphic novelist, painted a white glove, red fist, and the numbers “68” onto a blue background.<sup>1</sup> His friend Esteban took advantage of a cut in the cardboard to create a red slit against a black background, representing the open wound that the events of 1968 still continue to represent for Mexican society, where the party responsible for the events at the time—the PRI—has been in power for all but a decade since 1968 (President López Obrador, elected in 2018, belongs to a different party).

Menéndez’s photographs, like those of the Caravana, are not just commemorative and educative but also affective. To use Barthes’ terms, their effect lies in the relationship between the *studium*—the coded experience of “reading” or “studying” photos whose communicative power is embedded in shared cultural codes and accumulated experience—and the *punctum*—the irrational “element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me”; “this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument” (1993, 26). As indicated by the combination of fleetingness (“prick,” “shoots,” “arrow”) with prolonged duration (“wound,” “mark”), the punctum encloses a temporal dialectic. Indeed, the pictures in the collection, often bringing the reader close to

such distant events through physical details of protestors—their hands, feet, faces, and expressions of anger and determination—“pierce” the viewer just as they document the wound inflicted on Mexico by decades of violence and impunity. Importantly, though, the workshops in which Menéndez’s books were co-produced, bringing together historical discussion with the sensory experience of engaging with the collection and making the cardboard covers, break the dialectic between studium and punctum, between the rational and the irrational, the factual and the felt. In these workshop scenarios, the photographs are mediated through shared material experiences that produce new, shared imaginaries and rupture any opposition between the common and the personal, public knowledge and private experience.

In interviews with consumers of cartonera books, the combined rational and irrational nature of first encounters with cartonera also emerged. Laura, for example, told us that she was walking home from university when she heard poetry drifting out of a café and wandered in, eventually leaving with several cartonera books. On the one hand, it was perfectly normal, she said, that given her interest in poetry she would be drawn in. On the other, she also emphasized that she was “atrapada” (captured or captivated) by the cartonera books. Another reader, María, had been introduced to cartonera books while attending a concert in the same *pulqueria*—a locale serving *pulque*, a frothy fermented drink made from the agave plant—where we interviewed her, and she clearly remembered the cover of the first book she bought, which featured a representation of a green bottle of XX lager. While María justified her attraction through a penchant for symmetry—“the bottle was perfectly centered”—she also used an affective lexicon to describe her engagement with cartonera, telling us that she was “atrapada,” “enchanted,” “fascinated,” and “seduced.”

From an authorial perspective, Menéndez was pleased to bring out a second edition of his book, this time in cartonera format, because he recognized a continuity between the graphic forms and processes of 1968 and those of the cardboard publishing movement:

All the publicity that we created in 1968 was artisanal: the murals, the mimeographs, the banners, not just in Mexico but all over the world. I was the only photographer in the San Carlos art school, where the biggest group of painters was based, making thousands and thousands of flyers every day until the police destroyed the printing equipment. And since *cartonera* is also artisanal, we are taking up (*retomamos*) the school of 1968 in the presentation of the book: that is the most interesting thing about this edition. (Menéndez 2018a)

It was not in political discourse, activism, or protest that Menéndez found continuity with what he called “the utopia of 1968” but in the material processes that were constitutive of cartonera practice. Creating cardboard covers to commemorate 1968 involved the placing of this horrific content/context of historic violence into a safe space—the Parque Chapultepec—creating a place of negotiation between past and

present, agoraphobia and public gathering, younger and older generations. Menéndez, now in his eighties, was present at many of these sessions, highlighting another key cartonera characteristic: the bridging of the gap between author and public. He was able to answer questions from younger participants about events at the time, particular photographs, and his subsequent exile.

Crucially, the discursive, conversational, and explicitly political element of the workshops was inseparable from the aesthetic and creative processes. As a regular participant, Gilda, explained:

I have recordings of some great discussions that we used to have about art and politics . . . exhibitions, a moment not just of work, but also of encounter, of sharing things, of opinions, and, especially at the time of the Movimiento Sicilia, of political involvement. (Cruz Revueltas 2018)

Gilda and others spoke of the “freedom” that the workshops and cardboard canvases afforded them, and how this had enabled them to mature as artists. Rocato, meanwhile, spoke of the joy of seeing a cartonera regular, anarchist sociologist Victor Hugo, overcome his frustration at his creative shortcomings and develop his own style. “It is also beautiful to see boys, girls and adolescents turn up out of the blue and paint some really cool stuff,” he added. As Cala Buendía writes, such endeavors create spaces where “people who share a point of view that does not exactly compound with the ruling cultural, economic, and social ethos can converge to create, experiment, and work” (2014, 120).

Rocato, a founding but now estranged member of La Cartonera, finished our interview by telling us that he hoped that “*La Cartonera no se acartonea*,” which literally means that the cardboard publisher should not “become cardboard,” a Spanish expression that translates as “becoming stiff” or “set in their ways,” highlighting that cardboard publishers are temporal, dynamic, and changing entities, not static assemblages operating in set spaces with fixed characteristics. Openness to the spontaneous nature of the affective encounter—with cardboard, books, and texts but also people—was thus a key element of cartonera practice, one best grasped through an interdisciplinary attention to both textual and social forms.

## Contact Zones

At the time of our fieldwork in Cuernavaca, violence had decreased significantly since the founding of the Movimiento Sicilia. Yet in Guadalajara, where we worked with La Rueda and its third-generation Mexican-Chinese editor Sergio Fong, it was on the rise. In this section, we draw on this fieldwork and a recent collection co-edited by La Rueda to outline how cartonera was adopted and adapted in Mexico’s second city, helping to create new publics and contact zones. Between October and December 2017, we helped Fong to make books

and coffees, and to sell them in his bookshop-café and at markets. During the last month, we also lived with the publisher in the working-class Guadalupana neighborhood and traveled to the café with him daily. When he returned in June 2018, the city was awash with tales about how dangerous it had become, an increase in violence associated with the presence of *narcotraficantes*. Although rural areas of Jalisco—the region in which the city is situated—had long experienced violence and forced disappearances related to the war on drugs, Guadalajara had been considered relatively safe and peaceful. But a shoot-out in broad daylight on a bustling thoroughfare and the gruesome killing of three film students had shattered the relative calm.

One response to the violence in Guadalajara was organized by artist and curator Laura BM. Entitled *Cuerpo Colectivo* (“Collective Body”), it was planned as a cultural occupation of Guadalajara’s Liberation Square, a symbolically important central plaza situated between the Cathedral and the city’s oldest theater. The square features a statue of Mexican national hero Miguel Hidalgo, a priest and independence leader who declared the abolition of slavery in 1810, a milestone from which the plaza drew its name. As she recounts, Laura began to contact other cultural actors, inviting them to participate in an event that would creatively denounce urban violence:

You’ve seen the situation in the city over the past months, with the increase in violence, disappearances, and femicides, where the narcos are taking ever-greater control of the city. So I began talking to artists, asking them how to engage with politics, to involve the public, and to generate metaphors . . . I’d say ‘what do you think about doing something in public? Something participative that doesn’t have authorship as such?’ And we thought about taking over Liberation Square because it is somewhere symbolic, and because moving around the city as a student, as a young person, as a woman, is unsafe. (BM 2018)

Laura had met Sergio Fong years earlier, through a cultural collaboration, and invited him to participate. It was not the first time that Fong had mobilized his cultural activism in the fight against violence in Guadalajara. One of his proudest achievements as a young man was his role in the creation of an organization called B.U.S.H (United Barrios of the Hidalgo Sector), which brought together rival groups of young men involved in territorialized gang violence. The idea behind the “united barrios” project came from a friend, Tambo, who had been a victim of violence when the pick-up truck in which he was traveling was attacked with Molotov cocktails. Sergio remembers being in a house with a group of friends when Tambo’s cousin told them about wanting to “unite the barrios.” “It was a crazy idea,” Sergio told us, “but we came to believe in his madness” (Fong 2017). Sergio’s contribution to the initiative was the launch of a “young person’s fanzine, where young people talk about the problems of neighbourhood” (ibid). Supported by family and friends, they launched a publication with a print run of a thousand, featuring

“poetry, short stories, and illustrations” (ibid). “We realized that in the neighbourhood there were people who were interested in such things,” he explained, and “suddenly young people normally associated with a particular neighbourhood were now part of the BUSH” (ibid). However, this was thirty years before, and with the occupation of the central plaza, Sergio scaled up his response from the neighborhood to the city as a whole. The decision to act in the city’s symbolic center was in response to changing patterns of urban violence: the territorial gang violence that Sergio had been tangentially involved in, and then worked to fight against, had been replaced by a far more brutal drug violence that has become widespread across Mexico.

*The decision  
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violence*

Because Sergio was busy in the café on the day of Cuerpo Colectivo, his friend and fellow cardboard publisher Israel Soberanes went on behalf of La Rueda. We joined the jovial “Isra” in crossing the city center from the Rueda to the plaza, carrying bags of cartonera materials. On arrival, we made our way to a stage where technicians were assembling sound equipment, introduced ourselves, and were directed to a small white marquee where we would deliver the workshop. There, we found two women from Bordados por la Paz who were hanging white embroidered cloths in commemoration of victims of violence.

Bordados por la Paz began in Mexico City, and grew out of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity. Its practice is simple: groups assemble in public spaces to stitch onto white cloth information about the oft-gruesome deaths of citizens. Each embroidery contains basic information about the victim and the circumstances of their death and discovery, stitched with elaborate needlework. The purpose is to ensure that the victims of the war on drugs are remembered, and to reclaim public space for gatherings (Celentani 2014). Hundreds of Bordados por la Paz groups have sprung up across and beyond Mexico, and through their work thousands of victims have been remembered. Éster, one of the two women, explained how purple thread is often used when a murder is considered a femicide, and multicolored when a homophobic basis for the attack is suspected. The panels, like the following, made for grim reading:

“Edgar Ramón Chávez Martínez, 21 years old, who lived in San Juan Ocotlan, was a resident of Zapopan, and had been delivering bottled water for 6 months, disappeared two days ago. His body was found in a van abandoned at a roundabout, together with 25 other bodies. Guadalajara, Jalisco, 23 November 2011”

Éster went back to hanging up the cloths, and we returned to preparing the materials for the workshop. The plastic chairs soon began to fill up. The transient cartonera community that formed around the table included teenagers who had come especially for the event, families who were out spending the day in the center, and a few homeless men and women who regularly slept on the plaza benches. This diverse public was encouraged to come together by the workshop format, as

people conversed, shared tools, and commented on each other’s artistic styles. The workshop took place in two stages. First, the assemblage of the books, involving collating pages, perforating and stitching paper and cardboard, then covering the spine with a piece of sticking paper. Then, the decoration of the covers, on this occasion using a combination of colored pencils, pens, and paints. The styles of the participants ranged from the abstract to the figurative to the testimonial, with some featuring splashes of color, others landscapes, and others still the names of participants (see Figure 3; Bilbija & Celis Carbajal 2009; <http://cartonerapublishing.com/>).

Such a gathering is what we consider an act of “public-ing,” where cartonera publishers help to instigate new publics through the social labor of book-making, creating “contact zones” (Askins and Pain 2011) that, through artistic activity, are able to “place people in meaningful... contact in city spaces” (Zebracki & De Bekker 2018, 19). Drawing on the earlier works of “contact theorist” Allport (1954) and Pratt (1991), who coined the term “contact zone” to highlight spaces of colonial encounter, Askins and Pain use the concept in their analysis of a participatory art project carried out in the North of England with young people of British and African heritage. In introducing the term to discussions of the spatiality of urban encounters, they highlight how art projects can serve to create bonds between young people from diverse backgrounds, nationalities, and ethnicities. Two points from their work are of interest to us here: the importance of material things and process in the creation of contact zones, and the disruption of social and ethnic divisions. In their fieldwork, sharing tools—paints, brushes, pencils—created moments of tension and resolution, possessiveness and sharing,



Figure 3. A participant in the cartonera workshop in Guadalajara’s Liberation Square holds aloft his book (Photo: Patrick O’Hare). [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

while a later focus on end product (photographs) over process caused young people to drift away and lose interest. In the case of cartonera workshops, we suggest that through emphasis on the book-making process *and* its end product (the book), cartoneras are able to create zones of contact not only between diverse social groups but also between people, familiar spaces and day-to-day materials, like cardboard, that are made unfamiliar through re-appropriation.

## Dissensus

Petr Agha (2018) argues that street art can create a common space, “a particular topography with certain relational arrangements of elements which exist through their reciprocal determinations,” enabled by “allowing our various partnerships with things, objects, and space to become part of our democratic milieu” (225). Like street art, the anti-violence activities in the square produced “temporary communities of intersubjective encounters from within public space, which allow[ed] for diverse subjectivities to emerge (and disappear again)” (225). Yet while Agha writes of public art creating “a temporary and spatially defined community of emancipated and equal *spectators*” (emphasis added), cartonera workshops create groups of participants and *co-creators*. Street art also has the power, Agha highlights, to lay “the foundation for a possible rupture, a change in perception” (226), echoing Rancière’s (2009) well-known theory that art works on, and can occasionally bring about a change in, what he calls the “distribution of the sensible”: “the set of perception between what is visible, thinkable, and understandable, and what is not.” The regular status quo is associated with order and the state he calls the “police distribution of the sensible”: the lived experience of conformity, or “a condition under which one’s most intimate modes of saying, seeing and doing are synonymous with structures of domination” (Applegate, 2013). Its opposite is politics, which involves democratic forms of communication, action, and practice, including art practice (Rancière 2009).

Shifting his use of the term police to the more commonplace security forces of the state, Rancière argues that “police interventions in public spaces consist primarily... in breaking up demonstrations” so as to ensure that “the space for circulating is nothing but the space of circulation”; politics, meanwhile, consists of the transformation of this space into “a space for the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens” (37). In the case of the cartonera workshop, the square was transformed from a place of circulation to one of occupation, “public-ing,” and dissensus. The homeless people who joined the workshop were not stripped of their association with public space, but their use of that space was altered as they joined others in finding a political and creative voice.

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Why were the homeless people or activists not repressed by police during the event? Interestingly, in the kind of ethnographic detail that can upset the broad categorizations of political theory, Laura had been guaranteed a security detail from the Ministry of Culture, whose role was to protect the demonstrators from regular police. Thus, one arm of the state was used to guarantee the right to cultural and political expression against another potentially more repressive branch. The assigned security was called for in the cartonera session when two street figures— younger, heavily tattooed, and smelling of alcohol—attempted to sit at our table, not so much to do the workshop as to profit from some shade. Their aggressive energy was perceived by the other participants. César—who had suffered a brain injury and had been sleeping rough—began to raise his voice, telling the new arrivals to move off or else he would call security.

This call from vulnerable subjects to police the boundaries of the cartonera community can be understood through the debate between Habermas (1991) and Rancière (2004a; 2004b; 2009) on the constitution of the public sphere. As Russell and Montin (2015) summarize, in Habermas’s model, “the practices of communication oriented towards mutual understanding requires that interlocutors take up a... stance of mutual recognition towards one another in which they regard each other as equals with respect to their capacity for rational speech and rational evaluation of speech” (543). For Rancière, such equality in communication in normal exchange under capitalist relations is illusory. The question “do you understand?” to use one of his examples, is not necessarily an invitation to rational debate, but rather can be seen as an example of performative speech, signifying “do you understand an order” in a speech act that implies a relationship of hierarchy rather than equality (Rancière 2004b). Only in exceptional political situations of dissensus, when the ordinary distribution of the sensible is shattered, can the arguments and reason of the subaltern be taken seriously.

The cartonera workshop in the square is an example of such an exceptional situation. The homeless, often physically and discursively excluded from the *public* of public space (Deutsche 1996; Mitchell & Staeheli 2005), were welcome participants, treated on an equal basis but only so long as they, like everyone else, complied with implicit rules concerning respectful and non-threatening behavior. They became co-producers of art and received rudimentary training in the craft of book binding, with social distinctions temporally flattened out by common labor and shared tools. Yet the diverse subjectivities in the square cannot be reduced to a people-police dichotomy, because groups like “the police” and “the homeless” are themselves not homogeneous, so that security might be called by one homeless group against another to enforce the boundaries of non-violent and reasonable public behavior.

In its unpredictable gathering of different people in a space normally only transited through, cartoneras can be seen as helping to constitute



a particular form of public, a counter-public, which Warner (2005) defines as “counter to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger sociability and reflexivity” (120). Warner’s definition of publics as only existing by virtue of being addressed is somewhat different from our own, given the utmost importance he places on discourse over materiality and his rejection of physical co-presence as constitutive of a public (as opposed to a crowd). Yet Warner also places equal importance on the non-state, self-organizational nature of publics, as well as on their openness to strangers—characteristics that we would argue are constitutive of cartonera publishers and their “public pages” (Schwartz 2018).

### (Urban) Imprinters

To the right of the cartonera workshop in the square, Margarita helped members of the public to use an “octopus” silk screen machine to print protest slogans onto textiles and clothes. These included “Every 1h 52mins, a disappearance,” “What does a country reap, that sows death?” and “I want to go out into the street without fear of being disappeared.” On her Facebook page, she had posted a status update encouraging people to participate: “we are in the Plaza de la Liberación... bring a t-shirt and take away a message of social discontent.” Another group of artists printed a manifesto onto the pavement, while a group of young people used colorful magnetic letters to spell out messages of peace. These groups might be compared to the young men who use graffiti and *pixação* to “imprint” the urban environment of São Paulo (Caldeira 2012). Like them, they are public imprinters, taking letters to the public plaza and pavement. Yet unlike the marginalized youth researched by Caldeira, cartoneras and their cultural allies do not resist participating in traditional social movements. In Caldeira’s analysis, “although aggressively public... *pixações* have no intention of emphasizing dignity, citizenship, law, or rights, as was the case with the urban social movements” (405). There are no explicit demands made by *pixação* artists, who resist inclusion while relishing transgression. This is not the case with cartoneras, who, despite being a new cultural movement, are happy to join or even found social movements that occupy public space with a clear set of demands to the state and clustered around a call to end impunity, violence, and the war on drugs.

*Cartoneras* are intricately involved with the associated activities of printing, imprinting, and publishing, and of stitching and textual production—two processes linked by their shared Latin root, *texere* (to weave). The act of cartonera book binding represents a bringing together of word and weave, hand and tool, in a productive socio-material knot or “ravel.” Their practices are connected with forms of “conflict textiles” like *arpilleras*—colorful patchwork pictures made famous by groups of women during Chile’s Pinochet dictatorship but found

throughout Latin America to this day (Bacic 2014). While arpilleras are involved in maintaining memory at a collective level, the AIDS memorial quilt is another example of “textile politics,” which, like the Bordados por la Paz initiative, remembers and names individual victims—in that case, those of the AIDS epidemic. These examples all represent forms of socio-material raveling that involve not only different material techniques and aesthetic styles but also different configurations of art, craft, and politics.

Rancière (2009) writes that aesthetic education and experience do not promise to “support the cause of political emancipation with forms of art,” and he differentiates the politics of aesthetics from political subjectivity per se. In Liberation Square, there was no question of the artists eschewing political subjectivity, even if they did largely reject co-optation by the state or political parties. But their politics do seem to correspond to Rancière’s (2009) idea of metapolitics: “the thinking which aims to overcome political dissensus by switching scene, by passing from the appearances of democracy and of the forms of the State to the infrascene of underground movements and the concrete energies that comprise them” (33). Local monuments installed by public authorities were temporarily reconfigured, as the *Hilos* (Threads) collective and members of the public draped in wool the large letters of the permanent sign that spelled out “Guadalajara, Guadalajara,” throwing the balls back and forth in what Laura likened to a pre-Hispanic “love tie” (Figure 4). The paving stones of public space were inscribed with manifestos; hung embroideries told stories of violence and assassination. Such interventions in public space denounced the failings of democracy by drawing attention to how



Figure 4. Members of the *Hilos* collective entangle the large Guadalajara sign as Hidalgo looks on (Photo: Patrick O'Hare). [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

public space was not equally safe and transitable for subjects like women, gay men, and the homeless.

The interventions in the square superimposed memories of violent deaths and forced disappearances onto these symbols, reconfiguring a space of affective encounter. This is a very tangible example of the mobilization of memory against history, as theorized by Enrique Gallegos in La Rueda's recent co-publication *Trazos de Resistencia* (*Traces of Resistance*): whereas history records "great events" involving famous people, populations, and nations, memory registers "micro-events, small actions, life's dust and the experiences involved in each movement" (2018, 18). That is why, according to Gallegos, "memory is the main symbolic safeguard of the disappeared and place of shelter for a politics of resistance" (18). The square, in this intervention, was "occupied" by multiple memories of the deceased through a series of micro-actions, which challenge the national narratives symbolized here by the statue of Hidalgo.

*Traces of Resistance* (2018) is a co-edition between La Rueda and *Huellas de la memoria* (*Footprints of Memory*), a collective whose public acts and installations commemorate Mexico's disappeared in what has become an international, participative, socio-artistic intervention. For several years now, Alfredo López Casanova has been creating evocative installations out of shoes sent to him by relatives of the disappeared—shoes they have worn to walk the country (or even continent) in search of their loved ones, whose soles he engraves with names of the disappeared, dates, and messages of suffering, resistance, and courage written by family members. It is this form that is adopted for the book cover, which features the words "Footprints of Memory: we will carry on until we find them" (Figure 5).

In the introduction, the *Huellas de la memoria* collective depicts their intention thus:

You could say that the shoes turn into a memory device, in which the body engraves the walking of searching family members, as well as their voice of struggle, resistance and courage, and their broken, intimate, loving voice, which the social body must protect. The shoe takes a necessary step forward, being used not to wear or walk, but to tell a story through its engravings. The power of the shoe emerges from the imperfection caused by its use: tears, dust, mud, dirt, wear. So it is also a reflection of the condition that you experience when a family member disappears, a continual wearing—spiritual, physical, psychological, economic. Searching families are prepared to devote themselves physically to the task of finding those they have lost and, in such a process, the social body needs to accompany them. Hence our call to society: make our bodies into a collective body so that the necessity for truth and justice become social necessities; so that when families are not there, we, as a society, can search for them and demand that they be returned to us. (2018:14)

The solidarity called for by the *Huellas* collective involves the transformation of the physical body into a social body, recalling the "Collective

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Figure 5. The cover reads: “Footprints of Memory: we will carry on until we find them” (Photo: Patrick O’Hare). [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

Body” event in Liberation Square and Melchor Flores’s account in *The Caravan of Solace*. Such solidarity is enacted by the process of turning these texts into a book through cartonera practices. In line with Askins and Pain’s (2010) argument that materiality and craft play an important role in gluing together transient communities, La Rueda’s participative workshop practices enable ever-evolving, transient communities to unite—through physical acts like cutting, painting and stitching—into a unified social body. It is no surprise that this collaboration is accorded primacy of place by La Rueda as its ninth anniversary edition: “For us, even though Tambo, like so many others, is not with us physically, his spirit accompanies us in our day-to-day action. The memory of all of them carries on, and will carry on, uniting us” (Fong 2018, 7–8).

It is the disappearance of Sergio’s friend Tambo, as a metonym of Mexico’s 40,000 disappeared, that drives La Rueda’s day-to-day public-ing activities, and lends unity to its transient communities. Crucially, both the Huellas and cartonera collectives share a common fundamental aesthetic: the recovery of materials from everyday life (whether shoes or cardboard boxes), which bear the traces or imprints of multiple itineraries (“tears, dust, mud, dirt, wear”), and are given an afterlife in the form

of a multi-layered, affective artwork. As Gallegos theorizes in his closing essay, “memory rests upon material foundations.... It is underpinned by the things that belonged to the disappeared.... The chair they sat on, the bed they slept on, the tools they used or the park bench they sat on” (2018, 19). Recovering this materiality, as the Huellas and Rueda collectives do, by repurposing disused objects, involves an act of dissensus (Rancière 2009).

This dissensus goes beyond the contact zone of the ephemeral urban encounter, since the books travel and continue on their own journeys. Unlike the work of Craig (2011), this article has not focused on the distribution and social life of cartonera books beyond their place of production, yet it is important to note these local and international trajectories. For instance, as part of the broader Cartonera Publishing project that informed this paper, we organized a meeting (*encuentro*) of cardboard publishers in São Paulo (see Cartonera Publishing, 2018), and Sergio brought along many copies of *Traces of Resistance*. These were unsurprisingly popular with the Brazilian and international public that attended the event—a public united by a pressing concern with the rise of state-sanctioned violence and hate crimes in Brazil in the wake of its turn to the far-right (with Bolsonaro’s election to the presidency having shaken Brazil just two weeks before the *encuentro*). This is just one example of the thousands of new, often unexpected “contact zones” opened up by the books and their publishers as they circulate locally, nationally, and internationally.

## Conclusion

Digital media and mobile technologies, as well as increasing forms of digital sociability, have evidently decreased forms of “real-life” meaningful contact and conversation between strangers in public space (Misra et al. 2016). As Carty writes, theorists have updated Habermas’s concerns about the media eroding the public sphere, warning that “virtual social relations in cyberspace are not a substitute for more traditional forms of community and protest, because they lack the interpersonal ties that provide the basis for the consistency of collective identities” (2018, 39). Worldwide, mobile phones provide company for individuals traversing public space, becoming “urban Sherpas,” to use Bull’s term (2007). A return to manual activities, though still closely connected to the digital as participants are invited on Facebook and event images invariably end up on social media, allows communities to reconnect both through dialogue and through the affective gestures associated with the “return to the tactile” implied in the resurgence of craft. Cartonera publics then are not simply a twenty-first century version of male sociality as championed by Habermas: the publics themselves are more inclusive, and our definition of the public must also be so, extended to bracket not only different forms of speech but also multiple forms of collective material and affective activity.

Cartoneras thus blur the lines between publics constituted through discourse, and those brought together by material practice. They assemble members of the public, usually in public space, bringing them together through the shared activity of book binding. Often, given the huge increase in violence in Mexico in recent years, this cartonera practice has joined better-known phenomena such as the Bordados por la Paz project in denouncing violence, whether that be the historic violence of 1968 or the contemporary violence of the war on drugs. They fight against creeping “agoraphobia” by creating temporary communities in the agora, united by political protest and book-making, but also longer-lasting communities of discussion, debate, and aesthetic practice in spaces like the Casona Spencer and La Rueda Café.

Public space is thus constituted not only “from above,” by politicians, architects, city planners, and construction companies, but also “from below,” by anybody (and indeed *every physical body*) that transits through its streets, squares, and public buildings. Within this process, forms of control, including state violence, are disrupted by creative forms of resistance, which this article has located simultaneously in literary/art/documentary collections, community workshops, public protests, and cultural occupations. This multi-dimensional and multi-body processuality, we suggest, must be replicated in the methods through which urban anthropological research is carried out. Our contribution is therefore intended less as a definitive statement on the role of cartoneras in the reconstruction of public space in the context of the Mexican drug war, and more as a step toward understanding—through collaborative, participative, and inter-disciplinary research as well as through socio-artistic practice—how today’s cities are formed and transformed at the interstices of political action and aesthetic activities, social gestures and performative acts, public statements and intimate affects.

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<sup>1</sup> Agent provocateurs who had infiltrated the student demonstrations to commit acts of violence and provoke the army into a response used white gloves to identify themselves.

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