

Institution: University of Surrey		
Unit of Assessment: 27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: The Cartonera Publishing Project: Empowering Vulnerable Communities for Sustainable Social Change		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2017–2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Lucy Bell Dr Patrick O'Hare	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Bell - Senior Lecturer in Spanish and Translation Studies; Principal Investigator of Cartonera Publishing Project O'Hare – postdoctoral research fellow, 'Precarious Publishing' (2017–2018)	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: Bell: January 2013 - present O'Hare: October 2017- July 2018
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2018–2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Sparked by Argentina's 2001 crisis, 'cartonera' is a socially-engaged publishing movement that has spread widely across and beyond Latin America over the last two decades thanks to a transnational network of autonomous collectives. Through long-term, horizontal collaborations with four collectives in Mexico and Brazil (2016–2020), the Cartonera Publishing Project (CPP) has shed new light on how these publishers create new communities of readers and writers, opening access to literature through unique modes of production: using cardboard ('cartón') recovered from the street as their covers, they make colourful books by hand through participatory workshops.</p> <p>Bringing together UK academics and Latin American publishers, writers, artists, curators and librarians, the CPP has generated significant impact on both local and global scales. Inspired by the cartonera workshop model, in which new literature, relations, and communities take form through collective work, the team has co-designed a constellation of workshop programmes to tackle SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) from the grassroots. Working across diverse vulnerable communities, from indigenous and marginalized rural groups to imprisoned women and trans sex workers, these innovative programmes have inspired 1,000+ participants to write, publish and – through this empowering communal process – <i>change</i> their life stories. At a global level, CPP has amplified the voice and reach of cartoneras through the largest cartonera exhibition to date (São Paulo) and the world's second-largest cartonera library collection (UK). Both were activated through hands-on public events, which in turn have led to new international collaborations, building capacity for more resilient, sustainable communities in the 2020s.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Cartonera was born in 2003 in the wake of the Argentine economic crisis, when a group of socially-engaged artists and writers set up a publishing collective – Eloísa Cartonera – in collaboration with waste-pickers, making low-cost books from the discarded cardboard they collected from the streets. This model of sustainable publishing soon spread, and there are now over 250 collectives across Latin America – a number greater than the imprints of publishing giant Penguin Random House. Though highly-diverse, the cartonera network shares a basic model: making low-cost books by hand through collective work, with recovered, recycled or low-cost materials (cardboard,</p>		

paint, paper, needles and thread). Through engaging, convivial work processes, cartoneras make literature accessible beyond the cultural elite in places where books are prohibitively expensive; and allow even the most marginalized communities to make their voices heard against the backdrop of an exclusive publishing industry (R1). 'Cartonera', then, means much more than upcycled cardboard: it is a mode of circulation under duress, resistance against cultural homogenization, and community-based resilience in the face of global crisis (Bell, Flynn & O'Hare 2021).

The small body of scholarship on cartoneras to date has tended to analyse cartoneras in relation to contemporary book culture, public reading programmes and the rise of digital media. Bell's research shifts the focus from cultural production to social intervention, asking: Why are cartoneras important in the fight against global inequalities, and how do they challenge prevailing conceptions of sustainable development? Bell's research demonstrates that arts-based initiatives like cartoneras allow us to rethink waste, consumption and sustainability in ways that foreground the experiences of those whose lives are characterised not by distance from waste (as waste theory would have it), but by daily proximity to it (R2). As alternative forms of publishing and meaning-production, grassroots publishers play a key role in countering the over-privileging of knowledge produced in the Global North.

Dulcinéia Catadora, for example, is a publisher based in a São Paulo recycling cooperative, run by artist Lúcia Rosa and a group of female waste-pickers. As Bell argues in *Literature and Sustainability*, this collective contributes to – and intervenes in – the global discourse on sustainability through hands-on, embodied, experiential practices and texts that materialise "empty-belly sustainabilities" from the perspective of the poor. (R3)

Designed by Bell, the collaborative and multidisciplinary Cartonera Publishing Project (CPP) has explored how cartonera models have been adopted and adapted across Latin America to help transform the lives of some of Latin America's most vulnerable people: not just waste-pickers, but many other vulnerable groups including indigenous peoples, rural communities and imprisoned people. In collaboration with cartonera practitioners and anthropologists Flynn and O'Hare, Bell has developed ground-breaking methodologies involving action-based research and post-critical literary approaches (R4). Emulating cartonera practices, this methodological framework involves horizontal collaborations from community-based workshops and publications to international *encuentros* (gatherings) and exhibitions.

Through these interdisciplinary methods, Bell and O'Hare have demonstrated for the first time how complex local and transnational networks have allowed cartoneras to develop new ways of 'doing politics' underground through socio-artistic action (R5). These networks, in turn, have been mobilized to fight against social exclusion, stigma and inequality faced by large sectors of the Latin American population. Cartoneras are also joining forces across international borders to combat skyrocketing levels of violence connected to the rise of far-right discourses in Brazil (R5), and to political repression and forced disappearances in Mexico (R6). The co-authored book (*Taking Form, Making Worlds: Cartonera Publishers in Latin America* (Texas UP, 2021) – the first full-length monograph on cartoneras – demonstrates how these publishers, through plural, hands-on forms that straddle literary creation, artistic practice and community action, repackage resistance and activism for the twenty-first century.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1.** Bell L (2017b) "Las cosas se pueden hacer de modo distinto" (Aurelio Meza): Understanding Concepts of Locality, Resistance, and Autonomy in the Cardboard Publishing Movement. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* (JLACS) 25.2. Doi: [10.1080/13569325.2016.1271313](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2016.1271313)
- R2.** Bell L (2018) Place, People and Processes in Waste Theory: A Global South Critique. *Cultural Studies* (Impact Factor 1.02). Doi: [10.1080/09502386.2017.1420810](https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2017.1420810)
- R3.** Bell L (2017a) Recycling Materials, Recycling Lives: Cardboard Publishers in Latin America, in Johns-Putra A, Squire L and Parham J (eds), *Literature and Sustainability*, Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2017. URL:

<https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/31273/632974.pdf?sequence=1#page=95>

R4. Bell L, Flynn A & O'Hare P (2020). From Cartonera Publishing Practices to Trans-Formal Methods for Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Research Journal*. Doi: [10.1177/1468794120914516](https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120914516)

R5. Bell L & O'Hare P (2020). Latin American Politics Underground: Networks, Rhizomes and Resistance in Cartonera Publishing. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. DOI: [10.1177/1367877919880331](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877919880331)

R6. O'Hare P & Bell L (2020) Cultural Responses to the War on Drugs: Writing, Occupying and 'Public-ing' in the Mexican City. *City and Society*. DOI: [10.1111/ciso.12259](https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12259)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The two principal impact strands detailed below are the result of a key finding that emerged from the above research: that cartonera publishing, beyond the dissemination of texts in and by vulnerable communities, offers hands-on, arts-based methodologies that are at once sustainable and socially-transformative. The first strand involved the design and implementation of tailored SDG-focused programmes to empower vulnerable communities to write, publish and change their life stories, while the second sought to increase the global reach of cartonera publishing through high-profile, international events and collections.

Strand 1: Empowering marginalised communities through cartonera-inspired workshops

Working closely with four principal cartonera partners on the ground – La Rueda Cartonera and La Cartonera in Mexico; Dulcinéia Catadora and Catapoesia in Brazil – the research team co-designed sustainable cartonera programmes to empower communities facing exclusion, stigma and violence (**IR1**). The resulting workshops have been delivered to 1,000+ participants from a wide variety of vulnerable groups (many of which do not feature below for reasons of space), from marginalized rural and indigenous communities to homeless groups and imprisoned people (**IR2**). We highlight three examples below to illustrate the significance and range of the impacts achieved by these programmes.

Building on their existing work in the Cerrado, a Brazilian biome threatened by mining and deforestation, Catapoesia have reached 200+ participants through a new series of 13 community workshops. The programme brought community groups together to discuss and try out more sustainable forms of working through closer, more respectful connections with the natural environment. e.g. In Riacho dos Ventos – a *quilombola* community originally established by escaped slaves – a group of female leaf-pickers produced *Buriti-Dão*, a book reflecting on life in the Cerrado. Through the collective process of making the book – discussions, writing sessions, book-making activities and book fairs – the women learnt new ways of telling their stories, forging community and making a living (**IR3**). As Luciana reflects, "We saw the possibility of making money by selling books to supplement our income. We love the project and we have even set up a mini version of Catapoesia in our community."

In the mega-city of São Paulo, the cartonera team co-designed a new intervention with 18 homeless people and housing activists, entitled *Mutirão (Task Force)*. The intervention focused on improving conditions in a housing occupation through DIY teamwork that was documented and disseminated through a cartonera book with the same title. As attested by Lúcia Rosa, co-founder of Dulcinéia, who co-ran the workshops, "*Mutirão* is a book that exposes the very serious problem of homelessness and inequality [in São Paulo]." But it was also a social project that had a direct impact, "bringing huge benefits to the quality of life of residents". As Stefania explains: "My room was painted. I also helped to paint it. It looked good. And there's going to be a photo of it in the book. The covers are very colourful and it's easy to make the books. I want people to have this book and to see that people who don't own property also have the right to decent housing." (**IR2**)

5,000 miles away in Jalisco (Mexico), the CPP team supported La Rueda Cartonera and Viento Cartonero to take their long-established publishing activities to a prison for the first time, running a series of workshops for imprisoned women with the aim of contributing to their rehabilitation.

These resulted in a double launch: *Wind & Mirrors*, a book written by nine participants; Bote Cartonero (Cartonera in the Clink), Mexico's first publisher run by prisoners themselves. The impact on the prisoners was powerful, enabling them not only to use literature to combat stigma and "denounce injustices" (Enedina), but also to begin rewriting their storylines and take control of their own futures. As testimonials and news reports demonstrate, the non-prescriptive, creative aspect of the programme allowed prisoners to come to their own understanding of what literature could do *for them*, whether as "a new way of coping with life" after several suicide attempts (Sonia) or as a means of finding creative freedom: "this cartonera project is a blessing!!! Thanks to literature, to travelling in writing, I no longer feel oppressed by this system. Literature liberates me!" (Erika) (IR2 & IR4). These stories of transformation, documented in the new BBC Arts animation "Writing from the Shadows" (IR5), inspired the first UK cartonera programme, launched in September 2019 at HMP Nottingham, resulting in *Unlocked*, a literary collection written and produced by 17 imprisoned men. Of these participants, 100% reported that they enjoyed the experience of making their own books and writing their stories, and over 80% noted an improvement in their literacy and communication skills. The success of these programmes has inspired the new, Surrey-led "Prisoner Publishing" project (2020-21), part-funded by Jalisco's Ministry of Culture, which is extending the impact of these programmes across the UK, Mexico and South America.

Strand 2: Curating and activating cultural heritage from the Latin American margins

Our international cartonera exhibition in São Paulo (Oct 2018–Feb 2019) was the largest to date, featuring 350 books from 40 collectives from all over the world, and attracting 2,500+ visitors from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, countries and ethnicities. It received high-level media coverage, from a review in Brazil's largest circulation magazine *Veja* (circulation: 1 million), to a feature on national TV programme *Journal de Culture* (audience: 4.8 million) (IR6). The community cultural centre Casa do Povo was chosen as a venue to help achieve our three goals: equip the public with new knowledge of grassroots publishing in Latin America; increase the accessibility of literary publishing; inspire and train visitors to make their own cartonera books and (in the case of teachers, writers and artists) develop new professional practices. The comments book demonstrates all of these impacts: "Lost for words! You have showed us how to do so many things without the need for anything too complicated"; "I learnt all about cartoneras. It immediately inspired me to develop something similar for my students at the state high school where I teach." (IR7)

The public programme led by São Paulo-based activists, writers and educators also fostered some surprising new initiatives, including a productive collaboration between Dulcinéia and three groups of immigrant and LGBTQ women, which led to the production of a high-impact book – *We are Women Immigrants* – which folds out into a protest placard. Generated through a series of face-to-face workshops and digital exchanges, the book/placard was placed in action at the 2019 Women's March (see image and quotation below).



'No Woman is Illegal' placard presiding over the Women's Day Demonstration, São Paulo, 8th March 2019. Photograph courtesy of Amanda Amorim.

People were curious, they asked questions, and we answered, starting various conversations throughout the day. 'Ah, how did you make this?' they asked, and not just about the content but also about the process, like, 'how was the book made?' We chatted with so many people. It was a fruitful process of knowledge exchange.... The book generated the effect that we wanted, to spark curiosity: 'Ah, what? It's a placard that turns into a book? I want one!' (Maria Botero, public programme collaborator)

In the UK, Bell has forged new collaborations with the British Library, Senate House Library, and Cambridge University Library, leading to the development of the world's second-largest cartonera collection, an open, ever-growing archive of 700+ books. The libraries have benefited in three main ways: acquiring these difficult-to-attain books, co-developing new collecting practices, and attracting new readerships. Most notably, the project has allowed partner libraries to "promote a more activist and decolonial culture within our libraries, whereby collections are developed in collaboration with grassroots collectives and vulnerable communities from the Global South" (IR8). This shift has resulted in further impact for the CPP, leading for example to the first public cartonera collection in Mexico (at Jalisco Central Library) supported by these three libraries.

To activate these collections, the Surrey-led team coordinated a series of digital resources (e.g. a feature on cartoneras in "[Rebel, Rebel](#)", an episode from the British Library's "Anything But Silent" podcast) and designed a series of public engagement events that together have involved 1,000+ participants (IR9), culminating in the first London Cartonera Book Festival (17–20 September 2019, SHL & BL). The festival's SDG-focused workshops allowed participants from a range of organizations (e.g. Save the Latin Village Campaign, Latin American Women's Aid and Amnesty International) to adapt and adopt the Latin American publishing model to strengthen their own community initiatives (IR10). The project team has also taken cartonera activities beyond libraries through high-profile festivals including Hay Festival 2018, where our two workshops led to new community initiatives led by local artists, and a month-long series of further workshops run independently by local teenagers at the Story of Books 'working museum', which attracted 200+ participants.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Strand 1: Empowering vulnerable communities through new arts-based models (IR1-10)

IR1: List of SDG-focused workshops, incl. numbers, outcomes & impacts (PDF)

IR2: Testimonials from SDG-focused workshop participants (PDF)

IR3: Article in the prestigious ecology magazine Ecologist and Resurgence (PDF)

IR4: TV news feature by Jalisco C7: [subtitled version](#)

IR5: BBC Arts animation film, [Writing from the Shadows](#), available on iPlayer

Strand 2: Presenting and preserving cultural heritage from the Latin American margins

IR6: TV news report by [Journal de Culture](#) (mins 7–9)

IR7: Exhibition report: <http://cartonerapublishing.com/cartonera/>

IR8: Testimonial from three libraries (PDF)

IR9: List of public workshops to activate the collections (PDF)

IR10: Collated feedback from London Cartonera Book Festival (PDF)