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Redefining Garbage in Contemporary Buenos Aires: The Imagination of Crisis and its Aesthetic Responses¹

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The phenomenon of waste, what we discard and what we simply call “trash,” “junk,” “leftovers,” and “crap,” is not defined by any inherent characteristics but by assigned and imposed categories. In *Rubbish Theory* (1979), British anthropologist Michael Thompson points out that objects designated as trash – whatever has been given a “death” certificate – can remain in this dormant state, deprived of time and value until they have the chance to be “discovered” and even transferred into a “durable” category which includes

¹ An earlier presentation draft of this article was delivered at the Centre for Latin American Studies at The University of Cambridge (UK) on 30 January 2012, and an expanded version can be found in my book *Políticas de la destrucción/Poéticas de la preservación. Apuntes para una lectura (eco)crítica del medio ambiente en América Latina* (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo, 2013).

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works of art and antiques; these are objects that conserve or even increase their value over time (7). This change of category – which, beyond material culture, can be related to systems of ideas and knowledge – is linked, according to Thompson, to a change in ownership and is therefore connected to the social relations of power. In equal measure, this way of looking at things with respect to their old functions allows new values and meanings for trash. Considering the arbitrary and multilayered nature of trash that Thompson evokes, I would like to focus on the figure of *cartoneros* or “cardboard scavengers,” a growing phenomenon throughout Latin America that has been drawing the attention of literary critics, sociologists and anthropologists as well as writers and artists over the last fifteen years or so. The central thrust of this essay is that the *cartoneros* phenomenon highlights that the impetus behind recycling in Latin America differs starkly from what one finds in the developed world. Whereas the recycling and reuse of objects in the US and Europe typically reflects an ideological commitment to better or improve the environment, Latin American recycling is more often than not motivated by the straightforward economic need for survival. To a certain degree, *cartoneros* emerge as a possible example of how to re-imagine both environmental policy and justice as a set of evolving community relationships, personalizing the process of recycling through a more communal and less individualistic endeavor, one more akin to labor practices. If garbage is a relational concept, a relative one that comprises notions of value that change from one society to another, as Thompson rightly has demonstrated,

garbage can also operate as a critique of consumption which is contingent upon the specific place where the trash is produced and to which it is addressed. In this sense, and as I hope to demonstrate throughout this article, (environmental) innovation could also emerge hand in hand with crisis and socio-economic degradation. Before exploring the cultural production that has been preoccupied with waste and its reuse in Buenos Aires since 2000, I will first offer a brief overview of earlier aesthetic responses to garbage. In closing, I will consider some of the political, cultural and theoretical implications of the *cartonero* phenomenon.

The story of people who live in garbage dumps is not new. Ever since human beings have lived on earth they have generated, produced, manufactured, excreted, separated, discarded, and eliminated all different forms of waste, as Martin Melosi has correctly pointed out in his 1981 classic *Garbage in the Cities*. Nevertheless, garbage has not always been a problem, or at least a problem of the scale and magnitude it represents in contemporary societies: throughout history, agrarian societies have successfully avoided solid waste pollution and contamination. Therefore, Melosi signals that trash is an urban problem, and although it varies in degree and intensity, it is exacerbated by the limits that habitable space implies, such as population density (1).

It is in this scenario of environmental contamination articulated as an urban issue that I attempt to analyze those textual and visual representations in which the subjects, besides collecting trash for its later use, whether through sale

for recycling, exchange, or the appropriation for their own purposes, are nourished literally and metaphorically from waste. The garbage-men constitute a global phenomenon of “underdeveloped” countries, and they have been called different names: from *facks* and *teugs* (which refer to a social caste system) in Dakar, *wahis* and *zabbaleen* in Cairo, *gallinazos* in Colombia, *scavengers* or *garbage pickers* in English-speaking countries, *pepenadores* or *resoqueadores* in Mexico, *catadores de lixo* in Brazil, *buzos* in Costa Rica, and *cartoneros* and *cirujas* in Argentina. These are “just different names to call the same activity: making a living out of garbage” (Castillo Berthier 149).

Although the *cartonero* is a recent phenomenon, the history of the disposal of material wastes and the circulation of garbage in Buenos Aires stretches back centuries, beginning with the foundation of the city in 1580 by Juan de Garay. Like any other setting, governmental urban hygiene policies have shaped the living conditions of the poor who depend on others’ trash to survive. One paradigmatic example is the lower Flores neighborhood dump in the capital, which by the end of the 1920s became the largest waste disposal site in the city and lasted until the 1960s when it was eventually cleaned up and urbanized with the construction of the Almirante Brown Park and the channeling of the Cildañez stream. For many years, men, women and children had collected paper, rags, cans, glass and even bones, gathering them for use as a source of heat. One paradigmatic example is renowned Argentine painter Antonio Berni (1905-1981), who portrayed the misery of these garbage collectors in lower Flores’

neighborhood by inventing a character, Juanito Laguna, a young man whose daily survival depends on scraping together all sorts of remnants from the city. With the creation of Ramona Montiel, another of Berni's famous characters, the Argentine painter refined his innovative printing technique called "xilo-collage-relief," a process that involves the recycling of materials from Ramona's daily life – fabrics, wigs, artificial flowers, brooms, clothes, tinsel, coins, and buttons – and creating molds of them that are then printed in a technique similar to a woodcut. The result yields an impression with elements in very high relief on handmade paper, creating a thick and richly textured printed surface. Through his unique combinations of commonplace materials with brutal realism, Berni sought to express the harsh realities of unbridled urban growth in Argentine society at the beginning of the 1960s.

Between the 1930s and the 1970s, two different social actors emerged in the domain of informal trash collection: the *botellero* [the bottle collector] and the *ciruja* [the junkman], the former surviving by collecting trash that had been initially disposed of in both municipal and clandestine dumps. In 1977, with the creation of the Metropolitan Ecological Coordination Area (Coordinación Ecológica Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado [CEAMSE]), the government forbade the use of industrial incinerators in the Buenos Aires area and replaced them with landfills (Schamber 62). With ordinance 33691 of 8 August 1977 in the Capital and law 9111, sanctioned on 17 July 1978, in the greater Buenos Aires area, the collection of trash and scraps was prohibited. The implementation of

the sanitary landfill system would put an end to the open air dumps and at-home incinerators, definitively shutting down the plants (63). This new policy indeed put an end to burning trash and made garbage collection accessible to only a select group of companies. The economic crisis and unemployment of the 1990s once again led to the emergence of waste collection through new and very different modalities.

Although there is disagreement as to precisely when the *cartonero* appeared – some have dated its emergence as early as the 1990s – the *cartonero* became a highly visible figure on a widespread scale in Buenos Aires with the 2001 demise of the 1991 Convertibility Plan where the Argentine peso was pegged to the American dollar.² The collapse of the national economy resulted in the freezing of bank accounts and the biggest foreign debt default in Argentine economic history. The percentage of people that were unemployed or underemployed increased dramatically in the wake of this crisis and many of the newly unemployed were from the middle classes who encountered poverty for the first time. Confronted with this hardship, people turned to rummaging and sorting through trash to collect recyclable material – usually cardboard – in order to sell it to the recycling companies located in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. It is important to note that the term *cartonero* is somewhat of a misnomer because these informal circuits of recyclers do not restrict themselves to cardboard, but

² See Ryan Centner: “Redevelopment from Crisis to Crisis: Urban Fixes of Structural Adjustment in Argentina” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 51 (2007), pp. 3-32.

also collect glass bottles, plastic, newspapers and metal. Because the *cartonero* is an ambulatory profession that is neither closely monitored nor legally sanctioned, it has been difficult to pin down precisely how many recyclers presently circulate within Buenos Aires; estimates have ranged from 25,000 to 100,000. Regardless of their actual numbers, the *cartonero* has generated a great deal of interest for social scientists, writers and documentary filmmakers.

Paradigmatic of the increased visibility of the *cartonero* as an object of cultural inquiry in the early 2000s were the documentary film, *Cartoneros* (released in 2006) by Ernesto Livón-Grosman, and César Aira's novel, *La villa* [*The Shantytown*] (2001).³ In *La villa*, we see an entire community of urban poor in Buenos Aires who are able to nourish themselves from the trash of the wealthy. Aira's novel narrates the story of Maxi, an adolescent from the middle class, who offers every evening to help the thousands of roaming *cartoneros*—men, women and children—in the lower Flores neighborhood in collecting cardboard. The body of Maxi, which is portrayed as both athletic and healthy, is markedly contrasted to the *cartoneros*, who are represented as silent, feeble, hardworking and frightened people. Already, in the 1993 novel *La guerra de los gimnasios* [*The War of the Gyms*], Aira referred to this “strange population” that, following its own laws, would leave the faraway suburbs at twilight, the slums, the “unimaginable desert.”

³ Other examples are the documentaries *Los cartoneros* [*The Cardboard People*] by Michael McLean (also released in 2006) and *El tren blanco* [*The White Train*], by Nahuel García, Ramiro García and Sheila Pérez Giménez (released in 2003).

They were the *cirujas*, the *cartoneros*, who moved with the wooden carts they dragged behind them, always with women and children. Their moment was nightfall, between the time when people took out the trash and when the trucks would take it away. They'd open all the trash bags and look for what they could use; they examined them with a precise glance as the ashy light of day was ending and the shadows of night began. (74)⁴

As the novel underlines from the very beginning, the *cartoneros* in Buenos Aires constitute a marginalized group that paradoxically become increasingly invisible while ever growing in number. One could argue that this lack of visibility is a result of Argentines having become desensitized to the scavenging landscape. *La villa* suggests that the *cartoneros* are confined to a compartmentalized territory that is spatially proximate to, yet socio-economically distinct from, other sections of the city, thus portraying an urban geography split along class lines. After having collected the cardboard from every corner of the city, the *cartoneros* return to the lower Flores shantytown in a mass exodus. Aira's novel highlights that the survival gesture of collecting and selling cardboard and other trash contributes to the environmental clean-up and improvement in the overall conditions within the metropolitan area. Argentine recycling thus is quite unlike efforts in more developed nations where recycling typically falls within the province of an educated, relatively affluent class of citizens. Recycling in Buenos Aires also is

⁴ In a similar vein, Sergio Chejfec describes in his novel *El aire* [*The Air*] (1992) a city that grows from leftovers, alongside great economic projects and splendors, where discarded elements, such as glass bottles, constitute the money that flows from "floating tribes" (54, 121, and 145). Not only the mobile but also the unstable condition that characterizes the geography of the characters confers upon them a vaporous, fragile, "airy" category that fluctuates within spatial interstices, human hierarchies, possessions, and deficiencies.

clearly decentralized and piecemeal, comprised of a series of individual efforts towards economic survival rather than a coordinated campaign whose aim is ecological sustainability; it is worth noting that Buenos Aires has no municipal department or organization devoted to recycling (Parizeau).

Ironically, while Aira's *cartoneros* contribute to the improvement of the environment in Buenos Aires, their very neighborhood slum is confronted with a real and ecological threat related to its demographic explosion. Its precarious and continuous growth reflects the absence of any social assistance organization and delegates this responsibility to neighbors and random citizens. Therefore, the novel registers a new type of cycle in which both the middle and upper classes dispose of their wastes and where the *cartoneros* paradoxically become disposable waste themselves. This is another irony in a persistent sequence of paradoxes that are inserted into a broader community, defined by deficiency, where the border between human and non-human is blurred, transforming the *cartoneros* into waste material. Although *La villa* problematizes the disposable condition of their subjects, assigning them to the space of institutional policies of abandonment and neglect, it is important to read them, in turn, from a global perspective in which consumerism and disposal – two of the principal pillars of contemporary societies – have profoundly marked the most vulnerable, the inhabitants of these precarious universes, shaping their daily pilgrimage to and from the slums. Aira tells us that they have “become invisible” because they discreetly inhabit a space and a reality that “most people prefer to ignore” (7)

Limited to the shantytown territory, its inhabitants leave their enclosed space in order to do their business elsewhere, but on the condition of returning later to the marginalized boundaries where they reside. *Cartoneros'* recycling activities display a circuit of an economy that is both precarious and informal, through which the *cartoneros* are usually exploited – they receive a very low rate for each pound of cardboard. As noted earlier, their recycling extends to other items, such as furniture, old mattresses, and all sorts of artifacts that the *cartoneros* either sell to fellow shantytown dwellers or exchange for another item. Aira's novel not only portrays the deplorable living and working conditions of the *cartoneros*, but it also makes evident one of the major social problems in Latin America: the gap between the rich and poor is depicted as so wide that it is seemingly impossible to bridge and a static "social equilibrium" is established where the rich remain rich and the poor remain poor. If *cartoneros* are "invisible," so too then has poverty become invisible. Maxi, the main character, does not seek to infuse the *cartoneros* with a consciousness of their socially exploited status. His aid can be translated into a sort of charity that, instead of challenging the status quo simply preserves it. In other words, beyond his trips to and from the shantytown, the sharp, exclusive boundaries of class distinction are left untouched.

Recent Argentine novels like *La virgen cabeza* [*The Virgin Head*] (2009), by Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, and *La boliviana* [*The Bolivian Woman*] (2008), by Ricardo Strafacce follow Aira's lead in articulating the core of their stories in

Argentine shantytowns where poverty and environmental issues intersect in an original manner. Cabezón Cámara's work portrays a whole community that dwells in the slum and breeds fish by nourishing them with their own waste, setting up a symbiosis between the slum dwellers and the fish by creating a food chain that begins and ends with the metaphor of waste endorsed to the whole community.⁵ In *La virgen cabeza*, the slum represents the space of ruin and waste. The story opens directly into the territory of a destroyed slum that has been completely bulldozed by the police who are at the service of new urban projects: "the slum, driven over by bulldozers, became the womb of the foundation for real estate businesses" (12). This human settlement is anchored in an immediate and ephemeral reality, and from the perspective of environmental justice it is built on a most vulnerable terrain with a proclivity for all types of man-made and natural disasters, from fires to floods. The "El Poso" slum in Cabezón Cámara's novel is located in "the lowest part of the zone" (37), and therefore its center floods continuously:

when it rained there were no kids, the Virgin did not help out, and the paths of the Lord turned navigable [...] sure, water falls "down," but what's even more certain is that "down" is where the slums are. Water sweeps away the most unsteady lean-tos, and every once in a while, it drowns someone. (51)

⁵ Strafaccé's novel is centered around another community set up also in the slum and that nourishes and survives by the ingestion of frogs that reproduce themselves in the contaminated stream that surrounds their neighborhood. For space limitations, I will not analyze Strafaccé's novel in this article.

In fact, there were mornings when “the debris of a shipwreck were only boxes of wine, syringes, plastic bottles and diapers”; with luck, there “were no dead bodies” (51). With the rains emerges all of the trash that piles up in the slums, including dead bodies, in the same way that human beings appear and disappear in landfills.⁶ The characters live with leftovers, scraps, trash, and ruins, becoming trash-men and human-ruins. Indeed, the slum was so much like a landfill that kids “would run and play tag in spite of the fact that their mothers would howl at them, trying to keep them away from the shit that was on the ground” (51). This might be the reason why the narrator emphatically reiterates “that the center of El Poso was a swamp of shit” (52). The novel narrates the story of the journalist “Qüity” and “Hermana Cleopatra,” a sort of transsexual “medium” who lives in the slum, talks to the Virgin, and supposedly works miracles. To alleviate hunger and misery, the Virgin Mary communicates with “Cleo,” who demands that all of the inhabitants of “El Poso” transform themselves into people who fish, “like the apostles,” – that is, that they use their “field” to practice artisanal fishing (65-66). In order to carry out the Virgin’s mandate, the inhabitants of the slum choose “carp,” since carp feed on “any old crap”: from what the residents themselves ate (“hot dogs, choripans, [with chimichurri and everything]”) to the trash that the residents threw to them (67). In the context of these representations, it becomes natural, as the main character in *La virgen*

⁶ See for example the novel *Única mirando el mar* [*Única Gazing at The Ocean*] (1996), by Costa Rican Fernando Contreras Castro and the documentary *Boca de Lixo* [Mouth of Garbage] (1993), by Brazilian Eduardo Coutinho.

points out, “to live like this” (73). The narrations (both textual and visual) about a significant quantity of territories considered inappropriate for human life proliferate at the same time as poverty becomes more globalized and the world becomes increasingly more urbanized (Heffes 2012). Not only “are there increasingly more slums in Buenos Aires” (80), but the representations of this space, as well as the garbage dump, are becoming more frequent, promoting environmental ethics and philosophy that, either explicitly or implicitly, establish the guidelines for an inevitable questioning of globalization and modernity. In fact, these narratives conform to a sort of paradigmatic reaction facing the increasing number of human settlements in unstable zones from a social and ecological perspective – settlements that are in a vulnerable situation, continually exposed to the threat of destruction and disappearing forever. From food safety to increasing deforestation and contamination, the environmental risks and dangers that these subjects suffer are related to the unequal distribution of resources. This is evidenced not only in the problem of water and flooding, of trash and excrement that abounds everywhere, as we see in Cabezón Cámara’s novel, but in the absence of green spaces that function as lungs so that their inhabitants can breathe: for example, in the slum “El Poso,” there are no longer “[trees] of any kind” (79). Settled in sterile territories, in continuous putrefaction and on the limit or border between existence and imminent disappearance, trees are absent and, besides the smell of “shit,” there is the smell of “decomposition, death in progress” (79). The slum, like a trash dump, takes in the dead and the

“shit,” which coexist alongside the human-ruins in a model that besides bringing them together, fusing them, and diluting them into an indistinct existence, denies them any legitimacy that could guarantee their most basic rights, in this way calling into question their very condition as human beings. The garbage dump turns into a slum – an informal settlement – where people live, and the slum, inversely, turns into a dump that takes in all kinds of waste. Trash contaminates, and in the process of classification about what makes up a “risk” for the “healthy” population, objects and subjects have the same fate.⁷ As Bauman has suggested, these objects and subjects make up a marginal class that, although it pertains to society, does not form part of it: this marginal class represents a status devoid of the rights given to recognized and socially accepted members (3). And beyond this, they are alien bodies that do not count as “natural” and “indispensable” parts of the social organism (3). Because they contaminate, they are isolated within a marginal space where they are continually exposed to permanent and irreversible contamination: by means of an implicit operation of dehumanization, the exercise of public violence is carried out, and, lacking legal and legitimate existence, they are transformed into vulnerable and violated subjects.⁸

⁷ Ulrich Beck rightly maintains that “the globality of risk does not, of course, mean a global equality of risk”: not only is the first law of environmental risk fulfilled (“*pollution follows the poor*”), but, when poverty numbers rise, the number of people without sanitation services, drinking water, housing, health and education services, and adequate nutrition also rises (5-6; original emphasis).

⁸ The disposable trope reemerges in a number of Latin-American novels, such as *Mis amigos los pepenadores* [*My Friends The Garbage-pickers*] (1956), by Mexican José Luis Parra, the above

Like César Aira's and Cabezón Cámara's novels, Livón-Grosman's documentary also conveys the abrupt social and economic changes that have been disrupting the lives of ordinary Argentines, emphasizing the transformations within the middle classes who have been reduced to rummaging through garbage in order to survive. His aim was to present how people are able to bring together resources and establish a new sort of income based on an informal, grassroots recycling system. Like Aira's novel, the opening remarks of the documentary allude to their invisibility:

Every day, several thousands of people from the outskirts arrive in the city to separate, classify, and sell the garbage neighbors throw on the street. For those citizens who don't do this job, the *cartoneros* are invisible.

In addition to portraying their daily lives and roaming about the city, *Cartoneros* establish an intimate relationship with other protagonists in the documentary, sharing their difficulties suffered since the collapse of the national currency and the economy. This abrupt both social and economic change plunged thousands of people into unemployment, forcing them to rummage for cardboard that is in turn sold to large paper companies. From its onset, the documentary attempts to demonstrate that a significant number of contemporary *cartoneros* formerly belonged to the middle class and hold a university degree, but have been

mentioned *Única mirando al mar* [*Única Gazing at The Ocean*] (1994), by Costa Rican Fernando Contreras Castro, and *Waslala*, by Nicaraguan Gioconda Belli (1996), as well as the Brazilian documentaries *Boca de Lixo* [*Mouth of Trash*] (1992), by Eduardo Coutinho, *Estamira* (2004), by Marcos Prado, and the well-known *Waste Land* (2010), by Lucy Walker, Karen Harley and João Jardim. Although I do not examine these visual and textual narratives in this article, I mention them in passing as examples of both a literature and filmography that problematize the condition that these subjectivities have been experiencing and thus the problematization (or lack) of representing them.

plunged into poverty due to the post-2001 economic, social and cultural reality. Sociologist Horacio González, being interviewed for the documentary, has suggested that the *cartoneros* are both witnesses to and protagonists of one of the most important Argentine crises. However, the collection of cardboard is a profitable business and a conflict arises when both private companies and the government weigh the potential profit they can obtain from this lucrative business. The unresolved conflict splits up the *cartoneros'* community that has been working peacefully under an implicit agreement among themselves regarding the distribution and circulation through Buenos Aires' richest neighborhoods. This fight over cardboard and other recyclable materials eventually leads to the foundation of several cooperatives.

One of the most striking features of Livón-Grosman's documentary is how he reconstructs the transformative journey of rubbish, from curbside trash to consumer product. At each level of the recycling process, we encounter a network of unconventional entrepreneurs operating within a micro-society complete with its own set of codes and hierarchy. Livón-Grosman's work was a departure from other contemporaneous depictions of Argentine poverty that tended to focus on death, misery and suffering in that his aim was to "show how people were able to pool resources and out of their own creativity, establish a new sort of an income based on this informal recycling."⁹ But his documentary is

⁹ Interview with Ernesto Livón-Grosman: *Trash to Treasure: A Story of Economic Survival*, *NewEnglandFilm.com* (1 April 2007). (Accessed on 2 September 2016).

more than a sentimental story of the *cartoneros'* misfortunes, as it offers insights into their daily lives, thoughts and feelings. The interviews with “La Colo,” the film’s primary spokesperson for those *cartoneros* who work independently, illustrate the obstacles they constantly face and their struggle to instill a “sense of dignity” to the collection of waste. Livón-Grosman’s documentary intends to convey the complexity of Argentine society and what its people have been capable of accomplishing since the beginning of the 2001 crisis, and to provoke an awareness regarding *cartoneros* not only in Buenos Aires but elsewhere. Similar to Aira’s novel, the documentary seeks to prevent them from remaining invisible.¹⁰

As Verónica Paiva points out, by implementing the use of “*recuperador de residuos*” [“the disposal retriever”] – term that migrated from scholarly discourse to the mass media – there was a shift that placed the environmental problem at the very core of the public debate (101). Furthermore, their beneficial environmental impact would soon go on to shape law and public policy in Buenos Aires with the 2003 creation of the Programa de Recuperadores de

¹⁰ It is worth mentioning anthropologist Verónica Paiva’s work, which examines the redefinition of *cartoneros'* activities within Buenos Aires since their emergence in the late 1990s up to the present. Although they were initially associated with all types of illegal, unhealthy and shady business dealings (being labeled as the “*mafia de la basura*” [“trash mafia”]), recent work by journalists and academics have begun to rethink and challenge this paradigm. Some of this work, for example, has placed emphasis on the honesty of their labor as opposed to criminal activities, and also has stressed the harshness of their work, their dignity, and the solidarity network established between *cartoneros* and political activists. The famous phrase “*todos somos cartoneros*” [“we are all *cartoneros*”] eventually became a national symbol of solidarity towards the widespread crisis that was affecting most Argentines. In 2002, a set of studies also demonstrated the positive impact *cartoneros* were having on the urban environment through waste collection. A new term accompanied this increased legitimacy in the eyes of the public: *recuperador de residuos* [“the disposal retriever”].

Residuos del Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires [City of Buenos Aires Government Program for the Disposal Retrievers]. The public visibility of the *cartoneros/recuperadores de residuos* thus provided them with a new space to develop their local organizational skills, access to information (i.e. to identify existent recycling opportunities), and public forums where they can discuss daily problems as well as political and social accountability. The *cartoneros* are to be credited with transforming the practice of waste collection in the city as their activities have made trash into a veritable commodity. What originally was an urgent effort to economically survive rather than an ecologically informed gesture to preserve the environment has become one of the most active waste management industries in Argentina. Social, economic and cultural crisis turns both social and economic degradation into an innovative environmental tool.

The *cartoneros* have led to the creation of cooperatives such as *El Ceibo* [*The Ceibo*] within the capital and *Nuevo Rumbo* [*New Direction*], *El Orejano* [*The Unbranded*] and *Alicia Moreau de Justo* in the larger province of Buenos Aires. However, these initiatives will not succeed in the long term unless the state facilitates the growth of innovative policies that can help ensure the viability of inventive projects.

The media also has played a major role in transforming the *cartoneros'* image. The *cartoneros'* increased organization and media visibility pressured the Legislature of Buenos Aires to account for the *cartoneros* in its political agenda and to acknowledge their activities as an honest profession instead of a criminal

activity. Of urgent necessity to rectify was not only the previously held negative perception of the *cartoneros*, but also verbal and physical abuse. As Paiva has argued, the emergence of the *cartonero* has reconfigured the traditional figure of the *ciruja* [the junkman]. After the 2001 crisis, the *cartonero* became the most visible emblem of poverty, a reflection of the social, economic and political chaos that plunged millions of Argentines into unemployment and misery (101). But the figure of the *cartonero* has recently been depicted in a more dignified fashion, appropriated by environmental organizations and city government alike.

Alongside the appearance of the *cartonero*, “Eloísa Cartonera” publishing emerged in 2003 in Buenos Aires, the first publisher to produce books with covers made entirely from cardboard that has been collected and hand-painted by *cartoneros*. An independent undertaking, Eloísa Cartonera has already published more than 50 titles, some by unpublished authors and others by well-established ones, such as Mario Bellatin, César Aira and recently deceased Ricardo Piglia. This extraordinary publishing endeavor – originally made up of four *cartoneros* turned-artisans and three artists – has had unexpected results, connecting the seemingly unbridgeable boundaries that separate intellectual production from the street and poverty. This project has since spread beyond Argentina and set a model for similar projects throughout Latin America that

seek to challenge how literary art is produced and consumed and to offer an alternative to the neoliberal political and economic model.¹¹

In Buenos Aires and arguably in much of Latin America, recycling thus has become not only an environmental issue but also a social, economic and cultural one in that it has given rise to an extensive network of shared aims where poverty and the creative imagination intersect. These works also give visibility to what is currently out of sight, as Melosi has rightly defined it. Yet scavenging may not be an option in other places, such as Yemen or South Africa, where everything is used until its very end, in other words, until it falls apart. These features allow me to engage with a number of concepts employed within the field of ecocriticism, especially those that stem from critical theory.

According to Carolyn Merchant (2008), the ecology movement in the 1960s and 70s extended the critique of the domination of nature and human beings by industrial capitalism begun by Marx, Engels, and the Frankfurt theorists looking at the relationship between first world capitalism and third world colonialism through Immanuel Wallerstein's model of core and peripheral economies (20). Globalization as the expansion of first world capitalism into third world countries, where resources are cheap, environmental regulations are weak, and free trade is promoted through tariff reductions, has led to characterizations of corporate globalization as the latest stage of colonial imperialism. This

¹¹ Other publishing ventures of a similar nature to "Eloísa Cartonera" are "Animita Cartonera" (Santiago, Chile), "Dulceia Catadora" (Sao Paulo, Brazil), "Felicita Cartonera" (Asunción, Paraguay), "La Cartonera" (Cuernavaca, Mexico), "Mandragora Cartonera" (Cochabamba, Bolivia) and "Sarita Cartonera" (Lima, Perú), among many others.

implementation of neoliberal regulations has pushed the vast majority of people into deeper poverty on marginal lands and in urban slums (20-21). The *cartoneros'* phenomenon is one of many examples.

Because, as Merchant rightly asserts, unchecked economic growth depletes water resources, food sources, oil reserves, and air quality, threatening bodily health and human production, exploitation and environmental degradation in Latin America – as in other parts of the underdeveloped world – is an environmental justice problem (21). In other words, environmental justice's claims entail the fulfillment of basic necessities through the "equitable distribution and use of natural and social resources and freedom from the effects of environmental misuse, scarcity, and pollution" (28).

In the context of Latin America and, more specifically, in Argentina, the creation of a grassroots type of activism occurs in a chaotic fashion where the economy as well as the politics of a nation have fallen apart. Such a power vacuum and absence of government enables new sorts of communal work and networks of solidarity to emerge. One wonders to what extent such dire conditions are necessary preconditions for an eco-consciousness that advocates for radical social and political transformation. The *cartoneros'* endeavor is an ideal example of a political gesture towards the environment that is born out of critical economic needs devoid of any political ideology. Having stated this, it is our common goal to better understand these issues from a comparative perspective as well as to encourage increased visibility of environmental studies, and

particularly ecocriticism. If, as Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges has cogently suggested,¹² it is from the margins where cultural innovation occurs, it is my hope that scholarly works stemming from the field of Latin American environmental studies and ecocriticism will generate a great innovation that not only can reorient scholarly attention, but also move the consciousness of students and the wider public towards a more eco-centered perspective.

¹² In 1951 Jorge Luis Borges, published a beautiful essay called “The Argentine Writer and Tradition.” In this piece, Borges referred to “irreverence” as a key component of cultural innovation. Drawing from examples such as Irish writers Shaw, Berkeley and Swift, he argued that these writers felt different and as not belonging to the land – England – where they produced their work, and thus were irreverent enough as to innovate within its margins.

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