

# “Leaves are pages of our lives”

Activist publishers in Latin America are telling stories the world needs to hear, writes Lucy Bell

On 20 September 2019, as climate activists launch the largest climate strike in history, we are making books with activist publishing collective Catapoesia from Minas Gerais state in Brazil. The event wraps up the London Cartonera Book Festival, a celebration of grassroots publishers from Latin America who make books from recycled cardboard (*cartón* in Spanish). This synchronicity – the end of the Cartonera Festival, the beginning of the climate strike – is serendipitous but significant. Today’s workshop, Cartoneras for Environment and Education, asks how precarious communities living in degraded environments can work together in a process of exchange, restoration and recovery.

The burning of the Amazon, which has reached record highs due to intensive farming and logging fuelled by the terrifying environmental policies of Brazil’s president, Jair Bolsonaro, has featured heavily in the headlines. What we have heard less about is the Cerrado, the second largest biome in South America after the Amazon, an area of 2 million km<sup>2</sup> that has been identified by WWF as the biologically richest savanna in the world but also one of the most endangered ecosystems on the planet.

This lesser-known ecosystem bears critical importance for climate regulation and biodiversity preservation. Yet while we are informed daily about the global environmental catastrophe, we hear much less from the local communities who are worst affected. Against this environmental injustice, Catapoesia is working with some of the most isolated Cerrado communities in Minas Gerais – Barão de Guaicuru, Conselheiro Mata, and Riacho dos Ventos, a *quilombola* community founded by people who escaped from colonial enslavement.

Catapoesia has set up a new *cartonera* publishing programme in these remote locations. The goal, as coordinator Sol Barreto describes it, is “to give voice to marginalised communities which are very distanced from big metropolitan centres, through hearing and publishing their words, their preoccupations and their desires”.

Catapoesia has been working as a *cartonera* since 2009, adopting and adapting an urban publishing model originally conceived in Buenos Aires in the wake of the 2001 Argentine economic crisis. Whereas the first *cartonera* collective, Eloísa Cartonera, worked with waste-pickers (*cartoneros*) who make a living from the city’s waste-stream, Catapoesia works with leaf-pickers and seed-pickers. As fellow coordinator Júlio Brabo puts it, “We bring together two extremes: natural elements from these rural communities with cardboard and *cartonera* practices from the metropolitan

centres.” Far from contradictory, working across these extremes is crucial to Catapoesia’s artistic process, which encourages participants to connect with their natural environments through the act of *catar poesia* – ‘collecting poetry’ – but also to become more aware of the critical interconnections between their fragile local ecosystems and the global climate emergency.

In the apt setting of the British Library Story Garden – one of a series of projects by Global Generation, which builds temporary community projects on sites awaiting development – Júlio and Sol tell us about their recent project *Conto que Conta* (a play on words meaning ‘tale that tells/matters/counts’), a title that highlights the importance of storytelling for the self-valorisation of isolated groups, and also the relevance of their contributions to the growing global conversation about our endangered planet. The book we are binding is *Buriti-Dão*, a text collaboratively authored by the female leaf-pickers of Riacho dos Ventos, who sustainably press a variety of Cerrado leaves for local sale. In taking care to collect the leaves without harming the plants themselves, not only do they assert financial autonomy from their husbands, but they also draw a marked contrast regarding sustainability: many of the community’s men work for nearby mining companies, as people in this region have tended to since the 17th century.

## In the case of the leaf-pickers, we have much to learn

One of the techniques Catapoesia employs in such community workshops is its own take on a method known as affective mapping, encouraging participants to problematise the social, subjective and geographic territories that shape their lives through playful visual creations, socialisation, collaboration, debate and exchange. In Riacho dos Ventos, one activity focused on recording feelings, experiences and issues related to the community and its environment on leaves collected from the Cerrado and dried, as well as on pages cut out from coloured paper. The women also took part in discussions and debates around the question, “What do the nights in the *sertão* mean to you?”, inspired by one of Brazil’s most celebrated authors, João Guimarães Rosa, who wrote extensively about the region, which was an integral part of his early life. On each page of *Buriti-Dão*, a fragment from Guimarães’ *Noites do Sertão* is followed