

To the memory of Esteban Valdés (1947–2020)

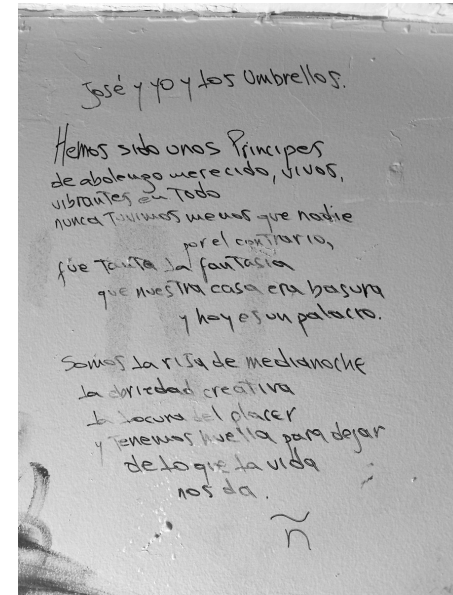
Eight years have gone by since I came back to live in Puerto Rico, the same number of years that I lived outside the country. It's hard to imagine a future from the present context, shut up in my rental apartment in Santurce during the global coronavirus quarantine. I dream of buying a big house where I can set up my workshop, La Impresora. Someday I won't owe rent to anybody. I want to live near the beach, establish a seasonal residency for writers and collaborators, and begin to create a network with nodes on other Caribbean islands. I want to grow vegetables, install solar panels, and build a cistern to store rainwater—all of this is part of the project. And of course, I want to continue making books of poetry.

I agree with Dorothea Lasky that poetry is not merely a project.¹ Rather, life itself, insofar as it permits the creation of poetry, is really the primary project. And the sustainability of life as a poet is without a doubt a difficult mathematical problem, a project of survival—even more so recently, as we bear witness to the collapse of institutions that used to be dedicated to education and art. The repercussions of these budget cuts have been severe for the sustainability of all kinds of cultural production.

This is what my daily quest is about. I'm calling up the stereotypical specter meant to scare young poets: *you're going to die of hunger*. But the challenge goes beyond not dying of hunger. The challenge—the project—is to live with dignity, to achieve real quality of life, to create community in the process and find joy doing so. The project is to live with/in poetry: poetry is the project's basic unity.

I

Ricardo León Peña Villa was a Colombian outsider poet who lived in a house on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the nineties and early aughts. The building, tucked between 2nd and 3rd streets on Avenue C, was known as the Umbrella House. Ricardo was, I think, one of the poorest people I've ever known. Also one of the most generous. His apartment, #3D, was the refuge and meeting place for a vast menagerie of Latin American artists who arrived in New York with or without papers. I traveled into the city on weekends from Albany, where I was studying for a Master's degree in Latin American Studies. The university did not strike me as a productive site of action. But in Ricardo's house there was a real network of cultural exchange, beyond hierarchy and capitalist logic. As in the popular story *Stone Soup*² with cooperation and a little ingenuity there was always food for everyone—also drinks, music, poetry, art, and love. Between Nuyorican Manhattan and Colombian Queens, this impossible logic supported the creation of many intergenerational DIY projects: poetry marathons, individual and collective publications (like the magazine *Casa Tomada*), and a Spanish language poetry festival that we celebrated for several years running. Ricardo also threw some of the biggest and most beautiful parties in the whole area. His project, without a doubt, was to live well in New York—while speaking Spanish and writing poetry.



Improvised text by Peña Villa on one of the walls of Umbrella House, circa 2008.

The project was going well, and the poetry was going well—thanks for asking. But capitalism played a trick on Ricardo. He died prematurely in March 2011, in large part because he couldn't pay the high price of medical care in the city.³ I like to think of him as my first chosen teacher. Thanks to him I traveled to Colombia to publish my first book of poetry with a small, almost invisible press in Medellín that his friends had started. I was only twenty-three; I was not especially ready. But in the days of preparation for this trip, sitting in the living room of his apartment, Ricardo León urged me to write “poet” as my “occupation” on the customs form.

Soon after that trip, I learned to make books by hand thanks to Tanya Torres, a Puerto Rican artist and poet

who had lived in el Barrio since she was a teenager. Tanya had training in printmaking, but during a battle with cancer she had adapted her practice to smaller scale projects produced with non-toxic materials—like books. When we met she had a gallery in her apartment called the Mixta Gallery where she offered bookmaking workshops. A few years later we became coworkers at the same community college in Brooklyn, where we both designed syllabi and lesson plans for classes focused on stimulating critical thinking and emotional development. She specialized in arts education and I was taking advantage of the opportunity to share the basics of feminist theory with my students, who were mostly single mothers from Latinx neighborhoods around the city. Tanya made use of lunches, coffee breaks, and free periods to teach me how to make books. With her help, I edited, designed, and published a small run of *Secretos Familiares*, my second poetry collection, a kind of #MeToo testimony ahead of its time. I didn't know it then, but learning to make books would be the key to my whole life.

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In November 2006 I traveled to Mexico for the first time—to take part in the “Encuentro de Mujeres Poetas en el País de las Nubes,” a gathering of women poets in the Sierra Mixteca mountains in Oaxaca. I lost my suitcase at the airport, so I traveled light by necessity. Over the course of the week, I turned twenty-six. I made friends with other women who would go on to become important sources of emotional support and co-creators. I decided, impulsively, to move to Mexico—to write, and walk. The year before,

after finishing my Masters degree, I'd chosen not to pursue a doctorate. I felt at odds with the academic environment, and I wanted to learn more about Latin America—beyond the books. I wanted to integrate myself, finally, in “real life.” I spent a little more time working in New York and I saved some money. I daydreamed of studying film in Cuba. When the possibility of Mexico came up I had already saved enough to stay there for at least a year without working (thanks to the favorable exchange rate). I enrolled in a creative writing program in Mexico City, but I left that behind too when I realized my education was better served by my everyday interactions—events and conversations with writers of various generations that I got to know on the road.

I began to translate miscellaneous texts online, to make my money last, to trust strangers, to travel wherever I was invited—to live in Mexico day by day. I almost always felt safe, even though I knew that many people suffered horrible violence at the hands of the narcostate. Over time I learned to trust—and refine—my intuition. That first year I didn't even have a cell phone. I adapted to a new rhythm: I learned to take people at their word, to surrender control, and to wait. As cliché as these affirmations may sound, they led me to many waterfalls, towns full of birds with flying bridges, pyramids half-hidden by dense jungle, deserts blooming with peyote, beaches and cenotes where I stripped and swam. And I had friends: friendship acquired a primordial importance. With my new sisters from the poetry festival in Oaxaca, we started to meet in our domestic spaces to read and workshop poems between mezcals.



An Argentine feminist named Miriam Djeordijian managed the CICAM (*Centro de Investigación y Capacitación para la Mujer / Research and Training Center for Women*), a feminist organization in Colonia Roma, and in those years, she began to use the space to host a series of poetry readings for women called “Barcitas.” CICAM had published *La correa feminista*, a Latin American

journal of feminist thought, for more than ten years.⁴ When I began to visit CICAM they were no longer printing the magazine, but the workshop was still there in the back of the kitchen—two Risograph printers, a small offset printer that didn’t work, inks, paper remainders, paper cutters, and many other light tools for artisanal publishing. Miriam invited me to reactivate CICAM’s press, and as an inaugural gesture I improvised a bookmaking and poetry workshop. Around ten women participated. I didn’t have much experience, but I needed to make money somehow and the opportunity excited me. I shared two types of bookbinding I’d learned in New York, and together—with lots of experimentation and technical support from Miriam, who helped us decipher the workshop’s tools—we made small runs of poetry books printed on one of the Risographs and bound by hand. This was long before today’s golden age of Riso workshops for editorial and

graphic design. In fact, I didn’t even know the name of the machines we were using. Ten years later, I would realize—thanks to kinetic memory—that the machines at CICAM were exactly the same Risos that I use now in La Impresora. More on that later.

The work is not to think of new things but to make them in a different way

The work is not the answer but the problem

The work is the journey not the port of arrival

The work is not the genre but the singularity

The work is not the product but the process

The work is to create spaces of pleasure, of intensity, so that desire comes naturally

From “Our Editorial Style,”

La Correa Feminista, Num. 15, 1995

My friends and I began a free poetry workshop that gave us a rhythm for writing and meeting. We borrowed a megaphone from CICAM and formed a kind of sorority that we started to call “Las Poetas del Megáfono.”⁵ We organized a weekly “open megaphone” in a café in Colonia Roma, where we collectively chose a theme for the next week’s poems. Megaphone Tuesdays became a busy hive of experimentation, attracting forty or fifty poets each week, and supporting many different collaborations. Sometimes I like to think we were characters pulled from a little novel Bolaño never published: young women poets living alone in Mexico City and cooking together, sharing clothes, learning to make books learning to make books by hand, buying paper downtown, visiting presses,

passing around pirated music on CD's, traveling by bus for hours to get to the beach, performing rudimentary rituals to burn photos of ex-lovers on the rooftop of an apartment building of Salvadoran students on the Calle República de Cuba, very close to Plaza Garibaldi.

I began to attend festivals in Central America that I could reach by bus. I accepted every opportunity that came my way to leave the city and explore towns in Mexico beyond the capital. I camped for whole weeks with people I barely knew and I experienced moments of real connection with the ecosystem and with the road itself. It was a heady time of true freedom, maybe the happiest time of my life. Even though I can see the accumulation of privileges that allowed me to make those choices, I should also point out that back then I had less money and fewer belongings than ever before or since.

The Festival of Navachiste claims a special place in my memories of that period. For more than twenty years, artists and fishermen have convened over *Semana Santa*



on a remote beach in Sinaloa full of birds and cactus. The Festival is only reachable by boat, and every person must set up their own camp. They offer a workshop under a palm roof with an invited writer, a poetry contest with modest publication for the winner, a sculpture competition with

materials scavenged from the beach, theatrical productions, musical performances, and campfires every night on the shore. The hosts are the local fishermen, who organized the Festival's daily schedule and feed the gathering—often with the catch of the day—in a rustic cafeteria on the sand. With minimal resources, they've created an experience of improbable beauty and resilience. When I imagine my ideal cultural event, I always think of the Festival of Navachiste.

I felt good in Mexico. I was learning things, I had stopped paying my students loans, and I was publishing poetry. The literature my friends and I made was rudimentary, anti-academic, rebellious, political, erotic, without theory, and often naïve. We thought out loud, in the shared dimension we were building one poem at a time. I don't think I had a "project" during this period. I was just connecting the dots. I listened, immersed in a profound process of poetic investigation without any methodology.

The work of the small independent Mexican press *Proyecto Literal* (who also created the *Colección Limón Partido* and the Latin American poets' biennial in Mexico City "*El Vértigo de los Aires*") helped me draw a map of alternative literary production. This Latin American network became aware of itself⁶ through the circulation of *libros cartoneros*,⁷ autodidactic bookmaking workshops, and road trips. Alongside the small independent Mexican presses that operated with state subsidies, the cartonera editorial model went viral. The cartonera design and development process was cheap and practical, artisanal but relatively standardized. Even with our shallow poets' pockets, we were able to build a global (or at least Latin

American) digital network of autonomous initiatives supporting low-budget local literature, with the help of the internet and the emergence of social media.

In November 2009, while I was still in Mexico, the Puerto Rican poet Xavier Valcárcel and I decided to start a parallel project: Atarraya Cartonera. We were long-distance friends for a few years: we went to the beach together when I was visiting the island, and when I was away we would exchange readings and write poems together by mail. In that way—me in Mexico City and Xavier on the island—we conceptualized our project. We designed three distinct editorial collections: new editions of out of print Puerto Rican poetry, contemporary Puerto Rican poetry, and contemporary Caribbean / Latin American poetry. We also thought of Atarraya Cartonera as an art project. We used cardboard discarded by the multinational bookstore Borders to make covers printed with stencils and spray paint, in dialogue with the political graffiti that proliferated in San Juan. The arrival of Borders in Puerto Rico in 2000 had resulted in the closure and dismantling of many local bookstores; using their trash as our raw material was our critique.⁸ During our most active years, we published twenty-five titles made of cardboard and photocopies and organized many bookmaking workshops which, in the midst of the financial crisis,⁹ inspired our comrades to explore more accessible avenues of publication. The Puerto Rican publishers were collapsing under the weight of the recession and those that remained were closed circles most responsive to institutional interests, charging the authors large sums to publish their books while excluding them from the editorial process; maybe

they still just didn't see our generation as significant cultural producers.



Some time in those days a copy of Ulises Carrión's *El arte nuevo de hacer libros* (*The New Art of Making Books*) fell into my hands, and it became a kind of credo for me. The Mexican poets Inti García Santamaría and Alejandro Albarrán had put a sign up in the empty living room of their new apartment in Colonia Roma —“Multipurpose Room Ulises Carrión”— and they'd begun to host events and poetry readings right there, at home. To celebrate the “inauguration” of the salon, they printed a free, pirated edition of Carrión's already legendary manifesto. Years later I too have photocopied the document Inti gave me and circulated it among friends. The manifesto was not at all new: it had been published for the first time in 1975, in the Mexican magazine *Plural*, edited by Octavio Paz. But for me it was revelatory even thirty-five years later. It felt like a friend's finger pointing the way:

On October 29, 2015 I posted this note on my blog, with this photo:



MAOF Materia y oficios

- History emerges from each object
- What's important are the insignificant moments
- Resisting technology's speed
- Crafting workshops without teachers
- Accompanying ourselves
- Learning to be
- Communicating with passing birds
- Exhibition of usefulness
- Repetition as an opportunity to be with yourself

At the end of the year I had the opportunity to return to Mexico for the first time since I'd moved to Puerto Rico. I did a residency focused on editorial production at the Cooperativa Editorial Cráter Invertido, in the neighborhood of Colonia San Rafael in Mexico City, where I produced the second edition of *Sucede que yo soy América* and learned some of the administrative aspects of operating a Riso workshop. We made five hundred copies of the book, the biggest

run I'd worked on up until that point. My friend Marina Ruiz, who had also been part of the Poetas del Megáfono collective, helped me print and bind the books. Now she was directing the artisanal press Astrolabio in Cuernavaca. Between serendipity and luck, this trip coincided with the first RRRéplica, a conference for "disobedient presses" where I made connections with other publishers using Risograph printers. This experience renovated and redefined the terms of my relationship with Mexico. I always try to visit with some frequency to catch up with friends, exchange books, buy materials, recharge, and rest from the daily struggle of life in Puerto Rico.



Presentation of the second edition of *Sucede que yo soy América* in the public library of Aeromoto in Mexico City, January 21, 2016.

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In January of 2016 the poet Amanda Hernández came into my life to do an internship with La Impresora as part of her Master's in Cultural Administration and from that moment on we've worked side by side, building

up the workshop along the way. We won some grants that helped us buy the rest of the equipment and tools we needed for our setup and we taught ourselves to use them through trial and error. On a one-year contract with the city of San Juan, we developed a free program of recurring presentations and workshops for all ages organized through FLIA and the Casa de Cultura Ruth Hernández Torres, a vibrant space in Río Piedras that reached a high point under the direction of the multidisciplinary artist Gisela Rosario Ramos. We also began to print projects and publications for the artists in the Beta-Local network and to define the services we could offer to guarantee the sustainability of La Impresora. Little by little we began to publish books of poetry. 2016 was a year of evanescent prosperity, just before the PROMESA law imposed new, asphyxiating austerity measures affecting every aspect of Puerto Rican life.²³

We were at MAOF until May 2017. The owners had new plans for the building and we had to leave. With the generous help of friends, we moved La Impresora to our current studio on the famous Calle Calma, in Barrio Machuchal, which is also the neighborhood where Amanda and I live, a few blocks from each other. Calle Calma is, as they say, the “backroom” of Calle Loíza: this part of the neighborhood, the poorest and most stigmatized, is known for being the birthplace of the great salsero Ismael Rivera and an enclave of Puerto Rican popular music from rumba to reggaeton. Our friend and neighbor Lío Villahermosa (a multidisciplinary artist and bomba dancer) grew up here, and he offered to rent his family’s empty apartment, betting on our ability to keep the project afloat and our shared dedication to the local community.

Grateful and enthusiastic, we began to make ourselves at home in the neighborhood, which turned out to be much more hospitable than Avenida Fernández Juncos.²⁴

In June of that year we organized “Edit: Encuentro de gestión editorial independiente” (Edit: A Gathering of Independent Publishers) in collaboration with Beta-Local, with the intention of seeding a conversation among colleagues about editing, publishing, and circulating materials responsive to our particular realities. Various Mexican projects participated alongside some of the independent publishers that regularly presented at FLIA. Although we would’ve liked more local participation, there still remains work to be done to bridge the divide between the world of visual art (represented by Beta-Local, the site of the event) and other cultural development efforts, including literary publishing.

A few months later Hurricane Maria hit.

Without electricity, amid rubble and widespread confusion, we were able to temporarily relocate the Riso to El Almacén, a garage in the barrio of Trastalleres (also in Santurce) where a friend wanted to start a hackerspace. Javier Rodríguez, musician and inventor, was repairing a good number of broken solar panels that had flown off in the storm. In this way, he was able to establish a small power grid. Faced with the urgency of finding communal solutions to the disaster we were living through, he invited various friends to work from El Almacén for a few weeks and use the solar panels in exchange for helping him reanimate the space and keep him company. We took the

Riso and began to do “solar Riso.” There wasn’t much work for obvious reasons, but all the same we were able to print a few things from there. Those hot and terrible months we were forced to consider, again and again, why we were doing the work we were doing.

First, we ratified our choice in favor of manual labor, small tools, and analog processes. Thanks to the nature of this work (and the support of El Almacén, which allowed us to plug in the Riso for two or three hours a week), we could keep binding books on Calle Calma, more or less like we’d done before, without depending on electricity. Keeping our hands busy buoyed our spirits, even though we weren’t making a profit and outside everything was destroyed. We also decided to slow down the rhythm of our commercial printing services and look for a way to subsidize the publication of poetry, our project’s main objective. We applied for emergency funds and grants to make books in line with our main editorial objectives; we published personal projects; both of us wrote our own poetry. At the urging of our friends—poets, editors, illustrators, and artists—we reactivated FLIA in makeshift form, even though we didn’t have a budget to produce it, as a pretext to gather together around our books.

Even though the disasters have continued to accumulate around us, we fight, alongside many other people, to adapt to our changing circumstances and continue to make poetry and books available locally in Puerto Rico. We try to facilitate spaces where we can share, create, and learn a craft that isn’t taught in any of the island’s universities. La Impresora now functions almost like an informal school of poetry and editorial skills. Each book we make testifies to

a process of collaboration: editing, design, and production. We make poetry books as well as comics, gallery catalogs, prints by local illustrators, signs for marches, and flyers for events and concerts. We offer workshops in Riso printing, creative writing, and bookbinding. We organize readings and literary events. Our space has been a refuge for friends and young artist-writers whose educational opportunities and general life chances are more threatened every year by budget cuts, political corruption, climate change, and a growing sense of insecurity and uncertainty. Under these circumstances, we’ve become facilitators and workers in a network of processes and exchanges centering on the independent creation of books on an island in crisis. I’ve come to think that the books we make by hand are not properly commodities, but rather points of encounter that adapt and circulate among our communities under another more noble, more fluid logic. Personally, poetry is what drives me.

June 2020

San Juan, Puerto Rico