

The World Humanities Report

Humanities That Heal, Objects That Remember

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Góngora, Yan Carlos Guerra, and Rayiv
David Torres Sánchez in conversation
with María del Rosario Acosta López



The World Humanities Report is a project of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), in collaboration with the International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences (CIPSH). The views expressed in the contributions to the World Humanities Report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the editors, scientific committee, or staff of CHCI.

The World Humanities Report gratefully acknowledges the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for funding this project.

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This publication is available online at <https://worldhumanitiesreport.org>.

Suggested citation:

Fergusson, Susana, Andrés Leonardo Góngora, Yan Carlos Guerra, and Rayiv David Torres Sánchez. "Humanities That Heal, Objects That Remember." Interview by María del Rosario Acosta López. In *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, edited by María del Rosario Acosta López. World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023.

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Humanities That Heal, Objects That Remember

Susana Fergusson *Project Restoring the Forgotten: Memories of the L*

Andrés Leonardo Góngora *Project Restoring the Forgotten: Memories of the L*

Yan Carlos Guerra *Project Restoring the Forgotten: Memories of the L*

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The Scale Model of El Bronx: We All Had a Story to Tell through Those Cardboard Boxes

María del Rosario Acosta López: Thank you all very much for making time for this interview. It is an honor for me to have all of you here and to be able to hear from such a variety of perspectives about the ambitious and multifaceted project at the old El Bronx Street and about the subsequent renovation of that space.¹ I would like our conversation to center around the memory exercises that have taken place throughout the project. These memory exercises have, among other things, changed the meaning of the notion of remembering, of coming back to a space and redetermining its meaning. This is evident from the name of one of the projects, *Restoring the Forgotten* (*Renovando el olvido: Memorias de la L*). I also want to talk about the implications of your work for thinking the very idea of patrimony, as Andrés has explained in some interviews he has given about the project. I am interested in exploring all the layers of the project with you and in asking you how the concrete initiatives that you are carrying out intervene in and relate to the broader discussion on memory in Colombia.

So Andrés, why don't you tell us the story of the project from your perspective? What are the lucky coincidences that made it possible? Some of the events

* All interviews included in this project took place in June–July 2021. To keep their original nature and tone, they were not significantly updated and therefore might contain information, references, or comments that have become outdated by the time of publication.

¹ The Calle del Bronx (Bronx Street), known to its inhabitants as “La L” (for its L shape) and composed of just a couple of streets in Bogotá’s Voto Nacional downtown neighborhood, was “intervened” by state forces on May 28, 2016. Everyone living there was evicted as part of a program intended by the mayor of Bogotá, Enrique Peñalosa, to regain territorial control in certain areas of the city. La L was known—and also stigmatized—as one of the epicenters of drug trafficking in the city, and it was home to hundreds of people experiencing homelessness, some of whose whereabouts after the intervention are unknown. This interview explores and explains many more details about the multiple memory initiatives that have been organized around La L with the participation of some of its former inhabitants with a view toward the resignification of the space and its history. Among the central goals of these initiatives is to produce a critical perspective of the stigmatization directed at the place and its inhabitants.

that led to the project are totally coincidental. Other events, however, in retrospect, seem as though they were perfectly disposed according to a plan so that you all could end up working together on this project.

Andrés Leonardo Góngora: OK, I will tell you about my own experience; we all have very different trajectories and experiences in the project. The processes that make up the project can in fact be explained by the trajectories of each member of the team. Susana and I started working together in 2005 as part of a huge project of the European Union with children experiencing homelessness. I had just finished my BA and was working at the National University of Colombia as a researcher. Susana, on the contrary, was already an expert in harm reduction in Colombia. Harm reduction is an anti-prohibitionist and progressive approach to understanding and intervening in drug use. Rather than focusing on ending drug use, harm reduction seeks to understand how drug use works as well as the global “failure” of prohibitionist policies.

This harm reduction approach had an antecedent in a pioneering project, El Parche (The Crew) in the Santa Fe neighborhood of Bogotá that started more or less in 2001.² This project, conceived as a listening center—that is, as a safe space where “treating” damage was conceptualized not so much in medical terms but much closer to a listening and a healing communal space—had brought together many nonprofit organizations from different regions in the country working on issues of social suffering and, especially, drugs. Susana and I met in that context. Our perspectives were very different, but we started working together. Susana brought me to the Fundación Procrear (Procreate Foundation), which she directed at the time. The foundation had the first listening center. So I joined the team, which was already more or less consolidated, and it was all very beautiful because the goal was always to work with mixed teams. This approach characterized the project and made it different from what was done in other countries, in my opinion.

In this context, we started experimenting with “artistic” approaches, so to speak. That is where our more recent work finds its start, especially our work with the transgender women’s schools. It was very important because it helped us realize that through art we could reach people and build somewhat sustainable projects. We could generate projects where the community actors would actually be recognized. This kind of project has, of course, always had many

² For more information, see “Proyecto ‘El Parche’: Para la construcción de una estrategia de prevención y reducción de daño por el consumo de SPA (2002–2005)” [“The Crew”: For the construction of a harm prevention and reduction due to SPA use (2002–2005)], Fundación Procrear, “Timeline,” accessed November 20, 2021, <https://procrearfundacion.org/historia/>.

difficulties, especially because of the inherent reluctance of institutional public policy to recognize the value of local knowledges. Institutional public policy approaches can't seem to understand that all projects have to include the people at whom they are directed because their experience is as valuable as the experiences of the professionals, the technicians, et cetera.

There, we developed a thousand initiatives and projects. This work was, in my opinion, like an embryo of our later work. Through this project we started to understand that there is a very important relation between art and social intervention for research and action. In the context of this first project, we had a “popular education” reading group, we had a community school, we tried to put together different initiatives like fashion shows and publications. We did many things following the community's own proposals. This work was also the embryo of many community projects around issues of sex and gender that are now very important at both national and local levels. For example, there is the transgender community network and other things that were done later by others.

Shortly after this, I left the country for many years to study. I lived abroad but kept working with Susana. When I came back, Susana was already connected to IDIPRON,³ of course not without difficulties. As you know, this is the institution in charge of the protection of highly vulnerable children and youth in the country. I came back to this situation where, after some months of work, we were able to start implementing harm reduction strategies but with intense pushback from the institution. This is when we met Yan Carlos, Smith, and the others. I remember that one day we had to ask ourselves: “What are we going to do here?” And we thought: “Let's do something, let's do a project.” The community already had a research interest in finding out what had happened with the young people that had lived in La L. They wanted to know the truth about what happened to their many friends who disappeared after the government's intervention in 2016. We started with small exercises. I designed small research exercises so that the community peers could go out and collect interviews that we later systematized. We looked for friends to volunteer in the project until we drafted a formal curatorial project proposal for which we ended up receiving a scholarship. This is when we started on what became the project *Renovando el olvido: Memorias de la L*.⁴

³ Instituto Distrital para la Protección de la Niñez y la Juventud (District Institute for the Protection of Children and Youth).

⁴ See Museo Nacional de Colombia, “Historias de la L—Capítulo 1: ¿De dónde surgió la pregunta de investigación” [History of La L—Chapter 1: Where did the research question come from?], April 27, 2020, video, 9:20, https://youtu.be/MuMGQKC_pIk.

We started hosting workshops and talks at Susana’s house and other places with the goal of revisiting the history of the urban intervention and its effects. We had already conducted research on Cartucho Street⁵ years before, so we knew the effects of that intervention, and we were seeing the same in the intervention of El Bronx. We started working on this with the guys of the Free Soul collective, with Yan Carlos and Smith.⁶ We started questioning how we could think through all of this in dialogue with the social sciences. It was difficult, but little by little more projects emerged that allowed us to include more people and to train them on the go, through practice.

In this context, we had the opportunity to put together different art pieces, especially video clips. One of these art pieces involved cartography. We wanted to make a map of El Bronx. This, however, proved extremely difficult because the demolition work had already started and the area had been blocked off. The whole place was being demolished. So how to create a social cartography of a place that no longer exists? How to memorialize the ruins? How to memorialize a demolished materiality that is not at all what it used to be? How to memorialize a materiality that is in the process of disappearing, of being dismantled? This is when Susana had the brilliant idea of constructing a scale model to re-create the space, the scenarios, the practices. This, in conjunction with a larger artistic project that included audiovisual pieces like video clips, gave us the opportunity to reflect deeply on the problem of memory by reconstructing the place as it used to be. The reconstruction, of course, was filtered through emotions and without pretensions of realism; this sometimes even turned into a source of controversy. Some people would see the scale model and say: “No, this is not how the place was.” We learned that this is OK—this is what memory is.

⁵ The Calle del Cartucho (Cartucho Street) in the Santa Inés neighborhood of Bogotá was also a stigmatized space designated as the epicenter of drug trafficking in its time. The inhabitants of El Cartucho were evicted from the location after the office of the mayor of Bogotá intervened during Enrique Peñalosa’s first term in office (1998–2000). The neighborhood was completely demolished and replaced with the Tercer Milenio (Third Millennium) Park. The Mapa Teatro (Map Theater) group accompanied the demolition process with art projects, similar to the historical memory project at the center of this interview. See, for example, the performance *Testigo de las Ruinas, Archivo Vivo* (Witness of the ruins, living archive) recently exhibited again at Mapa Teatro’s retrospective in Museo Miguel Urrutia, Banco de la República, Bogotá.

⁶ Free Soul collective is the name some of the former inhabitants of La L gave to their hip-hop music group. During the interview, many references will be made to some of their work and some of their members. Some go by their alias, like Smith, mentioned here; some by their names. Its members come and go, and we have left in the interview only those names that were explicitly mentioned by the interviewees. See some of their videos on their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Community-Service/Free-Soul-Colectivo-110871820267933/>.

Memory involves dealing with this fragility because the past is always a discontinuity, and memory is nothing but an affective relation with the past.

The scale model of La L also brought us to the National Museum. There was an exhibition involving things related to different letters of the alphabet, so we thought: “What if we bring

the scale model that we are constructing at the La Rioja house (one of the IDIPRON centers) and present it to the public as the exhibition for the letter L?”⁷ This is the actual starting point of our very

Memory involves dealing with fragility because the past is always a discontinuity, and memory is nothing but an affective relation with the past.

multifaceted work. One of the principal aspects of the project involved the work of mediation (something fundamental, in my opinion). What I mean by this is that if you bring to the National Museum a piece that touches on sensitive issues from social, moral, and ethical points of view—the description of La L is a very sensitive issue—you have to consider how to tell the story. How to tell this story to children, for instance? How to tell this story to people who bring many prejudices with them? This exercise of mediating the story is at the heart of the project.

Very soon we realized that this work at the National Museum required languages that we had not used until then, languages that differed from the ones required by the processes with the community. How to show, for example, that people in the community have the capacity to serve as a bridge to approach difficult and highly marginalized contexts? But how to do it while also showcasing that people in the community have the capacity to produce social transformations through changing the ways in which narratives about them circulate and by resignifying their stories and even spaces in front of a broad audience? The project allowed us to realize that this in fact was possible as part of the very work of harm reduction. It was possible to bring people out of the ghettos into spaces like the National Museum; many of them came to the museum for the first time because of the scale model of La L. The piece brought its people. The piece also has an agency of its own that allows for the generation of very powerful spaces of interlocution. So when the narrative is placed in a location like the National Museum, it can reach many more people, it can generate consciousness, reflections, and processes of change that involve

⁷ Museo Nacional de Colombia, “Apertura de Historias de la ‘L’ en el Museo Nacional” [Opening of “Stories of the L” at the National Museum], accessed November 20, 2021, https://museonacional.gov.co/noticias/Paginas/Apertura_Historias_de_la_L.aspx.

not only the people that perform the mediation, but also the audiences, the employees, and the staff of the museum itself.

I believe that the scale model, all the processes that it generated, the narratives that it made to circulate, the unexpected connections that came out of it, all of this is just so wonderful. And I think that, through all those amazing things that the scale model brought about, you can really see that the coincidence of all our trajectories happened in a very special way. Had it not been for the curatorship of the museum at that moment, and if Susana had not been there at that moment, the project would have turned out much differently. The fact of inserting our work in the circuit of culture, however, radically changed the way in which we carried out our work. We started thinking about the relation between art and memory in connection to the work of reducing social suffering and the possibility of healing, but also in relation to narratives and processes of social circulation. In short, this project showed that it is possible to carry out harm reduction work through the development of artistic projects. I think that Susana understands this much better than I do, but this is where the project has led us.

And of course, I should mention that the National Museum allows for collaborations with many other institutions. It is an institution that brings together people from the high-culture elite and people from low-income neighborhoods. The museum connects communities and regions, and since it is a node with this capacity to articulate voices and initiatives, it has allowed for a much broader circulation of our message. The museum has provided us with some important channels for diffusion and interconnection. After the exhibition of the scale model at the museum, many more things came our way, such as the work with the Gilberto Alzate Avendaño Foundation (FUGA) and the La Esquina Redonda (The Round Corner) project, which I imagine we will talk about soon. This is how I reconstruct our story from my own perspective.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Thank you very much, Andrés. This is a great start to our conversation because it definitively traces an initial map of all the facets of the project and how they are connected to each other. You have also given us an idea of the happy coincidences with which the project starts—and on which a project like this one inevitably depends. Your choice of words is very interesting because for me the project can be thought of as starting with the question about how to remember and in what ways, when so many of the histories that are being recounted have been not only silenced and erased but literally demolished. In this way, the project raised questions, such as: How to make a

cartography of a place that no longer exists? How to appeal to memory in these circumstances? What kind of memory can emerge in these contexts? How does remembering in a group allow for different ways of producing memory? But we should at the same time keep in mind, as you were saying, the immense difficulties of memory initiatives, especially in the process of mediation once memory has been produced: how to tell these memories to others? What is more, the process of telling the memories adds a layer of reflection about how the process of remembering initially took place and about everything else that followed in the process. One has to reflect on other initiatives that emerged in the process, other modes of understanding the power of narratives and, as you say, eventually also the power of reappropriating the spaces. It is in fact not only people but spaces that speak.

Andrés Leonardo Góngora: That's right. Before I have to leave, I would like to add something else for the conversation: we should also consider the power of objects.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Absolutely.

Andrés Leonardo Góngora: I am not talking about fetishism, though.

Susana Fergusson: Yes, you are!

Andrés Leonardo Góngora: No, I am not. Fetishism is an irrational belief that objects act and have a voice. This is not what I mean. Rather, I am talking about the idea that objects have an agency in the social world. I think this is fundamental, and it is related to a whole ontological turn that opens up new perspectives in the social sciences and the humanities. In this way, I would like to reserve a special place for the power and social agency of objects.

María del Rosario Acosta López: OK. Let's return to your story, Andrés. I would like to hear from both Susana and Yan Carlos. Tell us more about the beginning of your multifaceted project. How was it, Susana? I would also like you to touch on the idea of "listening centers" that you have been implementing for so long now. And I want to hear from both you and Yan Carlos about the encounter that made possible the wonderful initiative that led to remembering through spaces and through music. Tell us about how you ended up allowing music (hip-hop) to be such a powerful form of testimony for telling such an

important story.⁸ I am thinking, for instance, about what Yan Carlos says in some of the interviews of the series *Historias de la L* (Stories of La L).⁹ There, he talks about a kind of spiral that gives life, that returns us to the same places but in entirely different ways. In some of the verses of the song “Nosotros somos” (We are)¹⁰ (I am not sure if they are called “verses” in hip-hop. I must seem like I am from the Stone Age!). I could hear things like “the future is no longer dark, construction in my memory.” After that, the chorus says: “We are the hope of a voice / we are a life, we are the street before and after El Bronx.” Also, in another verse you say: “These are things I cannot forget / Sometimes you feel like crying / This is the story of a corner.” What did you mean when you wrote that the future is no longer dark in relation to the idea that it is now possible to remember? What is it that cannot be forgotten? Can you tell us about the story that your voices brought to light after being able to revisit and rebuild the spaces in order to remember them? And finally, how was working with Susana in a project that in my opinion truly honors the idea of listening and the meaning of creating spaces of listening? I leave you with these broad questions; do whatever you will with them.

Susana Fergusson: Yan Carlos, maybe María del Rosario’s question inspires you to start talking about your experience of our first encounter. I could speak when you are done to add to the story and return to the topic of the centers of listening.

Yan Carlos Guerra: No, I would prefer that you talk first about the centers of listening. I think this could get us going and give me a chance to comment about the idea of the spiral and how it connected with the project at the National Museum.

Susana Fergusson: OK, so I will return to what Andrés was saying about each of our “trajectories.” Andrés arrived where I was working when he was very young. Since then, he has always been my theoretical referent. I am more oriented toward executing concrete actions, and he is in charge of planning what we do and bringing things up to speed so that they are academically and technically viable. This has always been our story. He has helped me with writ-

⁸ See a fragment from “Nosotros somos” (We are), one of Free Soul’s main songs, translated at the end of this interview.

⁹ See Museo Nacional de Colombia, “Historias de la L,” April 27, 2020, playlist, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLIaD25P8E5vX4iLlXinm3_luYxpDkZDdT.

¹⁰ See Free Soul Bogotá DC, “Nosotros somos,” March 29, 2017, video, 4:24, <https://youtu.be/4E-kCaiaFFQ>.

ing because I am good at speaking but not so much at writing. Writing gets me all mixed up, especially if I have to do it in an academic tone; I find academic writing so dull. So Andrés brings his anthropological method into our work.

Our project, as Andrés mentioned, was born in the field of health care. The project was affiliated with the German Caritas Association, which was supporting twelve community operations at the time. Originally, the spaces that I later named “listening centers” were called “drop-in”¹¹ spaces. After changing the name to “listening centers,” our space came to be called El Parche (The Crew), and it ended up serving as a model for everything we have done until now. The space started as a shelter for vulnerable pregnant women (I was a midwife for a long time), and it was called La Casa de la Ternura (The House of Tenderness). This is what initially brought me to work at the Santa Fe neighborhood.¹² The

German Caritas arrived in 2001, and they started training me. They saw the great potential of the neighborhood and of my crew, which was made up mostly of people from the community, espe-

This project showed that it is possible to carry out harm reduction work through the development of artistic projects.

cially women, sex workers, trans women, and children. So Caritas started to inject a ton of money into the project. It was viable because Caritas was very flexible; I demanded that everyone be paid equally. We put together a huge group of community peers. This was quite something because they included former *basuco* [cocaine paste] users, people who lived on the streets, trans women. It was like Noah’s ark. But that’s where the tough talk of harm reduction took shape.

There is also “soft” talk around harm reduction, which patronizes people: “I will take care of you, sweetheart. Is baby sick? Come here, I will give you services and little soup and a change of clothes.” This is soft harm reduction; in the end it is just a quick fix. It covers basic needs; that is something good we can say about it. But after covering basic needs you must start talking about rights, about work, and about the possibility of inclusion.

This was our starting point as we began the project and trained community peers. With Andrés’s help, for example, we organized a seminar. Picture Andrés, a most distinguished doctor, a scholar of national renown, coming to

¹¹ In English in the original.—Trans.

¹² The Santa Fe neighborhood is located in downtown Bogotá and is home to some of the most vulnerable and marginalized populations in the Colombian capital. El Bronx was located in this neighborhood.—Trans.

talk to Pajarito¹³ about Jürgen Habermas! This was good training for Andrés. This context allowed for the gestation of our pedagogical model. It was a mix of Andrés' technical-academic knowledge (which was still very focused on medical anthropology and not yet on art and memory; this transition happened after he came back from abroad) and my own knowledge, which was entirely community-based, creative, and about hard harm reduction. We worked with Bogotá's most marginalized. This is how we started. Caritas was very respectful of our processes.

So Andrés has always helped me shape the projects by bringing in research that can give us a foundation. At this point, however, I was appointed consultant by the government, so I had to leave the foundation in the hands of some friends. As a government consultant, I started traveling and bringing the discourse of harm reduction to other places. This was the first time that harm reduction was generally used in Colombia as a mediating strategy between prevention and treatment. With the support of Caritas, I also started going to Uruguay, Peru, Bolivia; so there was a lot going on at that time.

In 2012, however, my daughter committed suicide. My world shook and everything came to an abrupt halt. This destroyed my family and my life. On top of that, only six months after my daughter's passing, I found out that in the part of the network where I had appointed the people in charge, they had forged my signature and defrauded the foundation. This was a huge fight for me because at the time we had been expecting a building for the foundation from Caritas, and yet the building was taken by these "friends." Besides the building, these so-called friends were also expecting a considerable sum of money in funding, but nobody involved was willing to make it happen. And while all of this was going on, I was trying to bring the man who had abused my daughter to court. It was all a tragedy, and I dropped everything. I started losing my mind. I was absolutely beside myself for two years.

It was in the middle of all this that I found art. My whole process of healing happened through art therapy. Little by little I started coming back down to Earth and processing so much grief through painting. Later on, in 2013, a friend invited me to work as a rights advocate, but it had to be done remotely because I did not want to leave the house. I hated the world; I hated men; I could not stand them—it was a whole thing. Life, however, works in strange ways; shortly afterward, it took me to a house full of men. When I came to work at the

¹³ A person's nickname; literally "little bird."—Trans.

La Rioja house, there were 150 men living there.¹⁴ A friend had told me: “You’ve got to get out of your house. You must get back to your life. We have this position available; it is a very interesting directorship. Let’s bring harm reduction to IDIPRON” So I responded: “Fine. Let’s give it a try. But I will only work in one house; I don’t want to have to go around to all the IDIPRON houses.” So I ended up at La Rioja. Take it from there, Yan Carlos. I met him there: Yan Carlos with his hat, hiding in a corner of the courtyard of the house. I can still see him there. The first time we connected he was in a corner of the courtyard, almost hiding. This is where this long romance started. I will add more to the story later. Yan Carlos should continue.

Yan Carlos Guerra: I was standing there just like this [*puts on the hood of his sweatshirt; everyone laughs*]. I will start with your question about the lyrics and such. I think the phrase “the future is no longer dark” emerges when one is able to see something like hope, like an opportunity to change in specific ways and still be oneself. Some therapeutic models for drug use, especially residential models, demand a drastic change from people, a definitive change that is very difficult to achieve when you are used to the dynamics of living on the streets and using drugs. I think that my hope comes from encountering Susana and from a different approach. There is hope when I can say: “I can still be myself, yes, but I can change and modify aspects of my life.” I think that the phrase from the song—“the future is no longer dark”—is born of this sentiment. This is what it feels like, you know? There was a light at the end of the tunnel that helped me be myself and show my true potential.

We also came out to the street to do research, sometimes very late at night because this was the only way to find people who were experiencing homelessness during that period. I think this research work was very important because it was important to learn to execute a research question, for example, to figure out where our friends are. It helped me ask about what happened during the “intervention” and how everything that was involved there works as a piece of machinery in motion. The team from the National Museum has played a key role in all these processes. We came from a world excluded from the larger context, outside of reality. We didn’t even know where we were coming from, who we were, where we were going. The kind of research we did into the history of the place is not something you learn in any school, specially without access to all of the information and these great teachers. It is important to recog-

¹⁴ La Rioja was one of the places administered by the IDIPRON where many of the displaced inhabitants from Bronx Street ended up after the state’s “intervention” in El Bronx.

nize them because they have very high and clear academic standards and can clarify a lot of the historical context. So, through research about the history of the country, of substances, drugs, drug use, and the war on drugs, we were able to see ourselves and to find ourselves through a reality different from our own.

I think the research has also given us ways to enrich our art. It has helped us to make art not just for the sake of doing it, but to do so in a coherent and conscious way, in order to generate questions rather than just to leave a message. This is what we were trying to do in all the projects that we have been work-

We didn't know where we were coming from, who we were, where we were going . . . [but] through research about the history of the country, of substances, drugs, drug use, and the war on drugs, we were able to see ourselves and to find ourselves through a reality different from our own.

ing on from *Renovando el olvido* to the creative laboratories. We have worked with people from other cities, where we got to work in depth on other issues beyond drug use, including with children, developing tools to evaluate the contexts and people that surround us. Likewise, we learned that we could contribute to society on

multiple levels, not only with music or art but with a coherent social practice that is also educational.

Moving on to your question about the spiral, it is something that we have been recently generating with the whole team. Andrés and Susana already mentioned it: the spiral that gives life by returning us to the same places but in entirely different ways. The spiral is about going back to La L, El Bronx, to these old spaces, but returning in a very different way, as part of the leadership of the community peers. It was the opportunity to come to the space again, to remember, but to renew the memory. And this is precisely what we intended to do. The idea of renewing the memory is the origin of the song. We realized that life is really a spiral: it put us in the same situation twice, but the second time, well, we turned to mixing art and music with the research questions that we had been exploring. Rayiv played an important role in developing the concept of the spiral. We clarified it with him through the history of the obelisk and the basili-

ca at the Plaza de los Mártires.¹⁵ Through these cases, we could see how history, in one way or another, was just this—a spiral that had put us right there asking these questions. I am pretty sure he had to work very hard to introduce us to the concept. Teaching us was, well, is a very complex process; we don't easily believe what we are told. Art helped mediate this process. It was the connection we had with Rayiv. Everything that goes into research, writing, and interpreting involves a kind of artistic passion. There is an art to explaining and putting the right words on the table. I think the orality that we have carried with us is also a form of art; we have learned it and practiced it very well.

This is the origin of the motivation for these lyrics, these songs. There has been a huge team that has helped strengthen what we do today and many things that we have carried over from our story, such as the centers of listening. We have never been as committed to the centers of listening as we are now, but we have also incorporated the historical research aspect, which is very important in my opinion. Research is crucial to being able to ask all sorts of questions: Who are we? Where do we come from, and where are we going? Research helps us rid ourselves of prejudice.

On to the question about my relationship with Susana and how we met. Yes, it was in the courtyard of the La Rioja house; it was exactly in the courtyard. Susana's right, it was a spontaneous interaction. It wasn't something forced, it wasn't planned or anything like that, but everything came out of it. Even though, as Andrés was saying, there was the obstacle of building affection and trust, which are so difficult to cultivate in those spaces. It is difficult to have reconciliation in spaces like shelters, where there are 150 men and even your toothbrush could be stolen at any time. Yes, it is very hard to attain any level of trust in a space like that, a grotesque space. But when all is said and done, I think that this trust is what has kept us going and has taken us to spaces such as the National Museum—where the question of having confidence in oneself also appears, as Andrés was saying. I think that many of us carried many prejudices like: What is someone like me going to do at a museum? I am not capable of putting an art piece together. I am not capable of speaking like I am required to at the museum. But I believe that the freedom to be able to be who we are in spaces like the National Museum played a key role. Spaces like the National Museum, of course, require behaviors to be very regulated, but there in particular we still had the freedom to be who we are. This helped us understand that

¹⁵ Plaza de los Mártires (Square of the Martyrs) is a neighborhood square near the former location of Bronx Street. It features an obelisk in the center that is a memorial to rebels executed at the site by Spanish authorities during the war of independence in the early nineteenth century.—Trans.

there are certain behaviors that one has to modify in certain spaces and this is fine. (One had to modify behaviors even while using drugs, depending on what one was using, with whom, where and why, the quality and kind of the substance, where it came from, and so forth.) I think that we were not asking these questions before. We do ask them now, and we do so in a way that is historically argued and pedagogically informed, so that we can replicate the experience.

Susana Fergusson: To follow up on what Yan Carlos is saying, I would add that what is necessary is humanities that heal. I mean humanities in a broad sense: all the expressions that can become means to heal and build hope. I have recently been very happy about something that I discovered. I love looking up the etymology of words, and not too long ago I found that the word *esperanza* [hope] comes from the idea of *esperar una acción* [to wait for an action]. This means that *desesperanza* [despair] comes from having stopped waiting for something to happen. This is exactly why we are now going to start working on the figure of “community mediators for hope.” I had wanted to also include the word “creativity” in the name, because art is often thought of as something that belongs to a museum or to some “doctor” with the “aura” of an artist, and I would rather understand creativity in all its forms, including the capacity to put things together. But we should also keep in mind what Andrés was mentioning: the materiality that allows one to talk about difficult topics. Materiality is creative in this sense. Yan Carlos, why don’t you tell María del Rosario about the process of remembering: How did we remember? How was it done? How do you remember the construction of the scale model, especially in the beginning? Do you remember when we started assembling the stories in La Rioja? Perhaps she would like to hear from you about the memory process of the 150 young men telling their stories while at the same time thinking, “these people, what are they going to use these stories for?” Maybe you should talk a little about the construction of trust that was accomplished with that piece, as you mentioned.

Yan Carlos Guerra: The process consisted of remembering, with the help of the scale model, many of the everyday scenes from El Bronx that began coming back to our memories when we started working on the model; this all started at Susana’s house. Andrés was talking about the origin of the idea of building this piece. Well, I remember the euphoria that I felt when remembering certain moments, certain places, certain stories as well, telling them, making them lived in the present, all triggered by the scale model. So this was the initiative: to re-create

all of this in a bigger scale model, like the one we had started at Susana's house, but this time in La Rioja, where everyone else could start participating. We started with five or six people, but that was only the beginning, because when they started seeing that a space that no longer existed was once again as we were building it, everyone wanted to participate.

What is necessary is humanities that heal. I mean humanities in a broad sense: all the expressions that can become means to heal and build hope.

Everyone wanted to contribute their two cents to the historical reconstruction because they knew that it was going to be preserved for the future, that we were going to be able to use it to tell our story and to teach as well. They realized that the scale model was not just a bunch of cardboard houses on a board. They realized that we all had a story to tell through those cardboard houses.

I think it was very interesting to see the emotions and the behaviors that surfaced when we were putting together the piece. I even remember that in many of the interviews that we recorded, we asked people, at the precise moment when we were making the piece, what it was they remembered the most. What was the activity, what was the situation they remembered the most from that space? Many started weeping, many laughed, many got angry and wouldn't say anything but would open the door and leave. Many got upset when one asked them about the spaces or the dynamics of that place. But seeing these reactions solidified the idea of continuing with this kind of investigation, as Susana just said, of continuing the process of healing. In the end, three or four months after this, when we decided to take the piece to the museum and reproduce the experience there, this time with an audience, everyone wanted to go. They also were saying: "Take me, I also have something to tell, a piece of the story." As we know, however, the problem is that access to spaces like the National Museum is limited. We could not bring each one of the 150 to tell his story.

The fact stands: each one of us had the bravery and courage to tell and to remember our stories. This was the goal: we didn't want to erase the memory and to wipe away the past. That is what all these machineries of urban gentrification intend, but also all the machinery at work in traditional addiction therapy that demands that you forget who you were, that demands that you are reborn "in the name of Christ." That type of approach leads to relapse, to not believing in yourself. On the contrary, these methodologies of memory, as Andrés was saying, especially in a place like the National Museum, allowed the scale model

to gain momentum. The scale model overcame this machinery. Many people in the spheres of research and civil society became interested in the processes and projects that we were producing. All of this wasn't done by Yan Carlos single-handedly. There were many people involved, many young men, many friends that left the project but, in some way or another, learned from this process and keep replicating these practices, even if they no longer work with us. Whatever space they inhabit, they now do so by asking these questions: Why am I here? What for? Where am I going?

I think this is what came out of the scale model. From this also emerged the project of building another scale model at the National Museum, this time

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with a different focus, with a more participatory focus and a gender focus—it also included children, elderly people. Many came to build, to re-create what no longer was there from their own point of view, their own perspective. What they did was not imposed on them or something they were told to do; each person had their own version

and perspective and could replicate it and make it in that space created at the National Museum. By the way, this space was also very innovative for museums. Coming to a museum and finding a room with materials to create, to discuss, to interact with different kinds of people, to inhabit other social roles, helps us, people like us, grow both artistically and personally. Indeed, what came out of the scale model, beyond the piece itself, is that stories were clarified, and a lot of taboos—many social paradigms that held us captive—were broken. Each one of us brought our own contribution, including forgetfulness (this is why the project was called *Restoring the Forgotten*), because this is what it was: to restore what everyone else wanted to forget so quickly.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Thanks, Yan Carlos. I want to highlight the last thing you said: “To restore what everyone else wants to forget so quickly.” It is a very powerful expression because it recognizes the problem of the silencing performed by policies and governmental machineries, as you were saying, of

imposed forgetfulness. But it is also a kind of forgetfulness that can be restored to turn it into memory from other perspectives. I had already heard part of these stories in the video clips of *Historias de la L*, but hearing them again in your words is very powerful, and I am left with many questions.

The El Bronx Herbarium and the Round Corner Projects: Being Reborn in Order to Remember

María del Rosario Acosta López: Following the line of what Yan Carlos has been telling us about the role that space has played in this process, I would like to hear from Rayiv about the kind of emotions that emerge when re-creating a space that no longer exists but remains in the memory, a space that survives in other ways and resists disappearing. This is the case, for example, with the Herbario del Bronx (El Bronx Herbarium) project, which, besides dealing with a space that no longer exists, returned and reappropriated the same space, thus turning it into something else. As you put it in the presentation of the *Herbario*: “How can we narrate violence and exclusion without losing sight of the care and resilience of the living?” In this way, the *Herbario* became a symbol of the fact that in contexts of violence and exclusion there always is something that is reborn. This rebirth can also turn into a symbol of the process of remembering, of other modes of telling the same stories.

In this context, Rayiv, I have many questions about what happened in the process of returning to the space and reclaiming it in alternative ways. To begin, I would like to ask you about the herbarium project itself and about its publication as a daily planner.¹⁶ The choice of this publication form reveals the many layers of memory at play in the project. There is, on a first level, an “ancestral memory” of the plants, the memory of seeds. I’ve heard that seeds can remain ready to germinate again for up to two million years. There is, on a second level, the memory that spaces themselves hold. This memory of space goes beyond individual people and often even survives them. This is the memory of those we have lost, those who are gone and will not return. And yet there is also the memory of those who are still with us and who want to remember. Then there is the fact that you chose to present

¹⁶ *El Bronx Herbarium* is an ongoing project on site, in La L; more details about it are explained throughout this interview by Rayiv David Torres Sánchez. Part of the project was a “publication” of some of the pictures taken on site of the plants, of the people working with them, of the spaces, and it was given out and sold as a calendar and planner for the year 2020. Parts of the planner can be seen here: https://issuu.com/patrimoniobogota/docs/agenda_bronx_web_.

the product of the project as a daily planner (on which, by the way, I am currently keeping notes for these interviews), which is in itself an artifact of memory. The daily planner is yet another layer of the project's multilayered reflections about memory and about reclaiming spaces. So I wonder, Rayiv, how do *you* see all these connections? How have you and the group discussed these connections? These questions are even more relevant now that I know that you have been behind many of the other facets of the project, as Yan Carlos reminds us.

Rayiv David Torres Sánchez: Of course, María del Rosario, thank you. Everything you are mentioning should be contextualized through the framework that made it possible. So before we get to the *Herbarium*, I should back up to say something about the project to fundamentally rethink the National Museum of Colombia. The National Museum's central concern in this process has been finding ways to reconfigure the hegemonic narratives of the past two hundred years of republican life. This process starts roughly in 2010 with the renovation of the National Museum, the first room of which is called Memory and Nation. The 1991 constitution of Colombia is one of the political horizons that correlates with the renovation process.¹⁷ Taking this constitution as its starting point, the National Museum established a path to dialogue with contemporary memory work. To put it differently, we could say that the collections of the museum reached a certain point that allowed for the possibility of telling stories like the ones from the former El Bronx. By reconfiguring the spaces within the National Museum and finding new ways of interpreting its connection to contemporary memory initiatives, the museum deepened the dialogue with other possibilities of remembering and especially with other places of enunciation.

I bring up the Memory and Nation room because this is the space where collectives that seek to narrate their own experiences of pain and memory started participating in the narratives of the National Museum. Among these collectives

¹⁷ In 1991, and after a peace process with the leftist guerrilla M-19 and a massive student movement, the Colombian state reformulated its constitution through a democratically elected Constitutional Assembly. The 1991 constitution of the Republic of Colombia replaced the very conservative 1886 constitution.—Trans.

we should mention the *Mujeres Tejedoras* (Weaver Women) of Mampuján.¹⁸ They occupy a central place in that room, which allowed the National Museum to start a dialogue with difficult memories from the communities themselves. This has been the direction of the renewal of the National Museum, and we continue that work. So it was in the context of this renovation that the scale model of La L came to the National Museum. It came with the sponsorship of the Gilberto Alzate Avendaño Foundation and also with a proposal to create a museum at the former El Bronx street. Indeed, it was a proposal to create a museum in its classical version, but the National Museum's response was that it was impossible to have a museum there without involving nontraditional ways of creating memory and without including the experiences of all those who lived there from their own perspective. This is the context for *La Esquina Redonda* project, namely, the part of El Bronx project devoted to reconstructing the building in La L that bears this name as a museum and cultural space.

The implications of this approach included an additional layer in the discussion. We had to redefine what is thought of as possible for the construction of memory as a sociological space. The question was: How can we practice a critical museology? A critical museology necessarily has to reconfigure its own places of enunciation. Museums cannot do this from within their own collections or curatorial lines alone. It is necessary to formulate lines of participation that allow for the construction of collective memories and a participative museography. To achieve this, we looked into successful experiences of community museums in Colombia. Among them we found the itinerant museum of the Montes de María region, El Mochuelo Community Museum, the Community Museum of San Jacinto, the Pedagogical Museum of San José de Uré, among others. In short, we found a lot of different experiences in which social fabrics had been rearticulated through processes of healing, listening, and art therapy. As Susana said, healing through participatory processes that allowed for a diversification of

¹⁸ The *Mujeres Tejedoras* de Mampuján is a grassroots collective memory initiative led by women from Mampuján, a village in the Bolívar department in northern Colombia. After a massacre perpetrated by counterinsurgent paramilitary forces and the subsequent mass displacement of the population, the women of the community came together to create quilts in which they could memorialize the violent events they experienced. Their quilting work is exhibited at the National Museum of Colombia. See VICE en Español/Pacifista, "Las Tejedoras de Mampuján," May 4, 2016, video, 11:42, <https://youtu.be/QmWE7Glebugl>. See also Luis Alberto Pulgarín, "El tapiz de Mampuján y sus tejedoras: El Museo Nacional de Colombia como espacio para narrativas del conflicto armado" [Mampujan tapestries and weavers: The Colombian National Museum as a space for the armed conflict's narratives], *Cuadernos de Curaduría del Museo Nacional de Colombia*, no. 16 (2020): 118–37, https://museonacional.gov.co/Publicaciones/cuadernos-de-curaduria/Documents/2020/Cuadernos_de_curaduria_16.pdf.

the possibilities of museology and museography. The project of a museum at El Bronx was made possible by the support of the FUGA. So with their support, we proposed a space of creation and memory.

María del Rosario Acosta López: And this space is the Round Corner project in El Bronx?

Rayiv David Torres Sánchez: Yes, that's right. The Round Corner project has, we could say, the matrix, or the blueprint, of a museum, but with a much more complex vision that takes into consideration broader possibilities than a traditional museum. Among these possibilities are the ones that I already mentioned like the Museum of San Jacinto or open-air museums like the Museum of Siloé. These are spaces where the possibility of telling stories is democratically distributed and diversified. In these spaces, narratives can intersect (but do not compete with each other) and can be reconstructed. From both a curatorial and an ethnographic perspective, the goal is to reevaluate the status of truth and especially the status of testimonies. We work from the perspective of a symmetrical anthro-

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pology, which grants to testimonies a different status of truth from that traditionally given to them by historiography.

In any case, we are putting together an exhibition. A little later I can talk in detail about all the spaces that the Round Corner project will have. One of them will be an exhibit that narrates two hundred years

of street life in Bogotá, which are also two hundred years of Colombian republican life. In this way, we are going to narrate street life starting with the end of the colonial period and the birth of the republic in 1810. We are exploring many themes. One of them, for example, is an exploration of the transformation of the people who have inhabited this place in terms of local history. Who has inhabited this place? What are the apparatuses of government and public management that the birth of the republic carried over from the colonial period? How did diverse apparatuses of control, which were actually apparatuses of exclusion,

start to be configured? I am referring to apparatuses such as substances and their prohibition, which configured the ways of inhabiting the space and the hierarchical relations that developed starting at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. How did these apparatuses evolve? How have the people who inhabit this space been transformed by them?

We have started developing a critical interpretative apparatus of the population management apparatuses that have made exclusion possible. We have begun a genealogy to explain how a place such as La L exists. We want people who visit the space to ask themselves big questions about what makes places like Cartucho Street or La L possible. One of the threads that we are considering for the narrative of the exhibition is what Marta Saade calls “social prophylaxis” in her book *Ciudad en cuarentena: Chicha, patología social y profilaxis*.¹⁹ This concept can be used to analyze, for example, the whole phenomenon of prohibition by tracing all the policies that developed around the prohibition of substances, from chicha, at the end of the nineteenth century, to *basuco*. Over time, these policies configure relationships around prohibited substances, in relation to hygienism, law, and medical-moral policies, which begin to explain how these places have long been marked to become what are now called *ollas*.²⁰ We intend to evaluate the full historical arc of the development of certain narratives of disdain that have become ingrained in Colombian society and that make possible genocides like the one that took place at Cartucho Street’s first “eviction” and, later of course, at the intervention of El Bronx.

From this perspective, we establish dialogues and bridges with the guys of the Free Soul collective, who are also involved in this exhibition project, that allow them to explain their own experience through contemporary critical tools. We aim to give them tools that allow them to understand what happened and why it happened the way it did. In addition, the operation of the Round Corner understood as a pedagogical apparatus is to help them think about their experience in the long term. In this way we also intend to provide tools for future community mediators. Our main goal is to make sure that the museography

¹⁹ See Oscar Iván Calvo and Marta Saade, *La ciudad en cuarentena: Chicha, patología social y profilaxis* [City under quarantine: Chicha, social pathology, and prophylaxis] (Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura, 2002). Chicha in this context refers to a precolonial traditional drink, common throughout the Andes, made from fermented corn. Chicha survived colonization and preserved the traditions of many communities. At the beginning of the twentieth century and on the basis of hygienist ideologies, the Colombian government aggressively regulated and eventually prohibited the drink in the country.—Trans.

²⁰ *Olla* (literally a cooking pot) is a Colombian colloquial way of referring to localized areas where psychoactive substances from marijuana to heroin are commercialized and used.—Trans.

script that will structure and give life and content to the exhibition that will inaugurate the Round Corner as an exhibition and cultural space can be easily understood while also assuring that people, both visitors and neighbors from the Voto Nacional neighborhood (where we are right now), are in control of the narratives.

Moreover, we are thinking that the transformation of the place itself, the neighborhood, from the perspective of its significance in the urban history of Bogotá should serve as the correlate of the two great blocks I just mentioned: the historical research about two hundred years of street life in Bogotá and the exhibit at the Round Corner. This is what Yan Carlos was talking about when he mentioned the obelisk. Think about the fact that Bogotá has its own obelisk at the gates of El Bronx! Just like Paris has its obelisk at the Place de la Concorde, and Washington has its own at the National Mall, we have one at El Bronx. Why is the obelisk there? And how is it useful to telling the history of the place itself and the place that El Bronx occupies in our national narrative? In this way we can formulate a critical national narrative, which is why when we talk about two hundred years of street life, we are in a way talking about two hundred years of republican life. Likewise, from the perspective of the National Museum, this narrative allows us to create tools to decode the narratives of the nation and its populations.

These are the three large blocks that, slowly, we have been sharing with the community and building from a diversity of perspectives, of disciplines. Evidently, a task like this one demands the combination of historical knowledges with, as we explore the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, other disciplines like sociology, urban anthropology, and various mechanisms for reimagining museology to help us tell this history. These are all moments of the script for this exhibition, which was created with the people who inhabit this place. At this level the ethnographic discipline also intervenes because we have to work with the local population to know how they came to this place and how they lived through its ups and downs. We have to ask, for example, how the logic of Bogotá's urban organization has changed. The construction of Tenth and Caracas Avenues has completely transformed what used to be an "east-west" logic. We must ask how the people who lived in or visited this place experienced the transformation and how they seek to tell their memories. The notion of living memories emerges in this context, which is of great interest to us. We want to know how memories have their own lives. Memories are not crystallized in time. On the contrary, they actively participate in the construction of narratives.

The second major chapter of this whole project focuses specifically on the microcosm of La L. This started, among other things, with community-based museological experiences such as the reconstruction of the Round Corner—the last building standing after the demolition—in the scale model that Susana and the Free Soul guys did together. The focus of the Round Corner project was much more microscopic. The point was to explore how the space of the Round Corner fit within the logics of La L and to reconstruct the history of the place where the memory space will be located. The guys participated by telling us how the place was hierarchized, how the borders were distributed, how space was configured and divided. They explained where the entrances and exits were and what went on in there. We have been working on all of this with people who inhabited the space to know exactly how its internal borders operated and what norms governed them. In this way, they help us bring a critical lens to dominant narratives about this area of the city so that we can dismantle them.

It is very important to us to dismantle these dominant narratives. It is possible to preserve the focus on the logics of terror that we already know existed in this space and that dominant narratives highlight, but we also need to inquire into the possibilities for creation and cultural circulation that also existed there. This is the work that we have been carrying out during the second stage of the project. The goal of this stage is to reconstruct the history of the art festivals that took place in La L. How was it possible that collectives organized street art festivals in this place, which we know was so full of pain, terror, and everything else we know about it? Hip-hop was an important way to approach the question since it emerged in La L precisely as a convergence of spaces and creation of possibilities in the midst of what, as we know today, went on there. So we worked with the people who had organized these hip-hop festivals. Among them were artistic collectives such as *Todo copas* (All cups)²¹—which has played an important role in the evolution of hip-hop in Colombia—who had the opportunity to enter and register what was happening in this place, to work with people experiencing homelessness to register and keep a memory of the possibilities of creation that existed there.

After the intervention happened and the last house was finally demolished—the house where Susana arranged a classroom for the pilot listening center and where I worked introducing the museography script to the community peers—all that was left was the Round Corner. Susana was the first to notice that plants had started to grow out of the ruins. Around that same time, we learned about a project led by Professor Francisca Márquez at the Alberto Hurtado

²¹ See “TODO COPAS,” Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/todocopacol>.

University in Santiago de Chile researching plants that grow out of ruins. With Georges Didi-Huberman's work on tree bark in mind—that is, the interrogation of memories from other materialist and organic perspectives—it occurred to us as we went along to wonder how the organic aspect of pain can be seen through these plants, which are themselves testimonies to and witnesses of the ruins.²² We started thinking about memory in these terms and invited the Alberto Hurtado University to help us create the *Herbario del Bronx*.

In this process, we discovered something very significant: medicinal plants were among those growing from the ruins. This gave us an important point of reflection: How did the ruins of a place that we know was so loaded with horrors produce medicinal plants? So we established very interesting directions for reflection with this question as our starting point. Winder Jojoa, who is part of the Free Soul collective, wrote a text, included in the daily planner, reflecting on the experience of returning to El Bronx to collect samples of the plants. We then started thinking of the ruins as witnesses from another, mineral, non-anthropocentric logic and corporeality and asking what it could mean to produce memory in spaces loaded with pain.

Along the same lines, we were trying to think about the memory and classification of these plants from the standpoint of nonconventional knowledges.

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We were thinking with the actors with whom we had been walking these paths of memory. We worked, for instance, with the *sabedoras* [wise, or knowledgeable, women] of the Square of Las Yervas, who participated in the process of recollection. We also worked with the chief of nursing at the San Juan de Dios Hospital, who knows a lot about the vegetation in the area because

she keeps a knowledge bank of medicinal plants at the hospital. She helped us identify the types of vegetation, including flowers and medicinal plants, that can grow in inorganic soils. We found plants that became very special for us like

²² See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Écorces* (Paris: Le Minuit, 2017); English edition, *Bark*, trans. Samuel E. Martin (Boston: MIT Press, 2017).

the *suelda consuelda* [“welding” comfrey]. It is common knowledge that the *suelda consuelda* is used to recalcify bones and that it sprouts precisely in places where there has been pain and conflict. Where there is pain and conflict, for some reason, the *suelda consuelda* appears. So this plant became iconic for the El Bronx Herbarium. Francisca Márquez also taught us that we could dry the plants and keep them as testimony and evidence for the museography script.

This is the story of the *Herbario* in broad strokes. It will be a central aspect of the museography script together with a suggestion from El Mochuelo Museum, led by Soraya Bayuelo, to organize some kind of commemoration event for those all gone or disappeared after El Bronx was “intervened.” This was, then, the Muro de la Presencia (The Wall of Presence).²³ How to honor those who have been made to disappear? This is an eternal historical challenge, and it is essential in places like El Bronx. How do we speak about those who are no longer here? And how can artistic experiences be part of these exercises of memorializing absence, remembering what is not there? We established some preliminary dialogues with institutions and collectives of memory in Latin America to nourish this line of thinking. We approached the former ESMA²⁴ in Buenos Aires and places in Chile as well. We thought about creating an initiative that could serve as a referent for research about those who have been taken from us; something that would not just attempt to give definitive closure but could be nourished over time. Moreover, we did not want to use the language of *desaparecidos* (the disappeared ones), because this language narrows the focus a little too much. We rather think in terms of people who we can no longer see for a variety of reasons, including multiple evictions, because some of these memories go back all the way to Cartucho Street. But to be able to do all this, there must be a dialogue with the people who inhabited the space and who can contribute to the permanent creation and construction of memory.

María del Rosario Acosta López: I am glad you ended with a reference to the *Muro de la Presencia*. This is exactly where I wanted to go next. The description of the experience that you have reconstructed makes a lot of sense. As I was saying earlier, I think it all starts by asking about the places that can be opened

²³ The *Muro de la Presencia* was a live performance on site, at La L, conceived as a homage project for all those who disappeared after the Bronx “intervention.” See FUGA—Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño, “El Muro de la Presencia,” December 21, 2020, video, 16:54, <https://youtu.be/2l5tOUZ44r4>.

²⁴ Escuela Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA; Mechanical School of the Navy) was used as a place of torture and interrogation during the Argentinean dictatorship (1973–86) and was later turned into a memory space.—Trans.

up for testimonies. What kind of spaces have to become possible so that people's testimonies are truly audible? I think that this is the first thing that your project achieves with the experience of the scale model, for example. Experiences of listening can emerge from unexpected perspectives that break, as Yan Carlos was saying, with preestablished paradigms about what will be heard and what is going to be erased. These erasures often take place in so-called memory experiences.

Besides creating space for testimonies, the project puts a lot of effort into understanding its history in a much broader frame, as you both (Rayiv and Yan Carlos) have mentioned. There is a real effort to understand that this historical construction is at stake. We need therefore a historical-genealogical construction, and I understand the meaning of the museography script of the exhibition of two hundred years of street life in these terms. We need to understand the history of this place, of the governmental apparatuses that have contributed to the continued existence of places like this one, and of the narratives that describe them. How to dismantle these apparatuses? I think that to dismantle them we must first understand them; we have to reconstruct their history from the standpoint of different narratives.

There is, likewise, a huge effort to understand how the question is not only about a memory and a history but about a *living memory* that is present, grows, is reborn, and opens possibilities for other futures. This is partly why I started by asking Yan Carlos about the verse "the future is no longer dark." It is no longer dark because there is a process of memory that makes it possible to understand what happened differently, as he just said. The point is that besides resignifying the spaces, bodies have to be resignified, so that, as Yan Carlos says, people can keep on being themselves. People should not be demanded to change themselves and forget who they used to be, as so often happens in therapy. To keep being oneself, however, a process of resignification is necessary.

Finally, we have to find ways to honor those who are no longer here. Besides asking how to remember the spaces that no longer exist, as well as those that remain, we must ask how to remember the people who are no longer with us. I was very moved when I saw the filmed experience of the *Muro de la Presencia*,²⁵ because you managed to bring to light in powerful and suggestive ways the difficulty of re-creating absence while also doing justice to the memories of those who still live through the stories and experiences that they left *im-planted* in spaces. I wanted also to conclude our conversation by asking you to talk about this experience of the *Muro de la Presencia*. What came out of it? It was not easy, because many emotions were awakened when these memories came to life. This is why the aesthetic decisions of this event seemed particularly powerful to me.

²⁵ FUGA, "El Muro de la Presencia."

Susana Fergusson: Yes! What is happening right now is very important because the project has really embraced the discourse of community-based approaches. So many things are happening that will be revitalizing. Andrés, Ximena Castillo (who could not be here today but is also involved with all this projects and works with Rayiv at the museum), and Rayiv have been directing the museum toward another way of looking at memory that includes actors from the community. For example, we were back working in the area within a month of the demolition. (Perhaps among the happiest times in my life were those eight months there, wearing boots, doing whatever we wanted among the ruins that generated creative spaces, and then the steamroller came . . .) We're going to create something called Pabellón de Socialización (Community Sharing Pavilion), which will go on for three years. As Yan Carlos was saying, and Andrés also mentioned, this is a project of linked networks, and we haven't let go of these links. For example, the work that Rayiv did is fundamental. I am just now starting to wrap my head around just how important the museography script is. We have to keep returning to the script to produce new materialities and new reflections, because we are already broadening the project to include artisans, *ropavejeros*,²⁶ waste pickers, Indigenous people.

The *Muro de la Presencia* that you asked about started in 2019. After the demolition, a piece of wall remained standing. We had been dreaming about turning the wall into a memorial for those who disappeared during the intervention. The National Museum and Leonardo Gamez, our illustrator and artist, took to the idea and started to sketch narrated drawings: people told him things and he started sketching. That's where the creative strategy came from. We, however, have to admit that this strategy is missing the community leg because we did it ourselves. The institutional element elevated the project to the level of "artwork," but there is still a lot of work to do because it is a very difficult, very sensitive subject. I hope, for instance, to make a garden and to organize a ceremony where we can make a bonfire in remembrance of the many of the people who died in this territory and could not be identified; they are people about whom we know nothing. We must also have a memorial for them, something that will keep growing transversally so that slowly many more community actors will appear and contribute to completing the story of the Wall. Yan Carlos, how was your experience with the *Muro de la Presencia*? What did it mean to you?

²⁶ *Ropavejero* is, literally, someone who collects and sells old clothes. It seems, however, that Susana here is referring more broadly to the people whose work is to recycle abandoned and leftover materials, more commonly known in Colombia as *recicladores*, that is, "waste pickers."

Yan Carlos Guerra: I think we experienced it as a ritual that we held around the biggest question that we've been asking since 2016: "What happened to our friends?" The *Muro de la Presencia* was our opportunity to reconnect with them again. I think we felt we were with them in presence, emotion, spirit. We experienced it this way. I talked to a lot of other people who felt the same. It was as a ritual, a debt we had, and more so because we had the opportunity of being back in that space. I think that returning to that space and ignoring what happened there and the people that were affected, well, that would just be violent. That would have been like trampling on their memory [*pisotear la memoria*], as people say. It was also very healing. Many of us felt at peace knowing that we had honored our friends, remembered them, and that they were still present even if we don't know where they are, whether they are dead or alive. Even if we can't know if what we are told is true or false, regardless of the kind of stories they tell or whatever it was that actually happened, they are with us. I think the point is to be in that space with the awareness of doing what has to be done, especially with events of this type, which go beyond art or research. They are sensitive issues, things that are hard to talk about and discuss. I think that this is how we experienced it, and, yes, it was a spiritual moment.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Thank you very much for your answers and for sharing these experiences. I think this interview has turned out wonderfully. Many things have come out here that will make audible an experience that really deserves to be heard on a bigger scale. To conclude, and because it is a question I have asked everyone I have interviewed, I would like to ask each one of you: Who are the voices that have accompanied you when you think about these issues, when you act, when you work in these contexts of memory? Who has accompanied your work at the National Museum, Rayiv? What about you, Susana, with your community work? And, Yan Carlos, what voices are there for you with all this research work but also with your music?

Susana Fergusson: When I heard you ask this question, I thought: "Oh no! Not this!" But you know? Yes, let me tell you how this project was born. I think there is someone I should acknowledge. When this whole project started in 2001, there was an Italian advisor called Efre Milanese. Earlier, I had fallen in love with Efre at first sight. I first saw him at the Iglesia de la Roca de . . . Yan Carlos, what was the church that is now next to the Girardot and all that called? [*Yan Carlos also did not seem to remember*]. Oh well, I was in a community activity up in that church, which is a gorgeous historical landmark. Efre

comes in with an advisor from the diocese—this project was actually born at the diocese, though we later had to leave it because trans women could not come to cash their checks there, so I quit. This is when the Procrear Foundation mentioned before and El Parche project became strong . . . But what was I saying? . . . Ah! Of course, love. I fell in love with this man. The advisor from the diocese brought him. (I do have my memory after all. I tend to have very bad memory—it is “cannabic”—but episodes like Yan Carlos hiding in the corner of the courtyard or Efreem coming into the church with a green raincoat are engraved in my memory.) So I saw him and fell in love. I had to wait a year to see him again, but during the year that I didn’t see him, he was present in my dreams and in my life. When he came back, he became my mentor at El Parche. It was a wonderful love, which lasted for eleven years, and this project came out of that love. Our method, that is, everything I’ve worked on and developed around harm reduction through artistic healing and listening centers, really comes from Efreem. I used to write daily love letters to him of at least a page. This is how the method was constructed. I have more than 1,000 written pages. For example, a considerable part of Andrés’s work comes from these love letters. I gave him the whole correspondence because there I would tell Efreem every night who had been killed that day or whatever else had happened. I narrate there the day-to-day of the project, so later on Andrés conceptualized this and started publishing it. Efreem is the love of my life to this day. I have never loved anyone again after him. No other man has been so deeply lodged in my heart. I will always have him there. Whatever I do, I think to myself how much I would love to share it with him. I owe the person I am to him, as a woman and as a professional. He educated me and he is always my referent.

There are also the voices of other community peers, Jazmín and María Eugenia. They are still part of my network. They used to be sex workers in the Santa Fe neighborhood, we were trained together, and today they have accompanied me during twenty years in different spaces. They are also my referents.

Rayiv David Torres Sánchez: I would like to have a story as beautiful as Susana’s. But I think that the voices that resound in this project for me are those of the Free Soul. The song “Vehículo del tiempo” (Time vehicle) is a leitmotif for me; it is a fundamental background for all this work. It is like the soundtrack of the project. The aesthetic futures of hip-hop are the guide of the project. All this work has the sound of hip-hop with its capacity to versify and create poetry. I want to make a public acknowledgment: Yan Carlos is a brilliant musician. He writes incredible lyrics; he has a capacity to construct a perspective on the world

with admirable consistency and to translate it into music. For these reasons, the voices of the Free Soul resonate in the project and in my particular experience of it.

Susana Fergusson: Of course, I also want to add the Free Soul to the voices that accompany me. When I met them, I was coming from working with sex workers, trans women, people experiencing homelessness, and the Free Soul taught me that I had to work with young men too. In this way they are for me, well, also a love referent. I love them. Sometimes I feel like killing them [*laughs*] but lovingly, and I also know that I will always have company with them. I know I will never be alone with them. They are also very important life referents after my tragedy. They came to rescue me from the depth of my sadness.

Yan Carlos Guerra: So the voices that resound for me are the voices of forgetfulness, the voices of silence. This is something I have been learning throughout the whole process. I realize it more every time because of the research. I realized that there are a lot of hidden truths or many things that have not been said. Things that were not said because of fear of repression and fear of punishments and penalties as extreme as losing one's own life. There is much that is still hidden. I think these are the voices that resound for me. The voices of silence. The poetry of forgetfulness, of disdain, of inequality, of stigma.

With respect to what Rayiv said about the lyrics, I feel like they are my contribution in exchange for being able to take advantage, beyond everything that we are doing, of this great team, of the emotional support, of the pedagogical and professional enrichment, everything I know and will yet learn. I think that from all of this, in one way or another, one gets an education. One is made and built. This is what the whole process has been: a collective construction where we have all learned from everyone. We have certainly made mistakes. As Susana said, she sometimes feels like killing us [*laughs*], but, well, this is all part of the process. And it can also be the source of inspiration. Our song "Vehículo del tiempo," we could say, is perfect to sum up everything that we have talked about around remembering and memory. I think that, as Rayiv put it, the song tells the story of two hundred years of Colombian street life where the lexicon, the connotation of words, the way we name ourselves, and how we refer to things and spaces have been transformed, changed. The song also explains well all that Colombia is as our republic.

“**Nosotros somos**” (We are; short fragment), Free Soul, 2017

Struggle with narcotics, the ones that cause despair and thirst . . . We're castaways, survivors in the streets of terror. From the 15th to the 9th in the center, only Bronx. . . . That's what we are, I don't lean out, rats,²⁷ *sayas*,²⁸ I don't name them. Bodies, minds and madness, wasted in bad habits. Today I conjure the profane evil; pure gesture for my pal, I get on move, fight; street rapper, cautious, I sing, my pal, and I distort, spliff, my pal, and feel inspired. . . . We're the hope of a voice, we're life, we're street, before and after Bronx Street.

“**Vehículo del tiempo**” (Time vehicle; full lyrics),²⁹ Free Soul, 2019

[*Epigraph I*]

In Colombia, since back in colonial days, memory is not worn down by time. It neutralizes it with shackles, shoots it down by firing squad, tears it down with machines; it builds monuments over life-volcano nests. Memory, time vehicle, you go missing as a bubbling in the blood, you hide fearful in silence, you return as waves that no fear contains, as swordless warriors arousing multitudes that will not quiet down, as courageous artists who demand peace for the people. Memory, I call on you today and redeem the dignity of those forgotten by history. Because if time were to stop, I will talk you through three centuries, the sixteenth to the eighteenth, that's a story to be told, around a few provinces and a colonial root the antipodal stigma emerged, and a god to adore, when Jiménez de Quesada founded Bogotá and brought with him epidemics, the measles, and even more.

The chapel at El Humilladero, before going into it, better get on your knees. The priest won't look at you, only his back toward you. In the seventeenth century it all begins to change. Children, men and women, tailors with a trade, cobblers, hatmakers, time swept it all away. The Comuneros revolted, the version says: bad government, those lives were lost at the Puente del Común.

We come to the eighteenth now, beautiful rivers, only two: San Francisco, San Agustín, nourished by the ancestor. I miss the dust at the square where the horse used to walk on, it turned to pavement. Over there you find subterranean waters but for money making only, daggers cause harm, faces are scarred, the centuries have recorded, the Viceroyalty, the very first who is yet to say something:

²⁷ Delinquents.

²⁸ *Sayas* or *sayayines*; security agents in the former El Bronx.

²⁹ Transcription by Rayiv David Torres Sánchez.

[*Chorus*]

Time goes in a spiral
How many cities are gathered in the city?
Better not forget, memories
The certainty of what might have happened
To keep on
Able to record
The very essence of the centuries and their stroll
As I remember I can call on
The voice of those they sought to silence.

In the nineteenth century another version is told. Some defend, liberate, the nation rebels, no buying or selling, it's a vow of pain. In Don Jaime's garden they honorably sacrifice themselves. Martyrdom spreads, the Basilica is minor, it obeys supreme history, the country is the great tenor. A thousand-day war that splattered us with blood, with symphonic death, then a child and now she's grown. We now see it day after day, and history recorded it. Vain experiences, the railway took her, the kid grows up with the bum who then became a street child, mind what I do, mind my inquiries, partner.

I analyze the package that was delivered to the gallows, biopolitics of the state, we're in the wrong, the city, the great legacy of kings spreading out, never without symbiosis, died on the line. With no memory and little ethics, submerged in aesthetics, parliaments are put together with arithmetical answers, monuments are raised and death becomes epic, they split up the fragments on Caracas and Tenth.

[*Chorus*]

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Time is nothing but a puff, the sky is gray in this city, temples and pillars, society is just a bluff, in cold blood my nation, my history concerns us, choose an education, a war is draining us, they're building highways at the Plaza de

Maderas. They modernize the Plaza España, a government and its spheres, they put together a long journey. The metropolis awaits, progress with its costumes, one same government prevails, Jorge Eliécer made the point: democracy or hegemony. Twenty centuries and one martyrdom, rebirth of utopia, the fatherland made a vow, the basilica would be the great trusted lady, obelisk of a thousand days, the most solemn card for the state to deal, we're martyrs of the fatherland who transcend day by day, nostalgic for the past, what would the future say? The present is a fallacy, like April in nine days, independence and democracy, for the nation to consecrate, as an act of faith and grace the republic was being born.

[*Chorus*]

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Able to record
The very essence of the centuries and their stroll
As I remember I can call on
The voice of those they sought to silence.

[*Epigraph II*]

“Don't try to exterminate us as you're doing now. Social cleansing squads everywhere. We get off a sidewalk, because on the sidewalk we're in the way, and we get under a bridge, there they kill us under a bridge, they shoot us down. We don't have weapons. Our only weapon is dirt” (Speech by El Comanche, Commander of El Cartucho, at the Bogotá City Council, September 27, 1993).

An explosion in El Cartucho because there was no decision, money for war in dollars it was no million, the Free Soul remembers history, the spiral that hid, and what did it become? The news is complex and the mind freezes. We are all on something, some just won't accept it. Accept that for the sake of profit the credit grows on water, no food on sight, they grant this scarcity to get them to vote by law. Law of a fairy tale where some king does not exist, the king enjoyed the good life, that's the story I told.

[*Chorus*]

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How many cities are gathered in the city?

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To keep on
Able to record
The very essence of the centuries and their stroll
As I remember I can call on
The voice of those they sought to silence.

The twenty-first century, this chapter is more cruel, a rite to memory, to Jesus and Lucifer, the evidence is well known and so they seek to hide it, repelled by the one next to us what can we pretend? The notion of good destiny still depends on yesterday, avenues and paths, sidewalk histories, the beggar is the finest and delights with pleasure, grief is his great friend, deceit is his wife, disgraceful are the outrages, state interests, how much do you have? what are you worth? Whether human or animal. High property taxes, if you don't sell . . . now you know. No knowing how it will end, how, when, with whom. A great district is breeding, transformed by memory. Sharing myths and legends, they cast it out to fortune, noises are heard coming from El Pedazo (Bronx Street), motionless from pain, trace and blood of the moon for the ditch of death.

[Chorus]
Time goes in a spiral
How many cities gather in the city?
Better not forget, memories
The certainty of what might have happened
To keep on
Able to record
The very essence of the centuries and their stroll
As I remember I can call on
The voice of those they sought to silence.

Translated from the Spanish by Julian Rios Acuña

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