

The daily three o'clock traffic jam.

The signs that the guy who ask for money next to the freeway makes

or next to the road that I take every morning at 5, and the pine trees,

how can you forget the beautiful pine trees, there is almost nothing besides pine trees.

I can see the downtown buildings and of course the Space Needle.

It's snowing.

The floor is slippery so everybody drives slowly.

The always crowded coffee spots.

It's cold, super cold.

I want to get home and make a fire or at least turn on the heat.

That is the way Seattle is.

Text by E., a *morra*

El Mezón is not a hospital, but has a large cabinet with medicines of different doses, and rigorous administration schedules. It's not a prison, and there are no sentences, but once the time to remain inside is determined, the only way to get out before your time is up is to escape. It's not a house, but it has bedrooms, a kitchen, a TV room, bathrooms and showers. It's not a school, but has a gym, a computer room, a director's office, and daily meeting schedules.

The border is an ideal space to speak about exception. Its inhabitants are Mexican citizens; nevertheless, our rights and obligations are different than those of the rest of the country; we have the fiscal benefits and the human limitations of a free zone. We are in the middle of a constant consciousness, perennial and absolute, of the limit; the city limit, the space of the transition—not only cultural and territorial but also poetic.

We came to El Mezón looking for a state of exception inside the State of Exception. We wanted to work with two factors: the written word and women. The rehabilitation center seemed to be the ideal space because of its condition of confinement and its hybridity. If our rights and obligations as border inhabitants are different than those of the rest of the country, the rights of an intern in a rehabilitation center are not only different but **are** annulled. Because of their addiction, they are forced to remain marginalized and silent. That is how we started working with the *morras* in a literary activism project that the micro-politics of the written word can produce.

The *morra* as a female entity has become indefinable to us. A *morra* can be a young and immature woman: “Don’t listen to her, she is a *morra*,” or a girlfriend: “She is my *morrita*,” or any woman: “That *morra*.” Luis Humberto Crosthwait writes: “I don’t know where the word *morra* comes from. It has existed since I have existed and probably even before that. Are its origins to be found in the word love? This may be; it’s a word that you use to call a girlfriend, or little kids: “*morra, morritos*”. The expression is common in downtown Tijuana, and every woman uses it to address another woman, either in the singular or the plural, like “*morras*.” The word *mujer* has another context, however, and *chica* is too reminiscent of Mexico City, *chava* even more so, while *ruca* is too violent, and *jaina* is only for girlfriends.

Usually *morra* is used to address a young female, but at El Mezón there are women between fourteen and sixty-six years old. Some of them have been in twenty-three rehabilitation centers, some others in thirty. But for the most part, this is the first time that they have been locked up. Some of them are mothers or grandmothers; office workers or gang members; students or deportees; Los Angeles *pochas* lost in Tijuana. There are also some who are “ungovernable,” almost always minors without addictions, but that land at the center because—unwilling to obey rules—their parents can’t control them. Beyond these differences, no one calls anyone else the boss, girl, madam, *doña*, or gal. The horizontality and equality of their relation starts with the word *morra*, which they use to identify each other, and continues with the rules that all must obey. There is uniformity even in the dark blue of their clothes and in their hairdos. They all wear their hair pulled back, which surprised Roberto Castillo, one of the writers invited to collaborate on this project. During his visit he told the *morras*: “I have seen you in pictures, I recognize some of your faces, but when I saw you, more than thinking that I was in a rehabilitation center I felt as if I was in a contemporary dance school because of your hairdos.”

The project consists in establishing contact through a literature workshop between the *morras* from the outside (i.e., us) and the *morras* from the inside (i.e., them). It also brings invited writers to present their work and the work of others. Every session ends with a writing exercise. At El Mezón there is a strict routine of confinement, work, and anti-addiction therapy. There are no recreational or cultural activities. We thought it important to offer an alternative activity to this otherwise rigid atmosphere. We have never been interested in offering a therapy workshop or to convert the *morras* into an object of study. Our intention has always been to share, know, understand, and learn. Observing it from the inside, we wanted to propose a critical view of the rehabilitation center. These objectives, which we had defined since the beginning of the workshop, have been our guide. With every session, the problem of rehabilitation has become increasingly complex. This has forced us to reconsider the possibilities of literature, our own limits as a collective, and finally the relevance of ceasing to be merely passive observers, of exploring the possibilities of our own artistic practice and discovering that through art, we can build new social and gender relations.

I breathe, I open my eyes,

after one month and eleven days, it is hard for me to believe that I am still here.

it hurts to accept this and it hurts even more not to know how long it's going to last.

Text by A., a *morra*

We have encountered several obstacles: for instance, the fact that some *morras* don't know how to write or read, or that some of them suffer from the irreversible effects of drug addiction; also the temporary nature of a transient group—there is always someone new and someone who has left; as well as the issue of internal regulations (men are denied entry, there is a rigorous control of pencils and pens which can only be used during the workshop sessions). Mainly, we have encountered a problem with power and who yields it. The manager of the center decides everything: what is to be eaten, said, who gets in or out, who is granted visits, who is deemed crazy, who needs more confinement. His voice wakes them in the morning, and he is the only one permitted to shout. Although the interns at El Mezón have a relatively decent standard of living, part of their treatment does include submission, silence, work, and obedience to every rule. This situation is repeated in different degrees in the innumerable rehabilitation centers throughout Tijuana. We, as a collective, receive similar treatment, and are conditioned by restrictions that constantly define the limits of our influence. This represents an expansion of control over all—inhabitants, visitors, and all those who in any way participate in the center. Nonetheless, up until now we have been able to negotiate everything. This situation invites us to think about this center in relation to Foucault's definition of the prison: "The prison has to be a microcosm of a perfect society where individuals are confined in their moral existence, but where their gatherings are performed under a strict hierarchical frame, without lateral relations, where communication can only happen in a vertical direction." (Discipline and Punish, 1976)

This non-lateral framing and the absence of non-hierarchical communication are the things that "El proyecto de las *morras*" has been able to break, offering a free space: sessions are not mandatory, *morras* aren't required to identify themselves as addicts, and can speak and express themselves verbally or through writing—whichever is more convenient. This has shaped a different space, where they can become familiar with the thoughts, feelings, experiences of others, where they can explore imaginary worlds through reading, where collectively they can create and share their own experiences.

I listen to the noise in the street. I see my colleague, she sees me. I don't know what to write, my mind is blank. I hear the dog barking and see everybody else writing, so I do the same. Sometimes I can't find meaning in any moment, but now it's the opposite: I find meaning; I feel my heart beating with everyone's heart. I hear my thoughts and write and write. I laugh with myself and think...I feel peace, and think...

Text by E., a *morra*

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