’Meditating memories is a political act.’

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(l-r) Ted Rivera, Jenny Rivera and Peg Rivera speak out in the aftermath of Julio’s murder. Photo courtesy of Jenny Rivera.

On July 2, 1990, at the height of the AIDS crisis, Julio Rivera, a 29-year-old gay man, was beaten to death by three armed men in Jackson Heights, Queens. Julio’s assassination rallied people from around the city and left a powerful legacy of activism in Queens and beyond. For the Queens Museum’s presentation of ALTERNATE ENDINGS--Visual AIDS’s 25th Anniversary of Day With(out) Art--media scholar and memory activist Julian de Mayo Rodriguez and journalist Luis Gallo revisited the tragic yet pivotal moment through an oral history practice. A series of short interviews were presented, reflecting on Julio and the legacy of the community-wide response, followed by a discussion about the construction of collective memory that included strategies for media literacy and community-based storytelling. It was a moving intervention into traditional media coverage, especially in the context of Queens and days after the ruling in the Eric Garner case.

Below, Visual AIDS interviews Julian and Luis about their oral history practice. On their tumblr they highlight their non-linear storytelling practice reflecting multiple voices to detail the narratives of Julio’s assassination.

Can you describe Julio Rivera’s story and what made his assassination such a charged and galvanizing moment?
We like to imagine a historical ecosystem. It’s the summer of 1990, it’s hot, humid, and New York is a violent place, particularly for men of color. The city is living through some of the worst years of the AIDS crisis, and the crack epidemic is lingering. Homophobic violence is also common and under-reported. People are living with that fear. The summer he was killed, Julio had moved from Manhattan to Jackson Heights, Queens, because he thought it was safer.

According to Jenny Rivera, Julio’s niece, Julio grew up in the Bronx and was raised in a working-class Puerto Rican family. He was openly gay, too. Jenny remembers him as a loving uncle who loved to dance and laugh.

Jackson Heights already had an established gay population even though it hadn’t mobilize politically. Queens Councilmember Michael Dromm, who was a gay rights activist then, told us that 37th Avenue was referred to as “vaseline alley.” A lot of great cruising was going on.

On the night of July 2, Julio was walking home when he was approached by three individuals carrying a

40-ounce bottle of beer, a hammer and a knife. They attacked him viciously; a stab wound punctured his lung and the blows of the hammer cracked his skull. Left for dead, Julio stumbled out onto the sidewalk looking for help. In what seems like a beautiful and bizarre coincidence, he was found bleeding profusely by his boyfriend, Alan, who was walking his dog. Julio later died of his wounds.

Julio's death is met with silence and neglect from mainstream media and the authorities. The police write it off as a young Latino man involved in a drug deal gone wrong. Jenny mourns her favorite uncle. Alan and the Riveras, distraught, determine to seek justice.

What ensues is a fascinating sequence of events that transforms a hateful crime into a dynamic mobilization of diverse sectors across the city. Alan and Jenny's parents, Peg and Ted Rivera--Julio's brother--engage with the Anti-Violence Project, Queer Nation and some of the membership of ACT UP NY, in developing both a media strategy and a grassroots campaign to pressure the NYPD and the city to investigate and hold the perpetrators accountable.

We learned that Julio's murder helped bring LGBT politics, already active in Manhattan, to Queens. Because of the murder, activists were able to galvanize the LGBT community in Queens. We also felt that activists harnessed the strategies and energy that was characteristic of AIDS activism, and translated it to community activism.

And this is where Julio's story, his last moments in this life, expand beyond their physical parameters and develop into a variety of simultaneous narratives. This is what our project attempts to explore. What eventually became an iconic tragedy and sensational news story of 1990 and 1991, is a wonderfully textured, networked and powerful statement of collective will and organizing. The lives of many people were transformed, legal precedents were set, annual rituals were sewn, and markers were left in the city's landscape that attest to the impact of this moment in the city's history.

How did the AIDS crisis impact the narrative and response surrounding Julio's death?
This played out in a few ways. The media hysteria around AIDS, and the stigma it unleashed, created an environment of fear and danger. Gay men were one of the populations held responsible for the epidemic, and violence against gay men was heightened during the AIDS crisis. The association of deviant, dirty, sickly bodies inspired the notion that streets were in need of cleansing, plagues in need of extermination. These myths were at play in Julio's murder. In Julio's case, race created an additional barrier for mainstream media, the police force, and the legal system to honor his life and do him justice.

AIDS activists by 1990 had been at war for enough years to understand that homophobia, racism and stigma were just as deadly as the virus itself. The same system that was intent on ignoring Julio's murder and absolving the hate behind the crime was responsible for the politics of silence that killed thousands of New Yorkers who contracted the virus.

Gay men of color were murdered frequently in New York. Julio was not the first, nor the last, unfortunately. But unlike so many others, his story made the headlines. And this took work.

As the indignation over Julio's death grew after authorities framed the incident as a drug deal gone wrong, a coalition of people come together--family members, friends, ACT UP NY, Queer Nation, the Anti Violence Project and people from the local community. Julio's murder brought all these forces together.

What approaches are you taking to telling the various perspectives involved in Julio's story? In what ways

do you see biases coming into play with the way Julio's story has been told, and how are you working to offset those biases, or perhaps embrace your own set of biases in the historical process?
We approached this project as a media literacy exercise and we tried to engage the audience to think about the media's portrayal of Julio's murder.

We presented two New York Times articles, "An Unlikely Martyr Focuses Gay Anger" and "The Symbols Spawned by a Killing," that capture the language, tone and form that mainstream media used at the time. Another interesting aspect of these articles is that they are some of the top entries one finds when searching for Julio Rivera on Google. In other words, Julio's memory on the web is commanded by these articles. What are the implications for people who are unfamiliar with Julio and the case?

One of the articles opens with: "[Julio] was the most improbable gay martyr--a Hispanic drug user from Queens who lived on the far fringes of gay society," the article follows by describing Julio as a "handsome and charming but deeply troubled man, a part-time bartender who supported a cocaine habit. He loved to dress well and 'play macho,' ...and had shared houses with a variety of lovers."

These representations not only stigmatize but also dehumanize Julio and the people and spaces he's associated with. Julio is depicted as a man lost because of drugs, his lust, and the color of his skin. One of the conclusions that was drawn from our group discussion was that it makes Julio expendable to the reader. The implication is that Julio's life did not matter.

Something we found interesting in our research was how the Latino community at large reacted to the case. While the AIDS crisis fueled the public's fear and loathing, Julio's ethnicity added another layer to the anger projected onto his dead body. Perhaps Julio was killed for being gay, but he could have just as easily been killed for being Latino, and that resonated with many kinds of people in Jackson Heights. This wasn't just the murder of a young gay man, it was also that of a young Latino man.

These types of nuances in the story would not have been possible to surface without a longer format model. While we only got around to interviewing Jenny Rivera and Councilmember Dromm, we were able to present both of their accounts of the story. A newspaper article or a podcast, wouldn't allow for the type of redundancy, slow rhythm and contradictions that we were looking for.

We got to learn how Jenny's and Dromm's recollections of the sequence of events agreed or differed from one another. This in itself becomes a part of the story we present. It was also important for us to recreate a memory of Julio's life told by those closest to him, and contrast their impressions with the shortsighted narratives offered by mainstream media. The experience, we hope, challenges the traditional news story's 'arc,' and the linear, chronological order of things we find so digestible.

We know that Julio's case was at first discarded by detectives and police, while activists demanded a reward to be put out for Julio's murder. The detective assigned to investigate the case was actually on leave and there were no clear intentions from the police to dig deeper into the case. It was because of the pressure from the community that authorities had to reignite the investigation.

There is consensus, however, from Jenny, Dromm, and Richard Shpuntoff, the filmmaker behind Julio from Jackson Heights, that as a result of Julio's death, the LGBT community in Queens became political and, in a way, LGBT folks became visible on an institutional front. For Dromm, it was a turning point in his career. Julio's case was one of the events that thrust him into politics: "Julio's death galvanized us all and then followed up by the Pride Parade, we began to see huge numbers of people willing to turn out and

say we are everywhere...we are here in Queens."

And while the ramifications of Julio's case--which became the first case tried as a hate crime against an LGBT person in the state of New York--were far-reaching, this remains for us a Queens story at its core.

It was significant for us to present the project at the Queens Museum. Most of the people in the audience, many whom were raised or currently live in the borough, did not know about Julio Rivera, not even in relation to the Queens Pride Parade.

What can we learn from the visual legacies and performative histories that are central to the AIDS activism and response to Julio's murder?
As we mentioned, the Queens Pride Parade and the corner named after Julio in Jackson Heights are the two most poignant visual legacies. Every year there is a moment of silence when the parade marshals reach the place where Julio was murdered.

While we think these are certainly beautiful imprints, it may be that their meanings become more evasive with time. The power of orality is that we interiorize stories, even if they're not our own. Let's celebrate our visual legacies and performative histories. But let's also talk (and listen) about Julio Rivera, Jesse Hernandez, Islan Nettles...

The parade also acknowledges and normalizes the public presence of LGBT people in Jackson Heights and reclaims space in the neighborhood. It's a visual legacy in creating a sense of belonging in the public sphere and serves as an open invitation to other LGBT people to celebrate themselves in the neighborhood.

How do you envision Julio's story will impact contemporary considerations of stigma, racism and homophobia?
We hope it can elicit a discussion on how these forces are at play today. We first presented The Assassination of Julio Rivera days following the verdict that freed the cops that killed Eric Garner. It was at the back of our minds as we organized the piece. For one, the way that mainstream media packages our stories is still problematic. And our fight for justice and safety, against the police and judicial system is ongoing. And the wins, as much as the losses, need to be assessed and monitored. Are the institutional changes that were fought for following Julio's murder working? Is anti-hate-crime legislation relevant to social justice today? Any changes or strategies of change, rather, are better formed when knowing how they came out about in the first place.

One could have grown up in Jackson Heights and walked by the intersection of 78th Street and 37th Avenue and never really questioned who that was. You could have attended the Queens Pride Parade and never really wondered why there's a moment of silence every year, in front of the school where Julio was assassinated.

What plans do you have for your account of Julio's story, as well as your unique process for bringing these stories to the light?
One of the challenges is ensuring that our work is easily accessible. While we conceived it as an interactive real-life exercise, we're interested in making the material public. Trying to find a platform that would allow us to play with temporality and the different elements in the piece, which include images, audio clips, pulled quotes and news articles, was a challenge. But when in doubt, choose tumblr. We're not quite sure it's the best fit, but it's easy to navigate and has kind of a disorderly, fleeting appeal that

evokes some of the characteristics of our approach, like multiple voices and non-linear storytelling.

As for the process, I'm (Julian) flirting with the notion of "memory activism," which is inspired by the belief that mediating memories is a political act. In some cases it can be an intervention, in other case it's more of an exercise. Our piece for Julio may be more of the latter, but I'm trying to carve out some time to work on a series of stories about the ongoing AIDS crisis in the Latino communities of New York, in collaboration with activists leading the response. A lot of this has been motivated by research and friendships I've made with surviving members of the Latino Caucus of ACT UP NY. It was through my interviews with them, that I learned of Julio and his legacy.

This project made me (Luis) think a lot about the role of community storytelling in activating a collective memory. When we activate collective memories we are not just honoring or remembering a new past, but enabling each other to change the way we see the current material world and re-imagine future possibilities.

We think that in blurring the line of a single narrative or historical record, it encourages us to reconsider the binary of life and death. As Jenny attested, Julio's spirit is powerful and continues to bring us together.

Julian de Mayo is a media scholar and artist based in Brooklyn, New York. His work engages with cross-disciplinary and non-linear mediations of collective memory. Currently, his research is focused on the mediations of trauma and genocide in Guatemalan contemporary art, and the legacy of the ongoing AIDS crisis in Latino communities. He holds a bachelor's degree in geography and Latin American studies from Simon Fraser University, and is a master's candidate in media studies at The New School.

Luis Gallo is a Colombian-born journalist. He has reported on urban development in Turkey, produced radio stories on LGBTQ youth in Colombia and recorded audio for animated shorts. He captures stories for StoryCorps, a national oral history and radio project. He holds a bachelor's degree in geography from the University of Washington and is currently completing a master's in urban planning at Hunter College. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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