



Latin Elephant: On language, translations and connections in an urban ethnic migrant movement

Patria Román Velázquez

Natalia Pérez

Santiago Peluffo Soneyra

Sophie Rebecca Wall

Latin Elephant

in conversation with

Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia

Camila Cociña

Radical Housing Journal

Latin Elephant (LE) is a charity that promotes alternative and innovative ways of engaging and incorporating migrant and ethnic groups in processes of urban change in London. **Patria Román Velázquez** is LE Founder and Chair of Trustees; **Natalia Pérez** and **Santiago Peluffo Soneyra** are LE Co-Directors, and **Sophie Rebecca Wall** is LE Project Coordinator. **Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia** and **Camila Cociña** are members of RHJ. Website: <https://latinelephant.org>. Contact: info@latinelephant.org

Abstract

Latin Elephant is a London-based charity that works with migrant and ethnic groups in processes of urban change, and which has had a critical role in articulating the voices of traders threatened by displacement in the context of the Elephant and Castle redevelopment plans over the last decade. In this *Lexicon Conversation*, members of Latin Elephant discuss with RHJ the different ways in which language, vocabularies, solidarity, memory and translation have played out in their work in South London, both in relation to the use of English vis-a-vis other native languages, but also in terms of the technical language of planning in relation to intersectional urban struggles on the ground.

Keywords

Ethnic migrant groups, London, urban development, translation, Lexicons of housing struggle.

1. Introduction: How do we translate that?

The six of us met for a slow, post-lunch conversation at a bustling Aroma de Café, a Colombian eatery serving fresh food located in the open-plan centre of Tiendas Del Sur. The latter is one of the remaining Latin American-run shopping centres of Elephant and Castle in South London. We sat around a set of rectangular tables, with three recording

machines to try to capture the sound amidst the business around us. After some informal introductions and hellos, a conversation ensued around the open topic of how translation was conceptualised and managed for and by Latin Elephant:

Patria: Issues of translation are (also) about translating issues within and *between* Spanish, when we have different ways of saying things depending on where we are from. Planning in Spanish is *planificación*, but others call it *planeación*, or *planeamiento*, so we need to decide how we want to say things.

Santiago: This is very interesting because it relates to how we do our work. When producing flyers with translated information, I remember many times asking Natalia, who is from Colombia as the majority of Latin Americans in the area, if she says, for example, *planificación* or *planeamiento*... To find out which is the term that you would relate to the easiest, because in the end this is our audience, right? So translating is an interesting exercise that has an impact. Because it is not that people won't understand *planificación*, but still we know that the most straightforward language that we can put there, the closest to these people we are.

Natalia: Or the question of words that have no single translation. Gentrification, for example, is not a word that exists as such in Spanish. Someone once told me it wasn't *gentrificación*, but rather *aburguesamiento*.

Patria: Resilience is another term, *resiliencia*? To me sounds really odd, and I don't think there is a word that captures what I think resilience does...

Camila: That's very interesting. I feel like sometimes academics just translate them, and you can find lots of academic articles that will use *resiliencia*, even though for most people might not necessarily have the more colloquial meaning it has in English. So, it is not just about translating literal terms, but about finding meaningful words that actually will make sense to most people.

Santiago: Many times, Sophie is Sophia, *pero con ph*.

Sophie: I am happy to switch between the two. I've got two identities.

Natalia: And many times, I am Nathaly. *Lo pronuncian mal pero no lo erran por lo menos*.

Patria: And I am Patria, or Patricia. People would sometimes ask, "is there a typo or that's your name?"

2. Lenguaje inclusivo?

Natalia: There are also specific questions when you choose a language in our work. For instance, in Spanish, there is the question of inclusive language. Are we following the traditional RAE approach, or are we using *language inclusivo*?

Sophie: Things about inclusive language that you don't even have to think about in English, you take for granted. Sometimes this is the case, but rarely in comparison to Spanish.

Natalia: But thinking about the planning context, it is not always inclusive. If you go to a planning meeting, or a planning development and control committee, there is a very sexist language as well sometimes, when they refer to the Chairman of the meeting. The Chairman, and it could be a woman chairing, but people in their subconscious just have got this word attached to them. Why don't they use the neutrals, chairperson, or chair? In planning, it happens a lot.

Meli: Such a male dominated environment as well, traditionally, there is very little questioning.

Patria: This is important to us, as an organisation, that works with inclusivity, how do we make that distinction? We are all very aware of that. I remember at the very beginning when we made an exhibition, and we used the 'x' in *Latinx*, there was a huge debate about whether we should use it or not. Some people within the group said, 'that doesn't mean anything'!

Santiago: For instance, in terms of visibility, the Arts Council formally recognises now "Latin Americans" as a category for performers, audiences, etc, in their application forms. I was part of this discussion, and there was this question of whether to use "Latinx" or "Latin American". But then, in this instance, when you're just seeking the minimum recognition internally, we can compromise and say 'okay, luckily English is inclusive. So Latin Americans, anyone can be part of it, then we can discuss whether you're black Latin American, Indigenous Latin American, and so on.'

So, the debate ended in the sense that we said, 'Well, as the Arts Council *will* cover the box, let's leave the Latinx and so many others for maybe later, like next year or whenever, but let's get the recognition first.' But this is a debate in different circles, within Latin Americans, not just in the charity sector.

Santiago: For instance, specifically we use a lot the word *Traders*. You don't need to think here about being inclusive or not inclusive.

Patria: I try to eliminate the article sometimes, like *comerciantes* rather than *los* or *las comerciantes*.

Santiago: I tend to use English terms- not just at work- it saves me time. Even though *Comerciantes* is gender-neutral in Spanish, other words are not... for instance I say, "my friends", so I don't need to say *amigos*, *amigues*, *amigas*...

Camila: This is very interesting because on the one hand using the English neutral means avoiding an effort, and therefore avoiding the quite strong statement that involves using inclusive language in Spanish. Somehow when you use the neutral in English, because it's the 'by default' in most cases in a more colloquial conversation, it's like the problem disappears. But the problem of sexism still exists, as Natalia was saying. It's interesting to think to what extent sometimes using a language that makes something easier, might render invisible a particular struggle, in this case, about gender

Meli: It is interesting because there's a kind of politics to that easiness. And I get you are making a choice in doing that and a very conscious one, that allows not addressing that

in a particular moment. Like in every struggle, you have to make these choices, about what makes sense in what context and why.

Camila: Connected to this, the anecdote you shared about when you first presented the use of 'Latinx' shows that even within the Latin Community there might be some resistance. That speaks about diversity *within* certain communities that sometimes are treated as homogenous, 'Ah, there are Latinos in London'. And then, you still might have anti-sexist struggles to fight within that community.

Natalia: And racial!

Meli: And class!

Camila: I wonder if language plays a role in those intersections as well, in the way you work with them.

Santiago: It does, it does in many ways. I was thinking quickly how amongst the community of traders there are references to the colour of the skin of someone else, or their nationality. I am trying not to generalise, but there are a huge group of people that some Latin American traders will refer to, for instance, 'the Egyptian'; not as an insult, as they like it as well. But for the sake of getting together around an objective you let go something like this, because it's not a battle that, at least to me, is the most relevant when you are fighting the development.

Meli: I wonder if, on the back of Black Lives Matter movement, did that shift anything? Did that impact conversations, discussions around language, or was it there still a resistance? Being such a visible thing that happened here in London, I know it has certainly entered academia in a way that it hadn't been there before. It has also entered some other housing environments that I do research in. There is a kind of consciousness and a willingness to use certain language that was not there before, but very much in English. Have you noticed a shift at all?

Sophie: It is not something that has ever cropped up, but actually around the time I began to communicate with traders and build relationships was not long before the Black Lives Matter movement happened. And maybe it's because the way we approach things is quite un-politicized in a way –I mean, political in its nature, but not in the approach– that perhaps it was like passing conversations that we would have, but never really came to the forefront. While at the same time, in my personal life, there were so many conversations going on around that.

Natalia: I personally feel that there are a lot of conversations that we need to have... It is a tricky topic, because you sometimes find yourself in conversations with traders that... well, with clear racism basically. Maybe the way the community or the neighbourhood was described 30, 40 years ago, and how did they come to the area, and they helped build the area that it is... They might reflect on historical moments where there was more tension in the area. And it was attributed to specific ethnic groups, even within the Latin American community. And I, for me, it's very uncomfortable. I think we need to have those conversations and we cannot be bystanders, and just let it pass. I think we do have a

responsibility in terms of, not only about supporting the Black Lives Matter movement for example, but about being upstanders as well, and we need to call up situations that are not right.

And it makes me think about my past as well, when I was being brought up in Colombia, and there was racism in the context in which I was growing up all the time. The way people describe indigenous communities, it was not right. And of course, we may have equality legislation and diversity legislation but sometimes comments come out and they are questionable.

Patria: And we have been the target of racist attacks, not physical attacks, but verbal attacks in social media, tweets... When we were doing our fundraising there was someone who posted things; our YouTube channel sometimes has comments like “oh these Latin turds are having children” or “they use our benefits”. Even once I got really scared because I received at the very initial stage an email to my university account insulting me. We were launching the initiative of the Latin Quarter, and the message said things like “what is it that you're doing? you are segregationist”... And it was scary. When we were doing the fundraising event, we also received from someone in social media threatening us: “we know what you are going to do, we can send people”, something in this language. So we were extra cautious. And there is a lot of racism towards the organisation per se, I don't think it is towards us, but what we symbolise, the stereotypes about Latin, or “you are taking our spaces”...

Natalia: I think it is important to say that as an organisation, when it comes to equality and diversity, I think we have been quite self-reflective, and we do question whether we and our board are representing the community that we serve. Do we have enough diversity? Is there a bias towards the Latin American community? Should we be having more representation from other ethnic groups at board level or within the workforce? Which I think is healthy because then we can, going forward, think about proactive steps in terms of equality and diversity; and go beyond just having, of course, the policy and practices in place, but going that extra mile to make a very meaningful process. That's representation.

Patria: It's interesting what you say about diversity. Even though our constitution says that we must be at least 60 percent Latin American in our board, at the moment because we are only four in the board, it is only 50/50. When we set it up, partly because of the politics of Latin American charities at the time, there was a lot of care in making sure to acknowledge that “we are working for our communities, and our communities have to be represented in the board as a majority”, so that's why that was there. But we need to think about that...

I've been called to other boards, partly because of what I represent. Sometimes I feel that I could be in the board, but if they let me rot there then, what's the point? Representation has to come with action, so we do the thing on the ground. Our board is also quite diverse. Initially we were all women, but now we have one man, we have me (from Puerto Rico), someone from Chile, one English and one Irish... so it is diverse. What is not diverse is that we are all academics.

3. Technical 'neutralities'?

Camila: Latin Elephant is also acting almost as a translator of legal, technical and planning processes, as a translator of languages, and a translator between the language of a university, a developer, a council, a resident... You work always articulating and playing something like a 'broker' role. In the whole process of the redevelopment of Heygate and the shopping mall, you have been dealing with planning and housing, in an extremely legalistic and technical universe. I wonder if the fact that there has been any particular challenge in those moments of translation. That translation is in many layers, both institutional, idiomatic, and also liking of technical and the colloquial.

Patria: I must make a point, that none of us are planners or lawyers, and we had to learn a lot.

Santiago: We work with lawyers, with architects. People ask a lot if we have those professional backgrounds, because we are supposed to be the organisation that can help if you have a planning issue, and eventually we will provide the assistance, but we don't!

Patria: At the very beginning, the first objection we made to the Elephant and Castle redevelopment, came from the heart. I went to a meeting with Jerry, and I think with Richard Lee, I have read the application, have analyzed it, and I said, "these are my asks." They were like 13 asks. If we look at that particular objection that we did at the very beginning, and it was not like Southwark Law Center helped us understand what we needed to do. It was from the heart. We just put them like that. The next thing I heard was a mediator from the developer, more or less telling me "come on, you really don't want all of this; why do you need all these documents in Spanish? You can take that off. You can speak English." But this is not for me, I am not writing this for me! So it is those languages that you need to sort of navigate. Later on, we started forming alliances, with Southwark Law Centre, with BWC, lawyers, people from Kings, legal firms that have helped us with everything. Also, working with architects has really helped us transcend a language that as an organisation we don't have as an expertise. In a way, we know what the issues are but not to translate that into visual language... The elephant petit mapping, for instance, was wonderful, to produce evidence that we couldn't have done, and represented in that way.

Santiago: There are huge reading comprehension skills that it requested. Because it's not just the jargon, but it's the way it is drafted so that very few people can understand it. There is some deliberate vagueness in certain terms that will give at the end leverage to the developer to manoeuvre. Right? There are specific things that we had to literally object to and cross out; I remember a few objections that were about rather than saying, 'in priority to these local businesses' should say 'exclusively'. Big difference, because 'priority' is just basically about offering a three-week priority, and then getting away. Then you go, and put on some Starbucks. Ultimately, all these things that are about just one, two terms that could change some phase in the area.

Natalia: Additionally, developers use a 'viability assessment' for all their applications. They have someone 'independent' do a viability assessment for them. But of course, they are

not really independent, because they've been commissioned by the developer to carry out the report, which is probably going to be biased towards their own proposal. So, ideally, we should be thinking about a viability assessment from an independent, scrutinized source, maybe even from the community. The local authority might also have a viability assessment to compare against the one they have, but there is an interest as well for them, because of the resources coming from the social infrastructure Section 106. Ideally then, as a community of grassroots activists, asking for some transparency in terms of that process, we should be able to have our viability assessment.

Sophie: Because it is always the trump card, on their part. They always try to play it, like "yes, good question, BUT, there is the viability assessment". And there is kind of a game over, 'ok, but what's next?' Even understanding... Still I probably don't fully understand how a viability assessment works...

Patria: As if it is designed for that incomprehension...

Meli: And it is probably why so many groups are pushing to try to generate other kinds of assessments, social value assessments, to build in other forms of viabilities that are not so strictly, technically economic.

Camila: And it is also about what Natalia was just saying, about contesting that supposed 'neutrality' of certain knowledges over others. Because there is no such a thing as "a neutral assessment". There is never going to be a neutral assessment. Neutral for whom? For the money? That is not neutral; that is a very clear bias! You probably need to have as many assessments as possible to make sure that they represent the actual diversity.

Natalia: They even came with an 'equality impact' assessment, but it was an assessment that was not representative of the community where the development is. The assessment had a representation of Latin Americans of something like 3%!

Patria: It wasn't representative of the actual population, which is one of the things that should have happened. Equality was removed from the very design of the assessment.

Natalia: You need to be able to scrutinize, and that is tricky for us. The 'viability assessment' is an extra layer. It is all about the challenge of demystifying the whole planning process, because, within the system, there are layers of accessibility.

4. Authentic representations?

Meli: You mentioned those early objections that came from the heart, and the journey of learning with others around different kinds of language and evidence. When you submit evidence, is Spanish present in the evidence? Is that something that is taken away because others react to it condescendingly in some way? Or is it kept in because it provides something authentic?

Patria: Well, about gathering evidence, one of the things that we did in order to get traders involved in the planning process was demystifying the planning process with the Southwark Law Centre, through bilingual workshops.

Santiago: There were a few, I remember *Gente de los Arcos* in that workshop, that put their objections in Spanish. The idea of that workshop was that by the end of it, participants would have some basic knowledge of what are ‘planning grounds’ of which you can make objections and submit an application. At the end we had over 10 objections, which was incredible. Because the same people who would benefit from that scheme and would eventually move into the Castle Square relocation site, were putting direct inputs.

I think that at least a few of those objections were in Spanish. But then our own Latin Elephants official objections, from those early ones – from the heart to the last ones – were all in English. That is obviously the language in which they have to be submitted. Then, the representation of objectors at planning committees, or in Southwark Council, is done in English, whether that is your first or your second language. We had a few traders there, both Latin American and non-Latin American, making representation, which was interesting because you can see there is an imbalance of power there, right? But nevertheless, we got a few gains on that scheme in particular, and it was done through that bilingual workshop and with traders representing what *they* felt was being lost and needed to be compensated for in the future phase.

Patria: There was also a shift from not wanting to attend meetings, and not wanting to be present in those, to suddenly representing themselves. That is hard work on the ground, and all of these things helped. But beyond this more official sort of evidence that we gathered for the objections for the planning processes, we also gathered a lot of professional evidence through the mapping, but also different evidence about what the area means to people and how they use it. There was a lecturer for instance who did "Recorriendo Elephant" and that's also presented as our evidence. The videos that we did were part of that too. What is London's Latin Quarter? What is this thing that people are calling now, London's Latin Quarter?

So we did a workshop for gathering evidence that was less planning-centred and more about people, what the area means, and what the loss will mean for these people. To denounce that this is not just a ‘go through area’, as some of the developers were describing it initially. I suppose there have been different stages and moments: the very beginning was much more emotional, and later on it became much more professionalised and legal. And we have done it without losing that connection to working with people on the ground, which I think is really good, so they have been there in the planning committees representing themselves. I think that is an organisational development for the traders as well, which is a great achievement. We have helped create a community here that feels much more, I wouldn't like to say the word empowered, but feels much more involved with the process and has ownership of that process.

Something that Natalia did very well at the very beginning, when we started, is that she insisted that at least one of the traders should be in that meeting, where developers, Council, the University College of Communication, everyone was going to be. And one trader felt really intimidated, and said no, this is not my environment... and we said you come, you come. Until the very last minute Natalia was there convincing this person. And it was the best meeting we had ever, because, you know, no one can speak for them but

themselves. And that is something that I think Latin Elephant has done really well, negotiating the spaces with the government, negotiating spaces with developers, and community groups.

5. Who counts?

Patria: Our objectives, in our constitution as Latin Elephant set up by the Charity Commission, mention that we are an organisation for *migrant ethnic groups*. In particular *Latin Americans*. There is always a sort of confusion about who we work with. In a way, our name draws on the fact that initially, when I started Latin Elephant, it was just going to be a blog when I left academia; and as we were thinking of the name, 'Latin Elephant and Castle' felt too long, so we just used Latin Elephant. Initially, it was only Latin Americans, and then many of the other traders began to say, 'can we start coming to your meetings? Can we be in there?' And then I went back to academia, and that's when they all decided to come and said, 'Let's get everyone incorporated, because the issues we are dealing with are affecting everyone.'

Santiago: Because the charity is called Latin Elephant, we come across people that think that we just represent Latin Americans. Around 2017-18, there was still some resistance among some traders that thought that we were focusing more on a certain group. I mean, our motto as a charity does say that we care in particular about Latin Americans, but we made this decision, at the very crucial time when all of the traders were being affected the same, to give the same amount of time, regardless of the origin. And the only way you can prove this is by action, by giving someone that is a Latin American 45 minutes, and to someone who is not the same 45 minutes.

Natalia: I think a question for us, thinking about the future strategy as well, is if we might change the name, to have a more inclusive representation of the work we do.

Patria: I thought of 'migrant urbanism', because I am really interested in that aspect, around the world, not just here.

Santiago: But at the same time, there is an element of branding, in my view at least, that is very strong. And it has earned the respect of non-Latin Americans in the area and beyond. I guess it is a balance between what you built, and what you project to someone who sees the name for the first time.

Sophie: Because there is no confusion within the local community, it is clear what it is about, that it is for everyone; but as you said, it is more about from the outside.

Patria: I like using the term 'migrant and ethnic'; I know there is a lot of debates about 'minorities', BAME, *minoritised*, and what concepts to use, but I feel migrant and ethnic captures most of what we want to address, and that's how we describe ourselves, migrant and ethnic businesses, migrant and ethnic groups. I always use those words, because I feel it captures the migrant who doesn't necessarily consider themselves ethnic, and the ethnic person who doesn't necessarily consider themselves a migrant.

Meli: This makes me think of the status of Latin Americans here as migrants, vis-a-vis other migrant groups. You have talked about connections and solidarities, or potential solidarities, with other migrant ethnic groups; links that could or should be made. As a Latina here, I have always felt, in comparison to the reality of Latinos in the United States, that it's a minority migrant group, vis-a-vis other much more politically powerful and numbers-wise relevant migrant groups. I wonder if that kind of status might matter to the politics of it all. Is there a sense that you are fighting for a space of recognition? And maybe coming back to language, perhaps forging solidarities with other groups, you might then lose that minority power that you have as a group?

Santiago: One topic that has been haunting us, and anyone that works in the charity sector with Latin American communities, is about the battle for visibility and recognition. A Coalition was born primarily to get 'Latin American' as a formal ethnic category in the UK, ideally nationwide. So far, it is four boroughs, the GLA and the Arts Council that we mentioned. The question that we have seen the last couple of years, was, 'Why have we missed the 2020 census? Why are we going to be left out again? What else does it take for us to be recognized in the national service statistic?' I think this will be the case until the day that box is nationwide. But answering your question, it is very important because we are definitely more than the most accurate figure around, that is 250,000; because the tendency only went up in terms of people who came from Spain, and things didn't get better in Spain. Maybe that figure could be half a million, and it is a very different debate when you are half a million, rather than a quarter of a million.

So it is very difficult to start to address this without having a notion of 'how many'. We keep quoting a report that is already 10 years old, which is a massively great report. But even today you get articles from *the Guardian*, and they still quote that 2011 report. Then, for us, it is twice as tricky because we lost the shopping centre, a symbolic and very crucial loss for the Latin American Communities. Although we know that a lot of people that regularly went to the shopping centre and the traders are not all from a Latin American origin. But still, it symbolized a lot. You put that together with the fact that we don't have the statistics, and that we are going to miss out on the census, and it looks like we are losing power as a community. I don't think we see it that way, because we are on the ground and know what is really going on, but on a bigger scale we need at least to know how many we are, and therefore, the campaign for the recognition.

Natalia: There is also a bit of competition, isn't it? Not competition, but there are activists in the community instigating a parallel campaign of recognition that goes beyond Latin Americans, to include all Spanish and Portuguese speaking groups into that recognition.

Patria: The Iberoamerican versus the Latin American. In my book I write a reflection about these two campaigns: what does it mean to be Latin American within what is happening in London, and what does it mean to be Iberoamerican. For me, this invocation to the Iberoamerican is to the empire's history and our connection to Europe. While Latin American is much more politicized, it is about the Bolivarean dream of the liberation of states, and that is played out on those two labels. So whether you want to be part of one or the other depends on where, politically you stand. That's how I see it, but not everyone

sees it as I do, and it becomes perhaps more fluid on the ground. There are those sort of solidarities around the Latin American recognition campaign, and frictions with the Iberoamerican identity as well.

6. Where can we hook?

Patria: Working on our exhibition and the Afro-Caribbean community, I think we have forged solidarities with other gentrification struggles that are really important. And to me that that has been also a way of branching out to other struggles similar to ours. Because it is not only Latin Americans who are losing their spaces, this is happening across London, it is happening in housing. This is something that really helped the way in which we develop the campaign, and the sort of Coalition of groups around “up the Elephant”. All the groups that were part of that, we all represented different interests in the area. We all have different strengths.

I don't know how to translate this, but *‘cada cual utilizaba como un gancho, y utilizaba los recursos que cada organización tenía como una cuestión estratégica’*... We played to our strengths and we used it as a 'gancho', or a hook. There is no easy way of translating this.

Others needed the Latin American Communities because we were a strong partner here. Traders never were part, or very rarely part of gentrification struggles. And what we did really well was to bring the housing and trader struggles together.

Santiago: Also because of the size of the development. It is difficult to find a development that covers as many areas and populations affected as this one: there is the housing, the traders, the university, the entertainment venue, the bingo and the bowling alley... and I could go on and on. So there was no way to address it without a Coalition of different people with different strengths.

Patria: For example, we knew that the owner of the bingo hall and the bowling alley was a strong actor; if he decided to side with the developers, that was it. And he went with us and we did a protest where there was a bingo outside the council, as a symbolic thing, and he was there. Eventually he got his deal, and left. But it was how we used those things to our advantage at a particular moment. So, the protest and the activism around Elephant and Castle always gravitated to 'where can we hook', what is the thing that will hook us. And we had a very consistent message. We had that as a focus. And any tension or differences that might appear, if anything, we united. It was a real learning experience.

Santiago: Going back to the language issues, it is really interesting how we worked together. For instance, Jerry who led the 35% campaign, a longtime activist who used to live in Heygate, was the person who would in the first instance 'translate' the jargon for us. And we would in turn go to the traders and translate it into an even more simple language, but also then into Spanish. So there are all these layers that have to do, not only with planning, but also with housing.

Generally, someone who is a trader doesn't have to care whether eventually people around here get 116 or 55 social rented houses, because obviously his or her family depends on

the income, whether he keeps the shop or not. But strategically, you need to pursue and seduce this person, *en términos de militancia*, to understand that without tackling the housing issues, all go together, right? The politics of it all was in between; obviously Jerry is an outspoken person and he is very well respected. But also some people as traders will see it as “oh, *estos izquierdosos*, they are leftists just blocking the road”. So, for us, it was very difficult to be there in between, trying to keep everyone in the same boat. Obviously, you have very different interests, and people would perceive these other parts of the campaign as 'radical ones'. In between, having people from the developer putting *shit* into their ear, saying how we, who were respected, partnered with these people that were blocking roads. This was all very, very difficult. And I think language here was crucial, not only in terms of communicating with the beneficiaries but also to the media as well. How to keep a very consistent narrative: we have different ways of approaching things within the different groups, right, but somehow, it worked.

Patria: Alliances are very important to deal with these issues that Santiago is mentioning. At the very beginning Latin Elephant was a new organisation that no one knew; we could have gone and sided with the developer, the council or our beneficiaries. And I never doubted which was our focus, but we were sometimes being told by government officials, or people in the council, or by the developers, ‘I don't know where to place you yet. We don't know. We are not sure’. And I would sit on a board with Delancey, and they would be all “oh yes, we do want a Latin quarter, we will support a Latin quarter”, and I'm there wondering if what they want is the marketing for it, right? It is about how we negotiate those spaces with the developers and others. Some stakeholders would meet with me, but they would say to me that they didn't want ‘so and so’ there; and I would bring my people with me, because that person can talk about their experiences in their own ways better than I can ever do.

Meli: And do you feel that in that process and struggles there are certain terms that have been appropriated by others? When things become more powerful, like your movement, the language can be co-opted or appropriated by others, do you feel that?

Patria: The area is recognised sometimes as “Latin Elephant” rather than Elephant and Castle, which happens many times but is not a problem.

Santiago: Sure, as well as the idea of ‘Elephant Latino’, the Latin character of the area, which also exists as a term.

Patria: But something else that I feel Latin Elephant has done is bringing ethnicity into the planning agenda. And of course there are other groups that have taken hold of it, or that have put us in a case study, putting themselves as the great umbrella, and within this, we are only the case study. That has happened to us, and they might get scholarships or grants because suddenly they are working with ethnicity, race, which continue to be the focus of our work and we continue giving lessons, we are recognised. This is not necessarily a concern, but what I always say is “*espérate*, do you just want my contacts for you to go ahead and do it? What are we gaining from this? So you gain from the fact that we put this on the agenda, so let's work together.” With the Planning Group this is happening,

with many others as well. Also from the very beginning, we work together with Just Space which is a great organisation, I think we learn from that a lot.

So this is not about protagonism, it is about the cause, but it is a learning curve. I think, being an academic, you are very jealous at the beginning, but you relax a bit more over time. And I think being in an organisation like Latin Elephant, with a great team of people, it just teaches you, everyone who comes and volunteers teaches you: this is what we are about. So let's do things together, but understanding what we gain as well, and how we can actually work collaboratively. I'm always stressing that. To keep the collaboration spirit, because all organisations are struggling for funding. We're all trying to do our best. And you learn that collaboration is good and works with people who have that mentality as well.

7. Translating home

Meli: Coming back to housing and home, it struck me how you were describing very beautifully, how overtime in your campaign you found a way of representing this community and its complexity, officially, unofficially, through different voices, different visual representations... *Sonaba como un collage*, you know, something complex, which it is, of course. It sounds like your work is a lot about translating to many others, something about how this is home to many people in different ways. Like you are translating what that means to various congregations and groups, traders, business owners of different kinds, residents, etc.; translating that feeling officially and unofficially. So, as an open reflection, what do you think is that home? Is it connected to something like a feeling of what home might be for migrant communities that are at home and not at home? Because we migrants are all in that kind of space...

Sophie: I think I only understood the shopping centre on a different level once I had been to Colombia, and Colombia had been my home. And it is the same with friends I have, people who are drawn to it have a connection with Colombia especially, just because that happens to be in the people I know. And then also there is a whole different group of people who may have a childhood connection, like they would go with their grandma, or they would hang out here after school. I guess it's like the different ways that it's meaningful to people. And I think the shopping centre over the many years of existence was like that in different ways for different people. But you are right, it's different for people who haven't had that experience, just coming at it as a commuter who's just passing through.

When I was younger, it was kind of popular around people in the Southeast to say, "oh, it's a shit hole, isn't it? It's really rundown." And people would agree without even going inside, or thinking about it. And yeah, it did feel like an act of translation to bring people into that circle, to see it from this perspective, understand it this way. Just walk through, have a chat with a couple of people, and it's not hard as soon as you cross that barrier to understand that. I think people are just living fast-paced. If you're from the area you're

drawn in without even trying, it's part of your history; but if you're just passing through you need that kind of connection to a translator, I suppose, maybe to introduce you.

Patria: I remember we organised some tours once, and that was interesting, what you said, because it was an act of translation. And there were some people who lived in these new towers, and they said, “oh, I never came before, when I saw that you've done this tour, I said this is my opportunity to come in. I would have never dared to come into the shopping centre.” I never reflected on that as a translation sort of activity. But in a way it is, we're translating spaces for people, giving them access to a world they otherwise don't venture into.

Natalia: I think from my experience as well, I would definitely think our work is part of that support and translating systems. If you are a new migrant, understanding London, understanding how to go about, how to find secure stable accommodation, what are your rights, how to access a National Insurance number; if I don't speak English, where can I go? Okay, Latin Elephant, they speak Spanish, they are people from my country. Maybe you are a bit nostalgic about the music, you can talk to people, may even come across people from your region, your own area. If you're hungry and you want the traditional grandmother soup, you will find it there. That reminds you of home, of your childhood, of nostalgic music, of coming together, dancing. There is a happy spirit in the area. I feel it. You come here and people have an ability to laugh and to enjoy life despite its challenges. I'm not saying it doesn't happen in another context, but I think Latin Americans have more of a disposition to be more sort of extroverts.

And then also judging from my experiences as a mother. I'm a first-generation, I migrated here, and I've got a second-generation child. For me, it's important that she is exposed to her heritage. What is her Latin American culture? The language, the food, the people, celebrations as well, not only of Colombia, but the whole region; and celebrating diversity, equality and all of us. I've got little family here, I've got my sister in France, I've got the Latin Elephant family, but in terms of my direct family, and contact that she may have as she grows older here in London, I think it is an important space to have that sense of community.

Sophie: I was going to say that it feels like extended family. Like if we were here in the shopping centre before it shut, you would drop your daughter there, and just everyone knew her there, and she felt comfortable.

Natalia: Yeah, last time we came, we were doing the turn of the statue. And she was really happy to stay there, and they treated her like a granddaughter. And then when she left, she was being hugged and kissed. I posted a video of “My Elephant Story” with her, and she has a lovely description of what the area is, and what she likes about it. That will be something for her to look at in the years to come, which will be a good reference point, I think.

Patria: And also how to adapt to change... I came last Saturday, with my son who is now 14. We used to come to eat here, what you said about the soup from the *abuela*. He knew that the shopping centre was gone, so he wanted to go around and see. So we went

around, and then he was talking back to me and said, “well, I suppose change is good, it was about to happen, you need things to be mobile”... I suppose we never opposed change, it is just about change for whom, by whom, and who is benefiting. But it is interesting to see, because obviously they have had different experiences, and for us the struggle means something, and I am never quite sure what they make of it.

About the participants

Patria Roman is founder and Chair of Trustees of Latin Elephant. Patria is a Senior Lecturer in Culture, Media and Creative Industries in King's College London. She is the author of *The making of Latin London: Salsa music, place and identity* (2017, Routledge) and co-author of *Narratives of migration, relocation and belonging: Latin Americans in London* (2020, Palgrave). Contact: patria@latinelephant.org

Natalia Pérez is Latin Elephant co-director. She has over thirteen years experience in the voluntary sector. She has been involved in the operational and strategic development of large and small frontline organisations including Latin American and other Migrant and Ethnic led initiatives. Natalia has also been part of an infrastructure organisation providing capacity building and training in different aspects of running and resourcing services. Contact: natalia@latinelephant.org.

Santiago Peluffo Soneyra is Latin Elephant co-director. Journalist, researcher & campaigner. Santiago graduated from the University of Leeds with an MA in Political Communication in 2013. Specialises in equality, identities and migration. Contact: santiago@latinelephant.org

Sophie Rebecca Wall is Latin Elephant project coordinator. She is an access worker, translator and writer. Sophie has 6 years of experience volunteering for student and community-led projects in Bristol, Glasgow and London. Contact: sophie@latinelephant.org