

WOLVES, SHEEP AND VATOS LOCOS: REFLECTIONS OF GANG ACTIVITY IN CHICANO LITERATURE¹

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ABSTRACT. *The difficult social and economical reality of many barrios in the city of Los Angeles, and the outgrowing anger provoked by this situation in many Chicano youngsters, has resulted in the emergence of a strong gang activity. Violence, crime and a deep sense of frustration lead the lives of the members of these groups, who, in an attempt to fight a system that does not count on them, choose to live the dark side of life. The gang, albeit its highly hierarchical system of organization, becomes the safe haven in which these angry young Chicanos seek for shelter and protection, in an often self-destructive way.*

Always Running (1993) by Luis J. Rodriguez and Locas (1997), by Yxta Maya Murray, expose the extreme and harsh existence of Chicano gangs, its internal and external fights for power, and the subsequent fatal consequences that these often provoke upon its members. The different visions of gang life, symbolized by their male and female protagonists, respectively, offer a rough, though extremely human vision of the dark side of the barrio.

I got nothing to lose, I'm going all out
The due's never stop, I refuse to play by the rules
Uptight when you stepping into the night right
Pigs rolling up shining a bright light.
Nothing better to do than fuck with the pride
When you hide behind your badge and gun and ride.

(Lyrics from *(Notbin 2 Loose) Goin all out*, by Chicano rap band Cypress Hill)

Territorial, social, cultural and linguistic conquest have marked the existence of the first inhabitants of the territories of the Southwest of the United States. Many

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Chicanos, consciously acknowledging their situation of global colonization, have managed to overcome the painful effects of the usurpation of their culture and identity, by way of different means, such as literature and arts, amongst others. Nonetheless, the fate of all the members of the Chicano community has not been this rewarding and productive. This is the case of many Chicano youngsters, who have transformed the *barrio* in the symbol of the reconquering and regaining of a territory that was once stolen from their ancestors.

The difficult social and economical reality of many *barrios* in different cities of the United States, and the outgrowing anger provoked by this situation in many Chicano adolescents, has resulted in the emergence of a strong gang activity. Violence, crime and a deep sense of frustration lead the lives of the members of these groups, who, in an attempt to fight a system that does not count on them, choose to live the dark side of life. The gang, albeit its highly hierarchical system of organization, becomes the safe haven in which these angry young Chicanos seek for shelter and protection, in an often self-destructive way.

Always Running (1993) by Luis J. Rodriguez and *Locas* (1997), by Yxta Maya Murray, expose the extreme and harsh existence of Chicano gangs, its internal and external fights for power, and the subsequent fatal consequences that these often provoke upon its members. The different visions of gang life, symbolized by their male and female protagonists, respectively, offer a rough, though extremely human vision of the dark side of the *barrio*. The aim of this work is hence, to examine the diverse themes and subsequently, realities, that the two novels illustrate, as well as to explore the male and female portrayal of gang activity and life.

From their outset, both novels coincide in the representation of the *barrio* as a tough, difficult place to live in, where kids experience a high rate of school failure, and are thus more easily introduced into criminal activities. Diego Vigil (1993: 96-97) gives a clear definition of life in the *barrio* where the first gangs were organized:

The barrios in which the earliest, most firmly established Chicano gangs developed were well-demarcated settlements of Mexican immigrants. They were located in geographically isolated areas that other settlers and developers had bypassed as less appropriate for habitation, and were further isolated by cultural, racial, and socioeconomic barriers enforced by ingrained prejudices of the Anglo-American community. The isolation imposed by these conditions exacerbated the problems that barrio residents faced and, at the same time, rendered the barrios more impermeable to outside influences. The nuclei of the gangs that emerged in these barrios were comprised of street youths who saw

little to aspire to in their parents' difficult circumstances and received little guidance from other adults.

This situation is clearly exposed in the two novels which are the subject of this study. *Always Running*, by Luis J. Rodriguez, published in 1993, portrays the autobiographical experience of the author, who has personally been an active member of gang activity, and chooses to recount his life experience pursuing a highly instructive aim, as a result of the discovery of his son's gradual involvement in gang life. The novel starts with a reflection on the part of the author of the previously mentioned extreme situation for Chicano youngsters in the *barrio*, which is clearly discernible in the high rates of education failure among the group. As Rodriguez (1993: 7-8) strongly denounces at the beginning of the novel,

In East L.A. and in schools like Chicago's Clemente were some of the nation's highest drop-out rates. Youth unemployment hovered around 75 percent in the most neglected areas. [...] With little productive to do, drug selling becomes a lucrative means of survival. A 10-year-old in Humboldt Park can make \$80-\$100 a day as a lookout for local dealers. The drug trade is business. It's capitalism: Cutthroat, profit-motivated and expedient. Also, the values which drive gangs are linked to the control of markets, in a way similar to what has created borders between nations. In communities with limited resources like Humboldt Park and East L.A., sophisticated survival structures evolved, including gangs, out of the bone and sinew tossed up by this environment.

The inevitability of the gang activity is somehow implied in the previous words, even though the novel itself stands out as a call for Chicano youngsters to avoid the implicit subconscious acceptance and assimilation of their deprived situation, which is a product of strategies aimed at the discrimination and criminalization of these groups, who eventually turn their wrath towards their own community. Words, literature in this particular case, are proposed by the author as one of the best means to combat and face these circumstances. Concomitantly, the lack of control of language becomes, together with that of other social and economical rights, one of the elements that, as understood by Rodriguez, provoked his involvement in a *vida loca*, as a result of the deviance it implies in mainstream, white-controlled institutions such as the school. As Rodriguez (1993: 27) clearly portrays in the following words:

In those days there was no way to integrate the non-English speaking children. So they just made it a crime to speak anything but English. If a Spanish word sneaked out in the playground, kids were often sent to the office to get swatted

or to get detention. Teachers complained that maybe the children were saying bad things about them. An assumption of guilt was enough to get one punished.

As a consequence of this discriminatory exclusion and relegation of the children, the need of belonging becomes a strong urge in them. The gang, or *clicka*, becomes therefore a safe refuge in which these rejected young kids seek shelter, respect, and ultimately, recognition. Concurrently, the rage that they have grown as a result of this painful experience, becomes one of the axis around which gang life evolves. Unadapted and having fully assimilated their situation of non-belonging, they quickly turn into delinquency and crime as a means of economic survival and retaliation against a system that has violently mistrusted and discarded them.

But the practice of the exclusion does not always find its source from external, mainstream institutions, as in the case of Rodríguez's life, but it may also be found in the gang itself, as it is harshly portrayed in Murray's novel, *Locas*, published in 1997. It is the story of Lucía and Cecilia, two women whose destinies are marked by the existence of a gang called Los Lobos in Echo Park, a *barrio* in East Los Angeles, and the strong gender-based hierarchies that the all masculine members of the *clicka* impose upon *their* women, who are depicted as *sheep*. The animalization of the protagonists into wolves and sheep, and the implications that this provokes, render the story and the reality portrayed in the work with a very violent tone, which surpasses tremendously Rodríguez's novel in this aspect. Wolves and sheep live in a constant battle, in which the most powerful ones, the male wolves, use their sheep as a means of gaining respect and honor. The stories of these two women are presented at the outset of the novel as parallel, for they share a wolf, Manny, the gang leader, who is Lucía's boyfriend and Cecilia's brother. Both women become representative of the rejected minority within a strongly established, highly hierarchized microcommunity, the gang, and each of them will eventually become the symbol of contrasted attitudes towards *la vida loca*. Lucía will opt for adopting the life of a wolf, and therefore, her masculinization will stand for the attitude that the gang adopts towards mainstream society, because, "the gang has often been thought of as a monolithic institution in which physical force (who is strongest) is the primary criterion in gaining and maintaining power within the organization" (Sánchez Jankowski 1991: 88). Her stance towards the imposed role for women is clearly depicted in her following thoughts:

There was maybe fifteen girls hanging around the Lobos, stuffing their chi-chis into tight dresses and making tamale dinners and keeping their vatos happy in bed, trying to get knocked up. Most of them was worthless lazy-brains. Milkmakers. There's Rafa's girl Monica, who gave him a little Paco, and of Popeye's sheep gave him another boy. You couldn't walk half a block without

seeing some fifteen-year-old *mamacita* dragging a kid by the hand and lugging another one in her belly. That mess ain't for me. I saw them baby faces crying and Lobos all smoking cigars like high-rollers, but it didn't make me moony or jealous. When I'm around babies I get cold and skittish like a racehorse who sees a deer mouse. But I guess Manny liked the way it looked. Whenever he'd hear about a new baby, he'd flick me a look like he's getting his own ideas. (Murray 1997: 41)

Lucía, just as Rodriguez and his friends, decides to defy her imposed destiny and fight it from within, gaining control and creating her own feminine gang. She is from this moment on, depicted as a highly rational, witty, wolf-like woman, whose only aim is that of having control over Los Lobos and their important cocaine dealing business. She is bloodthirsty for power and ready to step on her own man and even die or kill for it. Cecilia, on her part, who is all throughout the novel presented as psychologically dependant on her brother Manny, who provides her with a status within the gang, will eventually, in an absolutely opposite way, desire to fulfill her role of sheep, having kids and spending her free time sharing talk and experiences with the rest of the sheep of the hood. She longs to become a “good girl”, who,

want[s] to assume traditional complementary roles towards males. They look forward to a future as Good Wives, dependent financially and emotionally upon a man, living in a clean, decent apartment (perhaps not quite in the area of town to which they aspire) with children who are well dressed and who will grow up to better themselves in a respectable job as clerks or carpenters. Although this girl associates with a boy from the neighbourhood gang, her aim is to save him from his rowdy friends who are clearly a bad element, bringing out the worst in him. (Campbell 1991: 7)

But the treatment of the source of the discrimination and the need for belonging is not the unique theme in which the two novels differ. Power and its materialization, as well as its implications and depiction are also different in them. As stated previously, Rodriguez, whose work and real life experience is much more positive, instructing, and therefore, mild, opts for presenting the need to gain power over words and cultural education as the most suitable form of survival to the subtle genocide imposed by the mainstream society and ultimately, by themselves (as in the case of the Lomas and Sangra gangs, members of the same *barrio*), over these kids. The very idea of having decided to recount his experience as a means of educating his son and the rest of the boys involved in *la vida loca*, is a clear proof of his position. Thus, he develops, when he attends

high school, a very strong Chicano ethnic and cultural consciousness, as observed in the following words:

More Chicanos became involved in ToHMAS. We started our own *folklórico* group in which Carmen San Juan taught the students some basic Mexican and Flamenco dances. Esme and I started a *teatro* group, based on what the Teatro Campesino of César Chávez's farm workers union were doing in rural California. Our *teatro* group, however, had an urban slant.

I wrote the three plays we performed. One involved a dramatic verse monologue of a Chicana about to be arrested by the cops. Another involved a one-act about being proud of our culture. But the most controversial one dealt with getting Lomas and Sangra to stop fighting each other. (Rodriguez 1993: 177)

Lucía, on her part, who is the symbol of an uncontrolled rage against those who have despised her, once she is allowed to smell the scent of power and control, will ferociously fight for it. Manny trusts her to be responsible of the gang's economic accounts, and this will give her enough power and knowledge so as to be ready to get it all. She abandons the state of naivety and sheeplike, submissive attitude that she had once adopted, and the fact of acquiring knowledge over the gang activities leads her to an extremely violent rush for power and control. At the same time, she wants to fight the role imposed upon her, which is clearly depicted by Mark Tottem (2000: 31) in the following words:

Gender role socialization in patriarchal capitalism is theorized to associate aggression, dominance, independence, and violence with masculinity and power. Femininity and powerlessness are believed to be associated with passivity, dependence, nurturance, and non-violence. Most girls are taught to focus on the maintenance of social relationships and the importance of serving others. Most boys grow up believing that they are entitled to power and privilege because they are males.

Drugs and violence are two of the themes that are very explicitly portrayed in both novels and become directly related to power, even though, once again, Murray's novel becomes more violent than Rodriguez's one. The latter's gang, although organized and committed to crime and violence, is depicted as more childish or innocent than that of the girls' and Los Lobos'. Drugs in Rodriguez's gang are part of the deviance from the imposed rules of behavior and belonging, whereas in the case of Los Lobos and Lucia's story, drugs obviously become the source of power and economic and individual control over the rest of the members of the gang.

Violence, drug abuse and commerce and power are explicitly portrayed in both novels, even though, as observed previously, Murray's text continuously portrays a much more aggressive and brutal vision of gang life and activity. In conclusion, we could state that the degree of violence with which certain aspects of gang life are deployed is one of the main points in which both novels differ. On the other hand, Rodríguez's work proposes a positive, instructive ending, whereas Murray's one closes with a very negative, pessimistic vision of gang life. Nonetheless, there is something essential that makes the two novels differ absolutely, the fact that Murray's work is pure fiction and its characters recreations of members of an imaginary gang, whereas Rodríguez's narration accounts for his own personal experience, which becomes synonym of the reality of many Chicano youngsters who are already involved in gang life or are potential gang members. This fact renders Rodríguez's novel with a strength that widely surpasses Murray's work. Once again, reality is stronger than fiction.

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