

LIVING/LEAVING *LA VIDA LOCA*: ON BARRIOS, CHICANO YOUTH AND GANGS

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Abstract: Most US *barrios* are characterized by abundant academic failure, insufficient educational resources and high unemployment rates. In this context, the street becomes a place in which lower class Chicano kids find a space they belong to and a communal tie which renders them with visibility and a voice. This essay aims at observing the way Luis Rodríguez's *Always Running* (1993) and Mona Ruiz's *Two Badges: The Lives of Mona Ruiz* (1997), memoirs of gang members who have grasped education as a means of escape from their dramatic reality, or the fictional version of gang life of Yxta Maya Murray's *Locas* (1997) and Ana Castillo's *The Guardians* (2007) portray barrio life and prove the importance of Literature in the public exposure and denunciation of this new urban border.

Keywords: Chicano Literature, youth, barrios, gangs, violence.

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Resumen: La situación de muchos barrios latinos de Estados Unidos está marcada por la existencia de un sistema educativo con pocos recursos, el fracaso escolar y el paro. En este contexto, son muchos los jóvenes chicanos de clase baja que encuentran en la calle el lugar en el que desarrollar su identidad y su sentido de pertenencia. El objetivo de este trabajo es el de observar el modo en el que las autobiografías de dos ex-pandilleros, Luis Rodríguez, *Always Running* (1993) y Mona Ruiz, *Two Badges: The Lives of Mona Ruiz* (1997) exponen que la educación es el único modo de salida de esta opción de vida. Del mismo modo, se observará cómo las versiones de ficción de Yxta Maya Murray, *Locas* (1997) y de Ana Castillo, *The Guardians* (2007), describen la vida en el barrio. Se tratará además de reflejar la importancia de la literatura como método de denuncia de la existencia de esta nueva frontera urbana.

Palabras clave: Literatura chicana, juventud, barrios, pandillas, violencia

The *Movimiento Chicano* that emerged in the Sixties, together with other civil rights movements, brought to public attention the obviously marginalized situation of the community and demanded both the access of the group to the mainstream North American life and the pursuit of a voice and an active position within the hierarchical US social network. The Chicano youth, in particular, were faced to a difficult socioeconomic and

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cultural position, as a result of which many turned their frustration into street life, becoming *pachucos/as* who showed their anger towards both the mainstream group and their own. The surfacing Chicano/a literary body of the times echoed this situation and became the public and collective voice of many of the demands of the group. More than a decade after the beginning of the new century, it is undoubtedly clear that many things have improved for the Chicano/a community, regardless the still hard existence in many *barrios* and the subsequent proliferation of gang activity in them. The angry young men of today, the *vato locos*, and their female counterparts are similarly featured in the novels of some of the new generation of Chicano writers, who, like their ancestors, are trying to portray a harsh reality that persists today and which still seems forgotten by many. Within this context, the main aim of this essay is to describe the means contemporary *barrio* life and youth gang activity are addressed and denounced in the fictional versions of gang life of Yxta Maya Murray's *Locas* (1997) and Ana Castillo's multithematic *The Guardians* (2007), and in Luis Rodríguez's *Always Running* (1993) and Mona Ruiz's *Two Badges: The Lives of Mona Ruiz* (1997), memoirs of ex-gang members who have grasped education as a means of escape from their dramatic reality. These works, both the autobiographies and the fictional ones, aim at describing and exposing the harshness and complexity of the reality of the *barrios* and gang life, in an attempt to strongly denounce their activities and the diverse forces that facilitate their existence, and thus, call for alternative ways out for these marginalized, angry youngsters. Concomitantly, the works portray the social and economic situation from which these gangs emerge, which they also denounce and want to make public, as all these stories begin in the *barrio*.

The history of *barrios* dates back to the annexation of Northern Mexican land to the expanding Anglo-American territory as a result of the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Ever since then, a wide socioethnic and cultural diversity has defined this territory, as well as an unstoppable and constant multidirectional, transnational movement, which characterizes it as a permeable, fluid, ever-changing, *mestizo* space. In the particular case of the Mexican population inhabiting those lands, this necessary demand of adaptation was evident, as they were suddenly turned into (second-class) US citizens and their living spaces soon became the "all-Mexican" quarters or cities. The different chronological flows of people from Mexico to the US, and the subsequent uncontrolled growth of these quarters, soon converted them into spaces where the housing, sanitation and educational resources were inadequate and limited. The gigantic growth and population increase over the course of the centuries that followed, turned US cities into vast geographical areas, divided and organized in terms of their social and ethnic hierarchical arrangement, which oftentimes placed those of a non-middle class standard (in most cases, non-Anglos) outside the welfare suburbs which grew enormously during the supposedly rich, wealthy 50s. Hence, the ghettoization of the colored and/or poor Americans became a reality and the color/class divide acquired a new form in the shape of ghettos, *barrios*, and other kinds of segregated neighborhoods. Conversely, the "welfarization" process of the suburbs and the proliferation of a secluded, nuclear-family-based unity life was simultaneous to the "streetization" of life in these underprivileged areas of cities, where the living conditions, the overcrowding of home units and the terrible infrastructure, took its people outside their homes, making the street, *el barrio*, their space for social and human relationships, especially for men.

Concurrently, the average, middle class citizen adopted a passive, conformist position towards social issues, as his/hers was a life of commodities and comfort. The threat of an “enemy within” and the fear of losing a status the middle class thought they deserved *per se*, provoked the assimilation of an “us vs. them” divide, which, encouraged by the most inherent, irrational human fears towards “the Other”, culminated in discriminatory measures such as the approval of the “repatriation” of thousands of “Mexicans” to the neighboring country (following the orders of the *Operation Wetback*). Jorge Bustamante explains that “[o]ne year after the program was initiated, June 17, 1954, more than one million apprehensions and subsequent “voluntary departures” of Mexican undocumented immigrants were recorded by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service” (1977: 150).

In such a context, a number of Mexican–American youngsters adopted a clearly anti-establishment pose, defined by a non-conformist attitude towards, not only the mainstream social fabric which had hurled them into oblivion and otherized them, but also their own community, too traditional and “Non–American” in their view. The generational gap between the first Mexican–American citizens and their offspring, born in and within the US social system, regardless of their obvious non-belonging to it, marked the lives of a generation that fought against the norms and traditions of their ancestors, but who were concomitantly rejected by the dominant group. The 50s, thus, witnessed the growth of the *pachuco* figure, ancestor of the contemporary *vato*, or gang member, both of which could be defined by their inability to articulate their anger and frustration towards a society that did not welcome them. The first *pachuco* “gangs,” thus, were soon labeled as criminals and marked as delinquents, becoming the targets of the mainstream media, among others. The Sleepy Lagoon trials in 1942, which tried twenty-two Mexican–American boys for the death of Jose Diaz after another 600 had been arrested with no clear evidence against them and was orchestrated by *The Herald-Express* and *The Los Angeles Times*, and applauded by the majority of the normative society, are regarded today, however, as the symbolization of the public criminalization and lynching of a group in the name of social order and stability. The mass media’s biased role in this process is today evident and considered one of the most shameful episodes in the history of US mass communication, as well as the substantiation of the media’s power in the construction of a communal ideology and, in this case, communal threat.

However, the *pachuco*’s defiant and anti-normative physical and attitudinal stance also rendered him incredibly appealing to other kinds of media and the arts, and many artistic works turned *pachucos* into their protagonists and focal point. In fact, “[c]hicano studies scholars across a variety of disciplines, theoretical orientations, and political agendas have repeatedly conjured up one or another rendition of the *pachuco*’s anti-assimilationist defiance as a kind of oppositional, protonationalist (notably, masculinist) embodiment of Chicano particularity” (De Génova, 2008: 145). As an example, founder of the *Teatro Campesino*’s Luis Valdez’s *Zoot Suit*, (first staged in 1978, screened in 1981, and published in 1992 (De Génova, 2008: 145) became a highly acclaimed theater play which was soon converted into an innovative and groundbreaking movie, both starring Edward James Olmos. The playwright, whose enormous contribution to the *Causa Chicana* and the national and international denunciation of the socioeconomic discrimination of the Chicano People, wittily appropriated the figure of the *pachuco* and denounced the subjective positioning of part of

the media against the Mexican–Americans in general and its youth in particular, turning his character, *El Pachuco*, into the voice of the oppressed and the focus of a society's fear and anger.

The social deprivation which the *pachuco*'s rebellious attitude addressed and denounced with his manners appears, however, to remain unchanged today. The socioeconomic marginalization of most *barrios* is still obvious and the destiny of many of its dwellers, especially the youth, is conditioned by such a situation. Unemployment rates increase continuously, academic failure is abundant and educational resources insufficient, and in this context, the street becomes the only place in which contemporary lower class Chicano kids find a space they belong to and a communal tie which renders them with visibility and a voice. Gang proliferation in lower class US neighborhoods is evident and apparently unstoppable, and the Chicano community, especially in California, is witnessing a tremendous increase in gang affiliation among its younger, more vulnerable members, the youth. Hispanic gangs represent 47% of the gang census in the United States (helpinggangyouth.com), and are "specialized" in "turf" or territory defense (according to the *Bulletin for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention*, a fact which proves their strong ties to the *barrio*, the communal territory they defend "to the death."

The nature of Chicano/a Literature throughout the last few decades and since its emergence together with the *Movimiento Chicano*, has been defined by a strong commitment to the issues that affect the deprived reality of the community. Among these, the plight of Chicano youngsters stands out as one of the most prominent ones, and the *pachuco*, as observed in Valdez's example, has been present in the Literature and arts of the Chicano community ever since it came to the fore, as it is in the work of the authors who are the focus of this essay. In this sense, Yxta Maya Murray's *Locas*, published in 1997, offers a dramatic fictional version of female gang life in an East L.A. *barrio*, in which the author proposes a contrasting, dual vision of life in the *barrio* through the personae of Lucía and Cecilia, the protagonists of the novel. The outset of the narrative marks the development of the lives of the two central characters, who, through a biphonic narrative voice, depict female life in general, and gang life in particular. The two girls' quests for self-definition and a life of their own is conditioned from the beginning by male dominance, as they both share the "love" of Manny, a *vato loco*, symbol of *macho* supremacy and female social, economic and personal dependence. These three characters, who are the conducting line of the narrative, are low-class, uneducated kids, whose lives revolve around gang activity, delinquency, drug-dealing, and in sum, criminality. The clear contrast between their life choices defines a pyramidal structure of power within which the character who controls gang activity and hence, the drug trade, also controls the lives and destinies of his/her "soldiers". The novel addresses Lucía's harsh struggle to obtain such control, which she understands to be symbolic of her eventual social and economic independence, on the one hand, her personal recognition within a tight gender structure, on the other hand, and, finally, the catalyst for her individual revenge against a society that does not appear to see her. In the lower position of the pyramid, Cecilia opts to escape from gang life and finds redemption and a life on her own in her strong and extreme commitment to religion, a choice that forces her to sacrifice her personal, social life. This choice of turning to an exacerbated religious

life is recurrent in Murray's fiction (*What it Takes to Get to Vegas*, 1999) and as exposed by Jose Luis Rocha occurs, in essence, because

[t]he similarities with a youth gang are obvious. The group attempts some homogeneity of attire and postures. They are young. They portray violence to send out a message. They are a show of strength—Catholic in this case. They perform a transgression of the normal order that is tolerated by a certain group, but not by others—Protestants, for example. And they are immersed in a practice that brings their identity into play, announcing themselves as active Catholics.

The main setting for the lives of the protagonists is, undoubtedly, the streets, the *barrio*, which acquires extreme relevance in the development of the character's lives and destinies, since owning the streets implies having succeeded in their quest. As revealed in the *Bulletin for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention*, territoriality becomes one of the main concerns of contemporary gangs, and in the particular case of Murray's work, the move towards other areas implies greater control of the drug trade. It is interesting to observe, however, that regardless of the fact that the reader assumes that the ever present setting of the novel is the *barrio*, the author does not provide any clear or direct description of it, but only makes reference to its occupation by the *vatos* (boys) and the *rucas* (girls), as well as of the intrinsic nature of their belonging to "the streets" as implied in the following description by Lucía:

Twenty-five years ago the Park was just that, a park with regular joes walking around. In 1970's Echo Park, you had white families in tract houses with rose gardens and barbecues, and all of US Mexicans squeezed into the little spaces left over. We made our money by pumping their gas and bussing their tables and cleaning up after them with our hair wrapped up to keep cool. What were the *vatos* doing, zoot-suiting then? Mama talks about how in the old days you'd look outside and see hairy-chested greasers playing dice on the corners, laughing and yelling loud like music, playing boy games with their knives and their little stealing and running away from the police after puffing out their chests like prize turkeys (1997: 5).

The *barrio* is shaped, formed and transformed by and for its inhabitants, and, thus, is incredibly important for the creation of a communal *barrio* identity, which is stronger than any other affiliation, be it political, ethnic or even social (regardless of the fact that these issues clearly condition the realities of the characters of the novel and the lives of the people they symbolize). In this particular context, gangs define the conception of the cultural and social community that the *barrio* represents for its members, who create and develop micro societies within these already "limited" communities. Thus, the neighborhood, described and experienced as a safe haven from outer aggression, grows its own "shelters" for these young kids, whose "enemy" they find not in the mainstream, discriminatory socioethnic hierarchical chain, but within their own space. These youngsters, unaware of the macrosystem in which they have grown up and which has converted them into clear victims, turn their rage into their own and develop a criminal, violent system of beliefs and attitudes, which confronts them with others of their same kind. It is interesting, however, to note that the internal structure of the gangs reproduces the same system of control and supremacy that the mainstream social arrangement exerts upon them, as well as a gender-based organization

and set of power. The ultimate desire to control and possess the command of the street, by whatever means necessary, which defines the existence of these collectives, is nothing but a customized, contemporary form of interpretation of Manifest Destiny, which believes that each of the gangs has the moral and social duty and authority to expand the territory and control the space and human life of the conquered land. The harshness through which Murray exposes the moral, psychological and even physical transformation of the protagonist, portrays the irrational drives that move these youngsters, who embrace criminality as their only way out, and end up believing their activities as normative and almost inevitable. The novel, thus, serves to not only expose the reality of these youngsters, but to condemn their actions, as well as the situation that provokes them.

Moving to a wider sociophysical context, the border, it could be stated that conquest, deterritorialization and reterritorialization are concepts that define the contemporary essence of the US–Mexico borderland. This liminal space, site of amalgamation, *mestizaje* and transgression/passage, is also the scene of hazardous border crossing, criminality, unpunished and unprosecuted homicides and home to a constant clash of forces that claim its control. In this context, Ana Castillo's *The Guardians* (2007), where gang banging is just one of the phenomena that mark the harsh, violent reality in the borderland, clearly exposes the notion of the need of territorial domination which Murray's work applies to a smaller site in the form of the *barrio*. The novel mixes contemporary controversial borderland issues such as human trafficking, illegal border crossing and youth gang affiliation, in an attempt to denounce life in a sick border, infected by industry, militarization and the drug and people traffickers.

The story revolves around the disappearance of Rafa, Gabo's (the protagonist) father, at the hands of some *coyotes* while crossing the border and addresses several layers of "border realities" which concur at this site: the physical line of the US–Mexico border that the "illegal" crossers dream of trespassing, the desert and its strength and implication as a "no-man's land," and a borderless and "free terrain," and the borderline which exists between a criminal, violent life and a law-abiding one. In this sense, the inclusion in the narrative plot of a gang (as understood in the way exposed in Murray's work), whose endeavors are to help Gabo find his father, once again highlights the enormous levels of violence that exist within this multilayered and complex space. In this case, it turns "the bad ones" (the gang) into "the good ones," who fight for the control of the border territory against the *coyotes*, whose ultimate goal is to reinforce the painful line that divides the two sides of reality, the two sides of the border, as their transgression of the laws and trespassing of the territory has become a fruitful and expanding business. The novel, hence, proposes an extension of the concept of the *barrio*, or the quarter where people of Mexican descent dwell, to the notion of the *frontera*, with its wider and more conceptual connotations of national dominance, First–Third World coexistence and confrontation, massive and uncontrolled industrialization, military occupation and in sum, inhuman territorialization and death. The gang and the occupation of the *barrio* is redescribed within a wider environment and for once, it is presented as inherent and concomitant to live at the border, where internal border marking and the division between "us" and "them," does not only exist on a daily basis, but is controlled and designed by a few, the contemporary socioeconomically superior dwellers of the land and hence, the destinies of its inhabitants.

The depiction of the two novels mentioned above, illustrate a space defined by violence of all sorts and a seemingly inherent negative atmosphere, far from David Díaz's more positive, creative, communal and cultural description, where the *barrio* "symbolized the cultural lineage of Chicana/o social and political history. [...] the *barrio* was transformed into both a spatially defined location, and, just as importantly and essential resource of cultural memory, identity and pride" (2005: 56), which turns all the negativity into a creative force that defines the *barrio* as a unique, exclusive site, where its inhabitants acquire visibility and a voice. At this stage, the analysis of how real life stories with real protagonists define *barrio* life and its appropriation by gangs would be an interesting way to contrast the image provided in the fictional works, and in the true accounts of the same criminal activity. For this purpose, the analysis of two memoirs by ex-gang members, *Always Running*, by Luis Rodriguez, and Mona Ruiz's *Two Badges*, will shed some light on how the effects of the infrastructural and socioeconomic situation of *barrios* affect the lives of its youngest dwellers and their supposedly inevitable engagement in the *vida loca*, violence and delinquency.

Always Running (1993), Rodriguez's autobiographical *memoir*, has become a best seller and is now read in hundreds of schools in California and the United States. The author/protagonist's account of life in the dark side, of subsistence and survival in the deprived setting of an L.A. *barrio* and his current commitment to saving kids like his own (who is in prison for gang activity) offers an alternative to criminal life, which he acquired through education and a mastering of words. Rodriguez's activism is extremely relevant today in California, where he visits schools, community centers, streets and prisons in an attempt to expose his own life story as a model, an example of a different life choice for the numerous young Chicanos who live on the brink of delinquency and death. The author's political commitment and engagement, thus, arises from his own personal experience, and derives from the open denunciation of the terrible living, educational and economic conditions of the Latino quarters, which he describes as not having changed at all since he was "swallowed up" by a system that denied him and his peers visibility, a voice or any choice of survival, and subsequently pushed them into the "microcommunity" that the gang represents, which did provide him with the feeling of "being" and "having a voice" and a family to relate to. However, his denunciation does not stop in transmitting a condescending tone that would term the gang members into the victims of a particular social situation only, but also shows his present rejection and condemnation of gang activity.

The memoir begins with the description of the setting where Rodriguez's life evolves, which he exposes as innate to the outcome of his and other *vatos'* lives. The uncontrolled growth and development of most of the areas in US cities, which have been inundated with endless waves of immigration, have resulted in the creation of deprived areas, with no planned infrastructure, where living conditions are relegated to an unimportant position. Thus, Rodriguez outlines the map of Watts, his *barrio*, in the following words:

Except for the housing project, Watts was a ghetto where country and city mixed. The homes were mostly single-family units, made of wood or stucco. Open windows and doors served as air conditioners, a slight relief from the summer desert air. Chicken coops graced many a backyard along with broken auto parts. Roosters crowed the morning to birth and an occasional goat peered from weather-worn picket fences along with the millions of dogs which seemed to

populate the neighborhood.

Watts fed into one of the largest industrial concentrations in the country, pulling from an almost endless sea of cheap labor; they came from Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Arkansas[...] from Chihuahua, Sonora, Sinaloa and Nayarit. If you moved there it was because the real estate concerns pushed you in this direction (1993: 17).

The lack of planning, the bad sanitary conditions and the overcrowding of the quarter is made evident in these words, which similarly portray the inevitability and fatal consequences of this harsh life setting. In this context, and with no positive future prospects, gang affiliation stands out as a clear means of economic survival and personal recognition and empowerment, because as he posits,

criminality in this country is a class issue. Many of those warehoused in overcrowded prisons can be properly called “criminals of want,” those who’ve been deprived of the basic necessities of life and therefore forced into so-called criminal acts to survive. Many of them just don’t have the means to buy their “justice”: They are members of a social stratum which includes welfare mothers, housing project residents, immigrant families, the homeless and unemployed (1993:10).

In this same light, the spatial context in which Mona Ruiz’s (an ex-gang member who is now part of the L.A. Police Department and is endeavored to educating adolescents against gangbanging) autobiography, *Two Badges: The Lives of Mona Ruiz* develops, conveys a high degree of intrinsic violence, as well as an unconscious assimilation on the part of its dwellers of their non-belonging, non-deserving of an active role within the mainstream social fabric. It is interesting to note, at this point, Mary Pat Brady’s notion of the production of a space as not only involving the physical configuration of the place, *per se*, but

[...] the processes that shape how these places are understood, envisioned, defined, and variously experienced. The processes of producing space, however quotidian or grand, hidden or visible, have an enormous effect on subject formation—on the choices people can make and how they conceptualize themselves, each other, and the world (2002: 7–8).

where “a space is a practiced place” (De Certeau, 1988: 117). The dwellers of a certain space, the *barrio* in this particular case, become the agents of the personal and communal configuration and description of such spaces, which, in a kind of vicious circle, become their places of habitation, the only setting in which their particular personal practices can be performed. In this sense, the inherent conditioning of these personal/communal practices derives bidirectionally, to and from, the nature of the places/spaces of development and growth of their dwellers. Thus, each of the characters/protagonists of the works analyzed, become the victims of their spatial nature and geographical existence, which conditions their biased life choices. As expressed by Luis Rodríguez, thus, they turn into “gang bangers of want” (1993: 10) who engage in criminal activity as a social and personal survival mechanism. The impossible justifiability of their acts and deeds remains unquestioned, but the texts should make the general public aware of the real state of affairs in the most democratic, self-choice-driven country in the world. Abandoned and ostracized by a social fabric that has turned them into transparent, non-visible aliens, these young protagonists are forced to

make the only choice they think they can in this unfriendly context, which is, in all cases, to deviate from the norm and construct and define a defying version/vision of their *barrio*, as the only source of personal and economic survival. Thus, Lucía, protagonist of Murray's fictional account of female gang life, displays an absolutely Machiavellian need to overcome the obstacles she has been faced with all through her life, which she understands stem from her being a woman in a highly patriarchal society. Her absolute rejection and despise of her predestined role, compels her to try to find her way in the criminal world, which she considers her only route towards agency and empowerment. She says:

Don't tell me I don't know what it is. When I got into the business girls wasn't doing shit in the clika. They could grin, sex, color up their faces, that's about it. A woman was a sheep. So he thinks he's the man, but he's not the man no more. I'm the one scoring.

Hey honey, you get some respect for this cola, see? When I was a kid we had nothing. My mami and papi would scream at each other in our little house, the sounds bouncing hard off the walls so that you couldn't get away from it no matter where you ran, he's hitting on her like she's a punching bag, making blood-red and dark blue marks over her little eyes and wet mouth, and there was those rancheras on the radio over his yelling making me crazy.

Well check out my clothes now. I'm doing fucking fine. I'm the one screaming in all your faces, I'll do anything. I'll do it all (1993: 19–20).

Lucia's thoughts convey a remarkable idea about the original source of the discrimination of women like her. The overt male dominance and violence over women, both physical and psychological, thus, is presented as the catalyst of this girl's hatred and her affiliation to gang life is experienced by her as the outmost exercise of revenge and subsequent personal success. Similarly, these words illustrate that the protagonist does not have any need for a personal "intellectual" improvement, but that she desires to reproduce and perpetuate the violence she has experienced herself upon others to fulfill her only goal, to be the fiercest and most powerful gangbanger in the *barrio*. The novel, however, and Lucía and Cecilia's accounts of their lives in particular, imply a patently difficult socioeconomic reality, but, interestingly enough, gender discrimination and male dominance are prominent throughout the narration of Lucia's life. Conversely, and despite the fact that Mona Ruiz's autobiography shows high degrees of male dominance and violence (she becomes a mother at a very early age and is continuously beaten by her drug-addict partner), Ruiz highlights the naturalness and quotidianity with which very young kids observe gang life, which pushes them towards it for no particular reason and without any clear aim. Hence, the memoir does describe the *barrio* as a manifestly poor, unprivileged place, as a border terrain that keeps its inhabitants inevitably trapped in a harsh everyday existence. In the case of adolescents, who strive to construct a common ground with their peers, in a bid to find recognition and acceptance, the gang becomes (in a way that is described as a kid's game at the beginning, but which soon evolves into a criminal organization) the substitute for the family that protects and nurtures them. Mona Ruiz's report of the way she first joined *la vida loca*, is symbolic of the often unconscious step these kids take:

There was no specific day, no single moment, when I made the decision to run with the gang and turn my back on everything that had been taught by my father. It was more like a series of

surrenders and lapses that combined to deliver me into the very lifestyle I had been raised to most despise. I wish I could point to a single decision or event, because then it might be easier to understand and explain, or even dismiss like a bolt of bad fortune that strikes out of a dark sky, the way lightning had killed my uncle. [...] It was an accident, a careless moment in a young life that led to quick death. And there was no great fall for me, merely a steady slide. I chose the parties and the fighting and the sense of acceptance I believed the gang would give me (1997: 48).

In this same way, Rodriguez explains that “most of the clubs began quite innocently. Maybe they were a team of guys for friendly football. Sometimes they were set up for trips to the beach or the mountains. (...) Then also some of the clubs metamorphosed into something more unpredictable, more encompassing. Something more deadly” (1993: 43). Both memoirs’ exposure of the normality with which young people assume the presence of gangs in their lives, presents a *barrio* where criminality and violence are regarded as natural, and most of all, the easiest means of acquiring recognition and surviving in such a harsh context. The two memoirs, hence, imply a direct denunciation of the sources of such phenomenon, which derives from an evident lack of educational resources and opportunities for these kids, the impossibility of their future personal and economic development, and their unconscious assimilation of their fate and destiny. The *barrio* as an experienced space, in Brady’s terms, consequently, and its evident difficult living conditions, directly marks the choices of these youngsters and defines their life as a path to premature death. The *frontera* that Castillo exposes in *The Guardians*, similarly, with its high degree of implied violence, both physical and geographical, is presented as the source of the construction of the “violent” subjects that inhabit it.

The real and fictional versions/visions of the *barrio* as a “space of want,” which pushes (some of) its inhabitants to choose the wild life, a life beyond the confines of society, is clearly in evidence in the analyzed texts. Said texts ascertain a direct relationship between marginality and a socioeconomic and educational situation that is intrinsic to life in the quarter and which is therefore imposed upon its inhabitants. Their choices of personal fulfillment being scarce, the fact that they turn to criminality appears natural (though not justifiable). In this sense, the texts not only denounce the existence of gangs and their ruthless violent actions, but also the origins of their existence, which are to be found in the very foundations of US society as an ethnosocially hierarchized network. The *barrio*, hence, conceived as a micro-society on its own, is delimited by clear socioeconomic borders which render it with the apparent autonomy to have its own rules and chain of control. The *barrio* belongs to those who live in it, but as observed in these works, it is the space which predestines its inhabitants, and shapes (most of) their lives and futures, the prime source of their choice, because, as explained by Vigil, “The gang subcultural style is a response to the pressures of street life and serves to give certain youth a source of familial support, goals and directives, and sanctions and guides” (1998: 2).

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