

CHICANO GANGS/CHICANA GIRLS: SURVIVING THE “WILD BARRIO”¹

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1. The sociospatial context. The Barrio

Most contemporary US cities are spatially arranged around ethnohierarchical borders which situate those of a “non-standard middle-class” socioethnic origin in “ghettos” and peripheral milieus. The massive growth of cities during the twentieth century, following no systematic urbanization processes, favored an urban layout which adhered to obvious segregation patterns, and located the “different”, the newcomers, in remote spaces, far from the most privileged, affluent areas. Chicano/Latino *barrios* are a clear example of such hierarchically sociopyramidal planning, creating a vicious circle leading to widespread discrimination and hence, segregation. David Díaz explains that

numerous *colonias* developed adjacent to local employment centers, railroad yards, manufacturing districts, and in agriculture zones on the urban fringe. These “livable spaces” ranged from substandard homes to tents and shanties constructed from a potpourri of local materials. The sordid conditions of these urban residential zones established the negative and racist characterizations of Chicanas/os in urban space. Locked into substandard, deteriorating conditions, Euro-Americans viewed the *colonias* as a repository of marginalized families with limited desire for self-improvement (García 1975). Regressive ethnic stereotypes reinforced a racist ideology that posited Chicana/o culture as debased and therefore deserving of segregation. (2005: 32)

The middle decades of the century provided no big changes in the configuration of *barrios*, and the *Bracero Program* and further waves of immigration favored the massive overcrowding of these quarters. It was not until the Sixties, the era of Civil Rights Movements in general and the *Movimiento Chicano* in particular, that a relevant transformation of the concept of the *barrio* occurred and the political and cultural “conscientización” of the workers paved the way for its conversion, not only into a place, but a cultural space, a “state of mind”, which “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 an essential resource of cultural memory, identity and pride” (Díaz 2005: 56). The *barrio* was described in most of the cultural and artistic manifestations emerging from it as a safe haven, the shared space where the defense and development of an incipient communal identity could be performed, providing it with manifest positive characteristics. However, as expressed by Griswold del Castillo (1979) and rewritten by Homero-Villa, the ambivalent nature of the *barrios* as “the basis of a dynamic cultural updwelling”, and “a place of poverty, crime, illness and despair”, [...] avoids

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shining a singularizing idealizing light upon *barrio* culture that would render its expressive manifestations as always necessarily positive or politically contestative. Nevertheless, many of the cultural practices produced and exercised in the *barrios* have tended toward positive articulations of community consciousness, which contribute to a psychologically and materially sustaining sense of ‘home’ location. (2000: 5)

Taking as a starting point Griswold del Castillo’s description of a less “romanticized” *barrio*, as a place where poverty, crime, illness and despair occur, this essay examines how Yxta Maya Murray and Mona Ruiz have deployed this communal space from a feminine perspective, the former through the creation of a fictional *barrio*, and the latter using an autobiographical statement. Literary representations like these concur with numerous sociological reports, conducted by both members of the community and outsiders, which demonstrate the hazards of everyday life in many US *barrios*, as well as their inherently hierarchical gender structure. For instance, Maxine Baca Zinn’s has described women of color as “outsiders within” —marginal intellectuals whose social locations provide them with a particular perspective on self and society” (1997: 18).

The portrayal of *barrio* life in the body of Literature that emerged with the Chicano Movement in the Sixties deployed the disrootedness that the movement from the rural areas to the urban ones caused, as well as the fragmentation that the arrival to the city and the *barrios* brought about within the established gender structure. In this sense, many were the authors who described communal and family life as

overtly gendered. Rudolfo Anaya, to name just one such author, endeavored to portray in his novel *Heart of Aztlan*, and others, the reality of Chicano life, both rural and urban (with its clear male-dominated set of beliefs) by revealing the negative influence of urban, *barrio* life, on the cohesion of the nuclear Mexican family. In the story, the forced migration of the protagonist's family from the *pueblo* to the city brings with it the dismantling of this unity as it is understood traditionally, as its younger members (both the boys and the girls) embark on a life outside the safe haven, the controlled, gendered space that the family home represents. The desire of the daughters to live their life "outside", that is, to "live" the *barrio*, work, and have money of their own, is met with absolute rejection and rage on the part of Clemente, the father, as the following passage from the text illustrates, when Juanita, his daughter says:

"I'm the one that's working, and that gives me the right to..."

[...]

"Juanita!" Clemente commanded, "¡Respeto a tus padres!"

And because she could find nothing else to say she shouted in his face, "And don't call me Juanita! I hate that name! Call me Jan! All my friends call me Jan—"

He struck out and slapped her. The blow sent her reeling. "Your friends!" He shouted. "You mean those pachucos and marijuanos you spend time with!"

[...]

But Juanita challenged him again. "It's about time I had something to say about the things around here! I work too! I have my own money! So I will come and go as I want, and nobody will rule me!"

[...]

"Válgame Dios", Adelita groaned. "What is happening to us?" She asked her husband in disbelief. (1976: 37-38)

This exchange addresses a number of issues that were prominent in the Chicano Literature of the first generation of authors, such as migration to the city, the difficult working conditions in the *barrio*, the assimilation of the Anglo culture by the younger generation with the subsequent supposed break with the communal tradition, increasing awareness by the female characters of their position within their group and the social fabric in general, the disintegration of the family unit and its inherent gendered role division and the challenge to the patriarchal dominance and masculine supremacy, among others.

In this same light, Esperanza's account of female life in the *barrio* in *The House on Mango Street*, considered by many one of the foundational texts in the body of Chicana Literature, illustrates the traditional definition of the house as a female domain and the *calle* as a male one. The young narrator's innocent gaze and narrative tone, describes how most of the women in her *barrio* are trapped inside the confines of their home and look through a window that offers them a distorted

image of reality and public life, and concomitantly, of a place outside where they do not belong and to which they have no access. She says about her grandmother:

[...] a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. [...] And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window. (1989: 10-11)

The novel stands out, even today, as a denunciation of the gendered division of Mexican/Chicano society, the imposed politics of location in which it is based and finally, as a plea to women to obtain a voice and a place of their own with the acquisition of a proper education.

The two works which are the core focus of this essay, however, deploy a more contemporary vision of *barrio* life, and describe not only this communal shared space, but also another more marginal street "institution" which is becoming increasingly stronger among the teenagers, the gang or *clicka*.

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2. The barrio gangs: the girls in the gang

Some decades after several of the demands of the Chicano and the Feminist Chicana Movements were met, many US *barrios* are still defined as having obvious substandard social, economic, cultural and educational resources. A great part of the contemporary *barrio* youth, particularly the women, dwell in precarious conditions which they have assimilated as inherent to life in these deprived areas of cities, and are forced to develop survival strategies that often lead them to marginality and criminality. The proliferation of gangs in US Latino quarters came to the fore after the first groups of organized Latino youngsters, the *Pachucos*, appeared in the fifties, in response to the difficult living conditions in the *barrios*. As explained in the *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* published by the US Department of Justice, "[j]oining a gang can be an assertion of independence not only from family, but also from cultural and class constraints" (2001: 3).

Today, the gang system in the Latino districts has adopted new, more sophisticated forms and aims, and many young Chicanos choose to join the "wild life" as a source of economic income and a means of developing a personal identity within the micro-society that the gang represents. In contrast to the first *Pachucos*, many of the gangs or *clickas* today are highly violent, and drug and arms dealing has become the basis of their economic resources as well as the indicator of social

control and empowerment. In such a highly hierarchical and male dominated social microstructure, the role of women is the traditional one, perpetuated down through generations and reinforced by popular culture in general. Thus, the women in the *clicka* have become voiceless companions, whose only role is to pamper his pretentious macho image, as well as to keep him "happy" in terms of his sexual needs (Campbell 1990). This generally ends up with teenage pregnancies, which are regarded as the most formidable proof of a boy's manhood, and a girl's womanhood. The roles well-defined and assimilated, these young Chicanos are reproducing the most basic limitations to female empowerment that the Chicana Movement endeavored to target.

However, several reports are today challenging the stereotype of the female in the gang as just a "sex object or tomboy" (Moore and Hagedorn 2001) and are describing the increasingly more active female role within these groups or in the formation of female gangs. As explained by James Diego Vigil,

like young males, many female youths are subjected to: culture conflict, poverty, and associated family and school problems. In addition, they are apt to undergo personal devaluation, stricter child-rearing experiences, tension-filled gender role expectations, and problems of self-esteem stemming from all these forces. Sexual abuse and exploitation experiences, initially with male relatives and later male street peers can lead to pent-up rage. Not surprising, some young females are now channeling that rage into holding their own in the violence of the street gang world. (2003: 227)

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The number of female gangs is fast increasing, as is the involvement of girls in gangs, providing a "way out" from "poverty, crime, illness and despair" (Griswold del Castillo 1979) for many young women whose socioeconomic and cultural resources are scarce. Many factors may be behind the decision to join a gang. C.J. Walker-Barnes and C.A. Manson mention "peer pressure, the desire for group affiliation, excitement, and moneymaking opportunities" (2001: 313), "the need for protection and living in a high crime neighborhood" (2001: 317), and "the affective characteristics of the family" (2001: 319), amongst others. This involvement in the *vida loca*, however, poses questions about the "liberating, emancipatory" effects that it may provide for its protagonists. On the one hand, joining a gang may imply a certain degree of self-assertion and agency/empowerment, as the woman in the *clicka* acquires an active role within this micro-organization, and thus challenges her role and fate as a woman. On the other, some argue that joining a gang "is a turning point and a gateway to a life offering very little chance for a socially acceptable career" (Moore and Hagedorn 2001). In other words,

En lo que se refiere al papel de las mujeres en las pandillas, dentro de la investigación con orientación feminista existen dos hipótesis opuestas: la primera supone que el

hecho de pertenecer a una gang facilita que surjan efectos emancipatorios en las muchachas (*liberation hypothesis*, Taylor, 1993). La segunda supone, en cambio, que en las muchachas pandilleras predominan, al final, las 'heridas sociales' (*social injury hypothesis*, Chesney-Lind, 1993). (Liebel 2005: 136)

This essay looks at the way two works, the fictional *Locas*, and the autobiographical *Two Badges*, deploy gang activity from a female perspective and examines whether being part of a gang puts their central characters in a liberating or constraining position.

3. The girls in the gang: two examples in literature

Yxta Maya Murray's *Locas*, first published in 1997, recounts the story of Lucía and Cecilia, two women whose fate is inevitably linked to the Los Lobos gang and its leader Manny, Lucía's boyfriend and Cecilia's brother. The gang controls the gun and drug trade in Echo Park and the surrounding area, and the relevance of both women is focused only through their relationship to Manny. However, Lucía is presented from the outset of the novel as a highly ambitious and self-aware woman, who is becoming acquainted with the financial organization of the gang, and, when Manny is betrayed and sent to jail, does not hesitate to try to supplant his power by creating her own all-female gang, *Las Fire Girls*. Lucía's aim ever after is to create, no matter how, a stronger and more powerful gang than *Los Lobos*, as well as to prove her total independence and control over her own life. Cecilia, however, after a miscarriage and falling in love with another woman, consciously retires from gang and even public life and seeks shelter and comfort in totally devoted service to the Catholic Church.

The novel presents a group of women, personified by Lucía, (focus of the following analysis) who, acknowledging their situation, in a highly transgressive and even defiant way, opt to "live" the street and reclaim a space and a voice of their own in the traditionally male setting that the *barrio* represents. Lucía not only crosses the domestic, female space, which implies submission and personal defeat for her, but desires to control male territory, the streets, as the most ruthless, aggressive, power-thirsty gang banger would do, in an attempt to show her power to rule on the one hand, and on the other, her power to survive in a clearly hostile personal and social environment. Her shift towards criminality is clearly vengeful and full of hatred and implies a denunciation of the clear-cut gender roles that mark life in the *barrio*, as well as a means of gaining the personal and social recognition that the community deprives women of. She says:

It was a big crew doing good business dealing out Manny's guns, and there was so much fire in the Park that I saw police driving down the streets looking different, looking almost nervous. The Lobos were getting tough enough to maddog the

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cops, howling cusses and sticking out their bony boy chests and making macho faces at the big blue suits. [...] With all those boys came the women. Hustler girls like me with our sprayed-out hair and our faces painted up glamour shiny, dark red and frosty brown on the eyes and cheeks, mouths like stoplights. The deal we made was to sex the boys hard, any time they wanted, and in return they'd take good care of us on the money end. They called us sheep, “good for fucking”, was what they said. The more the money came rolling in, the tougher the vatos got, and you had to make like you love begging or else you wouldn't get a dime. (1997: 31)

While the hierarchical, gender organization and arrangement of the *barrio* and the gang is made obvious from the outset of the text, the writer sets out clearly the difference between the younger generation and their forebears, who, like the women in *The House of Mango Street*, have assimilated their forced entrapment within the realms of domesticity. The young women, though, have taken a seemingly rebellious and transgressive step by choosing to move towards the street, where they relate to each other. However, this decision could be defined as a conscious adaptation of their traditional, patriarchal role to contemporary times, as most of them “choose” to become, like their mothers before them, silent companions and mothers as a means of survival. The difference between the two generations lies in their mothers' passive stance in the face of such a choice. Their mothers assimilated it as their moral and social duty, which contrasts with the active, conscious attitude of the new generation, for whom motherhood is perceived to be their only means of economic sustenance.

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In this town a woman doesn't have a hundred choices. Can't make yourself into a man, right? Can't even pick up and cruise on out of here just because you get some itch. And even though people talk all about doing college, that's just some dream they got from watching too much afternoon TV. No. A woman's got her place if she is a mama. That makes her a real person, where before she was just some skinny or fat little girl with skin like brown dirt, not worth a dime, not anybody to tip your hat to. (1997: 61-62)

This apparently contradictory situation might make us think that the two hypotheses mentioned earlier—the “liberation” and “social injury” one— have become one and the same in the case of these women: they need to stick to their socially and culturally imposed roles merely to survive, as the socioeconomic reality in which they are born (with all its implications) marks their fate and leaves them “choiceless” in terms of individual and personal development and empowerment. The utter lack of desire for personal growth conveyed in the above passage proves that, regardless of the obvious achievements of the Sixties, the reality of young people from the most underprivileged areas of cities (which are mostly those of the ethnic minorities) is light years away from the attainment, not only of the fictional American Dream, but of a real decent life. 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)

The inherent conditions of these personal/communal spaces condition their dwellers' individual practices, and as wittily shown by Mary Pat Brady, turn people's choices into the only choices people can make. In this situation, each of the characters/protagonists of these works and the reality portrayed in them, becomes the victim of the space where they grow up, which conditions their biased life choices.

Lucía's abhorrence of the female role and destiny in the *barrio* is the source of her greed and need to "succeed" in such a markedly patriarchal microworld. However, her motivations are far from being those of one who has an intellectual personal desire to become a voiced woman capable of choosing her own destiny. Instead, she presents a strong need for revenge and hatred towards all the members of her community, both male and female, which she will attain through the punitive and indiscriminate use of violence since, "because their behavior is under scrutiny by both males and other females, girls may act aggressively to demonstrate 'heart' and gain respect" (Peterson 2012: 75). This destructiveness and uncontrolled need for power and money, seems to come naturally to this woman, whose movements are Machiavellian and ruthless from the beginning. Thus, the creation of her *clicka*, far from striving to liberate women from the constraints of the gender based rules which hold sway in the *barrio* in general and the gang system in particular, reproduces the most vicious and violent features of these microcommunities. Lucía chooses her own "soldiers", whom she treats from the beginning as her subjects, and tries to mould them according to her own expectations of power and control. Monica Brown sums up the result like this: "these gang members appear to reject victimization in favor of narratives of aggression and violence actively initiated by them" (2002: 88). The hierarchical organization of the band is obvious and she stands out as the person in total control. In this regard, Lucía's choice responds accurately to Luis Rodríguez observation on gang involvement, in which he states that

[y]ouths [...] aren't in gangs to be criminals, killers, or prison inmates. For them a gang embraces who they are, gives them the incipient authority they need to eventually control their lives, the empowerment that other institutions —including schools and families— often fail to provide". (2001: 25)

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In this light, Gini Sikes’ “as-told-to” story, *8 Ball Chicks* is an example of fact being stranger than fiction, addressing an even more brutal reality than that found in Murray’s work. Sikes spent two years living and talking to Latina female gang members in Los Angeles, San Antonio and Milwaukee, and collecting their life stories. The true story of TJ, one of the protagonists of her text, portrays the inevitability of joining a gang as the only means of gaining comfort, recognition and the family they often lack, due to the disruption in their family environment. In TJ’s case, as in almost all of the other cases, the failure of the education system to provide these kids with a continuation of their educational and personal formative process is portrayed as being an underlying factor in the deviation of these adolescents’ conduct. Joining a gang, as Brady states, is the only choice these girls can make, which, in Luis Rodríguez’s words, turns them into “criminals of want” (1993: 10). TJ’s story reads like this:

Since childhood, TJ wanted to be something more than a wife or mother, the traditional aim of many Latina girls in her neighborhood. [...] In TJ’s new neighborhood, girls faced the same risks as guys —poverty, drugs, unemployment, violence. Most of their mothers had been teenagers themselves when they gave birth, and without strong female role models to emulate, their daughters looked to the boys. In this world, the strongest cholo, the one ‘crazy’ enough to take the dare —snipe at the cop, deal the big bucks, wipe out the enemy— survived. So you found a guy who was crazy or became crazy yourself. (1997: 20-21)

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Similarly, the case of Mona Ruiz, portrayed in the autobiography entitled *Two Badges, The lives of Mona Ruiz* (1997), presents the life of a “*barrio* girl” who has been immersed in gang life like Lucía, but whose life and goals change drastically when she becomes a policewoman. The memoir begins with Mona participating in a police arrest in her neighborhood of a member of her former *clicka*, and following the circular structure of the narrative, the protagonist gives a testimony of her life story since she became a gang member. The narration of Mona’s life is an accurate and true-to-life account of the fictionalized version of life in the *barrio* as portrayed in Murray’s novel, and shows a much harsher reality than the one presented in *Locas*. Violence acts as the axis around which Mona’s life revolves and is presented as intrinsic to the life of this woman in particular and the *barrio* in general. The situation in the *barrio* is violent *per se*, and, regardless of the discrimination and aggressions its dwellers experience from the outside world, this violence actually stems from within the community. It is the gang members, unadapted youngsters who turn their wrath against their own community, exerting it upon its residents. Mona describes it in the following terms:

Most of the houses on Wood had grate fences and barred windows, barricades that residents hoped would protect them from the burglaries that supplied the gangs with income. Santa Ana was a small quiet town, rows of woodframe houses dotted

by orange groves and surrounded by clear skies when I was born, but by the 1980s, whole strips of the city looked like a Third World country. Crime was a daily part of life and the gangs were a problem in nearly every school. (Ruiz 1997: 12-13)

The image she provides of the neighborhood is absolutely devastating and illustrates the complexity of the difficulties of life within it, which come from different sources. On a more personal level and concentrating on Mona's life, this social violence that the setting of the *barrio* implies is reinforced by the violence she suffers from her husband Frank, a young gang member who represents the uneducated, violent, stereotypically *macho* gang member, who uses his wife and children to reaffirm his masculinity, personal and social relevance and superiority. It is thus no coincidence that the first time he hits her, he does so in front of his friends, who have turned Mona's apartment into the place where they meet and get drunk and high on PCP. In Vigil's words,

Girls face further marginalization due to gender discrimination. They turn to the gang to seek refuge from this marginalization, rejecting traditional definitions of their roles in the process. Although seeking refuge in the gang from an alienating society, denying mainstream values and lifestyles, girls continue to be discriminated against by their male counterparts due to their gender. Girls turn to the gang for protection or to learn survival skills yet are abused both emotionally and physically by male members. (2008: 70)

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Mona's life and destiny is undoubtedly marked by the effects (both positive and negative) of diverse types of interaction with different men. Frank, father of her three children, thus, symbolizes and re-enacts the most extreme form of female subjugation and embodies the worst characteristics of a patriarchal, male chauvinist attitude, which for Alfredo Mirandé imply exaggerated masculinity: authoritarianism; violence and aggressiveness and self-centeredness (1997: 69-71). Frank's negative influence will lead Mona to restructure her life and start anew with her children, with a goal of her own. Her desire to be an educated woman and become a member of the L.A.P.D. in order to work for the sake of her community is the result of her father's absolute loathing of and disregard for gang members, whom he considers betrayers of the community. She says:

My father's hatred for the gang members was driven by his belief that they were lazy, disrespectful and shamed our people. The gangs flew in the face of his strong ethic and love of tradition. He proudly detailed his family history, his roots spreading back to Spain. He spoke with admiration of simple people who through sweat and dedication made their dreams come true for themselves and their children. History was sacred to him, and the gang members, the *vatos*, were all about today, the satisfactions of the desire of the moment, be it for beer or drugs or rowdiness. [...] If his dream for me was to become a police officer, then his greatest fear was certainly

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that I would fall into the gang scene. It is ironic, I suppose, that both of these visions would come true. (Ruiz 1997: 27)

Her father’s expectations for her, then, are frustrated when she joins the gang, starts going out with a *vato*, and finally becomes pregnant, and his reaction is to throw her out of the family house. The paternal figure that she loses at that moment will be somehow replaced by Osuna, one of her colleagues at the Police Department. After Mona has given up her administrative job at the Department because she is pregnant, Osuna, aware of her situation, accompanies her to a women’s shelter to abandon Frank and later encourages her to attain an education, study and fight for her dream. The end of the memoir, which connects with the first chapter where she is in the streets trying to fight gang violence and shows herself to be a woman who is absolutely devoted to working to improve the situation of her *barrio*, conveys an unmistakably didactic and philosophical tone, which arises from her intense life experience.

What have I learned? When I speak to the school classes or neighborhood groups, I tell them that the streets are the toughest school in the world, and that you have to learn if you ever want to make it to a saner life. I learned that people can’t be judged by where they are from, what they look like, or the uniform they wear —whether it is police blue or gangbanger baggy. I also learned that prejudice is part of our culture, and to deny it defeats any chance of changing it. I know that many cops and gang members are more alike than either would like to admit, each sharing a thirst for action and an expectation that they deserve something more than the people who share the streets with them. I have learned, sadly, that women are the first to be victimized in our society, and, even more tragically, many of them pass on the pain and abuse to their children. I have learned what death smells like, but I have also seen my three beautiful babies come into the world. I have felt love and trust, but I know those feelings fade in the face of betrayal. I have learned that no street, *barrio*, or gang is worth dying for, but that sacrifice is worthy in the name of justice and family. (Ruiz 1997: 287)

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4. Conclusion

The end of Mona Ruiz’s account of her life acquires a strong didactic tone, and serves as a conclusion. Both works, regardless of the differences in their nature, draw a fictionalized but true-to-life picture of what US Latino *barrios* are for many uneducated youngsters today. Scarce educational resources, high rates of unemployment and seemingly inherent violence —the source of which is the socioeconomic situation itself on the one hand, and the crudity of the youngsters who join gangs and direct their loathing towards their own community on the other— characterize the everyday life of Chicano/Latino quarters. This social

violence is reproduced in a circular way within the domestic sphere of life, and the strong hierarchical divisions and blatant male supremacy result in tremendous brutality on the part of the males towards the women, who are mistreated socially, psychologically and physically. In an extremely interesting way, both works portray the idea of the “natural” superiority of men over women and the submissive, docile way in which the women accept their role, duty and destiny. In this sense, the aim of both works is to present an escape route for these young women and present them with different choices and paths in their quest for personal empowerment. Each work presents an escape route for these young women protagonists but the two solutions are quite different from each other, though at the same time both may be described as extreme. Both women reject “regular life choices” in their search for a personal voice. Lucía opts for a life on the fringes of the already marginalized, whilst Mona, in contrast, chooses to be part of the mainstream system in order to utilize it in favor of her community. We could conclude that a middle choice that comes from education and opting for personal self-development is the only way to release these young women from the situation they live in, which is far from the postulates the Chicana Feminists of the Sixties defended, because, as explained by Monica Brown,

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[t]he conceptual anomaly of the girl gang member challenges and complicates the traditional relegation of woman to the private sphere. [...] Despite participation in the public sphere —the streets and the glare of media spectacularization the representation of female gang life still sustains many aspects of traditional femininity [...]. (2002: 85)

Or, in other words, for a young woman, joining a gang is both liberating and constraining, if we follow Taylor and Chesney-Lind’s hypothesis and concepts.

Both Murray’s fictional portrayal of *barrio* life and gang participation, and Mona Ruiz’s deployment of real female gang bangers’ lives, demonstrate that a poverty-stricken socioeconomic background and poor education in the most deprived *barrios* bring out the survival instinct in the youth of the community which leads to their incursion into the wild life. In these *barrios* they find

[...] a segmented labor force, limited access to all but minimum wage work, lack of subsidized child care, inflexible and overburdened schools, chronic economic hardships that contribute to increasing stress and violence within their homes, and a social welfare system that is overburdened, underfunded, and disorganized. (Dietrich 1998: 157)

This life choice, however, which is primarily personal, stems from a structural sociopolitical deficiency, and therefore, as Sikes says, it takes a concerted political effort and far-reaching commitment to save these kids from it.

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As I write this, the likelihood is there will be no rehabilitative programs, education, or jobs for troubled youth in the foreseeable future. It's simply not on either party's agenda. Instead the gang girls who manage to go straight through their own personal strength will most likely face careers of unsatisfying minimum-wage work, without benefits or opportunity for advancement for themselves or their children. It is no wonder that many children today are given to the very unchildish apprehension that life is a dead end. For them, there is little reason to adhere to the sustaining tenet of the American dream; that the way to happiness is through hard work and sacrifice. (Sikes 1997: 271)

On the other hand, the gang structure not only provides them with economic resources, as drug dealing is their main source of income, but also with some kind of emotional stability. It replaces the role of the traditional family, and utterances such as “[m]y gang is like a family to me”, “[b]eing in a gang makes me feel like I really belong somewhere”, and “[b]eing in a gang makes me feel important” (Esbensen et al. 1999: 45), prove so. As opposed to Murray's fictional, constructed, type-like characters, Ruiz's autobiography is an example of real people, whose emotional and life contradictions are symbolic of the *cul de sac* that their life signifies. Adolescent mothers with numerous kids, previously involved in drug use and abuse, who cohabit with a tremendous degree of violence, both in the streets and in their domestic space, whose bodies and lives belong literally to the gang once they “jump in”, delineate a reality that is dramatic and horrific and shows absolutely no tangible improvement in the lives of a very large number of “ethclass” minority youngsters. The texts portray a space, the *barrio*, which becomes symbolic of Anzaldúa's conceptual definition of the *frontera*, as a site of violence, oppression and discrimination and, in a parallel fashion, a place of reunion, sense of community and the only space where its members feel they belong and have a voice. In this respect, works such as these are essential to remind us of the fact that there is still a third world within the first one and as Sikes states, “We need to know these girls. Once we see them as individuals, we might become more determined to find the money, time, and people to help them [...]. But first we have to listen” (1997: 272).

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Notes

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