

Gang Violence and Latino Youth in Chicano Literature: The Loss of Potential

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Abstract

This literature analysis examines the representation of violence in Chicano literature, in particular, gang violence. The violent culture of gangs in the Chicano community is an essential aspect of the works of Luis Rodriguez, Mona Ruiz, Yxta Maya Murray, and Alejandro Morales. By examining the lives of the protagonists in a selection of works by these authors, this analysis aims to determine how gang violence affects the Latino youth portrayed in the texts. The analysis reveals that Latino youth who live in communities where violent gang activities are a part of everyday life often end up joining gangs. The characters decline as drug addiction, imprisonment, or death renders them powerless. Effectively the texts, through their representation of gang violence, make the plea that young Latinos living in gang communities need other options to regain control of their lives and their potential in life.

Analysis

“In the mid-1990s, it was estimated that the United States had more than 10,000 street gangs distributed in more than 800 cities” (Klein, 1995). The violent culture of gangs is prominent in many minority communities. A gang is generally understood to be an associated group whose members share a common identity and often engage in unlawful or antisocial behavior. Most gangs are established by marginalized youth who want to create their own identity and protest against the injustices of the dominant culture. For many young Latinos, the only way of surviving the tough life of the barrios is by joining the gang. In *Always Running La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*, Luis Rodriguez gives a description of the barrios: “Sometimes they had no sewage system or paved roads” (38).

The roots of the gang crisis in Latino communities go back to the 1940’s when Mexican Americans were treated violently by the dominant culture. According to Rodriguez, Latino gangs originated with the “Mexican *Pachuco* style of 1930’s and 1940’s, and was later recreated with the *Cholos*” (4). The *Pachucos* became the model to follow for new gangs because they developed the foundations of a gang: “the Mexican *Pachuco* initiated the emblematic tattoos, the signing with hands, the writing of legends on walls” (4). In *Gang Nation narratives*, by Monica Brown, she analyzes the plays of Luis Valdez about the 1940’s “*Pachucos*” and the “Zoot Suit Riots” and concludes that the *Pachuco* of this time was struggling with issues of identity and being “caught between nations” (40). Latinos today face the same issues of identity confronted by those *Pachucos* of the 1940’s. Some of the difference between Mexican *Pachucos* and the new generation is the way they conduct business. Although *Pachucos* were considered an outlaw group by the dominant culture they respected their communities and older citizens. For example, in the past the code of behavior was that a *Pachuco* deals with the problem one on one. The new generation of gangsters has developed more violent tactics of controlling their territory. In *Two Badges: the lives of Mona Ruiz*, Ruiz writes:

A drive by had left a woman with bullet in her back. She had been a bystander, just minding her own business. To the *veteranos*, the shooting was proof that wild new generation was ratcheting up the worst parts of gang life and leaving behind the codes of behavior that had guided the Trooper and others (62).

Limited options are available to the youth who live in the poorest and most violent parts of the country. These violent acts have created feelings of fear and powerless for those who are not in the gangs. The question of whether to join a gang for some youth is not an option because growing up in a place like East L.A. is tough; exposure to drugs and street violence becomes part of the everyday routine. Under these circumstances, safety is a large concern. As stated by Luis Rodriguez, young Latinos are forced to claim a gang otherwise they get “fucked” by all the gangs (55). Youth join a gang out of necessity to protect themselves from gang members and surrounding neighborhoods. In her autobiography of Mona Ruiz, describes her first day of junior high as an intimidating and fearful day: “Changa and Guera hit us up in the morning, stepping in our path and demanding to know which gang we claimed” (40). Latinos living in gang neighborhoods are expected to claim a gang otherwise they are putting their lives at risk. Furthermore, it is sometimes a family tradition to join the gang, as Ruiz states in her autobiography. She was expected to join the gang because her cousins were the leaders. Latino youth join gangs to feel a sense of belonging. Many Latinos struggle with issues of identity because they feel caught in between two cultures. To create that sense of belonging they form clubs or gangs. Rodriguez states that gangs were seen as clubs by their members: “It was something to belong to something that was ours. We weren’t in boy scouts, in sports teams or camping groups” (42).

For whatever reason individuals choose to become members of a gang, they must go through the initiation process. Becoming an official member of a gang is a painful process that consists of a brutal jump in by all the members, or, if you are a female, of having sex with all the members of the gang (Rodriguez, 54). As Monica Brown states, “to join the gang, he must not only show a willingness to accept violence against his own body without showing fear, or breaking down, but also willingness to enact it upon other” (67). To gain respect and a leadership position in the gang one must be willing to take on any task including killing another member of the gang. For example, in the novel *Locas*, by Yxta Maya Murray the leader of the gang Manny was overthrown for showing signs of weakness. When Chico, one of the members of the gang, left to form his own gang, Manny did not punish him for withdrawing because he considered him to be like a brother. The consequences of Manny’s behavior were that Chico came back to rob Manny leaving the gang broke and one of Manny’s homeboys was assassinated: “Cause of Manny Ghost got beat and then he got dead, and Manny wasn’t even taking it like a man. The Lobos, though, they need to see their boss act brave” (142). Lucia who was dating Manny took advantage of the situation that Manny was going through and convinced one of the members to take Manny out. In the gang those who demonstrate no fear of killing take over the business.

Once new recruits have demonstrated to the gang leader that they can be trusted, they gain status and benefits. Some of the benefits are protection from surrounding neighborhoods, drugs, sex, weapons and power: “I was 13 years old already. Already tattooed. Already sexually involved. Already into drugs” (Rodriguez, 48). Gang leaders like recruiting twelve and thirteen years old because they can still be molded to fit the goals of the gang. In *Locas*, Lucia goes out to recruit members for the gang and explains that the new members were babies: “...but you want them young ones cause they can be the meanest” (212). The younger the gangsters the more aggressive they are, because they are fighting to gain or keep their status. Keeping the status in a gang can be a difficult task if one is not willing to follow up with what ever task the leader wants. There will always be someone else who is willing to do the job if you can not or will not do it. Being a member of a gang sometimes means dropping out of school, going to prison or being willing to sacrifice your life for the gang. In all the novels in this analysis, the main characters drop out of school to dedicate their time to the gang. In *Locas*, Lucia drops out of school to bang with Manny who had drop school to start his own gang: “He found me when I was fifteen years old, a red-candy cherry girl sitting on the porch in my new dress with the bow...” (Murray, 21). Rodriguez and Ruiz report dropping out of school to bang with the gang, but later both return to school and graduate.

Joining the gang is painful but trying to withdraw is deadly: “I sneaked out of my ‘hood in the dark of night, hid out in an L.A. housing project, and removed myself from the death-fires of *La Vida Loca*” (Rodriguez, 4). Members of the gang who want to remove themselves from this life end up dead because once you joined you are in it for life. To escape the cruel reality of living “*La Vida Loca*” where there is no future; many youngsters take refuge in substance abuse. In the novel *Barrio on the Edge: Caras viejas y vino Nuevo*, by Alejandro Morales the main character Julian becomes a drug addict who runs away from home and throws his life away.

In the autobiography, *Always Running La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*, Rodriguez dreamed of becoming a saxophone player:

I didn't really know how, but I envisioned myself offering melodies which screeched of back roads and wet sidewalks and Spanish Broadway night stalkers. I felt like I had this brass throat, moaning like Billy Holiday, shrieking like James Brown (86).

As the story goes on he and his friends start a club or gang because they do not fit in with the rest of the school. They try to establish their own identity and in the process of doing so the school labels them as troublemakers. Rodriguez feels like he is no good and compares himself with his brother Rano: "So when I was at Garvey, he was in high school being the good kid, the Mexican exception, the barrio success story-my supposed model" (49). Being labeled as a "good-for-nothing" because he would not assimilate to the dominant culture, affected Rodriguez's self esteem and made him hungry for power and status:

I wanted this power. I wanted to be able to bring a whole school to its knees and even make teachers squirm. All my school life until then had been poised against me: telling me what to be, what to say, how to say it. I was a broken boy, shy and fearful (42).

This anger towards a system that could not or would not understand Rodriguez drove him to join a gang, where his adolescence was spent doing drugs, committing crimes and serving jail time. Eventually, he realized that the gang would not offer him a future and relocated himself to Chicago, where today he works as a journalist.

The autobiography *Two Badges: The Lives of Mona Ruiz*, by Mona Ruiz another success story illustrates the story of young Latina trying to make her father proud by staying away from the gangs and focusing in school: "My father's hatred for the gang members was driven by his belief that they were lazy, disrespectful and shamed our people" (27). Ruiz describes that it was tough trying to live up to her father's expectations because gangs were dominant in her barrio and if you were not part of them you would get harassed all the time. Under these circumstances, Mona had no other choice but to join the gang:

I had been selected to join the gang and had been scheduled for initiation. I would have to take an oath to lay down my life if necessary for the gang, to fight and even kill...I had been tapped for membership and it was just assumed that I would accept. (67)

While in the gang she got married to a gangster and went through an abusive relationship. When the future seemed lost, Ruiz regained control of her life and joined the police academy. Currently, Mona Ruiz is a police officer in Santa Ana, the area where once she was a gangster.

The autobiographies of Rodriguez and Ruiz, and the novels of Morales and Murray give voice to the experiences of many young Latinos in the barrio. Few Latinos have the opportunity to withdraw from the gang and become success stories like Rodriguez and Ruiz. Many become drug addicts like Julian and Manny, others go to prison like: "Dario, Conejo and I were booked for assault with intent to commit murder" (Rodriguez, 188) or die running the gang life:

I had this feeling as he walked away that I wouldn't see him again. The next day I got a call from a friend. Conejo had been on the I-5 freeway with his brother when some rivals recognized them. The carload of bangers pulled up alongside and fired, shooting Conejo in the head. Then, after the funeral, a couple of Troopers went over for payback. It never seemed to end (Ruiz, 71).

The gang lifestyle controls the future of Latino youth because it interferes with their education. The majority of youth portrayed in these novels are students who are no longer in school either because they were expelled or dropped out. Rodriguez comments in his autobiography that he spent most of his time doing drugs and committing crimes after he got expelled from school because he had nothing to do (105). This deviant behavior leads to the incarceration or death of many young Latinos who could have a better future. The autobiographies of Rodriguez and Ruiz demonstrate that when Latinos are given the opportunity to remove themselves from the gang, some do succeed. Both these authors come from families who do not support the gangs and who supported them when they were trying to withdraw from the gang. In the novels of Morales and Murray the protagonists came from broken homes where the parents' had lost hope in them. Morales describe the relationship between the main character Julian and his father as unhealthy: "...Don Edmundo's words battered him. Look here, you asshole, if you ever come back to this house again, I'll kill you..." (28). Julian's father disapproved the activities his son was involved in and

after Julian's mother died their relationship worsened because both blamed themselves for her death. Murray comments about the example the mother of Lucia set for her as an alcoholic who prostituted herself to support her addiction and forgot to take care of Lucia: "A red wine *borracha*. She's drunk herself so big she only fits in one chair in the whole damn house, house, and her hair's everywhere, bushing brown and curly so she looks like a bum" (36). For Latino youth to regain control of their lives and withdraw themselves from the gangs they need family support.

In conclusion, the texts examined in this literature analysis give voice to a marginalized group struggling to establish their own identity within the dominant culture. The autobiographies of Mona Ruiz and Luis Rodriguez, two former gang members, vividly and fearlessly inform us of the cruel realities of the gang violence that many young Latinos face in their everyday life: "By the time I turned 18 years old, 25 of my friends had been killed by rival gangs, police, drugs, car crashes, and suicides" (Rodriguez, 4). Young Latinos need more role models like Rodriguez and Ruiz to give them hope so they believe that there is something better outside the gang culture. Latinos living in gang communities need other options to regain control of their lives and their potential in life.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express her appreciation to her loving son, Hector, her parents Aida and Alfredo Sanchez, her best friend Alma Navarrete, and Helen Barnes and David Hall of the Boise State McNair Scholars Program for their support, encouragement and assistance with this paper.

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