

YXTA MAYA MURRAY'S *LOCAS* (1997): AND WHAT ABOUT CHICANA BARRIO ADOLESCENTS?*

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The Chicano Movement that emerged in the decade of the sixties and continued in the subsequent years, served as an incredibly effective means to proclaim and demand the rights of this silenced community in the eyes of mainstream, accommodated U.S. society, and, most importantly, to raise the social, cultural and ethnic consciousness of those who shaped the group that had been labelled as "Mexican-American". Subsequently, the feminist Chicana Movement fought for the recognition of the silent existence of the female community within the group and mainstream society. However, at the advent of the 21st century, there exists a group of young women who still experience the difficult social and personal situation that living in a marginal position provokes. Some young women in the barrios, such as the ones portrayed in Yxta Maya Murray's *Locas* (1997), opt for joining the "wild life", in an attempt to survive and exist in the face of adversity.

Keywords: *Chicana feminism, adolescence, barrio, gangs, violence.*

El Movimiento Chicano que se creó y se desarrolló a partir de la década de los sesenta, sirvió como herramienta para proclamar y publicar los derechos de la comunidad chicana, que hasta el momento se encontraba en una clara situación de discriminación en el engranaje social de los E.E.U.U.. Del mismo modo, el Movimiento favoreció el nacimiento de una "conciencia chicana" entre aquellos ciudadanos norteamericanos que habían sido denominados y etiquetados como "mejicano-americanos". Posteriormente, el Movimiento Chicano

feminista luchó para que la comunidad femenina chicana tuviera una voz dentro de su propio colectivo y la comunidad norteamericana en general. Sin embargo, existe todavía hoy en día, a comienzos del siglo XXI, un colectivo de mujeres cuya realidad social y personal se caracteriza por una clara situación de marginalidad. Es el caso de algunas mujeres de los barrios, tales como las que se presentan en la novela de Yxta Maya Murray Locas (1997), que optan por asumir la “vida loca”, en un intento de sobrevivir en una situación vital de obvia adversidad.

Palabras clave: *feminismo chicano, adolescencia, barrio, pandillas, violencia.*

The Chicano Movement that emerged in the decade of the sixties and continued in the subsequent years, served as an exceptionally effective means to proclaim and demand the rights of this silenced community in the eyes of mainstream, accommodated U.S. society, and, most importantly, to raise the social, cultural and ethnic consciousness of those who shaped the group that had been labelled as “Mexican-American”. In this sense, the Movement contributed to the publication of the dates and historical references that had marked the reality of the citizens of Mexican descent who had inhabited the United States long before the first Anglo settlers arrived in the territories of the South West. It concomitantly served to vindicate the rich and culturally amalgamated nature of the *mestizo* race, La Raza, a symbol of the power of interculturalism and *mestizaje*. The literary works of the members an emerging literary group, such as Rudolfo Anaya, Alurista, Miguel Méndez, Tino Villanueva and Luis Valdez, amongst others, served as a means of publication of the history of the community, as well as a mechanism for the public condemnation of its social and economic deprivation within the intricate U.S. social network.

The *Movimiento*, committed as it was to the changing of the power relationships within the country, however, did somehow fail to consider its own boundaries and scrutinize its internal hierarchical

organization, based primarily on parameters of gender division. In this context, the situation of Chicana women inside the community was akin to the position of the Chicano community within the overall U.S. distribution of social hierarchies. Chicanas were forced to fulfil a set of strongly established roles and norms that had been perpetuated and transmitted within and without the group through centuries of an overtly patriarchal system. The rights of Chicanas, thus, were different and fewer than those of their male counterparts, and their capacity to dismantle such a constraining situation, very limited. Some years after the emergence of the *Movimiento Chicano*, the women of the community started to define and subsequently develop their own struggle which endeavoured to open up the internal boundaries the community relied upon, and to bring about the ensuing emergence of these women into the realm of society. In this context, the utilization of diverse literary means for the publication of their identity and the thorough re-description and re-definition of the myths that had kept them perpetually subjugated and silenced, was essential, as it had been for their male counterparts. From a contemporary viewpoint, the social and cultural achievements of the *Movimiento* in general, and the vindications of the female movement in particular, are undeniable. Yet, the advance of a fiercely capitalist society which disregards those who do not fit into the regular, mainstream system, still marks the reality of many of the citizens of the lower income brackets and underprivileged echelons of society, as is the case of many members of the present-day Chicano community. In the light of this, a widely known and recognized community of Chicano writers and artists continue to pursue the equality of the members of their community through the publication of their works.

The social situation of both U.S. society in general, and the Chicano community in particular, as well as the overall organization of the world with its increasingly stronger boundaries which are wittingly ill-defined and concealed in the name of a more globalized, democratic and universally shared humanity, have proposed new ways of understanding social, economic and cultural demands. This new structure of the world and the different social organization of societies are the cause of a veiled, more subtle source of hierarchy and discrimination within said societies, as is the case of the U.S., a society, where, theoretically, people of different ethnic, gender and religious

circumstances share equal rights in all public and private spheres and are eligible to be part of a regularized, mainstream social group. The recent presidential elections have undoubtedly marked the beginning of a new era in the understanding of social relationships within the country, some say. In this same context, the preceding dispute for the democrat leadership in the run-up to the elections for the eventual proclamation of either a woman or an African-American as President of the most powerful and socially, economically and culturally influential country in the world, has been construed as the accomplishment of the utmost heights of equality among the citizens of the country, as well as the worldwide manifestation of the idea that the universally exported American Dream does exist. The plight of women and people of different ethnic and economic minorities has proved effective in the eyes of the majority of U.S. citizens and the rest of the western countries throughout the world. Nonetheless, regardless of the symbolic significance of the facts, one should not forget that the situation of many U.S. citizens is far from being close to the ideals of the American Dream, and even to basic human rights and necessities, as there are still many communities and groups that live within the strongly established physical and socio-economical boundaries that exist within the country.

The configuration of space within cities in the United States, for example, is an interesting phenomenon which promotes said existing internal social boundaries. Cities have been planned, drawn up and distributed to hypothetically facilitate human life in perfectly angled squares, and organized in different areas or quarters. However, this apparent humanization of urban space is far from being true. The geometric distribution of cities and their internal subdivision is directly linked to a stratified, hierarchical organization of human existence. Thus, neighborhoods have been designed and in a way “fenced” according to parameters that do not always respond to the most democratic principles of human interaction. In this context, any big metropolis in the United States has districts that are organized in terms of the ethnic origin of its inhabitants.

Thus, the *barrio*, or the area in the city where citizens and immigrants of “Latin” origin reside is common in almost all big North American cities. These areas, generally separated from the downtown

areas of the cities, become safe havens in which the population of an ethnic and social origin other than the ruling one feels protected and “at home”, as observed in the following words by Richard Griswold del Castillo, collected by Raúl Homero Villa:

Whatever its implications for the socioeconomic fortunes of Mexican-Americans, the creation of the barrio was a positive accomplishment. The barrio gave a geographical identity, a feeling of being at home, to the dispossessed and the poor. It was a place, a traditional place that offered some security in the midst of the city's social and economic turmoil (1979: 150).

Concomitantly, *barrios* have also become ghettoized areas which promote the exclusion of their inhabitants from mainstream society, and respond to particular parameters of social organization and internal hierarchization. Thus most *barrios* in the United States experience difficult sanitary and educational conditions and high rates of youth unemployment and violence, for the “economic restructuring of post-industrial cities has left urban communities bereft of stable employment opportunities. Consequently, urban residents experience severe social isolation that produces self-destructive behaviors and reproduces values that foster helplessness (Ginwright, Cammarota and Noguera 2005: 27).

The case of Los Angeles' Echo Park, portrayed in Yxta Maya Murray's novel *Locas* is no different from other *barrios* throughout the nation, and corresponds perfectly to the following depiction of the impact of the present-day socio-political global situation:

Over the past decade, urban communities have experienced unprecedented social, economic, and political transformation. Global capitalism has contributed to the exodus of jobs, higher levels of inequality, and the marginalization of the urban poor. Urban youth have been particularly affected by this transformation and the concomitant social and economic conditions. The failure of so many urban school districts to prepare young people academically, the absence of

early-childhood education, and the removal of after-school opportunities have combined with a growing fear of crime to shape a national consciousness that is complacent to the injustices that negatively affect urban communities and the youth who live in them (Ginwright, Cammarota and Noguera 2005: 27).

The main aim of this essay is, accordingly, to portray the harsh situation Chicana women experience in the *barrios* as depicted in Yxta Maya Murray's *Locas* and to observe whether the demands of the first Chicana feminists have been completely achieved by all women of the Chicana community, in an attempt to raise the question of whether these young women are proposing a new way of understanding feminism and female liberation.

A great many of the vindications of first generation Chicanas conveyed their need for social, economic and personal emancipation from their male counterparts, a demand for the right to education and a public voice, as well as an individual, conscious development of their sexuality, and as a consequence, of maternity. Their achievements were many and they transformed positively the Chicana's position within and without the community. However, the work that is the core of this essay proves that there is still a substantial group of Chicanas whose hard living and social conditions prevent them from acquiring their personal freedom and choice of individual identity as it was understood by preceding Chicana activists. Yxta Maya Murray's *Locas*, first published in 1997, portrays the situation of some of these young women who live in Echo Park, and who have to overcome their difficult life situation by different, and sometimes questionable, means. Lucía and Cecilia, residents of Echo Park, an East L.A. *barrio* and protagonists of a two-narrator novel which provides the reader with two different perspectives of one same life situation, personify the quest for a place within a society that has already chosen their place and destiny for them. Poverty, an uneducated young population and an obvious lack of cultural and economic resources, define the lives of youngsters in the *barrio*, who opt for joining the *vida loca* and gang life, as a source of economic income, power and respectability. However, gang life, markedly masculine, relegates women to a position of sexual companions to the men, whose masculinity is proven by "having" a

silent woman next to them, who is eager to become a mother at a very early age and accept her role submissively.

One of the most essential demands of second-wave feminists in the sixties and seventies was that of the right of women to be economically independent from their male counterparts, as well as to vindicate education as the only means of acquiring such independence. The two protagonists of the novel, Lucía and Cecilia, are presented from the outset of the work as women whose existence revolves around a central male figure, Manny. Manny, leader of *Los Lobos* gang, is Cecilia's brother and Lucía's boyfriend and becomes the essential figure in the process of acquisition of an identity for these two women within the strongly hierarchical internal organization of the *barrio* and the gang system. However, being related to Manny does not provide them entirely with a different status from the rest of the women in the *barrio*, whose main role is to accompany the boys, as observed in the following extract from the novel:

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 deals 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 (Murray 1997: 31).

Within this context, Lucía and Cecilia present two different ways of facing this reality and "making their most" out of it. Cecilia, Manny's sister, admits her fate and desires to be a gang member's girl and attain her dream of being a mother, and thus, a "real woman" soon. Her acquired status in the *barrio* as the leader's sister, will facilitate her quest and she will soon start a relationship with Beto, one of the gang's leading members, who will rapidly get her pregnant. Cecilia, thus, embodies the stereotype of the accompanying, silent "sheep" (term used throughout the novel to define women) and opts for, in the eyes of Lucía, the "easy, passive life". Lucía, on the contrary, stands

out from the female community in the *barrio* and is presented as a “vocal” woman, who despises the rest of the women and rejects her socially constructed fate. She discreetly starts introducing herself in the organization of *Los Lobos*, by means of helping Manny deal with the accounts of the group, which come from the drug dealing that the gang is involved in. Her access to information will soon nurture the girl’s desire for power and a self-constructed identity, and she will rapidly acquire the “masculine” traits that are common to gang members. She organizes her own female gang, which she designs as a mirror-image of the male gangs, and establishes a strong hierarchical arrangement of the girls who work for her, and whom she selects from the flock of sheep in the neighborhood.

These sheep-like women, the majority of the young adolescents who inhabit Echo Park as portrayed by Murray, at least at first sight share many of the traits through which the traditional female stereotype of the silent woman, which the first Chicana feminists fought so fiercely against, was constructed. Passivity, silence, submission, endurance and the acceptance of maternity as the unique female contribution to the community are presented as intrinsic to the lives of the women personified in the character of Cecilia. However, the situation portrayed in the text differs considerably from the one denounced by the first Chicana writers and activists, as the position of these contemporary young women is described as a “voluntary” one, which these women adopt willingly in order to make the most of their men and acquire economic stability. In this sense, Cecilia overtly affirms that the fact of being a man’s girl and his babies’ mother is her own personal choice. Furthermore, Cecilia’s status within the *barrio* as the sister of the leader is consciously used by her as a way of overcoming her naturally accepted and assimilated ugliness in terms of the community’s standards of beauty, as she knows that being her partners can help the boys obtain upward mobility within the hierarchical network of the gang. She says:

So I had my use, but the best part was still getting all that attention from Manny’s boys even though I never had the feel for sex much. (...). I loved being Manny’s princess. All those gangsters came calling on me even though I look like a ditch-digging *bracero*. But that’s the

kind of power a woman has. Not like Lucía thinks, her head ticking with all her money thoughts, thinking she is the real driver. No, a woman can only make men do what she wants with the sex. Even if she doesn't like some of that little price so much (Murray 1997: 60).

Cecilia, thus, rationally and deliberately chooses her destiny and is able to utilize what she considers to be her female attributes and power to consciously decide about her life. In this same sense, she continues describing that "I picked Beto because he looked like he would be going somewhere" (Murray 1997: 61). The implications of this statement convey a standpoint in a woman's situation which depicts female agency and a voluntary choice over her life and destiny and moreover, a mindful, utilitarian approach towards males, who are presented as unconsciously relegated to female desire and power. In this context, she describes her relationship with Beto and her wish to be a mother in the following terms:

What I wanted the whole time was to be looked at that way, to have someone get real still and quiet when they saw me, like I was the most beautiful thing. And Beto would do that, he would see in me what he wanted, a girl wearing a skirt with her hair down, hands folded and modest, patient and willing just like any other girl, and he'd reach over to me soft and serious (Murray 1997: 61).

Following this line, the description of female sexuality differs from its portrayal in the texts by the first Chicana writers and intellectuals, who denounced the total personal annihilation and subjugation of women in this sphere. Cecilia's narration, conversely, depicts the control of these women over their bodies and sexuality, and the use they wish to make of it, even though the eventual goal she herself strives for is that of being a mother as the only means to achieve personal and social fulfilment. The young girls depicted in the novel make a conscious, personal use of their sexuality, which they intentionally utilize as an exchange product for their economic stability. The controversy proposed by the text, thus, arises when one looks at the possible moral implications that the choice of the girls

may provoke. Their supposedly silent and submissive role may be understood as no different from the one their predecessors, the first Chicana feminists, denounced and fought to change. However, on the other hand, the idea of the conscious, free exploitation of their body and sexuality may undermine the previous assumption, and, at the same time, could be criticized and interpreted as an obvious example of female subjugation which perpetuates the most traditional and constraining forms of male dominance.

Motherhood, moreover, also seems a controversial issue according to the parameters proposed above. Considered as the basis of the perpetuation of the Chicano community within the framework of an inhospitable society, motherhood, symbolized in the image of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, has been described for centuries as the only personal and social function of women within the group. In this sense, the reproductive function of the female community has been submissively assimilated by the women of the community as their duty and the only form of productive contribution to the group. On the contrary, even though they still consider motherhood as the only means of personal fulfilment and social survival, most of the girls presented in the text are adolescents who have “chosen” to be mothers at a very early age and become “real persons”, as Cecilia explains:

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 because you get some itch. And even though people talk all a out doing college, that's just some dream they got from watching too much afternoon TV. No. A woman's got her place if she's 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 (Murray 1997: 62).

The above words, which portray the conscious acceptance of maternity as the only way to be someone in the *barrio*, may lead to differing interpretations and imply distinct moral connotations. Understood as it is presented by Lucía, the conscious act of becoming mothers undoubtedly conveys the power for free choice and a tactical,

rational use of this uniquely female attribute. Nonetheless, the notion of teen pregnancy, and the economic intentionality that the girls provide maternity with, may be regarded by many as contradictory to the essential values of female integrity and freedom. A study proposed by Geoffrey Hunt about Chicana teen pregnancy shows, as is depicted in the novel, the fact that motherhood helps these girls fulfill themselves as individuals, and distance themselves from the risks of gang life.

In spite of the strains of motherhood, almost every mother agreed that having children had changed their lives in very positive ways. They found that they had much more stability in their lives, that they had calmed down, and that they were now able to set goals for themselves and look on themselves as the role mothers for their children, a responsibility that they were willing to assume. Motherhood facilitated their negotiating a new identity as more capable, more confident, more responsible, and more mature people. They had a new focus and purpose in their lives (2005: 369).

In contrast to Cecilia, the character of Lucia, the main protagonist of *Locas*, is aware of the aforementioned female fate and despises the rest of the women in the *barrio*, who have submitted to male supremacy, becoming mothers, and thus, dependent on males for personal and economic stability. A woman of strong ambitions, Lucia will fight ferociously to become an independent woman, and becomes the symbol of the utmost rejection of the deeply-rooted patriarchal system that the *barrio* in general, and the gang system, in particular, relies upon. Furthermore, her aim is to surpass male power and become not only personally and economically independent from men, but to be respected and feared by the whole community. In her quest for power and recognition, her first decision will be to avoid at all costs reproducing the submissive female mother role that the rest of the girls in the neighborhood docilely, sheepishly, adopt. She says:

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. (...) The next day I went to Family Planning and got on the pill nice and quick and didn't tell a soul (Murray 1997: 40-41).

The above words clearly show that she acts in a totally rational, greedy, "bloodthirsty, wolf-like" manner, abandoning for good her fate of becoming a sheep, like the rest of the women in her community. The creation of her own female gang, shows that her main aim is to prove her total independence from men, as well as the fact she does not have to sell herself for economic and personal survival. The moral debate surrounding Lucía's choice of life arises from the means she uses to achieve such emancipation, for she takes up violence and criminality in order to become economically independent, and thus, reproduces and tries to surpass all male attitudes. Lucía not only wants to be strong and free like the men of her community, but she wants to be stronger and more powerful, if possible. This attitude is not an isolated one, as we may infer from the following words by Taylor, transcribed by Isela Alexandra García, who explains that female gang members are,

Just as cutthroat in business practices as any male, and will be just as aggressive as any male to protect [their] commodity and territory. These females see the only way out of ghetto life, while keeping their self-respect, is through the creation of their own crews, with their own rules and values (1993: 44).

This overacting of female freedom is, however, a fervent rejection and denial of the blatant discrimination that women have

endured in the Chicano community in general, and the gang system in particular. In the case of Lucía, the figure of her mother, whom she absolutely despises, depicts complete female subjugation, as she has been brutally abused by her father, abandoned, and has had to turn to prostitution to survive. Lucía, in an attempt to escape such a destiny, fights for the contrary, and, as explained before, ends up going to the opposite extreme. Lucía's attitude, in this sense, may be criticised as totally individualistic and personal, since it does not call for the liberation of the women in her community in general, but only takes into account her own. She despises the rest of the women of her group and treats the girls in her *clicka* as inferior to her, thus, subordinate to her will, by means of the creation of a totally hierarchical structure, in which she is the absolute leader. Lucía, thus, reproduces the worst attitudes of male gang activity, and does not offer any overall, positive solution to the situation of the girls around her, which is the following:

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 with 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 channelling that rage into holding their own in the violence of the street gang world (Vigil 2003: 227).

Murray's portrayal of life in the *barrio*, in summary, responds to the previous words and opens up a deep debate about contemporary working-class Chicana adolescents' personal identities and social position. The fact that the only way out for many young women is through joining the gang world and assuming violence as a necessary means of survival, or as a means of economic stability within the framework of violence and criminality, proves the harsh certainty that the situation of this community is still far from ideal. In this context, the characters of the novel represent the urgent need for survival within a hostile reality, and show two contrasting escape routes, regardless of the moral implications of each of the two girls's choices. Moreover, from a more conceptual stance, the attitudes of the girls may lead us to question the validity of the unquestionable

achievements of Chicana feminists within such a hard life situation. In this sense, the implications of the two girls' choices may lead the reader to think about whether their acts may be understood as a new way of interpreting the right of women to be free and independent or as a step back in women's quest for total equality and emancipation.

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