

ON HAVING/BEING A MOTHER: YXTA MAYA MURRAY'S PORTRAYAL OF MOTHERHOOD AND *BARRIO* GIRLS¹

Amaia Ibararán

Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea

ABSTRACT

The marked patriarchal essence of Mexican and Chicano culture and the relevance of the family as a foundational institution, has «relegated» Chicana women to being perceived mainly through their reproductive and childrearing functions. Despite the innumerable achievements of the Chicana Feminist Movement, there is still a group of young, uneducated women who understands motherhood as an ultimate act of survival within a society that denies them their basic rights. This essay observes the way motherhood and mothering are portrayed in Yxta Maya Murray's *Locas* (1997) and *What it Takes to Get to Vegas* (1999), whose protagonists' lives are determined by a difficult social situation and an unbreakable dependence upon men.

KEYWORDS: Chicana Literature, female teenagers, motherhood, *barrio*, gangs, education.

RESUMEN

La naturaleza patriarcal de la cultura chicana y mejicana y la importancia de la familia como institución fundamental para el grupo, ha perpetuado la creencia de que la capacidad reproductiva de las mujeres era la única que poseían. A pesar de los innumerables logros del Feminismo Chicano, el grupo de las adolescentes de los barrios más desfavorecidos entiende la maternidad como el mejor modo de sobrevivir en una sociedad que les niega unos derechos básicos. Este trabajo observa el modo en el que las obras de Yxta Maya Murray *Locas* (1997) y *What it Takes to Get to Vegas* (1999) reflejan la maternidad, con unas protagonistas caracterizadas por una situación social extremadamente complicada, así como por una gran dependencia del género masculino.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Literatura Chicana, adolescentes, maternidad, barrios, pandillas, educación.

Motherhood, as defined by the Webster online dictionary, is «[t]he state of being a mother; the character or office of a mother». According to the same source, a mother is «[a] female parent; especially, one of the human race; a woman who has borne a child; «[t]hat which has produced or nurtured anything; source of birth



or origin; *generatrix*»². In addition to the merely biological connotations of these definitions, the role of mothers and motherhood itself encompasses many other more subtle and at the same time essential notions, such as the cultural and purely functional ones, which make it vital for the correct advance of societies. The role of mothers in general and the significance of motherhood, in particular, has been of extreme importance to the development of a female identity over the course of the last few decades, and has thus acquired a status that it lacked in the previous centuries, when it was «just» considered a genetic attribute of women, very much related to the definitions proposed above. At the beginning of the 21st century, and almost a century after the first female voices started to be heard, the situation of women has undeniably changed in both the public and private spheres. The contemporary notion of families in general and personal relationships in particular has broadened infinitely, providing motherhood with a heightened, more recognized status within society, which has facilitated the fact that women face motherhood and their role of mothers in a more holistic fashion. Hence, the way women have approached maternity and motherhood over the last few years has varied considerably and has experienced a gradual acknowledgment of the socio cultural and personal implications of motherhood. In this context, the voice of the Third-Wave Feminists that is being heard today is acclaiming and celebrating it as a political act, which should be a conscious choice and therefore, treated as such.

The case of Chicana women in particular, characterized by belonging to a group which is considered underprivileged within the US social configuration due to its ethnic and class characteristics, has also undergone several different periods regarding the significance of motherhood for the community. The marked patriarchal essence of Mexican and Chicano culture and the importance of the family as a cornerstone institution within the group, has «relegated» women to the position of mothers throughout the centuries, believing that the reproductive and childrearing functions of women were their only ones. In this sense, Adrienne Rich's description of motherhood as having two superimposed meanings, masterly defines the circumstances of the Chicana woman/mother:

the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that the potential-and all women- shall remain under male control. This institution has been a key-stone of the most diverse social and political systems. (...) In the most fundamental and

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² <http://www.webster-dictionary.net/definition/motherhood>
<http://www.webster-dictionary.net/definition/mothe>

bewildering of the contradictions, it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them³.

The iconographic tradition of the community, on the other hand, with its representation of supreme motherhood in the figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe and its connotations of endurance and suffering, has served to reinforce a role which the women of the community have accepted without hesitation throughout the centuries, subsequently perpetuating and transmitting it across the different generational lines. As Gloria Anzaldúa's states,

La gente chicana tiene tres madres. All three are mediators: *Guadalupe*, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, *la Chingada (Malinche)*, the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and *la Llorona*, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two.

Ambiguity surrounds the symbols of these three «Our Mothers». *Guadalupe* has been used by the Church to mete our institutionalized oppression: to placate the Indians and *mexicanos* and Chicanos. In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted-*Guadalupe* to make us docile and enduring, *la Chingada* to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *la Llorona* to make us long-suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the *virgin/puta* (whore) dichotomy⁴.

In her words, the cultural interpretation and subsequent utilization of the good mother/bad mother dichotomy has defined the female role within the group, and thus, the female choice. Furthermore, Literature from and about the community has contributed to spread and consolidate this notion of motherhood and many authors have described Chicana mothers as the embodiment of generosity, dedication, devotion and virtue, and the women who diverge from this role, as *Malinches/deviants*.

The emergence of the Feminist Movement in the decade of the sixties and seventies and the subsequent development of a Chicana Feminist Movement which included and denounced the threefold source of discrimination of this collective in the construction of its vindicatory discourse, paved the grounds for the creation and publication of an extensive body of Chicana Literature, which in turn opened up the vision of Chicana women in general, and that of the Chicana mother in particular. Following the contemporary trends of the Second Wave Feminist Movement which was challenging the very essence of the patriarchal system, Chicana women claimed a voice for each and every member of the community, as well as a redescription of the gender based roles and icons that maintained them in their quest for a conscious and self-conducted development of personal identity. The demand for control over female bodies and sexuality, thus, asserted motherhood as a voluntary act which

³ A. RICH, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York, W.W. Norton, 1976, p. 13.

⁴ G. ANZALDÚA, *Borderlands. La Frontera. The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1987, pp. 30-31.



was directly related to the development of said «new identity». Thus, the writers and novels at that time, among which we can mention the work of Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, Cherríe Moraga and/or Alma Luz Villanueva, among many others, depicted women who were able to choose freely about the use of their bodies and sexualities, and accordingly, to become mothers in a conscious way, and not merely within the framework of the static structure defined by the traditional nuclear family, because «[c]learly there has been nothing more oppressed than women's sexuality, the lips that cannot speak. Thus Chicana writers seize upon the notion of *mujeres andariegas* as symbols of empowering the body, sexuality, and the self»⁵. In this new social context, the lives of Chicana women and mothers have undergone a radical change and the stereotype of the submissive, Virgen-like image of the mother is slowly becoming part of the distant past. Chicana women, in general terms, have a more direct and important access to education and culture and their participation in public social life is evident, even though there is still a group of women, adolescents who live in the most underprivileged *barrios*, whose opportunities appear to be less accessible.

Throughout the decades in which Mexican migration developed and the community settled, the *barrio* has constituted a safe haven where its inhabitants felt secure and removed from the external aggressions which were manifold. On the other hand, living in an area of the city which was predominantly formed by people of the same ethnic, cultural and social background, provided its inhabitants with a feeling of community which the mainstream social structure denied them. However, a mere glimpse at the reality of many of the US Latino/Chicano *barrios* shows that the possibilities of development in the personal and social spheres are scarce in such a situation. The numbers which illustrate the amount of Chicano adolescents who access higher education are still very low, and according to Aguirre and Martínez,

An educational crisis exists in the Chicano population, for the Chicano population has fared poorly in its progress through the U.S. educational system. Compared to the educational outcomes of other racial and ethnic populations in the United States, the Chicano population's educational outcomes are deplorably low. In 1990, for example, less than half of the Chicano population 25 years and older had completed at least four years of high school. Compared with other ethnic groups in the Hispanic population, the Chicano population ranks at the bottom. Chicanos are undereducated, and a contributing factor to that undereducation is the relative social and cultural isolation of Chicanos in U.S. schools. This relative isolation, coupled with segmentation created by educational tracking, has placed the population at risk with regard to its educational outcomes and its economic outcomes. Perhaps the most noticeable feature of the Chicano population's position of risk in U.S. schools is the high dropout rate from high school of its youth⁶.

⁵ T.D. REBOLLEDO, *Women Singing in the Snow. A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature*. Tucson, London, The U of Arizona P, 1995, p. 183.

⁶ A. AGUIRRE JR., and R.O. MARTÍNEZ, «Chicanos in Higher Education: Issues and dilemmas for the 21st century». *ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education Washington DC*, Washington DC School of Education and Human Development, 1994.

The state of affairs described above worsens if we concentrate on Chicana women only, where the figures decrease enormously, proving that the educational chances of Chicana adolescents are very limited. Similarly to what has been occurring since the publication of the first works by Chicano writers, the lives of women in the *barrios* have become part of the thematic line of many of the literary works produced by Chicana authors, with the clearest and most widely read example of the profound picturing of life in *Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros (1989). Even though Esperanza dreamt of and finally achieved a certain degree of education, and therefore autonomy, the reality today still shows that life in working class *barrios* in the United States is not a bed of roses and Esperanza's dream still remains a dream. Adolescents, particularly, need to develop strategies for survival like the ones explained by Lisa C. Dietrich, who affirms that «[c]hicano adolescents experience a variety of social, economic and cultural pressures that may orient them toward making decisions such as joining gangs or engaging in unprotected sexual intercourse»⁷. The situation, definitely, differs greatly from an ideal one, in which women are free to choose their own destiny and act consciously with and over their bodies. On the contrary, these young women become the victims of their own social entrapment, which they reinforce with the aforementioned acts and choices⁸.

Yxta Maya Murray, Professor of Law in Loyola College in Los Angeles, is also a writer of fiction, and her literary works include the novels *The Good Girl's Guide to Getting Kidnapped* (2009), *The King's Gold* (2008), *The Queen Jade* (2005), *The Conquest* (2002), *What it Takes to Get to Vegas* (1999), and *Locas* (1997). These last two works of fiction present the reality of young adolescents and the divergent life situations they need to overcome within the context of the difficult circumstances in the *barrios*, where opportunities for young women are insufficient. Considering this social reality as the framework within which these works occur, the main aim of this essay is to observe the way the reality described by Dietrich, where young adolescent women opt to join the «wild life» and/or become mothers, is portrayed by the two novels, *Locas* (1997) and *What it Takes to Get to Vegas* (1999). The analysis of each of them will concentrate on the depiction of the representation of the mother figure by the protagonists of the works, and their daughter-mother relationship, one of the very recurrent themes in contemporary feminist discourse. On the other hand, it will aim at the observation of the way said daughters perceive their transfer to the mother position and their understanding of maternity and mothering. The final conclusions of the essay will describe how a difficult social, economic and cultural environment affects and conditions the development of a conscious, free female identity. In contrast to many of the works produced by Chicana writers throughout the decades of the 80s and 90s, which described women who were able to surmount

⁷ L.C. DIETRICH, *Chicana Adolescents: Bitches, 'Ho's, and Schoolgirls*. Westport, Greenwood, 1998, p. 2.

⁸ A.M MINNIS, I.A. MOORE, C. DOHERTY, C. RODAS, C. AUERSWALD, S. SHIBOSKI, and N.S. PADIAN, «Gang exposure and pregnancy incidence among female adolescents in San Francisco: Evidence for the need to integrate reproductive health with violence prevention efforts». *American Journal of Epidemiology*, vol. 167, n. 9 (2008), pp. 1102-1109.

their lack of chances and find their own way, the central characters of these two novels, members of the most underprivileged classes, still find their own coveted American Dream inaccessible. Or in other words, the girls in Murray's work will not «say goodbye to Mango» or come back «for the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out»⁹, the way Esperanza did. They will remain in the *barrio* inevitably.

LOCAS (1997)

Locas, Yxta Maya Murray's first fictional work, is far from being a chant to mothers, or a celebration of motherhood and/or maternity. The novel, set in Los Angeles' Echo Park, portrays the harsh life situation of Chicana teenagers in the personae of Lucía and Cecilia, two young women who become representative of two different ways of understanding life, destiny and commitment to the community. The novel inserts the lives of these women in the form of alternate chapters, providing the reader with a contrasting view of the same situation and their subsequent life options, somehow reproducing the Eva/Lilith, Virgen de Guadalupe/La Malinche dichotomies, the basis of most of the western stereotypes that have defined female identity. Both protagonists embark upon their quest for identity and self-definition from a similar starting point, which the reader infers is a difficult one. The construction of the characters is carried out by means of the use of the first person narrative, and both characters explain that they have not attended school for long and have no professional occupation. In this same line, the novel depicts a *barrio* in which most of its youngsters experience a similar personal situation, and the lack of educational and economical resources defines their social position. This state of affairs provokes their need to become involved in gang activity, in a bid to provide their lives with a sense of belonging, an effortless economic income, as well as a way to fulfill their duty towards the community.

Thus,

Some individuals join the gang because they see participation as a form of commitment to their community. These usually come from neighborhoods where gangs have existed for generations. ... Many of these individuals have known people who have been in gangs, including family members- often a brother, but even, in considerable number of cases, a father and grandfather. ... They feel that their families and their community expect them to join, because community members see the gang as an aid to them and the individual who joins is meeting his neighbourhood obligation. ... In a sense, this type of involvement represents a unique form of local patriotism¹⁰.

The participation of women in gangs, even though it is not as noticeable and customary as it is among boys, is growing enormously and *Locas* is a good example of

⁹ S. CISNEROS, *The House on Mango Street*. New York, Vintage Books, 1989, p. 110.

¹⁰ M. SÁNCHEZ JANKOWSKI, *Islands in the Street. Gangs and American Urban Society*. Berkeley, U of California P, 1991, p. 46.

such a situation. The preponderance of masculine participation in gang activity, however, defines gangs and their environment as predominantly masculine, and therefore, forces women to find and claim their own space within such hierarchical and established microcommunities. One way to reproduce the extremely traditional masculine and feminine roles that the gang system relies upon, which helps the girls attain recognition within the group, is through becoming the sexual companions of the masculine, active members of the group. Thus, girls in the *barrios* where important gang activity occurs, try to find a boy whose position within the gang is notorious, and therefore, they acquire themselves a certain social position, as well as a source of a economic stability they generally lack. These young couples, who reproduce the most restraining and limiting roles and functions for female liberation, frequently become parents at an early age, and need to fulfill parental roles that they are generally unprepared for.

Cecilia and Lucía's (protagonists of Yxta Maya Murray's novel) depiction of their supposedly similar life situation, presents the reader with two radically opposed alternatives. Their lives appear intertwined from the outset of the novel, and both characters are constructed in relation to a male character, Manny, leader of *Los Lobos* gang. Cecilia is Manny's sister, and she has absolute devotion and commitment to him. Lucía, who is Manny's girlfriend, on the contrary, knows that being Manny's girl provides her with a name and respect within the community that she would otherwise lack because she is «just a woman». Even though both women relate in different circumstances to the same man, they live in the same *barrio*, both of them come from the same educational and economic background and their lives revolve around the *barrio* gang or *clicka*, they represent the two very different sides of the same coin, and the paths their lives will take differ tremendously. Cecilia, after getting pregnant and losing her baby due to one of her boyfriend's customary beatings, chooses the «good», religious life in order to overcome her difficulties. Lucía, on the contrary, utilizes her relationship with the leader of the gang to seek power in an absolutely desperate way, and is presented as a witty, «wolf-like» woman, whose main aim is to surpass male power and authority and create her own female gang, and thus, become «somebody» that deserves to be respected within the community. Among the many facts and essential ideas related to life, personal relationships and the *barrio* itself that separate these women radically, their notion of female identity in general and motherhood, in particular, situates them in diametrically opposed circumstances. The presentation of their mothers and their feelings towards motherhood, which is performed in the first two chapters of the novel, where the construction of their characters start and their voices are heard for the first time, define their personalities and help the reader create a quick psychological outline of these two women.

Interestingly enough, the second paragraph of the opening chapter in the novel, whose protagonist is Cecilia, says: «I was gangbanging like Manny till I was fifteen and I got pregnant»¹¹. This simple and direct statement, serves to position the reader from the very outset of the novel in a hostile environment. Cecilia's account

¹¹ I.M. MURRAY, *Locas*. New York, Grove, 1997, p. 4.



of her life continues with the presentation of her mother, who embodies all the stereotypical traits that Mexican and Chicana women in general and mothers in particular have been associated with over the years and which are still alive today. Cecilia and Manny's mother is pictured as a hard-working, enduring woman, whose life is devoted to her children and family and who has «forgotten» about herself as a consequence of her conscious fulfillment of her «mother-role.» Thus, Cecilia describes her in the following terms:

Mama likes to say that we started here From Scratch. Like a cake. She's short and brown just like me, with flat hands and feet. (...) She came over here from Oaxaca, pregnant and holding on to Manny's little fist so he wouldn't let away. He was *loco* even then. «I must have washed five hundred houses before we got our papers», is what Mama says. «Better than having nothing to eat but dirt». We're all legal now but I'm the real American. I was born here red white and blue. Mama was so afraid of what INS would do when they caught her without her green card that she wouldn't go to the doctor until she was screaming with those labor pains and I was pushing out of her, small and wet and trying to be alive¹².

Cecilia's first words about her mother, whose name we never know as she is just «Mama», clearly delineate the everlasting and intricate assumption on the part of women of their unique female role. In this sense, the protagonist's mother is just described in terms of her essential function, being a mother, and her «womanhood» is utterly overshadowed by her «motherhood», which she has also assimilated as her only duty and purpose in life. On the other hand, the aforementioned words depict an enormous generational gap between the two women. The daughter describes the mother as a strong woman, but marks the difference between the two, stating, interestingly, that she is the only real American, in opposition to her mother and brother. The words she uses to describe her when she was young, on the contrary, portray a small but strong woman, who was brave enough to cross the border in search of a better life for her and her offspring. However, Cecilia's feeling of supposed superiority marks the mother's submission to her children, but, ironically, does not help the girl achieve «a better life» than her mother's, just for the simple fact that she is an American. The description of the mother continues throughout the opening chapter of the novel, and we witness the gradual and inevitable disappearance of any hint of dignity and pride in her. Her children pay her back with disrespect and fail to acknowledge the effort she made for them, provoking the subsequent dismantling of her whole system of beliefs and of the dream she had constructed her life and the very essence of her existence upon. Manny, who soon becomes involved in gang activity, has turned into a violent, *loco* boy, who dares to shout back at his mother when she reprimands him for his involvement in criminal activities. Cecilia, on the other hand, becomes pregnant at a really early age, impeding, thus, all the possible future development related to her personal, cultural and economic development that

¹² *Ibidem*.

the mother had dreamt of for her, in an attempt to prevent the girl from reproducing her own life-story. The following words convey an enormous brutality on the part of the male protagonist towards his mother, and depict gender violence as something that appears almost inherent among these young men:

He still had that fire in his blood when Mama won't stop. Her voice had tugged and looped like a knot, and then it starts booming longer and louder and snagging on us like barbed wire. Her eyes are as big as windows and her teeth are flashing and biting. I know she thinks he's killed somebody. But Manny decided he was sick of listening to what women were going to tell him. No boss man listens to an old lady, and no patron lets his mama tell him what to do. His eyes got full and steady, and he stood up taller than he had to and watched her real careful.

«Watch it, Mama», is what he said, his left hand quivering down by his lip like a wild animal. She stopped yelling when she saw him there, how he would hit her like she was just any other woman. Her lip dropped and she shrunk back, ashamed and frightened ...¹³.

The absence of a masculine father figure, who, in the framework of the traditional Mexican/Chicano nuclear family adopts the leading role in terms of economic stability, renders the microcommunity that families represent with a feeling of fragmentation and a lack of internal structure. This fact, together with the need to find basic economic resources leads many young boys and girls to opt for the «easiest» way out, taking their lives, and those of the people around them, to the limit. Manny and Cecilia's mother, in this particular case, finds the path undertaken by her children as an act of rebellion towards her as well as the ultimate materialization of the fact that her dream will never come true. Thus, «Mama was getting smaller every day with worry. ... She had that American dream the same as anybody else. But she wasn't saying anything like that after Manny started bringing home that money he gets from selling gangster guns. She just started squeezing back into her skin like she wants to hide, doesn't want anyone to notice her»¹⁴.

Manny, who acquires all the negative attributes of the *macho* stereotype, exaggerated masculinity; authoritarianism; violence and aggressiveness and self-centeredness¹⁵, as well as his life choice, profoundly affects his mother, who feels guilty and ashamed of her son's attitude, and becomes a suffering woman, a «martyred mother»¹⁶, assimilating and reproducing once again the traditional female stereotype of *La Llorona*, the Weeping Woman, or in Herrera-Sobek's¹⁷ understanding,

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

¹⁵ A. MIRANDÉ, *Hombres y Machos. Masculinity and Latino Culture*. Riverside, U of California P, 1997, pp. 69-71.

¹⁶ C. HERRERA, *Mothers and Daughters in Contemporary Chicana Literature*. Claremont, CA, 2008, p. 90.

¹⁷ M. HERRERA-SOBEK, *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis*. Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1990.



the suffering woman, the *mater dolorosa*, aligned «with the cult of *Marianismo*»¹⁸. Her feeling of having failed in the social and personal spheres makes her become smaller and turn to religion for personal and spiritual salvation, looking for a sense of belonging and participation in a certain community, echoing the reasons why young people to join gangs. She experiences this same feeling of shame and responsibility when she visits Manny in prison, an episode that symbolizes the total fragmentation of the mother-offspring relationship. Thus, she is described as «just sitting there with her face hanging down and her cross in her hands while she prays to the Virgin. Not even looking at her own son»¹⁹. The scene acquires an important meaning in the construction of the mother's character, in the sense that it illustrates a compliant mother, whose model of maternity and goodness, as well as of proper female behavior, responds to the Virgen's. Mama's duty and only meaning in life has failed and her feeling of guilt can only be redeemed by faith and spirituality, as she assumes she does not have a place in the real, social *scenario*, where she has turned into an invalid, non-functional individual.

This stereotype is diametrically opposed to the one Lucía's mother represents. Lucía depicts her mother from the outset of the novel as a woman she despises and who becomes a symbol of what she does not want to be like. The importance of the mother figure is extreme in the existence of this woman, who appears obsessed with not being a mother in general and like her mother in particular. The absolute denial of one of the traditionally considered most natural, biologically and socially intrinsic female attribute puts the protagonist in a situation of having to fight against a system that has also naturally assumed that women's personal fulfillment comes from being mothers. She says:

So you see how it almost was. I was gonna be letting babies suck off me and pretend that having a man's all I want out of life. But I save myself. I just needed to remember something I forgot. All I had to do is go and take a good look at my broken-down mami. That's when I knew I'm not gonna be no dirt sheep my whole life. I couldn't let that happen to me, not ever gonna be like her. Cause that's some bad dead-end road.

I used to tell people lies about her, to help me forget. «She's dead», I'd say, and I wouldn't even blink. «Died when I was a baby». It wasn't true, though. She didn't even used to live that far. Her house was just a mile down from me in Echo Park, but I don't got no shame. I do what I do, it's that simple. I've got my reasons. She's set up in her own place, sits in her chair drunk and dreaming. It isn't my business. She isn't my trouble at all²⁰.

Lucía's detachment from her mother, as well as her profound hatred towards her is somehow consistent with the construction of the character throughout the

¹⁸ C. HERRERA, *Mothers and Daughters in Contemporary Chicana Literature*. Claremont, CA, 2008, p. 92.

¹⁹ I.M. MURRAY, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 35-36.

novel, who is presented as an ambitious woman, absolutely devoted to breaking the stereotype of the submissive, conformist woman and who wants to find her own way in a highly Machiavellian manner. Lucía's shame when she is asked about her mother is a symbol of the enormous generational gap that exists between first generation Mexicans that had to settle in the United States in search of a better future for themselves and their offspring, and the latter, who are generally born in the country and become part of a system whose very structure is based on the «survival of the fittest». In Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's words, «[r]esearch suggests that this mother-daughter dyad experiences a love/hate relationship, often because the mother tries painstakingly to convey knowledge about how to survive in a racist, sexist, and classist world while the daughter rejects her mother's experiences as invalid in changing social times»²¹.

Lucía has strongly assimilated such ideas, and wants to overcome the position of inferiority that being a «non-white, working class woman» entails. Her rebellion against the situation results in a profound loathing of anything that represents submission and conformism, and thus, she chooses to follow her own version of the American Dream, regardless the consequences and the means she has to employ. Her mother, for her part, also tried to follow the Dream and is presented at the beginning as a strong woman, just like Cecilia's, who dared cross the border, but was later on, also similarly to the other mother, swallowed up by a system that did not recognize and/or accept her. In this case, Lucía's cruel description of her mother shows the girl's roughness and absolute rejection of her female role, which she understands her mother clearly represents. Her indifference towards her mother is clear and shows an urgent desire to break the mother-daughter bond in order to forge ahead in a highly structured social system that systematically thrusts women aside.

Some women, they just lay down and die nice and quiet. My mami's taking the hard way out. A red wine *borracha*. She's drunk herself so big she only fits into one chair in the whole damn house, and her hair's everywhere, bushing brown and curly so she looks like a bum. These red wet eyes looking out from milky pale skin, and there's that bad nervous smell she has. I've got to turn my head for a minute, cause it makes my stomach tight up sick when I see what being a sheep can do. She's a dam old whore, my mami. When she was younger, she was the hardest sheep you ever saw.

Not always. Way back when I was a little *niña* and she ran me over the border she held on to me tight, tight so it's hard to breathe but I felt sure with her strong hands around my middle, and when I looked up at her face in that dark night, she looked like the pretty moon, smiling down at me. She's nice then²².

²¹ E. BROWN-GUILLORY, ed., *Women of Color: Mother-Daughter Relationships in 20th Century Literature*. Austin, U of Texas P, 1996, p. 2.

²² I.M. MURRAY, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.



Lucía's rejection of her mother's defeat and subsequent conformism becomes the driving force behind her quest for a «better», more self-sufficient, autonomous life. The figure of the mother, which is exaggerated and taken to its furthest limits as a representation of female inferiority and incapacity to become active, productive individuals within the social group, becomes representative of Lucía's repudiation of all women in her community, whom she considers inferior beings, «sheep», who are not able to think and act for themselves. In this sense, Lucía chooses to create and construct her own character, as a decisive act of empowerment and freedom.

Once the mother-daughter relationship is broken, the girls embrace the central/dominating role and consider turning into mothers themselves, the description of motherhood and mothering is also almost diametrically opposed in the case of both protagonists in the novel. Their position in these terms helps construct both characters as a binary/dichotomous pair which allows the reader to understand the limited life choices these adolescents have. The situation of *barrio* teenage women, being characterized by an obvious lack of educational resources, and consequently, strategies for advancement in the personal and social spheres, urges these women to fulfill themselves as individuals with the «help» of a man, thus, reproducing the traditional stereotype of the economically dependent, submissive woman, who accepts her role of enduring mother and companion. Cecilia, for instance, one of the components of this two-headed character that she and Lucía create throughout the development of the novel, responds clearly to this stereotype, and describes motherhood as the ultimate aim in her search for personal identity. She says:

I wanted that and to have myself a baby. A woman's got to have a baby. «I'll juice you up real good, Muñeca», Beto said in his thick voice, and he had that macho thing about him, cool and hot at the same time like my brother, that I didn't mind it so much.

Girls in the *clicka* had babies like they were buying dollies. Most sheep don't know the difference until the kids pop out of their bodies with all of that blood and the tearing, the crying and drooling and feeding and nights and nights of no sleep, and their man out playing with some other girl who's not spread out in the hips and tired all the time. It's nothing like what you see in the movies, but I knew that even before Beto got me knocked up. Didn't matter to me. Having a baby's the only thing that would get me a better life.

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 to²³.

²³ *Ibidem*, pp. 61-62.

Cecilia's description of the expectations of young women in the *barrio* proves that motherhood is regarded as a decisive act of survival in the realm of a society that discriminates these girls as women and as active individuals of the group. Even though Cecilia is aware of the different opportunities that women should have, such as going to college, she understands that her fate is another one and she decides she should take advantage of her biological capacity to have children and the social expectations for women in order to become a person, as she explains. The image of the young adolescent boy is also depicted in an extremely negative way, as can be observed in the utterly derogatory and possessive words she uses to refer to Cecilia. However, she, in an attempt to survive and find her own place, submissively accepts them and directs all her efforts and devices towards obtaining her final aim, which is to have Beto's baby. The novel acquires tragic dimensions when Cecilia, once she is pregnant, loses her baby as a consequence of Beto continuously brutally beating her. The episode becomes even harder because of Cecilia's almost frivolous rationality when describing it. The submissive acceptance of her role as a docile, silent «sheep» by the protagonist, as well as the parallel assumption of ownership of women by the boys in the group, personified in Beto, reinforces the idea that the hierarchical arrangement of gangs, reproduces some of the most discriminatory and humiliating power structures that mainstream society exerts upon them, and responds to the idea that «a certain amount of violence is often tolerated as an acceptable male vice and sometimes as a demonstration of the man's passion for his wife or girlfriend»²⁴. Cecilia says:

Maybe my baby died that day I forgot to keep my hands down, when I didn't cover up my belly like a good *mamacita* would. If I'd just kept my head everything would be different now.

Beto had got that taste for hitting women the same as a *borracho* loves his drink and it wasn't too long before he was banging on me every night, back and forth then down to the floor, my mouth on the linoleum, tasting red inside my mouth. I'd been real careful, always keeping my hands ready so my face hits and not my belly, but then there was that one time he slammed me and I didn't do what I should²⁵.

The tranquility and normality with which Cecilia narrates the events, together with the sense of guilt for having lost the baby which she transmits in her words, provide them with a cruelty and harshness that clearly illustrates the aforementioned submission and passive acceptance of the gender roles. These attitudes towards male oppression and female subjugation, in contrast, are the driving force that spins the antagonist/protagonist of the novel, Lucía, on to try to not only free herself from male dominance, but to overcome it and even exert it upon the supposedly superior male collective. Her scorn for the boys and girls around her and the family roles that they acquire is tremendous, and the rejection she experiences towards her own mother,

²⁴ L.C. DIETRICH, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

²⁵ I.M. MURRAY, *op. cit.*, p. 121.



makes her feel superior and more gifted than the rest, as well as strong enough to dismantle the lifelong stereotypes that mark female and male realities in the *barrio*. Manny, for his part, leader of the *gang*, understands that having kids proves his masculinity in front of his boys and pressures Lucía into having a baby. Her capacity to think and act for herself, which situates her in a diametrically opposed position to the rest of the girls in the *barrio*, who seem unable to have a voice and a personal opinion, helps her cheat Manny, who is described as «not as clever» as Lucía, and therefore, not worthy of the leadership of the gang, a role that the «wolf-like» girl will adopt soon. Her description of the rest of the girls around her, picture her as a ruthless, cruel woman, who feels an alien within such a situation but who concomitantly wants to make the most of it in order to succeed in her personal, ambitious quest.

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 one 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 the Lobos all smoking cigars like high-rollers, but it didn't make me feel 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. ... Manny's so worried about how he's looking to his crew it made him blind. He wanted a happy Lobos family, with him sitting on top of the cake like a bridegroom, getting chicas pregnant so he could show all his gangsters what he could do²⁶.

Lucía's choice not to have babies represents an affront to the tradition of the community in general, and the gang structure in particular, and constitutes a step further in her conscious rebellion against her «natural» inferior position and her subsequent empowerment, both in the personal and social spheres. The two protagonists of the novel, thus, portray different approaches to motherhood as well as opposing understandings and descriptions of mothering, and help the reader understand the reality of many young *barrio* girls, for whom being mothers becomes one of the only «ways out» and a clear means of survival within a hostile and difficult environment.

WHAT IT TAKES TO GET TO VEGAS (1999)

The case of Rita, protagonist of Yxta Maya Murray's second novel, *What it takes to get to Vegas* (1999), supports this idea and portrays the reality of uneducated, young girls in the *barrio*, who seek personal and social recognition by means of

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 40-41.

a relationship with a man. Once again, the construction of the character is done through opposition to the rest of the women in the neighborhood, as well as in relation to the character of Rita's mother, who is considered by the powerful female community in the *barrio*, to be a whore. In this respect, the beginning of the novel places the reader in a clear position in the face of the creation of an environment that is foreshadowed as a complicated one. The opening lines of the narration, thus, say:

We could hear them doing it down the hall. Us and the rest of the world, it turns out, because it was a hot spring night with weather so thick that everyone in East L.A. had left their windows wide open to catch the breeze that might blow in and cut through the molasses air. The house was colored with after-midnight shadows and creeping moonlight, but Mama and Mr. Hernandez were busy whooping and praying as the springs bucked and sang under their bodies, while church-going neighborhood women laid stiff as twigs in their clean clean beds and tried to stuff a pillow inside each ear²⁷.

The description of the mother's affair, together with the opposite reaction by the «good» women in the *barrio*, presents a novel whose internal structure is based on said dichotomy and places the protagonist in a constant struggle against such an untresspassable border. The clear-cut and traditionally transmitted notion of what a woman should be like and the dos and don'ts of female morality and decency have marked the lives of Chicana women for centuries. Said roles, reinforced by a deeply-rooted system of iconography, legends and tales, have developed into fixed and static stereotypes against which contemporary Chicana women have had to fight in order to redefine their position within the community. In such a fixed cultural context, Rita becomes a survivor within a community that has clearly marked the line between «good and bad», «us and them», internally reproducing the strong discriminatory borders and limits this same community experiences from the external pressures of mainstream society.

The figure of the mother acquires extreme relevance in the fate of the character, which is trapped by the stereotype as a consequence of her supposedly «loose» and indecent matrilineal heritage. However, Rita's mother may well be described as a clear example of female empowerment and autonomy within the strict behavioral system that the female community in the *barrio* represents. Her description as a woman who wanted to be an actress and pursued her own American Dream and her subsequent entrapment by the cruel stereotyping of women in the *barrio*, places her daughter Rita in a highly contradictory position with regard to the freedom that the American Dream itself represents. Rita is destined to carry her mother's reputation forever, and thus, has no real opportunity to evolve on the social and «moral» scale, for she has already started as a natural holder of an extremely negative tag, which accompanies her forever, no matter what she does to rid herself of it. Rita describes her in the following terms:

²⁷ I.M. MURRAY, *What it Takes to Get to Vegas*. New York, Grove, 1999, p. 1.



That's what she was going to be. A movie star. Could have been one, too, in another life. She had the knockout body, the husky cigarette voice. Even yard-sale clothes hung neat and tidy off her curves, and she walked slow and swivel-hipped, like she was made of money. She'd learned how to move from watching old black-and-white movies, copied the strut-your-stuff from Grable and Crawford, the slinky-cat from la Superloca Lana Turner, the make-them-cry from Monroe, but she was born with that face pretty enough to make other ladies mad. Same as me. I loved it when people told me I was just like her; I'd run to the mirror and smile at my lassy eyes, black hair, big wide mouth. But when I got older and a bit smarter, I say they didn't mean it as no compliment. Good looks and a trip to Hollywood didn't bring my Mama any luck. Didn't get her name on any marquees. Just gave her high hopes and a bad reputation²⁸.

As opposed to Lucía, protagonist of *Locas*, who despises her mother and makes her the target of her hatred and rejection of her female status, Rita admires and respects hers, regardless of the negative influence that her name brought to her. Hence, Rita's clear position to support her mother and defend her as an empowered woman, who followed her personal and quest and was punished by the community as a traitor, recalls the Chicana Feminists' revision of the myth of la *Malinche* (Moraga, Anzaldúa, Castillo, among others) to «challenge, and ultimately to dismantle, patriarchal systems, based on institutional heterosexuality»²⁹. Interestingly enough, and regardless her acceptance of her mother's choice to pursue her dream, the only way out for the protagonist, again, will be to start a relationship with a notorious man, who can bring her economic stability and a certain amount of protagonism within the community. In this case, Rita's aim is a boxer, a clear symbol of masculinity and power. Rita «chooses» Billy Navarro, a Mexican boxer, who represents a new life for her, and is not aware of her moral heritage, because he was not raised in the *barrio*. According to Dietrich, «the fear of getting a 'reputation' severely limits a girl's ability to be independent. Girls are placed in a position of depending on a boy to protect their reputation»³⁰. On top of that, and as addressed by Gregory Rodríguez, «Chicana/o boxing offers one form of serious fun where we see people at work constructing or deconstructing ways of being this or that kind of 'man', or this or that kind of 'American' or this or that kind of 'Latino'»³¹. We could add, then, that in Rita's case, to be next to Billy is a way to construct her way of being this or that kind of «woman» too. Her relationship with the wrestler, who gradually achieves fame and prosperity in the boxing world and ends up fighting in Las Ve-

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

²⁹ J. DE FOOR, «(Re)Claiming the race of the mother. Cherríe Moraga's shadow of a man, giving up the ghost, and heroes and saints», in E. BROWN-GUILLORY (ed.), *Women of Color: Mother-Daughter Relationships in 20th Century Literature*, Austin, U of Texas P, 1996, p. 110.

³⁰ L.C. DIETRICH, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

³¹ G. RODRÍGUEZ, «Boxing and masculinity. The history and (her)story of Oscar de la Hoya», in M. Habel-Pallan and M. ROMERO (eds.), *Latino/a Popular Culture*. New York and London, New York UP, pp. 252-269, p. 253.

gas, provides Rita with a name and position within the group that she had always lacked, and thus urges her to think that saving her relationship is her only goal in life. Nevertheless, her desire is not reciprocated by Billy, who just sees her as another relationship, and rejects her offer and plight to marry her. Rita's fate, once again, returns inexorably and her mother's legacy appears to be inescapable, reproducing and transmitting the strong matrilineal line she belongs to. Her mother explains their destiny in the following terms:

I left Calexico because for three generations our family had nothing but heartache in that place: me, your abuela, her sisters, their mama, her sisters. Every single one of us liked the men too much. You think I never heard the word whore before? I heard it plenty. Your abuela Chita, she was the big romance queen of our town. Ooh-la-la, she was took to all the parties and the dances and this man gave her this diamond and this other man he flies her to Cabo San Lucas and everything. But what did it get her? Nothing-worse than nothing. The bad reputations, broke heart, empty bank account, ffffft. And she was just like every other Zapata woman, all of them sex maniacs who couldn't pop out nothing but more sex maniac girls, and none of them could ever but ever hold on to a good man. Mama said we'd been cursed with loneliness, but I didn't believe them stories. Those were old wives' tales! But I still knew there was something bad. ... My eyes are open now. What they said was right. We were cursed. I am cursed. And I couldn't escape because curses travel³².

Rita's mother's words prove the negative power stereotyping and the consequent labeling of people and life choices have exerted upon the women of the Chicana community for a very long time. The two predominant female role models that Mexican and Chicana tradition rely upon, The Virgen the Guadalupe, and her opposing manifestation, the *Malinche*, have served as ferocious dividing lines and markers of codes of conduct among these women, who have unconsciously internalized them and consequently chosen to position themselves in the shade of one or another. In the particular case of the female community that is the protagonist in this narration, both female roles are clearly represented by the «church-going», decent women of the community, possessors of the truth and correct code of morality and behavior on the one hand, and Rita's mother and Rita herself on the other, who are punished for their deviance from the strict, static law the women exert upon themselves. Her sister Dolores, who is the only female member in the family who seems to have been able to free herself from the hereditary stereotype and create a new self and name within the community, becomes an activist and endeavors to eradicate crime, violence and drug abuse in the *barrio*, with the help of the female community. She becomes a mother, and awakens the female instinct in Rita, even though at the beginning she feels displaced by her sister's baby and in a way fears that her sister's love for her will somehow diminish.

³² I.M. MURRAY, *op. cit.* (1999), p. 63.



Just for one moment, one breath, did the jade-green jealous flow through me. She was holding him and before that I'd always know she'd loved me best. And I wanted what she had, too, I would have snatched it in my grabbing hands if I was able. But then she looked up, the tiredest woman I ever saw- sweat-stained, ash-colored, blood dots broke around her eyes- and held him out to me.

I took him from her and as soon as I touched him I loved him speechless, and when I held him I was shaking and gripping so tight that his eyes flew open and he cried, and she took him back.

I didn't know it could be like that. I didn't know it could stretch you so much. I loved Dolores and that baby with an animal heart, and it came leaping out my mouth so that I choked and sobbed.

Mama and Jose were very quiet. They looked at the floor uncomfortable. But Dolores was smiling up at me. She laced her fingers in mine.

«It's your turn now», she said. «You go get yours, girl»³³.

Nevertheless, the desired baby never comes, since Billy abandons Rita, who, in an uncontrollable act of jealousy when she finds out he is with another woman, shoots him and subsequently kills him. The consequences of the killing of the person who had provided her with a name, gave sense to her existence, and around whom she had constructed her identity, together with a number of violent facts that occur in the *barrio*, will be irrevocable for the protagonist, who has to leave the *barrio*. The end of the novel, where a new Rita, who has forgotten her previous identity and has started a new life as «María Pura» in an attempt to break the curse of the women in her family, is described, proposes a somehow controversial reading of female identity and the right for female empowerment. Rita adopts the «good life» as the only path to salvation, and thus, denies her past, and consequently, her identity, in order to survive in a community that is ruled by everlasting and unbreakable codes of morality, which claim that women can never get to Vegas.

As opposed to *Locas* (1997), where motherhood, from the viewpoint of daughters and themselves when they become mothers is crucial for the development of both characters, *What it Takes to Get to Vegas* (1999) presents the role of the mother as an important one in the inevitability of the reputation of the central character, but is not part of the thematic line around which the plot itself evolves. Rita never presents any real desire to be a mother, or understands motherhood as a means of fulfilling herself, but directs her aim at finding a man who can support her economically and change her destiny and name within the community. In this sense, the emotional implication and strength of this character differs widely from the Cecilia and Lucía, whose feelings, desires and obsessions we get to know more profoundly than Rita's, who seems has had to defend herself from feelings and passions, and approaches life from a more materialistic position.

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 196-197.

CONCLUSION

Murray's novels propose an interpretation of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship which differs greatly from other works by Chicana writers, whose tendency has been to celebrate said relationship as an intimate bond, full of emotional connotations. *Locas*, thus, is a harsh example of the effects that a life which is obviously underprivileged can exert upon women in general and young ones in particular. Both Lucía and Cecilia's mothers are depicted as defeated individuals who have been swallowed up by the social structure that limits their chances for development. Both mothers are described by their daughters as powerless women, even though Lucía's depiction and her feelings towards her mother acquire a tragically negative tone, as she clearly detests her. Cecilia's mother, on the contrary, responds to the traditionally perpetuated female role of the sad, weeping woman, whose endurance and capacity to experience suffering transform her into an almost-virginal figure. Both mother-figure characters, however, coincide in the fact that they are regarded as role models, in this case, not to be imitated and looked upon as an example to follow in life and personal development. In this sense, Aída Hurtado's survey on several issues concerning female identity, proved that

Many of my respondents experienced this tension in their relationship with their own mothers—the pulling away while simultaneously feeling the need for connection. They were also aware of the «mirroring» between their own lives and the lives of their mothers. They spoke often of «carrying their mothers' dreams» and of living their mothers' yearnings for independence and accomplishments³⁴.

The case of Rita's mother, on the contrary, who has her daughter's support and represents how a strict morality and the definition of what is considered to be good and bad behavior, can mark a woman's life, not to mention the impact of social moral pressure upon women. Rita's family's women have all endured discrimination at the hands of the rest of the women of the community, because they represent a freer, more autonomous way of understanding life, female sexuality, and female identity in general, and are consequently «otherized» within the extremely hierarchical internal organization of the *barrio*. The older generation of women who appear in Murray's works, consequently, are the conveyers of centuries of female subjugation and oppression and their lives have been constructed or their fate decided according to traditional female role models.

When it comes to describing and depicting the experience of motherhood and mothering in the case of the new generation, who are the absolute protagonists of both novels, the similarities we found in the description of their own mothers, disappear, as each character's approach to being mothers themselves differs greatly. Rita, for her part, who does not experience motherhood herself, describes her feelings towards her nephew as an incredible sentiment of love and tenderness that she had

³⁴ A. HURTADO, *Voicing Chicana Feminisms. Young Women Speak out on Sexuality and Identity*. New York and London, New York UP, 2003, p. 78.



never experienced in those terms before. The protagonist of *What it Takes to Get to Vegas* does not show any particular need to be a mother, for her main aim is to be «somebody» herself, and she tries to find her own way by being with a man who is «somebody». The cases of Lucía and Cecilia, on the contrary, describe an almost obsessive approach to the idea of being mothers, and both represent extreme and almost excessive attitudes, Lucía for her absolute rejection and loathing of it, and Cecilia, for her total fixation with being a mother.

In general terms, both novels portray motherhood and the subsequent mothering as a reality that is present in young Chicana adolescents and corroborates the alarming data concerning the maternity rate in contemporary Latino/Chicano *barrios*. The social situation depicted in both neighborhoods show the difficulties young women find to achieve personal and economic independence and illustrate the way the latter have consequently assimilated that the traditional female role, which tied women to men and left them voiceless within the overall social network, is their only way to become «complete» women. In this context, the educational chances of Chicano youngsters need to be improved, especially those of women, because «the standard educational experience for young Latinas/os tends to submerge them into silence, where they are taught to be quiet and avoid independent and critical thinking»³⁵. This fact pressures them into initiating themselves into adulthood at an early age, and subsequently aborts all the chances of personal and social development, as described by Hunt et al., after interviewing female gang teenagers, who admitted that «once they became mothers, they were adults and entitled to make adult decisions. Not only did their own self-perceptions change, but in some instances, following motherhood, other's perceptions of them changed as well»³⁶. In this same line, Dietrich suggests that «they choose pregnancy as a means of liberating themselves and validating their adult states»³⁷, because, ultimately, «[e]ven the women who consider themselves self-sufficient and who have successful careers, are nonetheless shadowed by society's notion that 'good woman' means 'mother'»³⁸. The girls in Murray's novels, however, have no successful careers and live in a different and undoubtedly hostile reality that differs widely from the contemporary feminist statement that claims that «motherhood is political»³⁹. For many women, in general, and these women in particular, on the contrary, motherhood still needs to be understood as a strategy for survival.

³⁵ J. CAMMAROTA, and A. ROMERO, «A critically compassionate intellectualism for Latina/o students: Raising voices above the silencing in our schools». *Multicultural Education* (Winter 2006), pp. 16-23, p. 16.

³⁶ G. HUNT, K. JOE-LAIDLER and K. MACKENZIE, «Moving into motherhood: Gang girls and controlled risks». *Youth Society*, vol. 36, n. 3 (2005), pp. 333-373, p. 371.

³⁷ L.C. DIETRICH, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

³⁸ A. CASTILLO, *Massacre of the Dreamers. Essays on Xicanisma*. New York, Plume Books, 1995, p. 117.

³⁹ K. NOVOTNY, «Motherhood is political». *Sexing the Political. A Journal of Third Wave Feminist on Sexuality*, vol. 1, n. 2 [<http://www.sexingthepolitical.com/2001>, Accessed June 2nd].