From Representation to Reception: The Gang Girl and Girl Gang in Contemporary American Film

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the University of Hull

by

Emma Horrex, BA (Hons) English and American Literature and Culture

(November, 2016)
Acknowledgements

My ideas and self-confidence have developed over the past three years thanks to Josephine Metcalf, whose enthusiasm and spirit for learning inspired me and guided this project. I would like to thank James Aston for his invaluable suggestions that have opened new lines of inquiry and editing advice and feedback from Simon Willmetts, Barnaby Harran, Ben Offiler and Rachel Haworth has been received with gratitude.

I am deeply grateful to the American Studies department at The University of Hull for their dedication to developing student intellect. Thanks to John Osborne, Jenel Virden, David Eldridge and Jennie Chapman for supporting my professional development at varying points and in numerous ways during this journey.

I am indebted to Helen Binks and Pati Juaregui for their interest in this project and thankful to the students I worked with in both the US and UK for their enthusiastic participation in this study. I must thank Allison Anders and Damian Bailey for their contributions to this thesis; their willingness to engage was crucial. For supporting my fieldwork ventures and book purchasing in the form of educational grants, I am grateful to the Ann Watson Trust and Sidney Perry Foundation.

My friends have patiently listened to me during this process and provided me with much needed laughter. My parents have always supported my adventures and only ever wished for my happiness (and to reclaim their house from piles of books). My sibling’s own creativity and enthusiasm for my work has spurred me on over the past few years. Trevor, for the endless hours spent watching films, the Chinese takeaway meals and the lifts to the library; you’re the world’s greatest.
Contents

Introduction
Introducing the Gang Girl(s) on Film p.1

Chapter One
Gang Girl(s) in the Scholarly Sphere p.23

Chapter Two
“Some Lines Are Not Meant To Be Crossed;” From LA to NY – Girls, Gangs and Geographies p.63

Chapter Three
“Looking all homegirl and shit;” Styles of the Gang Girl and Girl Gang p.109

Chapter Four
“It isn’t pretty;” Gun Strapped Gang Girls and Fighting Females - Violence Part I p.154

Chapter Five
“Do it like a real lady;” Initiation, Revenge and Redemption - Violence Part II p.190

Chapter Six
Professional Critics and Online Consumers - Reception Part I p.222

Chapter Seven
Classroom Consumption - Reception Part II p.253

Conclusion
Representing the “Real-World” p.284

Figures p.302
Appendices p.309
Bibliography p.310
Introduction

Introducing the Gang Girl(s) on Film

Allison Anders’s 1994 film *Mi Vida Loca* (which translates as “My Crazy Life”) is considered by Deborah Elizabeth Whaley as a “cinematic companion” to former gang member Luis J. Rodriguez’s book *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* (1993). While Rodriguez is primarily concerned with Chicano men and “the ramifications of living in *la vida loca,*” Anders’s film garnered widespread public attention for its cinematic exploration of Chicana gang culture. Writing for the *Los Angeles Times* (*LA Times*), film critic Kevin Thomas criticised the film for “confirming a decidedly negative stereotype of young Latinos [male and female] as aimless, dangerous and incapable of thinking for themselves, not to mention welfare-dependent.” Anders responded to Thomas’s review stating, that “while posing as an indignant representative of Latino Power,” Thomas will in fact:

only accept a white middle-class male view of Latinos: He wants them to have ambition as he defines it [...] Maybe the gang girls all buy property in the end, and become real estate whizzes and really own their barrios. Maybe they buy a pizza parlor--and the sequel could be a kind of “Mystic Pizza” in Echo Park: “La Pizza Loca.”

For Anders, Thomas’s critique, which stemmed from a position far removed from the barrios of East LA, failed to take into consideration the “realities” of gang life. Alongside Anders’s open defence of the film, public and scholarly criticism surrounding *Mi Vida Loca*’s filmic representation of Chicana girl gang activity has continued throughout the last two decades. By comparison, filmic narratives

---

2 Ibid.
5 In his book on Chicano satire, notable literary scholar Guillermo Hernández recognises that the term Chicano, the male counterpart to the Chicana, has “diverse
concerning the representation of black and / or white female contemporary street gang activity (beginning in the late 1980s through to present day) are limited in number. This results in relatively little discussion in academia concerning their representation.

This study focuses on three examples of the representation of girl gang membership and / or gang girl participation in the films *Mi Vida Loca* (1994), *Havoc* (2005) and *Gang Girl* (2010). Produced and released during very different political, economic and cinematic climates (beginning with the changing landscape of the interpretations” including: “(1) politically, to refer to individuals who identify with the political ideology arising during the 1960s; (2) culturally, alluding to individuals of Mexican ancestry but who are either unfamiliar or uncomfortable with Mexican cultural codes-a usage that differentiates them from “Mexicanos” or “Latinos”; (3) historically, an ample meaning that subsumes a wide variety of perspectives, that is, it refers to the full range of historical experiences of the people of Mexican descent living or having lived in the territories that are now considered the United States.” This third interpretation could then suggest that Mexican American (a citizen of - although sometimes illegal dweller - in the US and of Mexican descent) is synonymous with Chicano and has indeed been treated as such by numerous scholars. However, academics including Rosa Linda Fregoso, Susan Dever, Thea Pitman and E. Ann Kaplan recognise the homegirls of Echo Park as Chicana. In interviews with Anders, the term Chicana has similarly been used when discussing *Mi Vida Loca* and so in this thesis, I refer to the characters (and real-life gang members) in Anders’s film as Chicana (female), Chicano (male), and Chicana/o (a conflation of the two). The Chicano Movement refers to the Mexican American civil rights movement of the 1960s. There is an interchange in this thesis of the broad terms Latino, (female, Latina) referring to a person of Latin American descent and Hispanic, those descending from a Spanish speaking country of Latin America. Both terms, Latino and Hispanic, include Mexican-Americans, and I use these wide-ranging terms where identities such as Chicana have not been applied to filmic characters and / or cast members (in *Havoc* and *Gang Girl* for example) regarding the exact origins / preferred terming of their brown characters. See: G. Hernández, *Chicano Satire: A Study in Literary Culture* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1991), p.118

6 “Contemporary street gang(s)” refers to a self-identifying group of four or more who engage in criminal activity. Contemporary street gang members are notably different from the earlier white gangster (seen in 1930s Hollywood films such as *The Public Enemy* (1931), *Little Caesar* (1931), *Scarface* (1932) and *White Heat* (1949)) because of their youth and street-based activity rather than criminal organisation affiliation. The “contemporary” gang as we know it today, emerged in the late 1980s, when in Reagan’s America, escalating firearm use and drug-dealing dramatically changed the nature of the gang.

Reagan-Bush era, and spanning Bill Clinton’s, George W. Bush’s and Barack Obama’s presidencies), these are noteworthy case studies because of the considerable controversial public attention that each film received and because of their content in terms of a range of racial representations. In terms of methodology, this research will consider text and context simultaneously, offering a textual analysis of each film and situating each text in its context of production. The thesis will also include a press reception study to examine how film reviewers (like Thomas) and journalists have received these films, while focus groups with young people aim to explore the consumption of these movies beyond those who are educated in film criticism. The specific methodologies for the press reception and fieldwork are discussed in chapter six and seven, before exploring the findings. Interviews with two of the directors (Anders and Bailey) will also contribute to an examination of the styles, rituals and behaviours of the gang girl; the geographies of the girl gang / gang girl film; sexual identities, and the politics of violence and redemption.

This project demonstrates the continuing relevance of the girl gang and gang girl in American film from the early 1990s to the 2010s and examines the everyday effects of, and how audiences use, these largely under-researched and often ignored texts. The study centres on the following research questions: Why is it important to understand the social, cultural and economic context of each film when discussing the representation of the girl gang and gang girl? Do these representations change over time? Do the style politics of the girl gang / gang girl vary according to locale and race? How have such films been consumed and received by the public especially with regards to their politics of violence and redemption? Before these questions can be answered, it is appropriate to briefly note the contexts in which the contemporary street gang featured in these case studies emerged.

In the decade preceding Mi Vida Loca’s release, contemporary street gang participation escalated in the US, especially on the West Coast with gang-related homicides reaching their peak in LA in 1992. While cultural scholar Eithne Quinn notes that the reasons for gang membership are “varied and complex,” gang involvement “filled voids left by the Reagan-era decline in educational institutions,
Soaring incarceration levels, economic polarisation and “the ghetto’s” penetration into and consumption in the mainstream through gangsta rap in the late 1980s produced “another outlet for the dramatic spread of gangsta culture.” The early 1990s “ghetto action movie cycle” (a term popularised by cultural scholar S. Craig Watkins) was reflective of the proliferation of gang membership, the spread of gangsta culture (a term emerging in the mid-1980s) and public fascination with this cultural phenomenon. Such films of the ghetto action movie and “new black cinema,” including Boyz N the Hood (Boyz, 1991), South Central (1992) and Menace II Society (Menace, 1993), enabled directors to convey a sense of street and gang authenticity. Much like sociological gang scholars’ approaches to the proliferation of gang participation within the late 20th century, male filmmakers widely debated and discussed the topic in terms of inner-city black and Latino male youth. Latino youths were not a central concern in the black-specific ghetto action cycle but did garner attention in prison and barrio-based films, such as the East LA-based American Me (1992) and Blood In, Blood Out (1993). The contemporary street gang subject has also provided an opportunity for lucrative popular consumption, particularly in America’s youth market. John Singleton’s coming of age story, Boyz, was set in South Central LA, cost $6.5 million and grossed over $57 million domestically.

9 Ibid, p.86.
11 The “new black cinema” movement (or wave) of the 1990s refers to black-centred, produced and directed movies, including films such as Boyz and Menace.; Boyz N the Hood (dir. John Singleton, Columbia Pictures, 1991), South Central (dir. Stephen Milburn Anderson, Warner Bros., 1992), Menace II Society (dir. The Hughes Brothers, New Line Cinema, 1993).
Filmic representations and reports of female gang activity are, by comparison to their male counterparts, less commonplace, remaining on the margins of academic and cinematic discussion. The reality is that females constitute a much smaller percentage of gang members than males. As criminologists Karen Joe and Meda Chesney-Lind note, “the gang phenomenon and its association with youth violence has been defined and understood as a quintessentially male problem.”13 Paralleling sociological studies, women traditionally feature intermittently in the gangsta narrative, forming part of the oppressive ghetto background. It is not that women always feature less frequently in these films, in Boyz for example, numerous black women appear on-screen, but it is their presentation that is problematic. The ghetto voices and bodies of women in the highly gendered urban space are often “Othered” as negligent mothers, prostitutes and drugs addicts. Conversely, we see (educated) girlfriends performing a dichotomous function to the politically conscious or highly violent male. The gendered discourse of the ghetto action movie cycle of the 1990s has been acknowledged by academics since its emergence. In 1991, Jacqueline Jones recognised the “glaringly prominent standard rap treatment of women” as “bitches” and “hoes” in films such as Boyz.14

In Boyz, the black male protagonist Tre Styles is “ambitious,” and considered by Jones to be a “responsible” youth.15 Yet such a portrayal contrasts starkly with the “denigration of black women” through the recycling of a “standard bitch/ho device.”16 It is important to note that black women do offer poignant moments of critique, exemplified by ghetto girl, Shalika, in Boyz who asks, “Why is it every time you talk about a female you gotta say bitch, hoe, or hootchie?” Ultimately though, black women exist in subservient relation to the black male characters of the ghetto. Nuanced female characters arguably appear in Set It Off (1996), a film produced towards the end of the ghetto action movie cycle which situated black females in an inner-city space previously reserved for representations

---

15 Ibid, p.45.
16 Ibid.
of (black or Latino) men. In F. Gary Gray’s movie, four African American female friends rob banks partially in response to systemic injustices yet, unlike the three case studies analysed herein, the women in *Set It Off* are neither gang members nor street-based criminals. *Mi Vida Loca, Havoc* and *Gang Girl* alter the male dominated filmic and social landscape, extending contemporary street gang culture to include girls more centrally than those previously.17

Over the last 20 years, there has been a significant increase in scholarly attention (notably, Ann Campbell, John Hagedorn, Meda Chesney-Lind, Joan Moore and Jody Miller), challenging earlier theoretical interpretations that rendered the girl gang member as simply auxiliary.18 As leading gang scholar Malcolm Klein explains, “virtually all self-report studies find that males join gangs at higher rates than females. While at lower rates than males, females clearly do participate in gangs and should be prominent in any discussion of gang problems and policies.”19 This more recent emphasis on sociological discussion concerning the girl gang is yet to be reflected in the analysis of the filmic representation of the contemporary girl gang and gang girl. This is partly because of the limited number of movies exploring the subject, but also points towards an ongoing tendency to position issues of race before those of gender. These woman-centric cinematic discourses, which provide crucial considerations of the complexities and shifting formations of girl gang culture, continue to remain largely understudied.

17 The critically acclaimed and commercially successful 1991 film *New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles) - the tagline of which read, “They’re a new breed of gangster,” - had already placed (black) women in the gang including the competent shooter, Keisha. However, she dies prematurely, repositioning the gang as quintessentially male. Furthermore, the characters can be recognised more obviously as *gangsters*, rather than *gangstas*. Charting the shift from gangster to gangsta, Jonathan Munby recognises Wesley Snipes’s character, Nino, as the “main gangster protagonist,” in *New Jack City* while characters in *Boyz* are referred to as “gangstas” by the film scholar. Media studies scholar B.E. Smith-Shomade also notes of this gangster (rather than gangsta) dynamic of Van Peebles’s movie. See: J. Munby, *Under a Bad Sign: Criminal Self-Representation in African American Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p.165; B.E. Smith-Shomade, “‘Rock-a-Bye, Baby!’: Black Women Disrupting Gangs and Constructing Hip-Hop Gangsta Films,’ *Cinema Journal*, Vol.42, No.2 (2003), pp.25-40.

18 For example, see Frederick Thrasher’s pioneering study of 1313 Chicago youth gangs in 1927 which considers the girl gang and gang girl as an appendage: F. Thrasher, *The Gang* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1927).

The Films: *Mi Vida Loca, Havoc and Gang Girl*

Despite limited academic attention concerning the gang girl and girl gang on film, *Mi Vida Loca* has generated the most significant, and ongoing, scholarly debate which provides a platform for discussion in the opening chapter. Anders recruited several female (and male) gang members to feature alongside (non-gang) actors in the 1994 movie. According to the filmmaker, these actual gang girls were themselves “aware of every stereotype about them that had been put on film. One of the girls complained, 'In these movies, girls don’t get to do nothing, they just get to stand under the guy’s arm.” For Anders, this was “a true feminist analysis” of gang-related movies. *Mi Vida Loca*, then, reappropriates gangsta and reconstructs images of female gang members as simple appendages to the male gang by focusing on Chicanas in the barrio. In one sense, the film upholds the “standard” gang tale - an impoverished urban neighbourhood is disproportionately affected by high levels of gang activity and gang-related violence. Yet it is the young Chicana women, including the central characters and best friends Sad Girl and Mousie, who are left to take up arms in the narrative’s conclusion. Life in Echo Park (East LA) does involve male gang members, such as homeboy Ernesto who fathers children with both Sad Girl and Mousie, causing the breakdown of their friendship. But Anders’s film ensures that it is the homegirls who take centre-stage; it continues to be acknowledged as the first feature length movie to do so with an “impact” Anders herself told me that she considers “huge” and is “enormously proud” of.

Whilst *Mi Vida Loca* features Chicana gang girls who have their own “operation,” Barbara Kopple’s 2005 film *Havoc* examines the cultural hybridization of the barrios of LA and the predominantly white middle-class neighbourhood of the Pacific Palisades. Originally written by 16-year-old high school student Jessica Kaplan, the screenplay *The Powers That Be* was sold to New Line Cinema in 1995 at the peak of the gangsta era and white fascination with it; by the 1990s, “Gang Chic”

---

20 *Colors* (1988) and *Menace* also featured “real” gang members, often as background character or “extras.”
22 Ibid.
23 A. Anders, *Personal Interview* [Recorded Interview] 22 March 2015, 1pm. Echo Park, LA.
was “pervading music, clothing, and the jargon of more teenagers than there were gang bangers.”

Kaplan’s age and success generated press attention. In an interview with the *LA Times*, Kaplan revealed that the film was based on her high school experience of white classmates in West LA imitating gangsta culture: “I just sat down to write something that was real and about my experiences. It had nothing to do with appealing to a genre or trying to get a studio executive to like it.” In the same article, Sandy Stern, who co-ran the production that bought the screenplay, stated:

I know all too well that you can’t get a 40-year-old screenwriter to write something like this [...] This young woman has such a unique voice—it’s so authentic and real. It’s her world, and she’s bringing us into it like no one else could. This is what it’s like in high school today.

Although considered by Stern as an “authentic” reflection of the zeitgeist of the mid-1990s, Kaplan’s screenplay sat on the shelves for seven years.

Kaplan’s original screenplay was later rewritten by 40-year-old screenwriter and Academy Award winner, Stephen Gaghan; in many ways exemplifying classic Hollywood as a white, middle-age male. Released ten years after Kaplan’s script was sold, the film depicts white high school teenagers and gang members of the PLC who identify with black and Latino youth culture, represented through their interaction with and imitation of black vernacular, street fashion, rap music and gang participation. Through the characters of PLC member Allison (played by Anne Hathaway who won a DVDX award for her performance) and the Latino 16th Street gang leader Hector (Freddy Rodriguez), the film explores the binaries between the reductionist stereotyping of black and Latino culture as “Other” and conversely the celebration of these cultures. The white characters, in Allison’s words, live “very

---

26 S. Stern quoted in Ibid.
27 Hathaway won the DVDX for Best Actress (in a DVD premier movie) in 2006. DVDX awards were presented on behalf of *DVD Exclusive* magazine which ceased publication the same year.
sheltered lives,” so they “dress gangsta” and “talk shit,” leading facets of black, brown and white youth culture to converge, demonstrating how gangsta resonates with youths across races. *Havoc* does not feature an exclusively all-female gang as the PLC is mixed-sex and the 16th Street is comprised solely of Latino males. Despite this, and in spite of the film’s lack of theatrical release and commercial success (*Havoc* grossed only $371,000 on a $9 million budget, while *Mi Vida Loca* was a “low budget” film grossing $3,269,420), *Havoc* is an important text that provides a rare filmic interrogation of young white females in contemporary street gangs through protagonist Allison and best friend Emily.28

The white characters in *Havoc* contend that “all the good shit came from black people” yet black characters are absent from the film as they are in *Mi Vida Loca*. According to the LA Times, Kaplan’s original screenplay was a drama concerned with “Beverly Hills high school students who try to get involved with the South-Central Los Angeles gangsta rap music scene.”29 The decision to shift the focus to Latino gangs, away from South Central gangsta rap artists and across to areas such as MacArthur Park (Westlake LA) and downtown LA remains unclear. My attempts to interview Gaghan and Kopple were unsuccessful despite media scholar Gregory Brown’s claim that “Throughout a lauded career that included two Academy Awards for her most ambitious labor films, Kopple has made herself readily available to interviewers from many publications and countries.”30 It is unfortunate that Kopple and Gaghan did not contribute to this thesis through interview form, and Kaplan’s opinion on *Havoc* is unknown; the young screenwriter died in an aeroplane crash in 2003 before the film’s release. The geographical repositioning of the film could be in part a conscious decision to move beyond the black gangsta (stereo)type of the ghetto action movie and into Latino territory. Kopple could well have been aware of *Mi Vida Loca*’s success in shifting the focus to the barrio. In real-life, figures pertaining to Hispanic and Latino gang membership in the US the year of *Havoc*’s release were significantly higher than figures for

28 Figures for *Mi Vida Loca*’s budget are unavailable. Other figures stated are from IMDb.
29 Riemenschneider, ‘Fast Times.’
African Americans in the same and preceding years.\textsuperscript{31} Ten years after its original penning and post-ghetto action movie cycle, it would perhaps be too inappropriate and insensitive to continue to render gangsta and contemporary street gang culture as exclusively black. Considered in further detail in the following chapter, it is important to briefly note the alternative viewpoints concerning this shift. The change in narrative focus, from gangsta rap artists in South Central to gang members in downtown LA, could be recognised as simplified and stereotypical conflation. Gangsta and gang culture appears to be blurred and rendered as black and brown culture, with no obvious distinction between the two.\textsuperscript{32}

The third film to be the focus of this study encompasses both black and Latina gang activity in the Bronx, New York (NY). Damian Bailey, an actor and CEO of Glory2God Productions, wrote, produced and directed \textit{The New Testament}, an off-off-Broadway play that opened in Harlem (NY) in 2002. The play was a modern day re-telling of the life of Paul the Apostle from the Bible. In Bailey’s theatrical reappropriation, Saul, a “troubled gangster, drug kingpin from the Bronx” is abandoned by his mother.\textsuperscript{33} A drug addict, Saul moves around foster homes and later joins a gang, “The Croniks.” Saul is, however, “struck blind by God” and unable to regain his sight until he gives his life to Christ.\textsuperscript{34} The redemptive trajectory spurred Bailey’s female friend and former gang member, Anissa Chalmers, to suggest to Bailey that he shift the focus of his play to female gang members on-

\textsuperscript{31} The US Census uses \textit{Hispanic or Latino} to refer to “a person of Dominican, Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race.” Chicana/o and Mexican Americans would therefore be placed within this category. According to the National Gang Center, in 2005, “Hispanic or Latino” national gang membership was 50.1\% with “Black or African American” gang membership totalling 32.6\% nationally. See National Gang Center, \textit{National Youth Gang Survey Analysis} (2012). Available online: http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/survey-analysis/demographics [Accessed 13/04/2015].

\textsuperscript{32} Without having access to Kaplan’s original script, it is not clear if these “artists” were originally gang members. Furthermore, it is not stated as to whether the “artists” of Kaplan’s story were black or Latino. It is worth noting, that although “a gangsta” is “a gang member,” gangsta culture is not synonymous with gang culture. Gangsta rap artists for example were not all active street gang members, as epitomised by NWA.


\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
Bailey told me that he first disregarded the idea as he “had no knowledge of female gangs in our society” and initially thought, “female gangs don’t exist.” Chalmers’s own research into the subject, and personal experience of “mini girl gangs,” abuse, rape and running with “thugs in the neighbourhood,” persuaded Bailey to pursue the issue. The New Testament became Surrender, which was later re-titled as Gang Girl by the distributor. It was the first film for Glory2God Productions and self-financed (with a budget of $600) by Bailey.

Bailey’s unrated directorial debut was made for DVD and distributed in March 2010 by Maverick Studio, at first garnering little-to-no public attention (and certainly no academic consideration). African American Veronica / Queen V (Chalmers) of the all-female (and mixed-race) gang The Croniks transitions from gangbanger to God worshipper with the assistance of similarly converted best friend, Lopez (a Latina Croniks member). Spanning a period from 1980 to present day, Veronica’s conversion narrative is delivered through a series of flashbacks, enabling an incarcerated Veronica to relay her story to a younger Latina Croniks member, Shakira. Despite being a tale of redemption and salvation, in March 2013, three years after its DVD release, Gang Girl attracted public criticism. Chalmers, who plays the lead role of gang leader Queen V, was revealed as the “real-life” principal of a Bronx elementary school. This discovery led to a disparagement of Chalmers (because of her role as “real-life” educator and “reel-life” gang leader) that will be discussed in the Reception Studies part of this project, raising fascinating questions surrounding, gender, class, race, pedagogy and film. A combination of factors - including the unrated status of the movie, Bailey’s contention that the film is “not for kids” and my own ethical decision as a researcher - have contributed to the omission of Gang Girl from the focus group dynamic. Despite this, its reception amongst general

35 D. Bailey, Personal Interview [Recorded Interview] 2 April 2015, 10.30 am, NY.  
37 Mi Vida Loca was Rated-R by The MPAA as was Havoc, with an unrated version of the latter released on DVD. This thesis refers to the Rated-R product; the original version (Kopple’s “cut”) reviewed by the press, and the version most suitable for the schoolchildren to view. It should be noted that the unrated version includes six minutes of extended footage scenes, and although it does not deviate a great deal from Kopple’s original feature, it does have an alternative ending.
audiences and press reveal that tensions between the “authentic” and “inauthentic” permeate the consumption of Bailey’s film to the same, if not greater extent, as *Mi Vida Loca* and *Havoc*.

**The History of the Girl Gang / Gang Girl in American Film**

Though this PhD concentrates on three primary case studies, I will draw points of comparison and contrast with other contemporary films in the main chapters of the thesis. It is important to acknowledge here that these contemporary films do not sit in a cultural vacuum and the filmic girl gang has a long established history in cinema. While some of the key issues within historical accounts - primarily the paradoxical position the gang girl occupies - remain significant in the contemporary girl gang / gang girl film, we will see here how context informs representation, with changing political, social and economic conditions contributing to shifting cinematic concerns and formations of the girl gang. Although contemporary street gang representations within the ghetto action cycle are limited for women, female gang activity and its representation in American film is not a new phenomenon. The Hays Production Code’s overseeing of the “moral” content of all Hollywood movies since the 1930s became relaxed in the mid-1950s with the growth of independent filmmaking, resulting in “occasional sideways glances at drugs, sex and beatnik crime.”

Capitalising on such interests, directors in the 1950s often utilised the girl gang (temporally removed from the contemporary street gang and defined more loosely here as a gaggle of young women who cause “trouble” and recognise their own group membership) as a vehicle for “mere titillating window dressing.” At the same time, films including *The Violent Years* (1956) and *Girl Gang* (1954) appeared to transgress gendered ideologies through the redefining of the gang as not a wholly masculine entity.

In *Girl Gang*, four white girls participate in what would be typically considered “male” activities by committing robberies, handling guns and preparing and injecting heroin. Their defying of conventional gender roles is, however,

---

somewhat capitulated by their male boss, Joe, who regulates their crimes, and bodies through prostitution. Any emancipatory potential is problematised further through their initiation into the gang - a feature of all three films explored in this thesis. Whilst the sexual initiation is determined by the girls, the act insists upon sexually satisfying men. Given the more general post-war facade of the all-satisfying “suburban housewives of Eisenhower’s America,” it is unsurprising that the gang girls confirm America’s obsession and anxiety surrounding theories of juvenile delinquency that characterised the 1950s, further emphasised in the girl gang movie *High School Hellcats* (1958). Circulating images of discontent concerning girl gang life, rather than contributing to or promoting juvenile delinquency during an era fuelled by paranoia, Dertano’s film demonstrates (and this thesis illustrates) how the context of production is crucial to understanding the on-screen presentation of the girl gang and gang girl.

An amalgamation of factors during the 1960s, including the conflict in Vietnam and the assassinations of JFK, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, resulted in the dissolution of conventional structures and the questioning of what historian Robert Toplin terms “the promise of American society.” This contributed to a demographic shift in filmgoers from the 1950s. As Susan Sontag notes, during the 1960s “going to the movies [...] became a passion among young people.” Whilst the American film audience was changing rapidly due to the decline of the Hollywood studio system, filmmakers had to attract youths who were challenging the cultural sensibilities that had previously dominated American society. The disappearance of domestic ideologies paralleled the growth in recorded crime.

During this cultural shift, the cinematic lens moved away from depictions of delinquency and towards a celebration of youth culture. The girl gang, whilst remaining in the cinematic imagination, shifted its formation from the delinquent girls of the 1950s to encompass a new girl gang; the all-female motorcycle gang. Featuring in a number of films including, *The Mini-Skirt Mob* (1968) and *She Devils on Wheels* (1968), the gang connoted visions of freedom and fantasy popularised in the 1960s.

With the feminist movement well underway, *She Devils on Wheels* features the “Man-Eaters” whose initiation process involves the cutting of a gang girl’s finger before she is kissed on the lips by the other members. Progression of the filmic gang girl is stilted by the continuing necessity to score high on the titillation rating. Throughout the opening credits, the leg of a gang member wearing knee-high boots is displayed and fetishised for the spectatorial (male) gaze, yet the Man-Eaters also beat-up men during considerably realistic fight scenes, underscoring the paradoxical positioning and frequent diffusion of women’s threat in popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s.\(^{44}\) Despite some advances in gender politics, which translated to alternative representations of (white) women in popular culture (on the small screen in particular), traditional treatments of women were ultimately upheld, especially in the filmic representation of the girl gang who delineated the importance of sex appeal to the tough girl character.

Unlike the filmic representations of the contemporary street gang, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the filmic girl gang was most often white. However, the 1970s saw the introduction of African American gang girls in Jack Hill’s 1975 exploitation film *Switchblade Sisters* and the mixed-race girl gang, The Lizzies, in Walter Hill’s 1979 cult classic *The Warriors*. Filmmakers, motivated by profit, attempted to satisfy the rising political and social consciousness of black people during the

\(^{44}\) As Sherrie A. Innes notes: “The representation of feminine toughness was in part a response to very real feminist activism of the 1960s and 1970s and women’s demands for personal and political power. During this time of profound social upheaval, television shows such as The Avengers, The Bionic Woman and Charlie’s Angels present women as far more tough than did shows of the past. Yet these new programmes also emphasized the importance of femininity and sex appeal for women, thus diffusing the threat posed by second wave feminism.” S. Innes, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p.32.
progression of the Civil Rights Movement and the changing demographics in moviegoers, which began to influence the girl gang film. Suspicion and danger characterise The Lizzies who lure members from the all-male central gang of the film from the (public) NY subway system into a (private) interior space. As the camera voyeuristically lingers on the bodies of two members of The Lizzies, Hill sexualises the girls and injects lesbian implications. Voyeuristic pleasure is abruptly curtailed after the brief scene of sexual seduction as The Warriors realise “the chicks are packed,” carrying guns and knives. Although The Lizzies physically hold firearms, they fail to successfully aim a shot at The Warriors. Their momentary transgression is thus incomplete, especially as The Lizzies are omitted from the rest of the film.

In the years following The Warriors’s release, the girl gang endured in a much broader filmic form. For example, Ten Violent Women (1982) featured a gang of females stealing jewellery and fighting in prison showers. Such exploitation and (white) male-directed women-in-prison films of the 1980s contributed to the decade’s “key theme of the restoration of patriarchy” which “is often complemented by meting out punishment against women.” Indeed, the Reagan administration encouraged a punitive attitude towards crime, especially along raced and gendered lines and as a result, “prosecutors unfairly targeted” black women. A backlash against women had already gained momentum in the years preceding Reagan’s presidency, specifically against the black welfare dependent woman who in 1976 Reagan characterised as the “welfare queen.”

---

45 Furthermore, the name “Lizzies” could be identified as derivative of the slang term for lesbians, “lezzes.” David Denby describes the narrative interruption as a “prolonged shot of two girls vamping each other in a rapt lesbian dance.” D. Denby, ‘The Gangs All Here,’ NY Magazine. 5 March 1979, p.106.


counterculture of earlier years was replaced with nostalgic family values. The urban black welfare queen who had children (purportedly solely for welfare cheques) was considered detrimental to the family unit, the welfare system and America’s economic problems more broadly, and thus “became the symbol of the ‘un-American.’”\(^49\) To reduce dependency on government welfare programmes, the Reagan administration made significant cuts in social spending and terminated initiatives such as the Comprehensive Employment Training and Training Act (CETA), exacerbating unemployment rates amongst minority groups.\(^50\)

President Bush’s inaugural address in 1989 claimed that America was “at a moment rich with promise [...] in a peaceful, prosperous time.”\(^51\) Despite increasing the minimum wage, the economic recession in July 1990 undercut any notion of prosperity, creating widespread poverty which, in combination with declining benefits, penetrated the ghettos. According to Anders, supposed “prosperity disappeared” right before Mi Vida Loca’s production, coinciding with Bush’s presidency when “there were kids getting shot at in the street” in Echo Park.\(^52\)

Economic pressures, youth unemployment and “de-industrialization of cities affected the persistence and proliferation of street gangs in the United States” in the late 1980s and early 1990s, contributing to the underground drugs economy, the selling of crack in local urban environments and the blaming of black women for the plight of her violent son, all of which was popularised on-screen in Boyz.\(^53\)

The routine racial profiling of young black and brown males and the brutal beating of Rodney King by the LAPD in 1991 (captured on camera) and subsequent acquittal of the police officers involved, encouraged a political consciousness amongst minority groups. At this particular moment, filmic narratives exploring

\(^50\) For a discussion of the Reagan administration’s attempt to reduce the welfare state, disproportionately affecting the poor, see Gail Garfield, *Through Our Eyes: African American Men's Experiences of Race, Gender, and Violence* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp.189-191.
\(^52\) A. Anders, *Personal Interview*.
black and Latino male youth culture in the post-industrial ghetto began to compete and capitalise on gangsta culture. However, this circulation of images, generated largely by black male directors, often recapitulated and reconfirmed stereotypes that existed during the explosion of blaxploitation movies in the 1970s, including Gordon Parks Jr’s *Super Fly* (1972). For Dennis Rome, such films often portrayed black men as deviant, criminal “Others” while black women are “not only marginalized […] but they are seen only as sexual beings and only when they are in the presence of men.”

The rendering of blaxploitation movies as simply regressive in gender politics is itself problematic. Stephane Dunn and Quinn explain that black women in blaxploitation are often too readily dismissed by commentators who, like Rome, focus on black women’s subjectivity within the genre when in fact blaxploitation did, at times, place black women at the forefront of its storytelling on-screen while consulting them off-screen. By comparison, “homeboy cinema” of the early 1990s as Jones terms it, firmly positioned men as its subject and failed to centralise the experiences of women. Men wrote, directed and starred in trajectories concerned with men and gangs in deprived inner-city neighbourhoods.

The crucial renegotiation of this filmic landscape in 1994 by Anders is where this thesis begins. While the homegirls of Echo Park are welfare dependent mothers that the ghetto action movie so often blamed for the plight of young men, they take centre-stage and pride in their impoverished neighbourhood and, significantly, fail to capitulate to “hoe” criteria. In Anders’s film, gang girls literally fight for gang membership, sell drugs and raise children in the barrio without the titillation factor of earlier girl gang movies. At the same time, we will see in the course of this thesis how a tenuous position is maintained by gang girls whose activity is, in varying ways (and perhaps less obviously than Dertano depicts), regulated by the boys.

---

Outline of Thesis

Before turning to the three case studies and examining their representations of the gang girl and girl gang, the scholarship which informs this project will be examined in the next chapter. Chapter two considers the geographies of the girl gang / gang girl film. Consulting scholarly work on urban space and place, this chapter reveals how the brown barrio operates on two levels; as a space of fascination but also a place of resistance and pride, particularly when compared to the (dystopic) black ghetto of Gang Girl and the PLC’s middle-class (white) Palisades neighbourhood in Havoc. In each film, the locale is explicitly referenced within the opening few minutes, making plain the significance of place-bound identity. In recognising the importance of geographies, this chapter seeks to explore the tropes and conventions of the girl gang setting, the degree to which gender restricts literal movement and the emphasis on the locale, territorial claim and place-bound pride.

Fuelled by this initial analysis of geographies, issues of the codifying styles of the gang girl, including an analysis of the dress, makeup, gestures and naming of the gang girl member, form the basis of the third chapter. In examining the intimate cinematography of each film, this chapter considers the extent to which the gang girl can produce meaning and power through aesthetics. I explore body adornment, including tattoos, and the tensions between both self-expression and spectatorial voyeurism, and “authentic” subcultural resistance and mainstream commercialisation; notions that scholars have either struggled to acknowledge or simply negated when discussing Mi Vida Loca and Havoc. The theoretical underpinnings of the chapter include the work of cultural scholar Dick Hebdige whose classic study on subcultures reveals how urban youth reassign and reappropriate pre-existing rituals, routines and practices as expressions of, and responses to, social, political and economic conditions.

Chapters four and five centre on the politics and representation of violence. The discussion is split into two parts examining whether the representation of violence changes through time from Mi Vida Loca to Gang Girl’s release, and the extent to which these representations correspond with trends in filmic violence. As both filmic representations and public perceptions of contemporary street gangs continue to position such entities as violent male spaces, it is important to assess the
violent role that the gang girl plays. Central to the exploration of violence is the examination of the representation of gun handling following Reagan’s deregulation of firearms (including the Firearm Owners Protection Act 1986). Chapter four begins with a discussion of the (male) ghetto action shooter which allows comparisons to be drawn to the female shooters of the case studies analysed herein. As cultural scholar Josephine Metcalf notes, “guns and their phallocentric associations have long been used to demarcate and assert maleness, with the gun metaphorically reinforcing both the power and sexuality of men.”57 Whilst guns continue to reinforce male sexuality in *Havoc*, both *Mi Vida Loca* and *Gang Girl* place the gun in the hands of women. Across both chapters, discussion centres on the boundaries of acceptance when it comes to girl gang violence and the extent to which violence is legitimised in order to satisfy cultural anxiety surrounding the violent filmic girl.

Depictions of rape, and the rape-revenge narrative, will also be fundamental to this study. While the initiation practices of the gang are detailed in chapter four through a consideration of the filmic representation of being “sexed-in” and / or “jumped-in,” the revenge narrative - which in both *Havoc* and *Gang Girl* stems from the sexual initiation - forms part of the focus in chapter five. This chapter also interrogates the representations of death row and prison, which although not essentially integral to each film, are fundamental to *Gang Girl’s* trajectory and reflective of the soaring incarceration rates amongst women since Reagan’s declaration of a “War on Drugs” in 1982. Much like the discussion of male shooters in the previous chapter, analysis here will intersect with the representation of male characters who feature heavily within episodes of violence in each filmic representation. I question the degree to which these men sustain stereotypical images generated during the ghetto action movie cycle of the 1990s when situated in the gang girl narrative, enabling the gendered representation of violence to be studied more comprehensively.

The project then moves beyond the reliance of textual analysis and socioeconomic contextualisation as the research shifts analytically from a traditional film and cultural study to engage with Reception Studies in the sixth and seventh chapters. Much like the analysis of violence, the Reception Studies material occupies

two chapters. The sampling of press releases, reviews and journalism pertaining to each film features first. I explore how the films have been consumed by those outside of academia, including reviewers’ criticisms of the texts and the responses by the directors to such criticism. How these films are received by professional film reviewers offers some insight into the “reel-world.” However, the voices of young viewers are often negated from these samples. I am further interested in exploring whether these films resonate with personal experience and how they operate in “real-life” contexts.

Consulting with high school youth in East LA through focus groups and questionnaire responses in chapter seven reveals how schoolchildren respond to episodes of violence and sexual imagery and whether their viewing strategies incorporate notions of moral didacticism. What follows is not an exhaustive reception study but the schoolchildren consulted live in close proximity to the setting of *Mi Vida Loca* in particular and are of similar age to the characters featured in all three films. Studying the viewing process in chapter seven will elucidate whether the films produce polarised opinions and tensions between violence and pedagogy and whether schoolchildren reveal the same spectatorial anxiety when viewing women and gendered violence as media outlets have when discussing *Gang Girl*.

Both reception chapters aim to examine the extent to which audiences paradoxically position these films as either educational and gang preventative or alternatively as sensationalist and / or stereotypical. The project has its limitations, as youth in school are often taught to seek alternative interpretations in texts by responsible adults. However, as Marcus Banks highlights, the screening of film, and subsequent discussion, is a “highly productive research tool [...] yielding insights and understanding that might otherwise be missed or not be discernible by other methods.”

58 The high school youth and online consumers of these movies at times support my own readings of these films but crucially offer broader levels of understanding regarding their meaning. There is no singular reading of these movies made plain by the wide-ranging theoretical frameworks applied to *Mi Vida Loca* and *Havoc* explored in the next chapter.

---

This thesis argues that the filmic representations of girls in gangs are the product of interconnected identities stemming from race, ethnicity and class which shape the gang experience. Nonetheless, gender is the leading denominator that produces meaning and manifests in similar and corresponding representations of the girl gang / gang girl. The three case studies illustrate how the strategies adopted by girl gang members in response to power structures – across the principle themes addressed – are influenced by factors according to the racial makeup of the gang girl and her position in the class system. In other words, the way in which the gang girl styles herself, and the way in which she can create meaning by doing so, differs depending largely on the intersections of class and race. Poor, non-white gang girls are further subordinated in the gang subculture, and by social institutions such as prisons, when compared to the wealthy white gang girl who has greater access to resources. Girl gang violence specifically can also be understood and framed through the intersection of gender, race and class, with these films illustrating how these factors influence the degree of justification required in violent acts. Rich white gang girls are less violent than their male counterparts who are themselves less violent that the economically deprived, non-white male gangbanger. We will see in the course of this thesis how at times, the overlapping of race and class seemingly overrule the intersecting gender discourse. For instance in *Havoc*, Allison’s gender limits her literal physical movement, yet her white and middle-class social standing affords her greater agency in her access to space and seemingly overrides gendered restrictions. Indeed, Patricia Hill Collins posits that “white women are penalized by their gender but privileged by their race.” Yet this project finds that it is fundamentally Allison’s gender, and the girl identity of the gang girl in each text, that delineates her experiences of oppression and privilege. When turning to press reception, both the critic’s and the filmmaker’s gender affects the ways in which the text is consumed. While high school youth complicate this gendered reading, and reveal how other factors are at work in these movies and in their reception (including that of age), how they read these films incorporates received ideas regarding gendered roles. By examining intersections at play, as well as production values, contexts and reception, this thesis provides new understandings of the contemporary street gang film, elucidating how these girl gang / gang girl films contest boundaries laid, and

continually reproduced, by the male-centred street gang film. I document the ways in which the gang girl negotiates and confronts the complex effects of racialised wealth, the hierarchical class system, and male control. Despite operating within many prescribed and preferred representational strategies surrounding gender, race and class, we will see that these films also provide some significant departures from standard image repertoires. Yet this thesis shows that well-established ideas surrounding gender differentiation (between the male gang and female gang characters) and femininity essentially produce filmic representations of the gang girl which can be understood as belonging to and feeding broader societal and cinematic gendered discourses.

Despite very different styles, widely distinct politics and divergent contexts of production, the plight of the contemporary gang girl and girl gang on film remains consistent as she operates under male control. Reception Studies’ (including press reception, online audiences and school consumption) heterogeneous nature reveals that these movies raise issues beyond the concern of male domination. These films contribute greatly to conversations around class, race and gender, opening up a space of enquiry for the examination of contemporary street girl gangs and gang girls beyond media headlines or auxiliary filmic positions. The case studies – despite their lack of mainstream artistic credit or popularity – are socially conscious movies, dealing with serious issues such as poverty but also tackling women’s social positions beyond the gang milieu.60 Put simply, they are important because they diversify the representation of young women in film, place female and non-white characters at their centre and generate varied discussion topics amongst viewers that carry importance beyond the movies themselves.

---

60 I acknowledge that these texts are not definitive “socially conscious” movies in the same capacity as films such as The Public Enemy (1931) and I’m A Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932) which were produced as part of Warner Brothers’ “social conscience” cycle. Such texts have resonated social messages in their aftermath regarding political corruption and the judicial system, however, I use the this phrase herewith to recognise that these three case studies address socially topical issues.
Chapter One

Gang Girl(s) in the Scholarly Sphere

Much of the scholarly and public attention surrounding girls in contemporary street gangs and girl gangs has concerned criminal and violent behaviours. These facets of gang membership continue to be important, illustrated by two chapters of this thesis being dedicated to the analysis of violence, an “extremely complex phenomenon” that within the social sciences is often considered to “not lend itself to any single, universal, all-purpose theory.”¹ Yet as the Introduction has outlined, other features and characteristics of the girl gang and gang girl’s identity have been represented on film and require scholarly study. Having detailed the themes and argument this research will explore, it is necessary to now consider how others have critically investigated the girl gang and gang girl in US film, and to explain some of the key ideas underpinning this project.

Unlike other studies of Mi Vida Loca and Havoc, or indeed the gang girl / girl gang on film more generally, this thesis takes a truly interdisciplinary approach - combining sociology, Film Studies, Gender Studies, Reception Studies, and Cultural Studies - to examine the representation of the filmic girl gang and gang girl in American film from the 1990s to 2010s. Leading cultural theorist Stuart Hall noted in his influential essay ‘New Ethnicities’ (1988) that “we all use the word representation, but, as we know, it is an extremely slippery character.”² For Hall, “Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture.”³ Hall’s important application of representation as “constitutive” construction rather than a “merely reflexive, after the event role,” complicated the fundamental understanding of representation.⁴ Rather than simply acting as a reflective mirror, filmic representation can act as a source of

⁴ Hall, ‘New Ethnicities,’ p.443.
knowledge with representation “co-created by its audience.” Hall’s work has immediate relevance to this study. Instead of adopting a reflective or intentional approach (whereby the intent of the text’s producer is imposed onto the world), this study adheres to a constructionist approach. In so doing, meaning is not assumed as fixed and representation is understood as jointly constructed by the producer of the text, the audience, and external societal factors. This is important when exploring the representation of young women and questioning what kind of meanings the case studies explored herein produce.

The work of Hall and other Cultural Studies theorists who emerged from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) is fundamental to this study. In addition to exploring the politics of representation, the consumption of these films by youth and the construction of these films by the media are considered and, as this literature review will illustrate, both film theory and Reception Studies are crucial to the investigation of these films. The intersection of varying disciplines and close textual analysis, informed by a traditional strand of Film Studies, enables the different aspects of these filmic texts to be understood in terms of production, consumption and construction. It is an interdisciplinary framework that Cultural Studies itself is established upon and by tackling this project in such a way, I hope to provide a fuller appreciation of the significance of the filmic gang girl and girl gang. I aim to showcase how we can use these texts to query representation, and to bring understanding to how these sometimes underappreciated films operate in the “real-world,” the important meanings they draw and the conversations that they can help generate.

Cultural Studies

Most broadly, in Eithne Quinn’s words, Cultural Studies, the theoretical discipline propelling this thesis, draws attention to and challenges “images that misrepresent and underrepresent non-dominant groups.” The girl gang and gang girl have been both misrepresented and underrepresented not only in filmic texts but more broadly in popular culture and by the media. The gang girl and girl gang as

---

subcultural youth / group thus lend themselves to a Cultural Studies theoretical framework of investigation. Cultural theorists Hall and Dick Hebdige began examining the social construction of subcultural deviance in Britain in the 1970s when a significant amount of early research pertaining to subcultures began to emerge at the CCCS.\textsuperscript{7} Founded by Richard Hoggart at the University of Birmingham in 1964, and later under the directorship of Hall, the CCCS initially developed examinations of British youth subcultures with a focus on white men but crucially lay foundations for gender and race studies. In the early days of the CCCS, subcultures, like gangs, were generally considered as masculine entities, as (predominantly male) scholars have often failed to fully integrate women into their analysis. Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber began to challenge this theoretical shortcoming in 1976, stating that “very little seems to have been written about the role of girls in youth cultural groupings. They are absent from the classical subcultural ethnographic studies, the pop histories, the personal accounts and the journalistic surveys of the field.”\textsuperscript{8} Both Hebdige’s classic study on subcultures and McRobbie and Garber’s challenging of the gender biases within studies of subcultural groups (something that Hall later recognised in ‘New Ethnicities’) are integral to this study.\textsuperscript{9}

More recent studies, in the late 1990s and 2000s, have revisited subcultures traditionally regarded as male to extend the analysis to include girls. In her 1999 discussion of female punks, which intersects sociological, subcultural and feminist theory with ethnographic analysis, Lauraine Leblanc succinctly writes:

The punk subculture highly valorises the norms of adolescent masculinity celebrating displays of toughness, coolness, rebelliousness, and aggressiveness. Girls are present in the subculture, but the masculinity of its norms problematized their participation. Thus, gender is problematic for punk girls in a way that it is not for punk guys, because punk girls must accommodate female gender within subcultural identities that are deliberately coded as male.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{7} For example, Hall and Jefferson (1976) and Hebdige (1979).
\textsuperscript{9} Hall, ‘New Ethnicities,’ pp.441-449.
Leblanc’s assertion regarding the “problematic” nature of gender in the subculture of punk is fundamental to the study of the subcultural identity of the gang girl whose female experience is located in the contemporary “male” street setting. Leblanc shifts the male-centred British focus to North America, re-mapping the centrality of the field of study. However, the fact that “punk remains a predominantly white subculture” with “only one Vietnamese-American, one Hispanic-American, and one African-American” participating in the interviews conducted by Leblanc (the remaining 37 are Caucasian which Leblanc considers “a fairly typical racial composition of the entire punk subculture”) differs greatly from the racial composition of the girl gang.\(^{11}\) For gang girls, who are statistically more likely to be non-white in the US, the intersection of race / ethnicity, gender and class are crucial to the understanding of the further problematisation of their subcultural identity.

Although race is not crucial to Leblanc’s project, race has become integral to Cultural Studies despite remaining absent from the field in its earliest stages. In 1978, Hall et al authored an influential Cultural Studies text: *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*.\(^{12}\) Utilising the “mugging panic” of 1972-73 as a case study, *Policing the Crisis* “tries to examine why and how the themes of race, crime and youth - considered in the image of ‘mugging’ - come to serve as the articulator of the crisis, as its ideological conductor.”\(^{13}\) Against a backdrop of economic decline in Britain in the 1970s - fuelled by high rates of unemployment and high inflation - the criminalisation of black male youth was rationalised as the media shaped the public view of this particular group as a threat to society. *Policing the Crisis* is of particular significance when considering the moral panics surrounding the gang.\(^{14}\) According to Joan Moore, the moral panic surrounding the Zoot Suit Riots of the 1940s in which a young Mexican America was killed in a gang-related incident, “had very little to do with violence and criminality of young

---


\(^{13}\) Ibid, p.viii.

Mexican American men, and a lot to do with how Anglos saw Mexicans in Los Angeles.”

Luis Valdez sought to expose the media stereotyping and injustices of a racially biased legal system in the 1981 filmic adaptation of his 1979 Broadway play *Zoot Suit* by bringing to life the events of the Zoot Suit Riots. Similarly, black filmmakers in the early 1990s responded to the criminalisation of black youth as arrest rates and incarceration levels soared for racial minorities in Reagan’s America. Although geographically distanced from the “mugging panic” of the early 1970s, images of race, crime and youth were sustained by US media outlets during a period of diminishing resources and opportunities, particularly for the welfare dependent. The racial profiling of young males, combined with images of urban crime and violence, most significantly in the streets of LA, resulted in a saleable filmic portrayal of the ghetto which both politicised and profited from repetitious anxieties of non-white youth crime that continued to make press headlines in the early 1990s.

The ability of the ghetto action film to both politicise and capitalise financially on these representations illustrates the two distinctive theories that underpin Cultural Studies: structuralism and culturalism. This paradigmatic split could be seen as well-worn, but as we will see, is still relevant here and has undergone a resurgence with works such as *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory* (2006) recognising its continuing importance. Within this edited collection, Gregory J. Seigworth reveals how culturalism has been “steadily finding” its “way back onto the diverse agendas of widely dispersed cultural studies.” Culturalism’s concerns with human agency and the notion that individuals can challenge structural constraints is undoubtedly applicable to this study. These films depict - and even sometimes cast - marginalised groups (in terms of gender, race and class) offering potential resistance to their oppressed status. The Reception Studies aspect of the project also pertains to the culturalist paradigm in the interest of audience activity and power. Nevertheless, the project also recognises the structuralist dimensions of these filmic texts: while challenging stereotyped representations of gang culture,

---

they are also relying on - and in a number of instances reproducing - stereotypical imagery, film genre conventions and public perceptions of gang members (as dangerous “Others”) to draw in audiences and to generate revenue. Bailey informed me during interview that the decision to change the title of his film (from Surrender) was made by the distributor highlighting this necessity, with Mi Vida Loca (a common trope used amongst gang members) and Havoc (suggesting destructing and catastrophe) perhaps less explicitly reinforcing this.

As the final chapters of this project reveal, reviewers often address these films in oppositional terms: as “positive” or “negative” and “authentic” or “inauthentic” depictions of girl gang culture. Discussing the binary opposites often used to position black popular culture, in 1988 Hall identified a “new phase” and “shift” (although not oppositional) in black British cultural politics in the late 1980s: a shift from “the relations of representation” of the “essential black subject” (“good” or “bad”) of the 1960s and 1970s to “the politics of representation.” Initial concerns with “issues of bias, positive and negative image and the ability to access media representations” shifted to a concern “with the production of diverse forms of representation which in effect challenge stereotypical, essentialised notions of black identity or monolithic versions of black culture.” This move in focus coincided with the advent of black Cultural Studies in the US. For S. Craig Watkins, “the flourishing of black American Cultural Studies fills a crucial void in our understanding of the complex relationship between race, (popular) culture, and politics.” Both Hall and Watkins, who insists “popular media culture is remarkably more complex than the containment/resistance binary opposition implies,” illustrate the necessity to look beyond “binary opposites” which, for Hall, are “a rather crude and reductionist way of establishing meaning.” Thus to understand the inclusion and representation of the contemporary girl gang and gang girl in popular culture it is necessary to look at broader structures, rather than focus solely on the text or binary

18 Hall ‘New Ethnicities,’ p.443.
representations, to make sense of the “complex relationship” that shapes the popular culture landscape.

This approach to gangsta culture is relatively familiar ground. Gangsta rap has received extensive critical observation by cultural scholars such as Quinn who examines the social and economic climate that produced gangsta rap in the late 1980s and its command of the music industry in the early 1990s. While not focusing on gang membership, Quinn contextualises gangsta rap’s emergence within the context of profound shifts in economic organisation which is essential for a Cultural Studies approach; economic inequality was a key social issue and concern for the Birmingham CCCS while Marxism continues to be a central ideology within the field. Similarly, Watkins’s discussion of ghettocentric films of the early 1990s and Josephine Metcalf’s (2012) study of gang memoirs situate texts within their social, political and historical context while investigating the complexities behind simplistic binaries ascribed to facets of black (Watkins) and gangsta (Metcalf) culture. Metcalf ventures beyond the production of black cultural products (which often dominate both the popular and critical terrain) with the critical reading of a Mexican American authored gang memoir alongside African American literary products. Metcalf’s approach informs my own research in terms of recognising the importance of investigating differences in racial representation and examining texts that derive from alternative perspectives. These studies are, however, specifically gendered in their discussions of (black) male gangsta rap artists, (black) male film directors and male gang memoirists. Cultural Studies scholarship conducted thus far continues to fall short of offering detailed attention to the representations of girl gang culture despite inclusion in popular culture and, most frequently, in film.

**Film Studies**

In a similar way to cultural scholars’ approaches to gangsta culture, film scholars also tend to focus exclusively on African American film or Chicana/o and /

---

22 See Quinn, *Nuthin’ But a “G” Thang*. Other notable Cultural Studies scholars who examine gangsta rap include Tricia Rose and Robin Kelley.

23 See Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture* and Metcalf, *The Culture and Politics of Contemporary Street Gang Memoirs* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012). Other important cultural studies of ghetto action movies have been undertaken by Todd Boyd while literary scholar David Brumble provides important definitions of the gang memoir.
or Mexican American cinema, rather than cross-analysing black, white and brown. A number of race specific scholarly works have been hugely influential in the understanding of raced representation, and stereotyping, in American film.\textsuperscript{24} Film historian Donald Bogle’s \textit{Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films}, originally published in 1973 and now in its fifth updated and expanded edition (2016), traces representations across film making periods.\textsuperscript{25} Bogle recognises how in filmic history, since \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} (1903) through to \textit{Straight Outta Compton} (2015), much has changed in the representation of African Americans (both women and men) yet at the same time, a great deal remains the same. Although not focusing exclusively on African Americans on screen in this study, it is important to flag Bogle’s work. He offers an understanding of historic representations of minorities and explores consistent representations over time. Bogle’s approach is paramount to this project’s consideration of stable and stereotypical representations of the gang girl / girl gang on film who is often racially marginalised.

Gary D. Keller’s \textit{Hispanics and United States Film} similarly maps the character types of Hispanics in 20th century film, identifying 11 Latino stereotyped characters on-screen.\textsuperscript{26} Charles Ramirez-Berg and Arthur G. Pettit had previously established similar trends, leading Ramirez-Berg (2002) to contend, “what the three of us discovered in our individual studies of American film was a steady repetition of the same basic traits assigned to Latino characters in the form of recognizable stereotypes.”\textsuperscript{27} Discussions of the representations of filmic Latinos frequently note the character of the “greaser;” the popularisation of the Latino (male) in Hollywood as “dangerous” and “dirty.” By comparison, the Latina (female) is often

\textsuperscript{24} Major works in the discussion of African American cinema include Manthia Diawara’s edited collection \textit{Black American Cinema} (1993) and Ed Guerrero’s \textit{Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film} (1993). Rosa Linda Fregoso’s \textit{The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture} (1993) and Chon Noriega’s 1992 study \textit{Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance} also offer poignant contributions to the discussions of recognizable racial stereotyping of Chicana/os and Hispanics throughout filmic history.


\textsuperscript{26} G. Keller, \textit{Hispanics and United States Film} (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1997).

(hyper)sexualised and / or victim. How stereotypes operate and what stereotypes exist in Hollywood, are important in this study’s examination of the extent to which Mi Vida Loca, Havoc and Gang Girl reuse and / or counter-stereotypes.

To fully understand the filmic representation of the girl gang and gang girl in US cinema it is important to look at how film theorists have historically approached the representation of females on screen. As the reader will see, to adopt solely a feminist reading to understand these films would be insufficient in dealing with their complexities (including reception). While not the central framework here, feminist film theory is important in this project’s analysis of young women on film. Prior to the ‘Second Wave’ feminist movement of the 1960s, Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (1949) articulated ideas that would inform feminist film scholars in the following decades. Discussing the marginalisation of women, not in film but in culture more generally, the French philosopher believed that woman “...is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other.”

Black men are undoubtedly subject in the “hood” movie and while the black woman is not inessential, she is essentially defined in relation to man, as mother, girlfriend, “hoe” and “Other.” This critical concept of the “Other” paved the way for the earliest feminist film scholars of the 1970s who examined images of women in Hollywood. Emerging in the 1970s, feminist film theory unsurprisingly developed from the women’s liberation movement of the previous decade which saw the publication of highly influential texts such as Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique (1963). Up to this point, film criticism largely stemmed, like Cultural Studies and other scholarly fields at the time, from the perspective of men.

Examining the presentation of women in film in the 1970s, scholars, significantly Molly Haskell in From Revenge to Rape: the Treatment of Women in

---

*The Movies* (1974), recognised films as reflections of society.\(^{29}\) As Karen Hollinger notes:

> The earliest critical stance came to be known as the images of women approach or reflection theory. It is a broadly sociological approach that sees film texts as simple reflections of social reality and critiques mainstream Hollywood films for presenting images of women that are in fact not reflections but distortions of women’s real lives which work to support patriarchal ideology.\(^{30}\)

Reflectionist theorists insisted that Hollywood “should be forced to change and present images that offer more positive role models for women” but as Hollinger reveals, “they fail to explain what exactly these images should be.”\(^{31}\) While significant in their contributions to opening up new conversations in film criticism, failing to fully explain broader questions, such as why at certain moments in Hollywood particular images of women emerged, led scholars to deem the approach to be underdeveloped and unsophisticated. Parallels can thus be drawn here between Hall’s rejection of representation as “merely reflexive” and the criticisms of early feminist film theory. Indeed, film scholars would later apply Cultural Studies approaches to cinema, moving beyond the more commonplace text-centric approach of the reflection theorists.

Prior to adopting Cultural Studies frameworks to texts, however, feminist film theorists moved beyond representation as reflection, adding psychoanalytical dimensions to examine cinema. Laura Mulvey famously suggests in her article ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975), that the controlling gaze in cinema is always male; spectators are encouraged to identify with the male and situate the female as an erotic spectacle. Mulvey created a foundation for an extensive body of literature and critical enquiry into the gaze with her ground-breaking study which moved beyond seeing cinema as reflective and instead “saw it as a construction reflective of male fantasies and desires that are projected onto female figures on screen.”\(^{32}\) More recently, Mulvey’s methodological approach, the utilisation of psychoanalysis theory, has been critiqued by scholars who, as Corinn Columpar

---


\(^{31}\) Ibid, p.9.

\(^{32}\) Hollinger, *Feminist Film Studies*, p.10.
writes, have demanded “a consideration of how factors other than gender determine one’s access to the gaze.”

Scholars (including bell hooks, Isaac Julien, Jane Gaines and E. Ann Kaplan) have thus extended Mulvey’s white, feminist perspective to examine the role of both race and class in cinema in relation to the gaze both “historically and textually.”

This approach bears obvious importance for my own project in its exploration of how race and class contribute to differences and / or patterns in representation. In her response to the neglect of race issues in white feminist theory, in Looking for the Other: Feminism Film and the Imperial Gaze (1997) Kaplan offers a short analysis of Mi Vida Loca. Rather than situate it in the context in which it was made, she engages with feminist and film criticism to simply conduct an insightful close reading of the film and the racialised gaze, asking questions such as what results from Anders’s “choices of narrative style and selection of stories to tell?”

The gender and focus of the gaze in Mi Vida Loca has been an issue of investigation for Deborah Elizabeth Whaley in an essay that considers two other films of “Latina subject,” but which do not feature girls in gangs: The House of the Spirits (1993) and I Like It Like That (1994). For Whaley, “Anders refocuses the look of Chicana youth in film, allowing the characters to ‘look back’ at the imperialist gaze through aesthetics and her polyvocal narrative.” Whaley’s analysis is important because she recognises the ways in which Anders interrogates standard gaze dynamics, imbuing her Chicana characters with a degree of power that had not yet been afforded in mainstream moviemaking. She examines the consequences of the filmmaker’s storytelling strategies and offers a positive reading of Mi Vida Loca yet contends, ‘Perhaps the next cinematic step is to imagine multiple representations and sexual agency for Latinas outside of the gang genre - a Latina cinesubjectivity.

---

34 Ibid, p.33.
beyond the barriers of the limited scope of *la vida loca*.” While agreeing that diversity is required in cinematic representations, analysis of film also needs to move beyond the limitations of the text itself.

While earlier US feminist and screen theory, which emerged at a similar time to Cultural Studies in Britain, centred on textual analysis and “tended to neglect the social conditions within which the consumption of cultural texts took place,” film scholar Christine Gledhill argued that texts must be studied in the context of their production. At the same time that Hall recognised a shift in representation, Gledhill also insisted that “the text alone does not provide sufficient evidence for conclusions on such questions, but requires the researches of the anthropologist or ethnographer.” For Gledhill, “the value” of “bridging the gap between textual analysis and social subject”:

lies in its avoidance of an overly deterministic view of cultural production, whether economistic (the media product reflects dominant economic interests outside the text), or cine-psychoanalytic (the text constructs spectators through the psycholinguistic mechanisms of the patriarchal unconscious).

To avoid an “overly deterministic view” of the films in my own research, the relationship between text and audience is examined through Reception Studies. Here, my work draws heavily on the work of reception scholars such as Janet Staiger in order to look at how actual audiences as active readers respond to the text.

**Reception Studies**

The notion of the reader as active participant was theorised by Hall in his seminal work ‘Encoding/Decoding’ (1973/1980). In this paper, Hall identified three categories in which audiences could read media texts: dominant / preferred, I unbiased /

---

38 Ibid.
41 Ibid, p.114.
negotiated and oppositional. The “dominant” or preferred reading of a text results in the audience responding to the product in the way in which the producer intended them to do so, while the “oppositional” reading occurs when the audience develops a reading in opposition to the intended meaning. In-between these binary readings, the “negotiated” decoding is the result of the appeal of both the oppositional and dominant readings but it is the preferred reading that dominates. These reading positions were used by a colleague of Hall’s, David Morley, in an influential 1980 study, *The “Nationwide” Audience*, which like other audience studies of the 1980s focussed on television audiences.\(^{43}\) In “a critical postscript” of his own study just a year later, Morley acknowledged that within *The “Nationwide” Audience* there was an “overemphasis of one structural factor at the expense of all others,” that only class was “dealt with in anything resembling a systemic way.”\(^{44}\) Despite this, Morley’s application of Hall’s work has contributed to a series of further investigations into audience reception. Janice Radway, Staiger and Robin Means Coleman can all be seen to “update” Morley and Hall’s work in their notable studies.

Further establishing the idea that media audiences actively create meaning in their interaction with popular culture texts, Radway’s 1984 research into female readers of the literary genre of romance fiction shifted the field of audience studies away from television. Radway, who developed an ethnographic study of 42 romance novel readers (nearly all of which were white and middle-class) in suburban America, challenged assumptions of romance fiction as a merely patriarchal, “lowbrow” genre and used audience research to read the genre as encompassing moments of subversive potential. Acknowledging some of the limitations of audience studies, Radway has herself noted in *Reading the Romance* that “even what I took to be simple descriptions of my interviewees’ self-understandings were mediated if not produced by my own conceptual constructs and ways of seeing the world.”\(^{45}\) However, Radway’s study illustrated the importance of examining the


relationship between audience and text, connecting the traditional textual analysis of both cultural and film scholars with the burgeoning emphasis on audience response.

In 1992, Staiger’s discussion of gender and sexuality in terms of the critical reception of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) continued to develop an understanding of what audiences do with texts. In looking beyond the film in its context of production and reinforcing the production of meaning by actual audiences, leading reception theorist Staiger demonstrated the importance of exploring the meaning of a single text. For Staiger, the “use value of Reception Studies [...] is not to overthrow the author in favor of the reader” nor to “attempt to construct a generalized, systemic explanation of how individuals might comprehend texts, or possibly someday will, but rather how they actually have understood them.”

Here, Staiger stresses the contextual detriments that are vital to recognise in an audience’s interpretation of a text. For Staiger and reception scholar Barbara Klinger, audience reception is distinguished by the contextual factors that inform audience meaning: in Staiger’s words it is “context-activated.” Contextual factors are therefore key to not only the production of the text but also the consumption. In 2000, Staiger’s *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* continued this “research agenda” arguing that “contextual factors, more than textual ones, account for the experiences that spectators have watching films and television.”

This is particularly important when considering the meaning of *Mi Vida Loca* for youth in 2015 who are far removed from the 1994 release of the film. Staiger and Klinger’s work is of immediate relevance to this study in understanding how audiences draw context-specific meanings from texts.

While Morley placed emphasis on class, and Radway and Staiger on gender in 2002, Coleman incorporated race into her discussion of the reception of *Menace*. Through a series of exchanged letters with incarcerated black youth, Coleman raised questions such as how race, class and gender could influence viewing practices. Coleman’s study also demonstrates the benefits of taking texts beyond “standard”

---

audience groups and in moving beyond the traditional research site. This approach is crucial to Metcalf’s reception study in which youth in East LA schools are positioned as active readers of gang memoirs. Metcalf’s inclusion of traditionally marginalised groups (both African American and Mexican American male and female working-class youth are central to her reception study) is highly influential in my own research which combines a Cultural Studies focus of non-dominant, under-represented groups and a Reception Studies concern with the production of meaning by audiences.

Having explored some of the key work in the fields of cultural, film and Reception Studies, illustrating the multidimensional approach that informs this study, I will now define the gang and examine the scholarship that exists in relation to girl gangs, and their filmic representation. My aim here is to illustrate where critical readings have been undertaken using different definitions of the gang and alternative theoretical frameworks, resulting in both a crude misunderstanding of the complexities of the girl gang and a disregard for the importance of the social, political and economic context of these movies.

**Gang Studies**

A great deal of sociological / criminological attention has been given to the American street gang which has resulted in disparate definitions of what constitutes a “gang.” In his comprehensive 1997 study *The American Street Gang: Its Nature, Prevalence, and Control*, Malcolm Klein, asks “What is a street gang?” By Klein’s definition it is, “any durable, street-orientated youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity.” This definition places emphasis on the criminal elements of the gang identity. This focus towards criminality as an intrinsic defining feature was considered as reductive by Ball and Curry in the mid-1990s because it extended the negative connotations surrounding the gang. There remains no consistent, static definition of the street gang. For Joan Moore (1998), the only

---

50 Ibid.
gangs that exist are those that describe themselves as gangs.\textsuperscript{52} Klein similarly acknowledges that the group must recognise itself as a gang and for the purposes of this research, it is Klein’s most widely accepted definition of a street gang that is used. In the three case studies, the girls identify themselves as a member of a gang and participate in illegal activities. However, acknowledging Ball and Curry’s criticisms of the focus of criminality in gang definitions, this thesis moves beyond solely examining representations of delinquency.

The definition of the girl gang, although not in a contemporary street sense, has already been discussed by filmmaker and scholar Bev Zalcock, a specialist in avant-garde and women’s cinema. In \textit{Renegade Sisters: Girl Gangs on Film} (1998), Zalcock offered the first scholarly attempt to provide an examination of (and entire dedication to) the filmic girl gang.\textsuperscript{53} In 2001, a “new updated and expanded edition” was published and is referred to here. Zalcock provides a survey of the history of the cinematic girl gang enhanced through the visual aid of illustrated photographs, and integration of interviews with the director of girl gang classics \textit{The Student Nurses} (1970) and \textit{Terminal Island} (1973), Stephanie Rothman. From exploitation films to women-in-prison, women-on-wheels, girls’ boarding schools, women in science fiction films and women outlaws, Zalcock provides a comprehensive account of the history of the filmic girl gang in North American and European productions, yet the wide range of texts considered results in only surface analysis. Dertano’s \textit{Girl Gang}, discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, is not considered by Zalcock, and when \textit{She Devils on Wheels} and \textit{The Warriors} are briefly explored, representation is contextualised all too fleetingly.

Zalcock contends that throughout movie-making history, it is possible to identify “strong” women on-screen. Looking back, Zalcock writes:

over a hundred years of cinema, across the spectrum of movie making, from the no-budget experimental short film to the mega bucks blockbuster, we can

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{53} B. Zalcock, \textit{Renegade Sisters: Girl Gangs on Film} (London: Creation Books, 2001).
\end{itemize}
trace a small but rich vein of film making that features women as powerful and active agents instead of the usual passive objects.\textsuperscript{54}

Zalcock continues, “in narrative cinema we find that there are three basic structures into which these active women fall: i) the central character who is solo; ii) the female duo in a buddy format; and iii) the girl gang.”\textsuperscript{55} Renegade Sisters focuses on “this last and least common variation [...] exploring a range of girl gang representations down the years and across the genres.”\textsuperscript{56} For the purposes of Zalcock’s study, “three or more female characters working together to resist oppression and fight back against injustice, constitute a girl gang.”\textsuperscript{57} According to Zalcock, “because this female unit is a collective one, it is, in essence more heroic than the solo female and more powerful than the duo.”\textsuperscript{58}

While Renegade Sisters provides a platform for further study, my approach to this thesis is distinct because scholars of the filmic girl gang have neglected in their study the discussion of contemporary street gangs. For example, despite offering the first study devoted to the analyses of the girl gang on screen, Zalcock’s contribution situates texts such as Charlie’s Angels (2000) within the girl gang genre. While Mi Vida Loca does briefly feature in Zalcock’s study, she considers Anders’s film alongside what she considers other girl gang films such as Julie Dash’s Daughters of the Dust (1991) - a story about Gullah women, set on the Sea Islands of South Carolina in 1902 - and Liberty’s Booty (1980) under the section “Female Bonds.” Unlike Zalcock then, my research uses the terms “girl gang” and “gang girl” (not as interchangeable as they bear obvious and crucial differences in meaning) in the context of contemporary street gangs since the 1980s, rather than Zalcock’s much broader definition of the girl gang. What distinguishes this study from Renegade Sisters is the full-length consideration of, and dedication to, the critical examination of three leading examples of the filmic representation of the girl gang and gang girl in a contemporary street gang context. Zalcock only offers a very brief consideration of the texts included in her book, while this thesis deals with Mi Vida Loca, Havoc

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, p.5.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, p.7.
and *Gang Girl* in considerable detail, allowing the complexities of these movies to be understood more comprehensively.

In this study, I propose that girls in the contemporary street gang in US film are simultaneously presented as empowered and operating under male control. Moore (2007) recognises how “The extent to which they [female gangs] are following their agency or are pawns of the boys is often an issue” for gang scholars.\(^{59}\) Thus, it is particularly interesting that pop cultural products have not been utilised to further examine this dynamic at play. Zalcock does rightfully acknowledge how the girl gang member is often “trapped in a double bind.”\(^{60}\) However, Zalcock contends that “as protagonists they must assume masculine attributes in order to drive the narrative forward but as women they are supposed to be feminine, recessive and passive - objects of the male gaze.”\(^{61}\) This assessment, teamed with the idea that “in order to mediate this contradiction, central female characters become honorary men, or to use the psychoanalytic jargon ‘phallicised females,’” is reductive in nature.\(^{62}\) Female street gangs and girls in gangs should not be identified by their male counterparts and should be studied independently. As Meda Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn contend:

> It is vital that we stop constructing images of girls’ participation in gangs that endlessly compare them to boys and their gangs, or worse, get caught up in the notions that girls, and their groups, are simply appendages or mirror images of boys’ gangs.\(^{63}\)

Although Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn are discussing the necessity of extending sociological studies to include girls, similar arguments can apply to cultural representations of the gang girl. However, it is important to note that in order to examine how the gang girl and girl gang are constructed in these films, we must not simply ignore representations of the boys and men. Feminist Susan Faludi reminds us in her important text *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999), that in order to make sense of how women are treated, we have to look at how men are treated.

---


\(^{60}\) Zalcock, *Renegade Sisters*, p.7.

\(^{61}\) Ibid, p.7, 8.

\(^{62}\) Ibid, p.8.

treated too. “It’s not just women who are bombarded by cultural messages about appropriate gender behaviour” but men too “who cast into the gladiatorial arena of ornament [...] sense their own diminishment in women’s strength.” The treatment of women (by men) is thus purportedly framed by men’s own struggles with gender expectations.

Hagedorn and Chesney-Lind are not the only scholars to recognise the significance of studying the girl gang in distinction to the males. Despite only making scant references to female gang members in his study, which places issues of gang proliferation, the gang-drug connection and the group process in gang control at its core, Klein clearly indicates the importance of an approach which does not reduce the girl gang to a mere emulation of “maleness.” However, a significant development of feminist criminology, in particular Anne Campbell’s pioneering study of African American and Latina gang girls, The Girls in the Gang: A Report from New York City (1984), had already identified the critical failure to understand the girl gang and gang girl. This sociological discussion continued throughout the 1990s and 2000s. For example, Jody Miller’s ‘The Girls in the Gang: What We’ve Learned from Two Decades of Research’ (2002) integrated previous research (emphasised by the titular reference to Campbell’s work) with her own to highlight contradictions within the field of study and trace patterns from the 1980s through to the early 2000s. This provided essential knowledge regarding the varied reasons girls join gangs, their initiations and rituals. The extent to which such gang activities are authentically represented in, and / or influenced by, gang-related movies - as expressed by actual gang members - has similarly garnered interest in the last two decades.

In 1996, sociological research undertaken by Decker and Van Winkle interviewed 99 St. Louis-based gang members (some female, but mainly male) with

the intention of exploring their lives and practices on the street. 67 Responses to the contemporary gang film Colors (1988) by male gang members featured briefly; “For many gang members, the movie Colors provided an important reference point for the origins of gangs in St. Louis.” 68 For the researchers, “popular culture provides the mechanism or catalyst by which gangs in St. Louis come to resemble those in Los Angeles.” 69 Building on this groundwork, criminal justice scholar Chris J. Przemieniecki (2005) interviewed law enforcement officials and six current or former gang members (aged between 18-29, two female and four male), examining the relationship between violent gang behaviours, the media and Hollywood movies, including Boyz. 70 Considering his participants’ readings of these films, Przemieniecki concludes, “while Hollywood is simply providing a gang story, these films may be doing more damage than good.” 71 It is crucial that the opinions of those purportedly represented on-screen ((ex)gang members) are consulted but interviewing gang members and / or law officials alone neglects mainstream consumers, such as young people. It is of equal importance to seek the opinion of other marginalised sectors of society, including youth from impoverished areas.

Przemieniecki himself recognises this need in his 2012 PhD thesis; an exploration of the depictions of “street gangs” in a sample of Hollywood films from the 1960s through to 2009, a year prior to Gang Girl’s release. 72 Conducting some content analysis of 25 films, including Boyz, Mi Vida Loca and Havoc, Przemieniecki applies a “theoretical framework of social constructionism and cinematic realism” to his study. 73 Recognizing that violence is not the only dimension of gang life, Przemieniecki wisely moves beyond this concern to explore the filmic representation of aspects such as clothes, turf and class relations. He aims

69 Ibid.
71 Ibid, p.60.
73 Ibid, p.xvii.
for “depth and breadth” in examining the similarities between Hollywood street
gangs and “real” street gangs but falls short of the former in favour of the latter.  
Przemieniecki fails to note of the re-writing of Jessica Kaplan’s original screenplay,
egates discussion of Anders’s off-screen violence and gives no space to the
significance of gang initiations. By consulting numerous films there is little
opportunity for in-depth analysis, meaning the discussion of distinct girl gang style
politics is absent (the makeup of Anders’s Echo Park homegirls and Allison’s
clothing in Havoc goes unexplored). Scenes from Havoc generate insightful if brief
readings, but there is no comparison between Havoc and Mi Vida Loca. The
connection between the two films is only tenuously (and misleadingly) established
through the female writer dynamic. Despite these shortcomings, Przemieniecki
rightfully acknowledges that the next logical step of study would consider “how
individuals interpret images” and the impact of these movies on real-life consumers;
such reception work is a fundamental component of my own project.

Przemieniecki fleetingly interacts with Havoc and Mi Vida Loca as cultural
representations of the contemporary street gang, fascinating for the way in which
they respond to some of the key issues raised by sociologists. Significantly,
Przemieniecki cites important figures including Klein and Moore yet the
fundamental differences and complexities between girls in gangs and male gang
culture, and how this translates to film, go unrecognised, something this study
rectifies. With contexts of production only referenced in passing by Przemieniecki,
such as the rise of gang homicides in the mid-1980s (there is no consideration of
Reagan’s economic policies that disproportionately affected blacks including the
budgetary reductions for Medicare and Food Stamps, nor does Przemieniecki
mention Rodney King), there remains substantial ground for further investigation
into these films’ politics of representation.

**Scholarly Work on the Films**

There is far more scholarly work on Mi Vida Loca to date, unsurprising given
its earlier release when compared to Havoc and Gang Girl. Short references to
Anders’s film can be found in pedagogical journals. For example, the year before the

74 Ibid, p.5.
publication of her study of girls in punk, Leblanc considered *Mi Vida Loca* as “one of the only available films to portray the experiences of gang girls as well as those of their male counterparts” in a 1998 article for *Teaching Sociology*. Leblanc’s essay, which discusses the use of feature films to teach ethnographic methods, includes a short student analysis of the subcultural systems within *Mi Vida Loca*, highlighting the function of the film in an educational setting. The film, Leblanc concludes, is “entertaining, rich in detail, and an excellent depiction of L.A. gang culture.” Leblanc’s article is one of a number of sociological scholarly works which place emphasis on the utilisation of feature films, which include gangs, as a pedagogical tool. For instance, Valdez and Halley (1999) discuss the utilisation of the 1992 Mexican American male gang and prison film *American Me* in a class entitled “Mexican American Experience Through Film.” Ann Brigham and Sallie Marston (2002) provide a fascinating comparative analysis of *Mi Vida Loca* with *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) to fulfil their “pedagogical objective” and “argue that teaching about the complexity of landscape and its central place within geography can be enhanced by exposing students to the ways in which popular film construct and portray it.” Combined, these scholars illustrate the importance of taking Anders’s film (and other contemporary gang films) into the classroom.

Emphasising *Mi Vida Loca’s* function beyond recreation / pleasure, Kenneth Fox examines the film alongside four other barrio movies including *Mi Familia* (1994). Fox’s contention that Anders’s film is the “most ambitious in terms of re-imagining a gendering of space and place” recognises how important Anders’s film is in “reconfiguring” urban America.

---

77 Ibid.
Angeles (LA) provides a starting point for my own exploration of geographies. Fox includes *American Me* in his analysis, a film that features the Chicana character Julie, an ex-gang member. However, her story in Edward James Olmos’s film is, in the words of Rosa Linda Fregoso, “untold.” This results in passing reference to her character by Fox who demonstrates the importance of examining the on-screen relationship between place and gang girl in Anders’s film but unlike this thesis, does not extend this analysis to consider other girl gang / gang girl texts.

Others make brief reference to *Mi Vida Loca* in discussion of substance abuse and female violence (Hien and Hien) while Debra White-Stanley considers Anders’s use of melodramatic sound in her filmmaking, which includes a brief reference to the film in a journal issue which explores the study of film and sound. Generally, however, scholarly work on *Mi Vida Loca* can be placed into two categories, feminist and Chicana/o studies, or in an interdisciplinary approach intersecting the two. Thea Pitman, a leading scholar in Latin American culture, highlights how feminist critics such as Linda Lopez McAlister “have praised the film substantially for avoiding trite and unrealistic narrative closure” while Chicana/o critics have tended to shun Anders “on the basis of her ethnic otherness,” which Pitman takes issue with.

Fregoso, who writes from both a Chicana/o and feminist perspective, is one of a number of critics who places emphasis on Anders’s “outsider” status. Her first published review of the film for *Cineaste* in 1995 revealed that she found the film “difficult to review” because the “gender politics are great [...] yet its daring and

---

gritty realism is so partial in its one-sided view of la vida loca.”\textsuperscript{84} However, since her initial review, Fregoso has received Anders’s film more favourably. For example, while still referring to the film as a “splendid contradiction” in 2003, Fregoso writes:

The film’s circulation of alternative images of girls in gangs fulfils Chicana desire for representation in the public space of culture and opens up a discursive space in which homegirls may reclaim and affirm their authority as subjects in history and producers of meaning.\textsuperscript{85}

Here, Fregoso confirms the importance of Anders’s text as providing much needed “alternative” representations of Chicana homegirls in the cultural sphere. When considered alongside her original write-up, Fregoso also makes plain the importance of viewing context as responses to texts can develop and indeed change over time; there is no singular reading of a movie.

Despite this more in-depth and more recent revision of her initial review which acknowledges the film as an “effective vehicle” that “opens up a space for the refashioning of Chicana urban subjectivities,” Fregoso continues to make reference to Anders as “another white director,” insisting that Anders’s “misses crucial elements of Chicana homegirl reality.”\textsuperscript{86} Pitman contends that these criticisms which claim that the film “is too heavily imbued with Anders’s personal life and values and thus misunderstands the Chicanas who are its subject - are specifically framed as ‘because she’s not Chicana she doesn’t understand what motivates us.’”\textsuperscript{87} Pitman argues that Fregoso’s choice of the term ‘white’ to describe Anders – and ‘brown’ to denote Chicana/o –means that, no matter how long Anders might cohabit in Echo Park with homegirls, and no matter what past experiences she might have of being a welfare mother herself (experiences/spaces which might produce the right kind of subjectivity she needs to perform Chicana homegirl identity), she can never be allowed in by the ‘border guards of (Chicano) identity’, for that identity is still seen to reside, at least in part, in biological claims to a certain ethnicity.\textsuperscript{88}

\textsuperscript{84} R.L. Fregoso, ‘Hanging out with the Homegirls? Allison Anders’s Mi Vida Loca,’ Cineaste, Vol.21, No.3 (July, 1995), p.36.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid, p.101.
\textsuperscript{87} Pitman, ‘Policing the Borders,’ p.80.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
Suggestively, Anders’s whiteness problematises her storytelling capabilities. But we cannot assume that a feature-length, fictional movie written and directed by a Chicana homegirl would simply be accepted by “insiders” because to do so would propose homogeneity amongst homegirls. Together, Pitman and Fregoso reveal the tensions inherent in “whites writing brown.”

While *Havoc* has generated little scholarly debate, Pitman’s argument and her poignant discussion of an “Anglo” view of Chicana/o culture can similarly be applied to Kopple’s film in its depiction of the 16th Street gang. The idea of “white” vs. “brown” direction is certainly a heated topic as Fregoso is not the sole scholar to engage in this conversation in the analysis of Anders’s film.

Mexican American literary scholar Domino Renée Pérez (2003) offers an interesting analysis of *Mi Vida Loca* through an examination of race and the figure of *La Llorona*: the iconic “Weeping Woman” of Mexican folklore. However, like Fregoso, the analysis “seeks to identify whether or not Chicana viewers are offered self-affirming positions by contemporary directors, even Anglo ones, outside of the fixed binaries of creator/destroyer, virgin/whore, and good/evil,” insisting upon creating boundaries between “this Anglo filmmaker” and Chicanas. While Pérez states that Anders “does make a feminist statement in reference to female agency,” the analysis continues to discredit Anders’s text as an unreliable, “Anglo” upholding of stereotyped Chicana characterisations. Pérez critiques Anders’s portrayal of the homegirls as welfare dependent mothers, insisting that the negative stereotype paints a “grim picture of Chicanas.” For Pérez, this “does little to help cultural audiences see these women in positive ways” although her analysis does not consult actual audiences.

---

89 The idea of “whites writing black” has also emerged as an area of academic interest. See, for example: C. Garcia et al (eds.), *From Uncle Tom’s Cabin to The Help: Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narratives of Black Life* (NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).
91 Ibid, p.82.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
Pérez offers an alternative to Anders’s “stereotypes” suggesting that had Anders chosen to focus more on college students, she could have positioned “us in potentially affirming roles.”

94 To insist that the (gang) girls should be represented in a more self-sufficient way ignores the inclusion of the homegirl as a potentially positive source of cultural image and undermines the fact that the film does not simply serve to reinforce the negative stereotypes often associated with images of gangs in contemporary culture. Furthermore, Pérez, like Fregoso, seems to disregard any contextualisation of Mi Vida Loca’s production, including the proliferation of gang membership, the socioeconomic demands placed on racially marginalised groups, the soaring rates of youth unemployment and dismantling of the welfare system.

Much like Fregoso and Pérez, Latin American literary scholar Ignacio López-Calvo (2011) highlights Anders’s “Euro-American” status in a passing critique of Anders’s film. 95 For López-Calvo, Anders reinforces “existing stereotypes, including dependency on welfare” by “focussing exclusively on the most negative aspects of Chicana life.” 96 However, there is an acknowledgement, when discussing the film and Yxta Maya Murray’s fictional work on Chicana gang members, Locas: A Novel (1997), that “perhaps such criticism detracts these works’ [...] importance of being, respectively among the first novels and the first commercial film to deal with the underworld of female gangs.”

97 According to Pitman, the film’s “most positive treatment to date appears” in Susan Dever’s 2003 study of melodrama. 98 Dever focuses on women filmmakers in her contribution to the field of Mexican Film Studies, illuminating how previously marginalised voices have been rearticulated and reconstructed in film by female directors while acknowledging that power structures can be simultaneously reinforced. Not only does Dever’s study offer the most positive discussion of Mi Vida Loca (although Pitman does rightfully flag that Dever still feels a need to identify both herself and Anders as white working-class feminists), but it is also

94 Ibid.
96 Ibid, p.146.
97 Ibid, p.147.
98 Pitman, ‘Policing the Borders,’ p.82.
unique in its approach to the film. Dever dissects *Mi Vida Loca* into “Acts,” placing particular emphasis on the lack of scholarly attention of Act II (“Don’t Let No One Get You Down”) and Act III (“Suavecito”).\(^9^9\) While this is an effective way to analyse the film, this study intersects *Mi Vida Loca’s* analysis with *Havoc* and *Gang Girl* to explore differences and similarities in representations of the girl gang / gang girl, meaning that themes are explored rather than “Acts.”

Dever considers the productive elements of the film, in terms of the representation of both the males and females in Echo Park as mentors and leaders, as “intimate portraits of individuals within communities [which] humanize the media-embattled barrios.”\(^1^0^0\) Her historical and cultural perspective allows the previous scholarly analysis of *Mi Vida Loca* to move beyond the politics of representation that exclusively focussed on gender and / or Chicana identity. Dever integrates her discussion of the film with cultural analysis, situating *Mi Vida Loca* as a cultural product against the backdrop of the 1992 LA riots and beating of Rodney King by the LAPD. This acknowledgment begins to situate the film within its context of production yet falls short of the examination required to fully understand and locate the film within the context of contemporary street gang culture. Dever’s analysis - particularly her discussion of violence and insightful integration of her “gratifying experience” of “viewing and discussing *Mi Vida Loca*” with her female friends - provides many starting points for discussion. Although my audience study is not exhaustive, it does move beyond the informality of Dever’s which nevertheless reinforces the importance of engaging with actual audiences and the necessity to move beyond an exclusively text-based study.

Although a number of critics, like Dever and Pitman, have documented the importance of the *Mi Vida Loca*, this study fills the critical gap regarding the insufficient consideration of Anders’s politics of representation. For instance, by engaging with sociological studies in this thesis, the film’s characterisation of girls in contemporary street gangs can be scrutinised further. In 2015, literary scholar Ewa Antoszek confirmed the significance of Anders’s film in the article ‘Cinematic Representations of Homegirls: Echo Park vs. Hollywood in Allison Anders’s *Mi


\(^{100}\) Ibid, p.127.
Vida Loca.’\textsuperscript{101} Much like Pitman, Antoszek reviews the literature pertaining to the film, offering a comprehensive overview of its scholarly criticisms while balancing such readings with the work of Dever. For Antoszek, who examines the "dynamics of interplay between Hollywood and the barrio," Anders’s "depiction of life in East LA is consistent and comprehensive; nevertheless, at times the Hollywood story of Echo Park does not exactly reflect the reality of the barrio."\textsuperscript{102} “Regardless of the aforementioned arguments” - including those posed by Fregoso - Antoszek insists that Mi Vida Loca is “worth watching” “because despite its drawbacks it does contribute to the discourse on female gangs in the U.S.”\textsuperscript{103} To reach this conclusion, Karen Hollinger’s 1998 reading of the film as part of a larger study of the female friendship narrative is consulted. For Hollinger, Anders’s film provides a “serious, complex, and sympathetic treatment of Chicana gang culture” which "stimulates thought about important social issues."\textsuperscript{104} Because of this it “should not be rejected by the Chicano/a community” when “there are too few filmic treatments of intraethnic female friendships.”\textsuperscript{105} For a film that “achieves so much” Hollinger concludes that Anders’s text should not be discounted.\textsuperscript{106} Agreeing with Hollinger’s contention in terms of recognising the importance of the movie, Antoszek’s reaffirms the continuing significance of Anders’s text in the present day.

Responses that Antoszek draws on include those consulted by Pitman, with reference made to the ethnographic work undertaken by Marie “Keta” Miranda who took a group of young Latina Oakland homegirls to the 1994 screening of Anders’s film at the San Francisco International Film Festival.\textsuperscript{107} After the screening, the youth participated in a Q&A with Anders, raising questions regarding the plot content rather than Anders’s racial status, contrasting with numerous scholarly criticisms. It was aspects of the “cultural logic” that Anders had “missed” including

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, p.148.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid, p.149.
\textsuperscript{104} K. Hollinger, \textit{In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p.200.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, p.201.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} M. Miranda, \textit{Homegirls in the Public Sphere} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).
the complexities of gang warfare that the homegirls found fault with, leading Antoszek to contend that at times Hollywood overshadows “reality.”

Miranda’s work *Homegirls in the Public Sphere* only briefly opens with a discussion of Anders’s film in relation to the San Francisco screening before focusing on an auto-ethnographic documentary project, “It’s a Homie Thang,” that the Oakland youth produced post-viewing Anders’s film. Despite not forming the bulk of the study’s focus and although my project is not strictly an ethnographic study, Miranda reinforces the importance of viewing and discussing film with “alternative” audiences, illustrating how personal experience shapes readings of texts. After consulting some of the scholarly work on *Mi Vida Loca* including Miranda, Antoszek also briefly illustrates the necessity to move beyond the text itself; a contention that I will also apply to *Havoc* and *Gang Girl*.

Further highlighting the differences in viewing context between scholar and youth, Antoszek includes one online viewer response to Anders’s film in a footnote. A 15-year-old youth who spent six years living in Echo Park praises the film’s depiction, positioning the film in real-life circumstance: “echo parc is really like this.” As the reader will later see, speaking with high school youth in East LA did raise some similar responses although students were far from homogenous in their viewing strategies. I spoke with youth and consulted online reviews in order to analyse the consumption of these movies prior to the publication of Antoszek’s article. Antoszek’s piece only further confirms that such voices should and need to be consulted in greater detail, verifying the importance of both youth as consumers and the online reviewing community which is paramount in the discussion of *Gang Girl*’s reception.

While I have demonstrated that much ground has been covered in the analysis of *Mi Vida Loca*, scholars have largely been concerned with the representation of race and/or gender as a framework for their readings. While race and gender remain highly significant in this study, critics have largely failed to give consideration to *Mi Vida Loca*’s examination of girl gang culture and even those who do offer favourable analyses choose to make only brief reference, if any at all, to the social, political and economic context of contemporary street gangs. Although

---

109 Antoszek, ‘Cinematic Representations,’ p.147.
Przemieniecki makes some perceptive observations regarding the changing racial composition of Hollywood’s black male street gangs from the 1990s to a more multi-racial street gang of the 2000s, he situates Havoc and Mi Vida Loca in the same study without examining the specifics of girl gang culture. This thesis advocates the urgent need to not only locate Mi Vida Loca alongside Havoc, but to actively compare it with other cinematic representations of girl gang culture. In her analysis of Anders’s film, Antoszek contends that “one may come to the conclusion that new texts and films are needed to do away with one-sided perspectives” of girl gang life.\footnote{Ibid, p.148.} Although this is framed in terms of texts dealing with Chicanas, it is fascinating that films already released, including Havoc and Gang Girl, have not been compared and contrasted with Mi Vida Loca. By doing so, this thesis assesses the extent of such “one sided perspectives” of gang girl activity across racial and class lines.

Exploring the gulf and crossing between raced, classed and gendered boundaries leads us to Havoc, a film that has received a very limited amount of academic discussion when compared to Anders’s film. Anders has been interviewed about Mi Vida Loca on a number of occasions since the movie’s release, which led me to be highly selective in questions asked to ensure originality in this study. While Bailey has not been interviewed or studied by scholars, he has been interviewed by the press in relation to Gang Girl for reasons which we will later see. He has also spoken publicly about the film in some detail. By comparison, the publication of Gregory Brown’s edited collection of interviews with Kopple in 2015 reveals that there has been no detailed discussion about Havoc with Kopple.\footnote{Brown’s book formed part of the University Press of Mississippi’s 2015 Conversations with Filmmakers Series. See: G. Brown (ed.) Barbara Kopple: Interviews (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 2015).} Kopple’s Academy Award winning documentary Harlan County, USA (1976), concerned with a Kentucky miners’ strike of the period, and her more recent documentary about gun control and rights issues, Gun Fight (2011), have been subject to in-depth interview conversations. Havoc on the other hand is listed by Brown in the chronology of Kopple’s career and is albeit briefly noted by some of the interviewers when asking about Kopple’s “other” and / or upcoming films. Yet there is no lengthy discussion of her first non-documentary feature film and Brown does not offer any
acknowledgment or reasoning for this. Despite this, academic material pertaining to the film is interesting and worth exploring.

In 2011, sociologist Karen Halnon discussed the notion of the “so-called Black Ghetto Cool” in America’s cultural marketplace by examining films such as James Toback’s 1999 film Black and White, which depicts white teenagers’ fascination with, and appropriation of black culture.\textsuperscript{112} Extending her analysis into book form in 2013, Halnon reinstates the claim that harsh “realities” of the black ghetto have been “transformed” into “a playful code of consumption.”\textsuperscript{113} Referring to sociologist Mary Waters’s (1990) notion of “Saturday suburban ethnics,” Halnon seeks to prove an idea established by Waters.\textsuperscript{114} Waters contended that those who “choose” their race - in Halnon’s case white suburban youth who choose “blackness” - “overlook the social reality of racial and ethnic identities of America’s minority groups,” an idea integral to the discussion of Havoc and gangsta styles.\textsuperscript{115} Halnon considers an “extreme case” of this to be evidenced in the 1995 article by journalist Nell Bernstein entitled ‘Goin’ Gangsta, Choosin' Cholita Teens Today ’Claim' a Racial Identity.’\textsuperscript{116} In this article, Bernstein details a trend, or “fad” as Halnon terms it, amongst white suburban youth in California “acting like Mexican ‘gangsta girls’” through aspects such as speech and makeup, supported by interviews with young adults.\textsuperscript{117} Such works are important to this study and its exploration of white fascination with gangs and gangsta culture.

One 20-year-old African American from Hayward (California) was interviewed in Bernstein’s piece, contending, “When Boyz N the Hood came out on video, it was sold out for weeks. The boys all wanna be black, the girls all wanna be

\begin{thebibliography}{117}
\bibitem{115} Ibid, p.156.
\bibitem{117} Halnon, \textit{The Consumption of Inequality}, p.37.
\end{thebibliography}
Mexican.”\footnote{Bernstein, ‘Goin’ Gangsta,’ p.89.} The publication date of Bernstein’s piece confirms the timely and relevant nature of Kaplan’s original script *The Powers That Be* in 1995, while the quote by the young adult offers potential insight into the decision to (re)focus *Havoc’s* storyline on Latino gang culture. In a chapter that “focuses on the faddishness of “ghetto” in relation to urban poor,” Halnon (2013) reveals that the “fad also applies to Latino poverty” and references *Havoc* as evidence of this.\footnote{Halnon, *The Consumption of Inequality*, p.75.} Halnon, Bernstein and the young interviewee make reference to white “wannabe” Mexicans yet it is the representation of white suburban youth interacting with elements of black culture that is more frequently explored in film, and thus studied and critiqued by scholars. This potentially provided impetus for *Havoc* to continue to screen white middle-class youth engaging with aspects of black culture, while consciously recognising that other minority groups exist and are being imitated. It is also important to consider the shift to the brown 16th Street in *Havoc*, and the focus on Chicana/os in *Mi Vida Loca*, as the next logical and simplified step in filmmaking. To make these movies “stand out” from the numerous texts exploring the black (male) ghettos, the transition to brown could be recognised as reductive by affiliating all non-white people with gangs, although this thesis does demonstrate that there is more at stake with these movies.

Much like *Mi Vida Loca, Havoc* has previously been studied alongside other films but similarly these films have not necessarily concerned girl gangs or gang girls. Linguistic scholar Qiuana Lopez places *Havoc* in conversation with *Black and White*, one of the films explored by Halnon, in an insightful 2014 essay.\footnote{Q. Lopez, ‘Aggressively Feminine: The Linguistic Appropriation of Sexualized Blackness by White Female Characters in Film,’ *Gender and Language*, Vol.8, No.3 (2014), pp.289–310.} Lopez’s analysis of Kopple’s film centres on the “wigger” phenomenon (a slang expression combining “white” and “nigger” and referring to the emulation of black culture by whites), and the linguistic representation of African Americans. At the time of Jessica Kaplan’s screenwriting (1995), such a phenomenon was explicated by African American rapper KRS-One who claimed, “Now we got white kids callin’ themselves nigger.”\footnote{KRS-One, “MC’s Act Like They Don’t Know,” *KRS-One* (Jive Records, 1995).} Lopez offers an analysis of the “linguistic and semiotic

---

\footnote{Bernstein, ‘Goin’ Gangsta,’ p.89.}
\footnote{Halnon, *The Consumption of Inequality*, p.75.}
\footnote{KRS-One, “MC’s Act Like They Don’t Know,” *KRS-One* (Jive Records, 1995).}
performances of hip-hop and gangster identity among white female characters in the films *Black and White* and *Havoc*” suggesting a reductive conflating of “blackness with Latinoness” in *Havoc*. For Lopez, “Blackness, gang activity, and lower social class are equated” as both films “fail to make crucial distinctions between cultures positioned as non-white, including hip-hop culture, gangster culture, and the street cultures of East Los Angeles and New York City, and as a result blackness becomes iconic of all of them.”

Allison and Emily’s fascination with the Latino 16th Street gang but their quoting of rap lyrics by black 1990s rap artist Tupac and female rapper Amil is an example put forward by Lopez of *Havoc’s* failure to acknowledge such cultural differences.

Lopez raises a number of valid points in her examination of the performance of language through readings of Allison and Emily’s dialogue. Yet when we probe further into styles, and explore the way in which the landscape is presented in the film, we can see that some distinct features of “Latinoness” are in fact present. Stereotypes of the non-white gangsta are plentiful yet moments in the narrative point towards the conflation of cultures as stemming from the naivety of the white youth rather than the film simply failing to make obvious and necessary distinctions between cultures and places. Examining the binaries between black and white “authenticity,” Lopez raises issues that often and continue to surround gang and gangsta culture: “authentic” versus “unauthentic.” Lopez does not make this link concerning gangsta culture and the binary often ascribed to it, but does make reference to the notion of “keepin’ it real.” Both Lopez and Halnon use *Havoc* effectively to underscore their scholarly ideas but also create opportunity for further academic enquiry, including press and audience reception which exemplifies concerns of authenticity.

Alternative frameworks beyond race and class have been applied to Kopple’s movie. The performance of acts is commented on by Lauren Rosewarne who in an

---

124 “Latinoness” is a term used by Lopez in her analysis of *Havoc*. Although the term is not established critically in the same way that “blackness” is, I use it in this thesis to illustrate moments in Kopple’s film that disrupt the idea of conflation between black and brown, highlighting aspects of the text that actually emphasise a sense of Latino identity.
investigation into masturbation in pop culture identifies *Havoc* as a “crime drama.” Rosewarne briefly examines Allison’s sexuality and “act” of masturbation in a study that makes reference to over 600 episodes from various television programmes and movies. Within her short discussion of *Havoc*, the dynamics of power are explored between PLC member Allison and non-gang affiliated white middle-class teenager, Eric, who is producing and filming a documentary on the PLC and their gang life. The analysis of sexuality by Rosewarne is important, but links between Allison’s sexual performance and the sexy cool of gangsta culture considered herein are absent. Because of this passing focus on one particular scene, there is no investigation into gang culture or the representation of the Latino 16th Street. Much like Lopez’s study, the focus of this thesis is on the female characters, yet the representation of the males within these trajectories is crucial to understanding how gender is constructed.

Lopez’s analytical focus on Allison and Emily’s performance of, and interaction with, aspects of black culture results in an omission of not only any consideration of white girls in gangs, but also any discussion of Latino culture. Lopez acknowledges that the characters interact exclusively with Latino gang members, but discussion of this culture is absent largely because she contends that the film fails to distinguish Latino identity (Latinoness) from blackness. Equally, although Halnon notes of the “fad” of Latino poverty, there is no discussion of this poverty, its circumstances or socio, historical or political context. Traditionally, Latino popular culture has received less critical attention when compared to African American pop culture, however, there is a large body of work that does offer a corrective, as the scholarship on *Mi Vida Loca* illustrates. For example, Fregoso offers a comprehensive study of Chicana/o film culture the year prior to *Mi Vida Loca’s* release in *The Bronze Screen* (1993) which successfully articulates the histories of Chicana/o film production against the Chicano Power Movement of the 1960s.

Looking at a variety of films that occupy different periods of Chicana/o film production, including *American Me*, Fregoso provides an insightful exploration of how the films respond to different epochs of Chicana/o history and sociopolitical

---

contexts more widely. Although neither Mi Vida Loca nor Havoc are films of Mexican American, Chicana/o or Hispanic production (as scholars including Fregoso are keen to point out), the inclusion and representation of Latino characters in Havoc requires examination. Fregoso’s The Bronze Screen focuses on Chicana/o production, contributing to an important field of study that not only considers the representation of gender but also gives insight into representational strategies used in an effort to deconstruct stereotypical imagery. To understand Havoc’s representation of Latino gang members and white girls, Mi Vida Loca’s depiction of the Chicana/o characters and Gang Girl’s portrayal of black and brown gang members, it is necessary to place the same emphasis on context that Fregoso investigates in Chicana and Chicano filmmaking, but fails to fully investigate in terms of her discussion of Mi Vida Loca.

Shifting the lens of analysis to the Latino male characters, Richard Mora’s 2012 essay ‘The Cinematic Cholo in Havoc’ comments on Kopple’s representation through a close textual reading of the film. It should be noted that unlike this thesis, Mora refers to the unrated DVD version of the movie in his article, but his conclusions and scrutiny of stereotypes remain relevant when considering the “official” DVD release. Exploring the binaristic constructions of the hypermasculine, “deviant” Cholo and the white characters, Mora concludes that “the differing portrayals serve to reiterate raced and classes [sic] discourses.” While Mora makes a significant contribution to the limited literature on Havoc, and the performance of black and Latino culture more broadly through insightful readings of the film, his focus, like Halnon’s and Lopez’s, results in no discussion of girl gang culture.

Havoc continues many of the conversations that Mi Vida Loca began (particularly the idea of “white” vs. “brown”) but has been relatively under-

127 It is interesting that Mora chooses to analyse the unrated version given that it is not Kopple’s “cut.” However, like the rated text, the unrated DVD is widely available to purchase online. It is not made obvious by Mora that his article pertains to the unrated version (or indeed that there are two versions). However, his analysis of the alternative ending reveals to the researcher, who has viewed both versions, that this is the case.
researched, providing opportunity for my own critical readings and reception of the two films to be originally compared. Including Gang Girl in this study allows the distinctions between East LA and NY, and black and brown - differences that Lopez contends Black and White and Havoc together fail to portray - to be assessed, while further contributing to the originality of the project. Gang Girl is a noteworthy text to study not only because of oppositional binaries in audience reception but also because it provides a rare filmic representation of black female involvement in gangs.

The absence of black girl gangs in American film has not gone unnoticed by film scholars. Timothy Shary reveals that “despite the success of the male-focussed African American crime films of the early ‘90s, no similar films about African American girl gangs have been made (with the arguable exception of Set it Off in 1996 [...]).” Set It Off is an “arguable exception” to the omission of motion pictures featuring black female gangs because, as noted earlier, the females in the movie are not actually in a gang but rather form a friendship group. Recent European movies have turned to black girls in gangs as filmic subject. The movie Black - whose Moroccan-Belgian directors cite Singleton’s Boyz as inspirational in their filmmaking - details the involvement of young black girls in gangs on the streets of Brussels. The gang is not exclusively female in Black, unlike the black girl gang seen in Céline Sciamma’s critically acclaimed French film, Girlhood (2014). The continuing shortage of movies that centre on black girl gangs in the US results in the obvious lack of literature pertaining to the subject. To a certain extent, Bailey’s movie offers a corrective to the neglect of on-screen African American girl gangs but as stated previously, the gang is mixed-raced and so the exclusively black US girl gang continues to be missing as filmic focal point. Equally absent is academic conversation regarding Bailey’s movie.

131 Of course it is important to note that there is a vast difference in the heritage and identity of black Europeans and black Americans.

Klein, who examines press pertaining to the ghetto action movies Boyz, Juice (1992) and Menace, places (but does not discuss) Gang Girl under the category of “The Urban Direct to DVD Cycle.”\footnote{Klein, American Film, p.198.} Klein herself acknowledges at the end of her book that a study of direct-to-DVD films cycles would be “the next logical step in a comprehensive understanding of contemporary film genres and cycles.”\footnote{Ibid, p.188-9.}

Klein thus highlights the importance of discussing Bailey’s film. Furthermore, through press sampling, Klein provides an understanding of “the racial climate of the early 1990s” and the strategies undertaken to attract audiences to the ghetto action cycle.\footnote{Ibid, p. 23.}

In this study, formally sampling the press of Mi Vida Loca, Havoc and Gang Girl reveals that film reviewers and press releases can aim to influence audiences but do not offer the only reading of a film. This is perhaps most evident in Gang Girl’s press reception. The limitations in the absence of critical material dedicated to Gang Girl and its omission from the classroom are compensated by the fact that the film provides some of the most interesting discourses surrounding the binary opposites that have so frequently been applied to gangsta culture and black cultural products.

The body of work relating to Chicana/o and Latina/o popular culture and the representation of browns in popular culture is under-examined when compared to critical material pertaining to black popular culture and the representation of blacks in popular culture (both in terms of gangsta culture and more generally). This provides opportunity for scholarly work on aspects of black cultural production and the representation of blacks to be explored further in relation to the representation of Chicana/os and Latina/os. For example, the ghetto action movie has received significant academic attention by film scholars such as Paula J. Massood.\footnote{P.J. Massood, Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).} While this is black-specific scholarship, discussions (particularly in terms of stylistic
features) can be applied, compared and contrasted to the representation of the barrios of East LA that feature in both *Mi Vida Loca* and *Havoc* and that are similarly occupied by marginalised groups. Furthermore, both black and Mexican American scholarship, which often highlights the oppression and resistance of these groups, can be used productively to explore the representation of white characters who inhabit alternative spaces.

**In Closing**

Traditionally, the fields of Cultural Studies, Film Studies, Reception Studies and Gang Studies sidelined the study of the girl in favour of male-centric scholarship and / or adult-focussed research (how women-not-girls read books, for example). In sociological spheres, the girl was key to studies of juvenile delinquency in the early 1990s but her inclusion in studies that went beyond delineating girls’ “badness” continued to lag. The study of girls and girl-centred research has grown rapidly within the last two decades, with scholars from various disciplines seriously analysing the dynamics of girlhood. “At the heart” of what has been termed Girl Studies scholarship since the early 1990s, “is a demographic group that has been consistently marginalized, trivialized, and exploited throughout the ages.”137 For Girl Studies scholar Mary Celeste Kearney, the “increased interdisciplinary of Girls’ Studies scholarship has much to do with the broad influence of Cultural Studies throughout the academy since the 1980s.”138

The Cultural Studies lens applied to this research allows for interdisciplinarity, enabling close-textual readings of *Mi Vida Loca*, *Havoc* and *Gang Girl* to operate alongside an investigation into their contexts of productions. This dimension of all three films by the scholars discussed in this chapter, is either negated or too fleetingly noted. Academics have interrogated Anders’s representation of Chicanas while *Havoc*’s handling of race and gender has been examined to a lesser degree. Yet how specific representations (including initiations, locale, makeup, tattoos, drug

dealing, gun shooting etc.) correspond to the social, political and economic circumstances in which the films were produced and how representation relates to scholarship surrounding girl gang culture has been neglected. This contributes to the long tradition of subordinating girls’ subcultural experiences to those of her male counterpart. By choosing to engage with high school youth rather than seeking (girl) gang members’ viewing responses to these movies, this project could be seen to further neglect girls’ subcultural experiences. However, gang films are not solely consumed, enjoyed and / or critiqued by gang members, but rather often attract a young audience who, as we will see, derive different meanings from such texts.

Cultural Studies recognises the creation of knowledge beyond academic circles, encouraging the researcher to seek an understanding of the meaning of texts for actual audiences. Consulting girls as consumers and recognising them as co-producers of knowledge has become popular within Girl Studies with influential researchers including feminist media scholar Sarah Projanksy (2014) engaging with and learning from girls (and boys) in classroom settings.139 Miranda, Dever and Antoszek have, in very different ways, consulted the viewing opinion of females in the analysis of Mi Vida Loca. But with males so involved in gang culture and male-female relationships fundamental in its cinematic representations, their viewing strategies must too be analysed and compared with the girls. Despite Girl Studies’ advances, there is still a requirement for factors such as race and class to be considered more fully in girls’ relationship to (their representation in and consumption of) popular culture; intersections integral to Cultural Studies and vital when examining the subculture of the contemporary street gang.

The continuing return to Mi Vida Loca by scholars, partly due to its status as the most commercially successful film to focus on gang girls and Chicanas, reinforces the importance that race and gender holds in the Obama era. Despite its release in 1994, Anders’s movie is continually returned to, with the most recent studies taking place during Obama’s presidency, in a supposed “post-racial” America: “a theoretical concept where the United States is devoid of racial

---

preferences, discrimination, and prejudice.”\textsuperscript{140} While discussions of Obama’s own racial identity have been a point of controversy, conversations surrounding race more generally and his election in 2008 fuelled new discussions of race which have remained constant throughout his two terms. Mohanalakshma Rajakumar and Alisha Saiyed confirm this notion, writing, “Since the 2008 election of President Barack Obama [...] race has become an even more vexing topic of public discussion in America.”\textsuperscript{141}

In the age of Obama, scholarship pertaining to post-racial cinema has been race-specific in terms of African American identity. To illustrate this, all the films examined in Movies in the Age of Obama: the Era of Post Racial Cinema (2014) are black-focussed. Despite the book’s inclusion of Fruitvale Station (2013), a film based on the death of Oscar Grant, a young black man shot dead by police in California in 2009, there is no analysis of Grant’s Mexican American widow, Sophina. In their discussion of the film, Rajakumar and Saiyed contend that “to be a black man in America means that you will be accused of criminality during your lifetime or will be the unwilling victim of violence.”\textsuperscript{142} Such examination of the racially marginalised male on screen and in society today is still crucial as this thesis recognises, yet consideration of the marginalised woman, particularly of Mexican descent, in film and society is still underdeveloped. The following analysis of Mi Vida Loca and Gang Girl contributes to reducing this racialised disparity while Havoc’s inclusion permits cross-racial analysis beyond black and brown in what I hope is an insightful and original discussion.


\textsuperscript{142} Ibid, p.108.
Chapter Two

“Some Lines Are Not Meant To Be Crossed;” From LA to NY - Girls, Gangs and Geographies

Introduction

From gangsters in NY to gangstas in LA, “the nation’s two largest cities and urban regions,” have been crucial spaces in the production and dissemination of gang culture. Within both cities, distinct neighbourhoods have been inextricably linked with race and class socially, and then translated cinematically. For French urban theorists Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Michel de Certeau (1984), civic space is socially produced (shaped by planners, for example) yet can be reconfigured by its users: spaces can become “liberated” by “articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning.”

Ghettos and barrios as spaces of containment for the disenfranchised with geographical, economic and social limitations, simultaneously enable their habitants to claim territory and identity through place. “Place - that crucial question of ‘where you’re from,’” writes

2 M. de Certeau, ‘Walking in the City,’ in M. de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p.162. Despite what Eugene J. McCann recognises as a “glaring omission of any explicit discussion of the role of racial identities” in Lefebvre’s The Production of Space, Lefebvre writes of the role of the state “as organizer of space, as the power that controls urbanization” (p.383). We can, as McCann has, carefully apply Lefebvre’s scholarship to American cities in which “counter-spaces” arise “on the margins” in “the form of resistance” (p.381, 382). In ‘Walking in the City,’ de Certeau, details how in “pedestrian street acts,” the “walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else” (p.98). For de Certeau, “the act of walking” is “a process of appropriation of the topographical system” (p.97). Despite issues of gender being somewhat absent from both their writings, Lefebvre and de Certeau are important scholars to consult because of their ideas pertaining to civic space and its production and appropriation. See: E.J. McCann, ‘Race, Protest, and Public Space: Contextualizing Lefebvre in the U.S. City,’ Antipode, Vol.31, No.2 (1999), pp.163–184.; H. Lefebvre translated by D. Nicholson-Smith, The Production of Space (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).
3 It is important to specify the relationship and differences between space and place. Jordana Dym and Karl Offen note that “often paired with the notion of space is the concept of place. The terms are entangled but not synonymous.” Place, as defined by Andrew Merrifield, “is not merely abstract space: it is the terrain where basic social
Susan A. Phillips, “is the driving force of gang life, one that gang members inscribe into both their environments and their bodies.” Rivalry between gangs has long been tied to spatial entitlement. Spatial segregation has enabled gang members to “own” one’s territory allowing place to articulate a collective belonging. For contemporary gangs, place has played an important role in the production of capital, illustrated by the illegal drugs trade when few other legitimate opportunities existed and competition between East Coast and West Coast rap artists in the 1980s/90s. Such discussions were publicised by Bronx rapper Tim Dog’s single “Fuck Compton” (1990) and epitomised by feuds between Tupac (West) and The Notorious B.I.G. (East) among others.

East and West Coast rap disputes revealed that despite occupying distinctly separate locales, rap artists shared certain similarities in place: paradoxically both limiting and empowering. The necessity of place to provide a sense of authenticity - to have survived in the Bronx or Compton conveys a degree of toughness and (ironic) saleable “realness” - has been integral to (gangsta) rap artists with NWA’s 1988 debut album Straight Outta Compton underscoring this notion. Considering the significance of locale for such artists, Murray Forman crucially acknowledges that the “criminal activities” they narrate, “are almost always subordinate to the definitions of space and place within which they are set. It is, therefore, the spatialities of the ‘hood that constitute the ascendant concept and are ultimately deserving of discursive pre-eminence.” Place is not only significant to black cultural production as Eithne Quinn recognises. Latino rapper Kid Frost (whose brief presence as Mousie’s father arguably works to add credibility to Mi Vida Loca’s representation of the barrio) drew on “the territorial imagery popularized by NWA” for the commercially successful album Hispanic Causing Panic (1990). The

terming of the *ghetto* action movie, sometimes referred to as “hood” movies, similarly underscores the importance of place in gangsta culture. Furthermore, “Psychologically, for the gang member,” sociologist Martín Sánchez-Jankowski notes, “the patriotism associated with the community/neighborhood supersedes all others.”7 Gang styles and violence stem from place, meaning that the analysis of geographies must be the logical starting point of this study and precede other thematics.

Much like the ghetto action movies of the early 1990s, *Mi Vida Loca*, *Havoc* and *Gang Girl* illustrate the importance of place through cinematography, flagging memorable location shots and physical signs. Although geographies are diverse - moving between Echo Park, the Palisades, downtown LA, MacArthur Park and the Bronx - they share many characteristics. I will suggest that each film reimagines the barrios and ghettos of LA and NY and in the case of *Mi Vida Loca*, does so to a great extent. However, the (re)mapping of the gang girl continues to illustrate the tensions of the ghetto and barrio, and wider space; a trait repeated throughout the ghetto action movie cycle. The confinements of these spaces for non-white youth who have less access to (public) space and mobility are revealed through a series of recurring motifs: cars, prisons and parks. Utilising existing scholarship of city landscape, this chapter investigates how the gang girl navigates her way through problematic spaces and how the visual style of these movies is informed by the context of production (the locale itself) and the race of the gang girl. I contend that mobility is shown to be increasing for non-white gang girls, yet visible and invisible borders continue to manage the relationship between race, gender and space. Each film has created a figurative space for the discussion of literal space, borrowing, revising and complicating visions of females – alongside their male counterparts - occupying

---

urban places, making their study important. While discussion of Mi Vida Loca’s geographies has been initiated by Ann Brigham and Sallie Marston, Susan Dever and Kenneth Fox, my analysis of place within all three films, symbolic of the struggle for one’s identity and prevailing social anxieties surrounding non-white and female mobility, widens the geographical and temporal scope of study.

Some of the theoretical underpinnings within this chapter, including the discussion of the postmodern city, could be identified as well-worn. Moreover, the films themselves could arguably lack innovation; in basic terms the directors could simply be seen to place girls in traditionally male spaces. However, my analysis of the three films illustrates how Havoc and in particular Mi Vida Loca, venture beyond filmic representations of the ghettos and barrios of urban America that captured the public imagination in films such as Boyz and Menace. This chapter notes how ghetto action movies often equated deprived urban America with numerous problems, resulting in reductive renderings of racialised, classed and gendered space. While Gang Girl potentially reinforces stereotypes of urban areas, Havoc and Mi Vida Loca offer directionally different visions. Havoc and Mi Vida Loca imbue ghetto and barrio dwellers and gang members with a degree of pride in their neighbourhood which has gone without significant scholarly recognition and complicates the perceived boundaries of “good” and “bad” spaces. Despite apparent reliance on standard ghetto images, Gang Girl is significant because “it is widely acknowledged that public spaces often constrain the actions of women.”8 Yet the film (much like Havoc and Mi Vida Loca) presents gang girls who have or develop confidence in the inner-city neighbourhood which has often been considered as a fearful place for females.

NY and LA from gangster through gangsta; A (brief) history of two cinematic cities

Latino males have been frequent occupiers of cinematic street corners, dealing drugs and drawing guns from Guns and Greasers (1918) to Blood In, Blood Out (1993). Similarly, since the release of The Birth of a Nation in 1915, film scholar Manthia Diawara reveals that Hollywood has fixed “black people within certain spaces, such as kitchens, and into certain supporting roles, such as criminals,

---

8 McCann, ‘Race, Protest, and Public Space,’ p.168.
on the screen.” The historical separation of certain people into literal spaces extends to the gendering of space as Sikivu Hutchinson reminds us in her important study of transportation politics in LA (and comparison with NY) consulted herein. Mi Vida Loca, Havoc and Gang Girl transgress the borders of the ghetto action movie, challenging the highly gendered space of contemporary urban America.

To evaluate the extent to which the gang girl films studied transform or rely on past configurations of areas of NY and LA, I return here to earlier cinematic portrayals of these areas. In 2013, Lawrence Grossberg, claimed that “for cultural studies, the starting point – and maybe the ending point – is always what is old, what is new, and what is rearticulated.” For Grossberg, history and transformation are fundamental to Cultural Studies; to understand the geographies in the gang girl film, we arguably have to revisit the histories of spaces to understand the present. Exploring the “old” in Grossberg’s terms, I examine how such depictions have been socially and cinematically shaped. Tracing such lineage is important as film scholar Jonathan Munby reveals how black-directed “hood” movies of the early 1990s “are deeply related and indebted to one of mainstream cinema’s most recognizable genres, the gangster film,” many of which have been located on America’s East Coast.

In the 1930s, the same period in which visually striking skyscrapers - namely the Empire State Building as illustrated in King Kong (1933) - were built within the city, filmic images of NY, including the acclaimed Angels with Dirty Faces (1938), conveyed a cityscape entrenched in crime and corruption. Like the phallic buildings that were erected at this time, the city space and its crime was distinctly male. In film, the urban landscape of NY, much like the city of Chicago as projected in Scarface (1932), was rife with gang warfare. Gangs, in a different “street” form, existed in NY long before the production of these films, with an estimated 30,000

---

12 Munby, ‘From Gangsta to Gangster,’ p.167.
gang members in the city (populated by nearly 500,000 people) by the 1840s.\textsuperscript{13} However, the rise of organized crime during the prohibition-era, in addition to high levels of both foreign and domestic immigration and deteriorating social conditions, fuelled pre-existing tensions, further contributing to gang activity and providing rich materials for movies.

Just as the Irish and Italian immigrants of the 1820s-40s faced hostility and discrimination upon arrival in the city, so too did African Americans migrating to NY in the 20th century. The Great Migration (1910-1970) of African Americans from rural areas to industrial cities in the North (illustrated by African American Oscar Micheaux in his 1920 silent film, \textit{The Symbol of the Unconquered}) caused bitter friction in NY as earlier waves of (largely European) immigrants sought to defend their housing and jobs. The creation of social enclaves in the 19th century further determined the settling location for African Americans. The term “Ghetto,” social constructionist Ronald Sundstrom informs us, “is of probable Italian origin and is the short form of the Italian word “borghetto,” which denoted a settlement outside the city walls. The term was used to describe old Jewish settlements.”\textsuperscript{14} Associated with poverty and poor housing, the ghetto (and the common usage of the term to denote an area of high minority inhabitation) expanded after the population of blacks in areas such as Central Harlem (NY) rose in the 1920s. With these changing demographics came an outpouring of creative cultural products within literature, art, theatre and film of the Harlem Renaissance period which often placed blacks in the city (consider for example, Rudolph Fisher’s 1928 novel \textit{The Walls of Jericho}).\textsuperscript{15} While ties with specific geographies resulted in artistic output,

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Massood notes that “African American city spaces did not just appear with the release of the \textit{Boyz, New Jack City, Straight Outta Brooklyn, Menace} or even Spike Lee’s \textit{Do The Right Thing} in 1989. They have a longer, more complex history in African-American culture which can be traced in African American literature and film from the earliest decades of the twentieth century.” See P.J. Massood, ‘City Spaces and City Times: Bakhtin’s Chronotope and Recent African-American Film,’ in M. Shiel & T. Fitzmaurice (eds.), \textit{Screening the City} (London: Verso, 2003), p.213.
immigrants were simultaneously contained by certain spatial and social boundaries, subject to “Othering” and exploited in the workplace.\(^{16}\)

LA has similarly experienced mass waves of immigration since the 19th century, including the movement of African Americans from the Deep South northwards. It is the significant and ongoing immigration of Mexicans into LA however, that has shaped the population of neighbourhoods such as Echo Park, turning minority groups into majorities and forming the subject of films such as *La Illegal* (*The Illegal Woman*, 1979). The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) caused vast numbers of Mexicans to flee instability. Work opportunities in LA, illustrated by Elisa Silva, a Mexican immigrant who describes how “we had been told that there were good opportunities for earning money in LA” in the 1920s, provided further motivation to cross the borders into the USA.\(^{17}\) Mexicans often settled on land near work sites displaced from the city. Marginalised socially and spatially, historically “barrio dwellers,” gang scholar James Diego Vigil writes, “were located apart from higher-income Anglos in defined spaces that were visually distinct from the more prosperous sections of town.”\(^{18}\)

Like the emergence of social enclaves in NY, the development of barrios (a term that much like ghetto came into use in the 20th century in this context) enabled residents to retain ethnic traditions. Experiences of immigration are variable. However, common subjugation to (white) hierarchal structures of power, particularly in labor markets, frequently contributed to feelings of inferiority that immigrants sought to overcome.\(^{19}\) The historical case of the Zoot Suit Riots (1943), which as noted in chapter one was translated to film by Valdez in 1981, epitomises such

---

\(^{16}\) For a discussion of spaces as both a site of resistance and exploitation see P. Carney & V. Miller, ‘Vague Spaces,’ in A. Jansson & A. Lagerkvist (eds.), *Strange Spaces: Explorations Into Mediated Obscurity* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), pp.37-38.


\(^{19}\) British director Ken Loach discussed the topic in *Bread and Roses* (2000) which centres on Mexican immigrant Maya, an underpaid janitorial worker in LA. The Emmy Award winning 2006 documentary *Made in LA* (dir. Almudena Carracedo & Robert Bahar) presents the ongoing issues surrounding the employment of Latinas in LA’s garment industry.
escalating tensions and in the words of urban Chicano scholar David R. Diaz, provides one example of the Chicana/o “traditions of resistance in defence of space.”20 For inhabitants, “El Barrio” Diaz writes, “was a state of mind” and “represented more than space” as “it symbolized the cultural lineage of Chicana/o social and political history.”21 Acting as more than a “spatially defined location” the barrio was an “increasingly essential resource of cultural memory, identity and pride.”22 Its formation provided opportunity for pride and resistance to emerge in varying forms.

The organisation of gangs within the barrios even since the turn of century offered solace to those controlled by white, exploitative powers. For Vigil, “the remarkable persistence of gangs in LA has been due in large part to continuous immigration of Mexicans into Southern California and the problems these immigrants face in adjusting to urban society.”23 Gang formation was also spurred by the pre-existing gangs that moved into the city as movement across borders contributed to the relocating of gang members into LA. It is a combination of such factors that led to LA being dubbed the “gang capital” of America in the late 20th and early 21st century.24 Significantly, intra-racial tensions since the Chicano Movement have furthered the formation of gangs, as evidenced in American Me. The formation of the 18th Street gang (the geographical naming indicating the importance of place) in the 1960s grew out of conflict between Latinos with the 18th Street offering an alternative to established Mexican gangs. This feeds our understanding of the presentation of the contemporary street gang in film today as gangs such the 16th Street (a name suggesting homage to the real-life 18th Street) in Havoc have distinctly defined spatial boundaries.

Despite many non-white gangs forming in response to race incited violence, it is intra-racial gang violence that has frequently fuelled public discussion and

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Vigil, A Rainbow of Gangs, p.34.
24 Since the late 2000s, media outlets have often considered Chicago as “the gang capital” of America.
popular culture texts. Male “black-on-black” violence in urban America became a media spectacle in the late 1980s and early 1990s; violence that partially stemmed from welfare cuts, the burgeoning underground drugs trade, access to cheap firearms and police brutality. Within the staged space of the ghetto action movie, feelings of subjugation, and systemic racism were shown to plague the (male) streets of areas such as South Central, Watts and Compton in the early 1990s. Locale is crucial in these movies much like the gangster movies that went before them which “made a feature of on-location shooting.” As Paula J. Massood recognises, spatial importance in the ghetto action movie cycle is most clearly evidenced by “place names, both specific and less determined,” which “were used in many titles” of the cycle’s films, examples including *Boyz* and *South Central*. Filmic images of these spaces illustrated deteriorating social conditions and the confinement and management of space, primarily through police surveillance. The necessity to understand the geographical specifics of the production of (black) popular culture is discussed by cultural scholar Todd Boyd who reveals the “dynamics of differences between East and West Coast notions of Blackness.” That rap music in the 1980s was “primarily an East Coast movement, centred in NY” and that “contemporary gangsta culture is undoubtedly a West Coast phenomenon” underscores the importance of place.

*Mi Vida Loca* reportedly turned heads not because of its content but because of the marketing approach of Sony Pictures based on locale. According to Sony Classic co-president Tom Bernard, there was “no doubt” that “out of all our pictures, this [*Mi Vida Loca*] has needed the most diverse handling.” Premiering “uncharacteristically on 50 L.A. screens,” Sony was reportedly “playing the

---

25 In the 1940s, black gangs in LA formed in response to white violence in schools and on the streets. See: M. Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in LA* (London: Verso, 1990), p.293.
26 Munby, ‘From Gangsta to Gangster,’ p.173.
29 Ibid, p.92.
strengths of the picture region by region” meaning that “In some areas it will be handled on a specialized basis. In other parts of the country it has more mainstream appeal. This includes L.A., with its huge Hispanic audience, but not New York where the film has an exclusive date.”  

31 We see here explicit differences in film marketing according to place and race. Anders’s subject and audience demographic had clear implications for the film’s theatrical release with Bernard highlighting how spaces within the cities themselves are separate: for Bernard, it was “kind of exciting to have the same picture playing upscale, mainstream and ethnic venues simultaneously.”  

32 While the film’s “mainstream appeal” is equated with the “huge Hispanic audience” in LA, Bernard reveals how the cinema venues are distinctly classed and raced, as the “upscale mainstream” cinemas he speaks of are not “ethnic venues.” Despite differences within NY and LA as illustrated by Mi Vida Loca’s marketing, both city spaces are what Hutchinson terms as “hyper-segregated, racially zoned communities.”  

33 The landscape of each film is crucial to its storytelling but it is Mi Vida Loca in particular that makes this explicit. Before we even arrive in Echo Park, the importance of place in constructing identity and community is revealed through the film’s opening credits.

“Us Versus Them;” Opening Credits, Music and Voice(-overs)

The opening credits of Mi Vida Loca feature a song performed (off-screen) by the all-male 1980s Chicano band, The Crusados, who Dever notes, “invite” the audience to “take a trip down Echo Park Avenue,” situating the film in a specific barrio community.  

34 Relatively unknown in the mainstream, the use of The Crusados immediately conveys a sense of the unfamiliar. Dever highlights that the “invitation is a recontextualization of the words of Thee Midniters’s (a popular Mexican American band) hit that invited ‘60s listeners to “Take a Trip down Whittier Boulevard.””  

35 In 1968, Whittier Boulevard became famous as a site of public protest involving the police and Chicano lowrider community resulting in three days of
riots. According to Charles Tatum the authorities and media “placed responsibility for the rioting and property destruction squarely on the shoulders of the lowriders, who were portrayed as common thugs and members of violent gangs,” and male. During the weekends of the 1970s, parts of Whittier Boulevard continued to be barricaded by the police as an attempt to restrict lowrider activities. The sectioning off of space by police officials, however, created not only a site of conflict but also one of unity.

Within segregated spaces emerged collective feelings of racial injustice, oppression and discrimination. As a consequence of police-incited repression towards the Chicano community, a number of rival lowrider clubs Tatum writes, “came together to form an organization, the Federation of Lowriders,” uniting against the authorities. Anders’s use of the “recontextualised” song by The Crusados establishes “unity with the larger Latino community” beyond Whittier Boulevard and Echo Park. Despite no notable competition between the two areas historically, LA has a history of gang rivalry amongst Mexican American communities as noted previously. The use of The Crusados reminds “outside” viewers that they are taking an exclusive trip down barrio avenues that may be unfamiliar and “alien” to their own experiences. At the same time, “The Crusado’s lyrics,” Dever suggests, “remind locals of the interconnected culture and history of all LA’s Latino neighbourhoods.” While space is often fractured by gang contests, connections and histories between spaces can also contribute to a sense of historically based community.

Bringing communities together, the film’s titles introduce the “Echo Park Locas and Locos” to the viewer, integrating their filmic acknowledgement alongside the names of the (non-gang) actors and actresses. In doing so, Anders not only “fully credits those who made the film possible,” as Dever contends, but also reinforces a

36 Lowriders are customised vehicles with less ground clearance due to the use of hydraulic jacks, enabling the vehicles chassis to be ‘low’ to the road. For more information on Chicano lowrider culture and for detail regarding the protest on Whittier Boulevard, see Charles M. Tatum’s book, Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show (California: ABC-Clio, 2011).
37 Tatum, Lowriders in Chicano Culture, p.18.
38 Ibid, p.18-19
39 Dever, Celluloid Nationalism, p.136.
40 Ibid.
specific spatiality and the nature of community within the barrio’s local space. Simultaneously, *Mi Vida Loca* acknowledges divisions within space. Once the opening titles finish, Sad Girl’s opening voice-over narration didactically, and directly, addresses the audience: “We’re East of Hollywood and you’re downtown [...] Our homeboys take pride in the history of our barrio ‘cause white people leave out a lot of stuff when they tell it.” Suggestively anticipating criticism for her white voice, Anders covers such bases here through Sad Girl’s narration which positions the viewer as geographically “outside” of the barrio, as white mainstream audience. The utilisation of collective and individual address (“you’re,” “our,” “white people”), create what Dever terms as an “initial insider/outsider paradigm” that is at “once inclusive and exclusive.” In a sense, viewers assume Anders’s own position in the barrio. Anders lived in Echo Park for over ten years, suggesting some degree of insider knowledge, yet critics and scholars have been more inclined to identify Anders’s status as a white filmmaker rather than acknowledge her experiential residence. Audiences, like Anders, are both inside and outside Echo Park.

While those spatially removed from the barrio are allowed (limited) access to its space, Sad Girl’s voice-over conveys a sense of pride in the ownership of literal space and (ironically) storytelling; both spaces that have histories of white (and male) possession. Norman Klein notes in a passing reference to *Mi Vida Loca* that until the release of Anders’s film, “the movie images of this district have not in fact been Mexican at all; quite the contrary. They are unrelentingly white, usually about impoverished white con men and sleazoids.” Featuring in films such as *Chinatown* (1974), the cinematic storytelling of Echo Park has been reflective of its white history. Developed in the 1880s by Thomas Kelly, the neighbourhood, first called

---

41 Ibid.
43 Michelle Habell-Pallan notes how “Chicana feminists theorists have long documented and debated both the male-centeredness and patriarchal nostalgia generated by various forms of cultural production produced by Chicanos, including film.” Although independent “Chicana and Latina filmmaking” surfaced in the 1970s, with short films directed by Sylvia Morales for instance, it has “yet to break into Hollywood and have yet to benefit from mainstream distribution.” See: M. Habell-Pallan, *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture* (NY: NY University Press, 2005), pp.173-174.
Edendale, was home to LA’s silent film industry, inhabited by white residents including Charlie Chaplin. Sad Girl makes reference to this in her narration, revealing that “we’ve had a lake here since the twenties, when movie stars had love nests in the hills.” Sad Girl acknowledges that this space has not always been “theirs” but with the dispersion of white families to the suburbs post-WWII, space became available for immigrants. Just as Chicana/os have not historically “owned” this area, Chicanas have not had historical ownership of these filmic narratives. Mi Vida Loca is ultimately rooted in Anders’s story yet consulting with the Echo Park community she insists that the voices of others are heard.

Such consultation and engagement with the community can be noted in Sad Girl’s voice-over which provides a faithful script to the language of the community through the use of “homeboys,” instilling a sense of identity. Revealing the origins of “Homie,” an abbreviation of “homeboy” which emerged in the late 1960s, Chicana/o literature scholar Francisco Lomeli notes that far from a “mere word of informal interaction” amongst “trapped dwellers” in the “hard-core barrios or ghettos” “its semantic anchor reverts back to a blurred notion of home or hometown.”45 Its usage enables “a reclaimed identity and a refashioned citizenship within a society that has denied them status and a sense of belonging.”46 The importance of such terminology for minorities is evidenced in Havoc, when the use of “homegirl” by Allison’s friend Emily results in a 16th Street Latino male’s instruction “Don’t talk like that.” Claiming her own space, Sad Girl’s terminology replaces terms that Lomeli contends “boxed” youth into “negative stereotypes”: labels such as “gangbanger.”47 At the same time, Sad Girl reinscribes geographical boundaries between “us” and “them.” Sad Girl’s language here evokes a sense of belonging, particularly through the use of “homeboy,” but the voice-over technique itself also enables a degree of authority: a device used in Menace and Gang Girl as both (Latina) Shakira and (black) Veronica’s displaced voices become centre-stage.

---

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
Allison is arguably already in a position of authority because of her whiteness, and no voice-over is employed in *Havoc*.

The voice-over technique allows the character to claim storytelling power. S. Craig Watkins notes of *Menace* that the voice-over technique is significant “because it gives Caine - a symbol of black youth social dislocation - a prioritized voice and privileged position.” The voice-over can be considered as unreliable if originating from one perspective as in *Menace* but this is something that *Mi Vida Loca* and *Gang Girl* avoid through multiple narrators (Sad Girl, Mousie, Whisper, La Blue Eyes, Ernesto and El Duran) featured in Anders’s film and two (Veronica and Shakira) in Bailey’s. In *Mi Vida Loca*, River Valley gang leader El Duran details the rivalry between the gangs and the history of his neighbourhood, again articulating the importance of place. Like the black male Caine, Chicano El Duran is socially and geographically dislocated from mainstream society yet the girls of Echo Park and Shakira and Veronica are arguably distanced more so because of their gender. While the voice-over technique of *Menace*，*Gang Girl* and *Mi Vida Loca* achieves similar ends in repositioning marginalised populations, the way in which the local environment is conveyed differs substantially in Anders’s film. At a time when a Seattle newspaper “personified” South Central as “[h]aving torn itself apart in an agony of looting and burning, South-Central LA was a place of anger, sadness and futility,” and films including *South Central* projected such destruction, Sad Girl insists that the Echo Park dwellers have “pride” in their impoverished neighbourhood.

Alongside Sad Girl’s voice-over, camera shots of Echo Park introduce the neighbourhood to the outsider while further emphasising the specificity of the space to geographically knowledgeable viewers. Unlike the bullet-laden opening of *Boyz*, *Mi Vida Loca* opens with an establishing shot of Echo Park imbued in sunlight and beauty, implying pride. The film features traditional, polished cinematography throughout as the camera lingers on panning shots of the lake, palm trees and swans.

---

cinematically establishing what Anders has previously termed as “romantic-realism.”\textsuperscript{50} For C.J. Przemieniecki, \textit{Mi Vida Loca} does not have “clear visual examples of the importance of turf/territory,” yet in the opening scenes, a wall “tagged” with the words “Echox Parque” in graffiti overtly articulates the importance of claiming turf.\textsuperscript{51} A cemetery can also be seen in the opening moments. Despite this, Brigham and Marston observe that “Echo Park’s lack of [...] litter accentuates its brightness and its very immunity from the ills of the urban streets.”\textsuperscript{52} Gang shootings, death and drugs transactions that later take place suggest that the barrio does suffer from issues that “plague” the streets of the ghetto action movies and is far from immune from such incidents but the opening images and voice-over work to reconfigure the barrio beyond simply troubled.

It is noteworthy that filmic images of the barrio as non-dystopic had already emerged. Chon Noriega notes how the 1987 movie “\textit{Born in East L.A.} challenges Hollywood conventions of the barrio” as the “home becomes the defining feature of the barrio, rather than -as in \textit{Colors} (1988) et al- a montage of graffiti, gangs, drug deals and so on that signals ‘problem space.’”\textsuperscript{53} The difference in the representation of locale is in part because \textit{Born in East L.A.} - much like \textit{Stand and Deliver} (1988) which depicts a colourful 1982 East LA barrio - came before the peak of gang membership in L.A. \textit{Born in East L.A.} does not concern gangs but rather (male) border crossing, and so \textit{Mi Vida Loca’s} reimagining of the barrio with gang members and pride is still significant. Talking about her decision to move beyond the “gritty” streets of films such as \textit{Menace}, Anders reveals that initially it was not something that potential cinematographers of the film envisaged: “Inevitably because of the subject matter, they’d say “Oh, I want to do it really gritty, really

\textsuperscript{50} K. Hollinger, \textit{In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p.192.


urban.”54 But for Anders, “That was the wrong way to go...because those kids I know think their neighbourhood is the most beautiful place in the world.”55 Cinematographer Rodrigo García clearly did share Anders’s views on reworking the representation of the barrio and the resulting images of Echo Park serve to replace media narratives and images of (racially) stigmatised space through aesthetics. The openings of Gang Girl and Havoc convey distinctly different relationships with their locale.

Ghetto action movies often opened with shooting bullets and in the case of Boyz, the film begins with what is termed by film scholars as a “cold open.” A cold open is a “teaser” of footage placing the viewer in the action of the movie rather than opening with title cards and music that we see and hear in Mi Vida Loca. The technique attempts to attract and hold the viewer’s attention. Both Kopple and Bailey utilise such method in their films. Gang Girl’s “cold open” is of substantial length compared to Havoc’s as the former seeks to gain interest through violent action much like Menace’s opening armed robbery. Havoc highlights that the management and construction of space is not exclusive to urban America. Within the “cold open” of the film, Allison, speaking into the hand-held camera used by Eric (the white non-gang affiliated videographer who is making a documentary film on the PLC) mockingly refers to herself as one of the “kids from the Palisades:” a reference to the affluent Pacific Palisades in which 88.6% of its residents were white in 2000.56 The 3rd largest neighbourhood in LA with a white population, the Palisades is recognised for its upscale neighbourhood, gated communities and as Allison reveals, the literal building of walls.

Expressing Sad Girl’s idea of an insider / outsider dichotomy, Allison recognises the manufacturing of the Palisades, revealing the dichotomous relationship between Palisades kids whose “parents moved to the ocean and built walls facing the other way” and “them” outside the “circle:”

55 Ibid.
They send us to private school. They hire rent-a-cops with uniforms and make them drive around in little Ford Escorts, see? This sends a powerful message. There’s us and there’s them... inside the circle and out. We live very sheltered lives.

Allison’s terminology articulates social historian Mike Davis’s 1990 criticisms of such constructed spaces: “We live in ‘fortress cities’ brutally divided between ‘fortified cells’ of affluent society and ‘places of terror’ where the police battle the criminalized poor.”

Fox recognises that Mi Vida Loca “charts a move away from the metaphors of decline in Davis’s City of Quartz and the development of a more positive message, as begins in his more recent Magical Urbanism (2000).” By comparison, we see here in Havoc a revival of Davis’s earlier, more cynical rhetoric, illustrative of the differences within their (Allison and Sad Girl’s) relationships with locale and the cinematic representation of the city. Allison’s dialogue reinforces urban theorist Edward Soja’s contention that “‘We’ and ‘they’ are dichotomously spatialized”; Allison’s relationship with others is constructed and managed by space.

Privileged by her whiteness and position in the class hierarchy, Allison has access to a space that is deemed safe, particularly in comparison to “bad” gang “infested” areas. Initially, however, Allison and fellow members of the all-white PLC choose not to “abandon the public arena.” Instead, it is their fascination with space beyond the Palisades that (in a formulaic manner operating within established cinematic

---

57 Davis, City of Quartz, p.223-224.
codes) literally drives the narrative forward as they penetrate the barrio. Before the inhabitants of two distinctly segregated spaces meet, the disparity between the Palisades and the barrio is conveyed in the opening credits, post-cold open.

Images of MacArthur Park in the Westlake area of LA, a notorious site for Mexican American gang activity, are positioned alongside panning shots of the Palisades, the ocean and the hills. Positioning the images alongside one another, the duality of the city space is conveyed. Alongside the visual binaries, the soundtrack “Welcome to Havoc,” performed by black East Coast rapper Bishop Lamont, further facilitates the dichotomy between the privileged whites who Allison states “go to private school” and those whose, as Lamont raps, are “from the school of hard knocks.”

Although signed by Dr. Dre the year of Havoc’s release, Lamont was an “outsider” of sorts in the rap scene because of his relatively unknown status, reinforcing the sense of those “in” and “outside the circle.” This works much like the use of The Crusados in Mi Vida Loca and the utilisation of an unknown Latino rap song (with Spanish lyrics) in Gang Girl’s post-cold open. Lamont’s lyrics, “Straight off the block / With that glock clocked / From the school of hard knocks / Sellin’ rocks, duckin cops” play in conjunction with images of the Palisades High School which was recognised as a California Distinguished School the year of Havoc’s release.

Although the geographical distance between the hood and the Hills is not vast, the suggestion in the opening dialogue and lyrics is that culturally – in clichéd fashion - these spaces are worlds apart.

Gun shops and liquor stores occupy the street corners of Boyz rather than distinguished high schools of the Palisades which suggest opportunity for educative and economic advancement. Yet as Mi Vida Loca proposes, the inner-city space is not simply dystopic. In her discussion of Menace and Boyz, Massood is careful not to reduce the city to simplistic binaries acknowledging the “dual function of city space in African American cultural production [...] mythologized as both a utopia-as a space promising freedom and economic mobility-and a dystopia-the ghetto’s

---

economic impoverishment and segregation.” In all three films explored herein, the duality of the city is crucial in its staging. But when evaluating *Gang Girl’s* opening which less explicitly opens with “us” versus “them” (gang girl versus non-gang girl) the city space is imagined as a place of deprivation and immobility. Although ghetto action movies present both limits and freedoms of the city, their openings most obviously stage segregation and poverty. *Gang Girl* aligns itself more closely with the openings of the ghetto action movies, failing to offer any notion of mobility for the gang girl.

In *Gang Girl’s* cold open, Cynthia, a Latina “born-again Christian” teenager, is stood at a bus stop at night with her black boyfriend, Troy (a brief character appearance played by Bailey). Awaiting the arrival of a bus after her boyfriend leaves, Cynthia stands alone but is soon joined by an Asian male and Shakira, a 16-year-old Latina, Troy’s ex-girlfriend and member of street gang “The Croniks.” In comparison to the demographics of Echo Park and the Palisades, the racial diversity of the characters in *Gang Girl*, located in the Bronx, corresponds with the diverse racial make-up of the contemporary borough. Today, the Bronx encompasses affluent areas including the “wealthy” Riverdale (in the North). By comparison, the South Bronx (inhabited by The Croniks), has been stigmatised as a “poor” area. Once regarded as the “leading headquarters of street gang violence” in the 1960s, the South Bronx is still considered a “crime-ravaged” neighbourhood, forming part of the NYPD’s “Operation Impact” (established 2003) in an effort to “fight” crime.

---

64 According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), the racial makeup of the Bronx is as follows: Hispanic Origin 53.5%; Black/African American Non-Hispanic 30.1%; White Non-Hispanic 10.9% and 5.5% Other (including Asian and American Indian). See: NYC Planning, *NYC 2010: Results From the 2010 Census - Population Growth and Race/Hispanic Composition* (NY City: Department of City Planning, March 2011), p.12. Available at: https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/planning/download/pdf/datal/maps/nyc-population/census2010/pgrhc.pdf [Accessed 29/02/2014].

Built in 1959, the Cross Bronx Expressway destroyed parts of the neighbourhood, forcing black and Latino residents to live in “dilapidated, rodent infested housing.” While the major freeway enabled easier movement for many, others were trapped by its construction as the South Bronx was left to deteriorate and the North was unaffordable for the poor to occupy. Economically deprived, Shakira is confined by historically manufactured spatial barriers.

Filmed on location, as were *Mi Vida Loca* and *Havoc*, the sound of passing vehicles in the background of *Gang Girl* intrudes on the characters’ conversations, bringing attention to the movement of vehicles while the characters remain static. Historically, racially marginalised women have used the bus as a site of protest or as a (literal) vehicle to reach a site of protest; the actions of African American Rosa Parks in 1955 being a well-documented example. The 1986 chartering of a bus by Aurora Castillo (a founding member of the activist group Mothers of East Los Angeles established in 1986) to make a 12 hour journey to Sacramento to protest the building of a prison in East LA, being a less-widely discussed incident. Yet Hutchinson informs us that nationwide, “buses are poorly maintained, slow and occasionally missing in action,” and thus “carry the stigma of backwardness.” The opening of *Gang Girl* suggests that these racially marked, urban dwellers are not going anywhere, physically or metaphorically in life.

Shakira’s place at the bus stop ironically suggests a limitation in her mobility. It should be a place of transition, however, while other busses pass, Shakira’s never arrives. Instead, Shakira beats “Church girl” Cynthia to the floor of the open-air bus stop, punching and spitting on her whilst repeatedly calling her a “bitch.” Considering issues of gendered mobility, Hutchinson contends that “large open-air stops and irregular hours” are “especially inhospitable to women, who are faced with the potential hazard of waiting for the bus at night.” Before leaving, Troy asks “Damn, when is this bus going to come?” but Cynthia ensures him “I’ll be alright.”


69 The Bus Riders Union (initiated post-LA uprising in 1992) has also provided women (and men) a place to interrogate and attempt to rectify the alleged racially discriminatory policies of the LA County Metropolitan Transportation Authority.


The Asian male flees the scene once Shakira’s violent attack begins, and Cynthia is beaten on the open and dark street. Hutchinson’s contention is played out here in some respects but made more complex because the inhospitality of the bus stop assumes a male perpetrator of violence. After the assault, Shakira’s brief narrative voice-over situates the physical and verbal attack on “the mean streets of the Bronx” where it is a matter of “life or death.” This sentiment is accentuated by the scene’s visual darkness and use of freeze-frames which heighten the violent action.

NY more generally has a cinematic history of urban decay and toughness, underscored by Gang Girl’s opening. Examining a paradigm shift from modernity to postmodernity in the late 1970s, film scholar Mark Shiel notes how NY had been secured as “the ultimate modern environment” characterised on-screen by hardiness.\(^2\) Comparatively, LA “the ultimate post-modern environment” Shiel writes, had “long since laminated itself as the ultimate space of affluence, comfort, health, control, superficiality and consumerist pleasure.”\(^3\) The aesthetics and narrative of Havoc most obviously imbue and reflect the conditions and concerns of the postmodern city, such as fortress-esque segregation and consumerism. Such distinctions between East and West Coast spaces will now be considered further in the following analysis of the opening depictions of city space in Gang Girl and Havoc.

**The Post-Panoptic and Postmodern City**

By comparing the openings of Mi Vida Loca with Havoc we have seen distinctions between how the city of LA is presented. Mi Vida Loca’s use of what Anders terms “reflexive” voice-over narration - meaning that the film refers to itself as a text as Sad Girl directly addresses the audience, is reminiscent of LA-based film noir movies, such as Double Indemnity (1944). Film scholar Barbara Mennel notes how LA is:

central to film noir in two senses: on the one hand, films emphasize the postmodern quality of Los Angeles to portray alienation and rootlessness; on

---


\(^3\) Ibid, p.160, 163.
the other hand, noir narratives and aesthetics also create Los Angeles as an alienated, transitory, postmodern city.\textsuperscript{74}

For Anders, however, the barrio is a place of community, with a rich history of which Sad Girl speaks. By comparison, \textit{Havoc} presents postmodern characteristics of LA in its narrative opening: LA is consumed by images and materialism and is a place of alienation. \textit{Gang Girl} similarly employs elements of postmodern cinematic aesthetics, including freeze-frames, but the film’s opening vision of the city suggests stagnation. The postmodernity of \textit{Havoc’s} LA - defined by social polarisation, consumption, privatization and Soja’s “fortified enclaves” which characterise the city as “the quintessential postmodern metropolis” - is offered as a key influence in Allison’s gang participation from the outset.\textsuperscript{75}

Immediately after Allison provides her brief mocking definition of kids from the Palisades, the opening credits include a bird’s-eye-view camera shot (a technique used in \textit{Menace} over the neighbourhood of Watts) looking towards downtown LA and MacArthur Park. This surveying of space mimics footage captured from police helicopters (or “ghetto birds” as termed by rapper Ice Cube) and CCTV cameras, enhanced by the blue hue of the images.\textsuperscript{76} The increasing utilisation of surveillance in cities has caused a number of scholars to argue that Jeremy Bentham’s mid-nineteenth century Panopticon, a mechanism of constant control and observation in the prison, has been “replaced” by a “post-Panopticon” or an “electronic superpanopticon.”\textsuperscript{77} CCTV surveillance as all-consuming provides a permanent record of movement compared to the one-man guard of the Panopticon. Placed in a position of power, Allison’s gated community enables a predominantly white neighbourhood to monitor the movement of others.

As viewers of \textit{Havoc}, we gain voyeuristic access to sites such as MacArthur Park. Conversely, those who are being watched and / or who do not have access to surveillance technology have less power. Despite this, the knowledge of societal

\textsuperscript{76} Ice Cube, “Ghetto Bird,” \textit{Lethal Injection} (Priority, 1993).
surveillance is so widespread that movement and activity can be adapted accordingly. Yet the presence of undetected surveillance is always a threat. In *Menace*, videotape surveillance of a store robbery is stolen by the young black perpetrator, O-Dog. He claims control of his crimes and recorded activity but once the tape is in the hands of the police, such footage leads to his downfall. The power relations inherent in the surveillance society position minorities under watch more so than whites: “Others, [...] are less able to enjoy the privilege of being anonymous, of being one who sees, but is not seen.”  

Hille Koskela, notable for her work on urban space, informs us that “most of the persons “behind” the [CCTV] camera are men and most of the persons “under” surveillance are women.”  

Although not discrete surveillance images but known camera footage, in one sense 17-year-old Allison controls the images that Eric and his camera produce by performing for and interacting with his camera yet he ultimately “owns” this footage as he is “behind” the camera.

The documenting of Allison’s movements is accentuated through the visual use of a ‘recording’ button and battery symbol imitating the viewfinder of a hand-held camera. In distinction to the refined cinematography of the montage of shots that survey the landscape, moving between the ocean, city, hills and beaches of LA which reminds us of the fragmentation of the city (a key feature of the postmodern city as noted by Davis), the footage of Allison (filmed by Eric) is initially articulated in a documentary style. Allison’s opening narration is similar to that of Sad Girl’s in terms of interacting with the viewer, or in this case, Eric. Like Sad Girl who looks directly at the viewer in the film’s opening and Shakira who positions us in the Bronx, Allison is in a position of privilege, controlling the storytelling and adapting her behaviour according to how she wants to be viewed. The cinematic framing technique in *Havoc* could be seen as an attempt to convey documentarian authenticity, yet as we observe Allison being watched on camera, viewers are made aware of the construction of the film. Allison holds some power here, as she


regulates her performance for the documentary film in a self-panoptic manner; “women” Koskela writes “are used to constantly policing their appearance in public space.” At the same time, we are reminded that Allison’s activity, much like that of prisoners and criminals, is being surveyed by a white male, Eric, and his hand-held camera.

Similarly utilised in Gang Girl, the hand-held camera technique resembles what Massood identifies as “the shaky, hand-held movements of surveillance video that became familiar with reality based television in the 1980s and 1990s.” This facilitation of street-authenticity and documentary verisimilitude, however, is disrupted in Havoc as the realist technique simultaneously highlights the practice of simulation as Eric is also being filmed. The suspension of disbelief is disrupted as attention is directed towards the techniques at play. In a discussion of the 1992 comedy film Wayne’s World, Jason Rutter notes how this postmodern cinematic technique makes viewers aware “that what we are watching is artificial.” This collapse between boundaries of reality and pretence foreshadows Havoc’s narrative trajectory concerning the binaries between the performance of, and reality of, gang culture. Havoc blurs the margins of authenticity and fiction in the opening sequence through a stylistic shift. The visuals interchange between conventional, refined cinematography and the imitation of a more experimental technique as real-time footage from Eric’s camera is intersected with slow-motion and speeded-up images of the cityscape. This technique, in conjunction with Allison’s dialogue, reinforces the dualities of the city: a place of movement and containment, oceans and city, us and them.

The postmodern city is characterised by a crisis in identity, a quality of the city that becomes apparent through Allison’s and the PLC’s adoption of gangsta as real-life is replaced with mediated and generated images of other cultures. For Jessica Kaplan - the original screenwriter - the story was “really about upper-class

teen-agers in L.A. who have no culture of their own, so they try and take someone else’s.”83 The images within the opening credits display LA’s enormity and convey Allison’s alienation in the large city space. According to Przemieniecki, the film is about “Allison’s own self-identity crisis.”84 She seeks a place and culture with a more attractive, stable identity and a history / past that the postmodern Palisades lacks. A number of postmodern aesthetics work to contribute to the notion of LA as the postmodern city exemplified by the film’s drawing attention to itself as a construction through the use of Eric’s camera. Similarly, Gang Girl produced on the East Coast features aesthetic elements of postmodern cinema, yet the presentation of the city of NY evokes traditions of earlier gangster and gangsta movies, suggesting that the city space is stagnant.

In interview, Bailey noted how his filmmaking drew inspiration from Martin Scorsese, director of the crime-ravaged, post-Vietnam NYC-based movie Taxi Driver (1976) in which Robert De Niro’s character claims, “I think someone should take this city and just...just flush it down the fucking toilet.”85 Scorsese also directed NY gangster classics Goodfellas (1990) and Gangs of New York (2002) and is a filmmaker that Menace’s “the Hughes Brothers admit to being heavily influenced by.”86 By setting his film over a period of 30 years, beginning in 1980 and ending the year of production, Bailey, like Scorsese, returns to earlier time periods.87 Gang Girl begins in the present at the bus stop, yet in later scenes that return to the 1980s, the temporal difference is not reflected in the representation of the landscape. Much like the ghetto action movies of the early 1990s and classic gangster films, the city streets are presented as dangerous and dark throughout Gang Girl. By bringing together the qualities of ghetto action movies and earlier gangster movies, Bailey’s film can be seen to work as pastiche, evoking the past through postmodern

86 Munby, ‘Fom Gangsta to Gangster,’ p.175.
87 Goodfellas spans from 1955 to 1980 and Gangs of New York is set in the mid-19th century.
technique. In *Gang Girl* we see qualities of NY as the modern city defined by toughness, but presented through postmodern practice. The implication being that cultural products are evolving, but the inner-city has not.

Visually, the city remains the same in *Gang Girl*, suggesting its stagnation as underscored from the outset by Shakira’s stationary position at the bus stop. In interview, Bailey insisted that in the Bronx, “some places haven’t changed in 30 years.” The visuals certainly suggest this and Operation Impact highlights the ongoing crime in particular areas. At the same time, *Gang Girl* can be seen to confirm the stylistic tradition of NY that Boyd discusses in relation to the geographies of rap. Although movie and music making are two very different entities, the geographies of production are important and distinct to both. Differences in cultural production originate from different locales, with NY being “tied to tradition” as “innovation” is forgotten. In *Gang Girl*, the city is presented as gritty, dark and dangerous reinforcing stereotypes of place because the East Coast gang film has continually represented NY in such a way, including films such as *The Warriors* (1979). *Mi Vida Loca* by comparison, produced on the innovative West Coast is progressive in its imagining of the city space while the postmodernity of LA is reflected in *Havoc*’s representation.

*Havoc* can be seen to typify the postmodern city space while references to the “Church” and “Jesus Christ” by “Church girl” Cynthia in *Gang Girl*’s opening suggest tradition. Yet to bring to a close the cold open, Bailey uses comic-book like freeze-frames which fade to red and feature graffiti-esque typography. The very words Shakira speaks in the opening, “the mean streets of the Bronx,” pays postmodern homage to Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* (1973) with its intertextual reference. *Gang Girl*’s forthcoming non-linear narrative is also a feature of postmodern storytelling. Experimental editing and temporal distortion point towards postmodern filmmaking, but the ghetto itself is static. How the city is (traditionally) presented through non-traditional techniques is partly reflective of Bailey’s ideas regarding the lack of visible change in the Bronx, and in part extends Boyd’s 1993

88 D. Bailey, *Personal Interview*.
contention that “The West Coast-style innovation” is “being picked up by” those on the East Coast.\textsuperscript{90} Produced 15 years after Boyd’s posited his thoughts regarding music production, it is not surprising that East Coast cultural products such as \textit{Gang Girl} are showing a degree of advancement in technique. Bailey’s presentation of the same dangerous, dark streets however, suggests that both Veronica’s gang membership in the 1980s and Shakira’s gang membership in the present is in part due to the non-progressive city space that offers little opportunity for transition, unlike the postmodern LA of \textit{Havoc}.

Despite differences between LA and NY, the opening sequences bring us to relatively familiar ground in the discussion of dualities, tensions and distinctions of the city space surrounding the ghetto action movie but Anders’s film offers a clear departure from such movies in her cinematic imagining of LA. Discussions concerning the modern and postmodern city are similarly well-established, yet gender is often sidelined in such conversations regarding urban space and film. We need to move beyond the openings of the films considered here to assess the relationship between gender and place more succinctly. The openings illuminate some of the key signifiers of the social and physical limitations of space and the importance of place in the forming of identity, while creating new space for the inclusion of the gang girl. I now turn to a wider analysis highlighting moments which demonstrate increasing mobility for gang girls, while reinforcing how visible and invisible borders continue to manage the relationship between race, gender and space.

\textbf{Cars and Signs}

We have seen how the use of voice-over in each film helps position the audience in specific locales. The use of street signs also achieves similar aims, while contributing to a sense of street “realness.” Signs (literal and figurative) also point towards issues of mobility, something furthered by the role of cars in these narratives. Sad Girl informs us in her opening voice-over that “a lot of the stories we’re about tell you, had something to do with a truck, Suavecito.” I have briefly noted the importance of automobiles amongst the lowrider Chicano community in relation to the significance of defending space and Chicano culture. Cars have

\textsuperscript{90} Boyd, ‘The Geography of Style.’
historically been signifiers of particular cultures, as well as social status. Rival gang
member El Duran believes Ernesto’s “beloved” customised truck Suavecito has “no
class” but the necessity to claim ownership of the vehicle illustrates its symbolic
importance: El Duran tells us that possession “is a matter of honour and is rightfully
mine.” Misunderstandings about the truck and the death of Ernesto lead to the
murder of El Duran. Later involved in a road accident, the truck’s financial value, its
literal mobility and symbolism of what Brigham and Marston identify as “(upward)
 mobility” are destroyed.91

The car has long been used in Hollywood as a symbol of economic
achievement and geographical mobility, particularly in conceptions of white
masculinity.92 The racialisation of the car continues to be important here but the
gendering of the automobile is equally significant. Once aware of Ernesto’s truck
after his death, Sad Girl and Mousie speak of its potential practical benefits; Sad Girl
claims “we could do our laundry more easier [sic]” with ownership of Suavecito. Yet
they plan to sell the vehicle and use the money for hospital bills and towards the care
of their fatherless children. Conversely, the homeboys plan to reinvest the potential
prize money from the car show into the truck and into gang “operations.” The
automobile is thus used to convey gendered distinctions in terms of its conceived
functions and its “maleness” is implied by the large image of a semi-naked woman
adorned to its roof.

Although the following pages move beyond the openings of the three movies,
it is important to recognise how the middle-class position of the PLC is immediately
conveyed through vehicle ownership. In the film’s opening, the PLC are gathered at
a car park near the ocean; a public space technically accessible to anyone. Yet going
to the beach is often associated with the middle-class who can afford leisure time as
the working-class are occupied with work or busy “doing time” for criminal activity.
This is exemplified in film by Mexican American gang member Santana in American
Me; in his mid-30s, former inmate Santana claims he has “never been to the beach
before.” Mousie claims that she and Sad Girl “could take the kids to the beach,” in

91 Brigham & Marston, ‘On Location,’ p.239.
92 For further detail, see: J. Davies, ‘Against the Los Angeles Symbolic: Unpacking
the Racialized Discourse of the Automobile in 1980s and 1990s Cinema,’ in M.
Suavecito; something that they have thus far been unable to do as welfare-dependent, single mothers without automobiles. Access to the beach is often difficult for those without a car and even once there, class and race continue to plague experience of the site. Former gang member and Mexican American Luis Rodriguez reveals in the gang memoir *Always Running* how his leisure activity at a beach in LA is curtailed because whites claim the space as “their” territory.\(^9^3\) With the arrival of a mixed-race and mixed-gender gang at the car park in *Havoc*, the PLC attempt to claim the space as theirs but with the advent of police sirens, flee the scene in Toby (Allison’s boyfriend)’s car. Richard Mora identifies Toby’s car as a “1966 powder blue, convertible Impala, a car that is popular among Black and Latino gang members in Southern California and some rap stars.”\(^9^4\) The choice of car successfully reinforces the PLC’s pursuit of gangsta while also (ironically) conveying the PLC’s middle-classness through the ultimate status symbol of the convertible car.

Moving beyond the opening of the movie, Allison is seen topless performing oral sex on PLC member Toby in the back of his car, “commonly regarded as a place where teen sex and loss of virginity occur.“\(^9^5\) In the post-feminist, postmodern city, it could be argued that gender equality has been achieved as Allison is seemingly sexually liberated, but such a straightforward contention is problematic. For Forman, “cars in films [...] enter into a wider economy of semiotic and symbolic value, circulating images that merge with broader systems of meaning.“\(^9^6\) The car, representative of power, ownership and control, works on a wider level of gendered

---


power dynamics rendering Allison as sexual object in the backseat scene. Toby’s Impala is symbolic of not only his pursuit of gangsta but his phallic power as he is sexually pleasured. The scene is discussed later in this thesis in relation to styles, but from the outset it is implied that Toby is in “the driving seat” holding power over Allison. It is Toby who first seeks to penetrate Latino territory, driving Allison into danger.

Toby decides to converge the simulation of gangsta with the reality of the “ghetto,” exiting the Palisades in his convertible vehicle. Toby declares to Allison, friend Sam and Sam’s girlfriend, Emily, “We gonna hit up that ghetto, we headin’ East.” The use of the term “ghetto” rather than barrio supports Quinesta Lopez’s contention discussed elsewhere regarding the conflation of blackness and Latinoness in the film. Sociologist Ernesto Castañeda notes how in the 20th century “in the imaginations of the American public and policymakers “the ghetto” became black and “el barrio” brown,” but both are “places of stigma.” This stigmatising suggests an erasure of Latinoness in Havoc. For anthropologist Arlene Dávila, there has been a “dominant tenet of urban studies, where issues of race and ethnicity are consistently subsumed to a black-and-white paradigm that veils complex multiethnic/multiracial dilemmas of contemporary cities.” Havoc appears to similarly reduce Latino urban “problems” to black issues. Yet this collapsing of spaces can be seen as a conscious effort to illustrate the white youth’s lack of understanding of distinct spaces, cultures and histories. This notion comes into fruition more explicitly through styles. At this particular moment however, the youth do recognise “East” as Latino territory. After the group of friends chant “East” inside Toby’s car, Sam states “Hola, la cabron! We coming for you!” While the “automobile ‘liberated’ the American subject from onerous encounters with the Other,” its usage here allows the white youth to interact with the “Other” on white terms. The Spanish term used by Sam, “cabron,” is identified as a “bad noun”

99 Hutchinson, Imagining Transit, p. 111.
literally meaning “goatish.”"100 Its usage here is derogatory but gives some indication of a distinction between black and Latino spaces that Lopez considers absent. Aesthetically, however, the “ghetto” they arrive in is non-distinct, unlike Toby’s Impala.

After crossing invisible borders, visual signs indicate that they have arrived in a racially “Other” place. In stark contrast to the opening brightness of Echo Park, where we witness a couple romantically kissing in daylight, the PLC arrive in the “ghetto” at night. Compared to the Palisades, “the streets look grimier” and we witness prostitutes inviting custom and a man receiving oral sex.101 The major billboard hit “I Got 5 on It” by black rap act Luniz, released the year Kaplan sold her script and at the peak of gang membership, plays alongside this scene.102 The choice of music appears to subsume gangsta, Latinoness and blackness, but also reinforces the PLC’s mediated version of the “ghetto,” the success of rap in the mainstream and “foreshadows,” as Mora notes, “the drug transaction that will soon take place.”103 Toby’s instruction to both the viewer and his friends to “look at this shit” while the music plays, encourages a kind of social voyeurism both satisfying and privileging the curiosity of the white public. It is “as if” the PLC are “on safari” Mora observes.104 The sound of distant police sirens permeates their cruising of unfamiliar territory; a “cue” used in Boyz to signify the “ubiquity of the police.”105 The initial excitement of penetrating the “ghetto” (signalled through facial expressions) transpires into a sense of apprehension from the girls: “They can tell we’re nervous” says Allison’s best friend, Emily. Without the car and the presence of Toby (and Sam), the girls are unlikely to have accessed the “ghetto” space at all as “Fear of

102 Luniz, “I Got 5 on It, ” Operation Stackola (Noo Trybe, 1995).
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
crime and harassment often restricts women’s freedom and enjoyment in public space.”

Despite Toby’s drug deal going sour, the exotification of the “ghetto” space (and the male 16th Street gang members that they encounter) entices Allison and Emily to return without the PLC boys, as initial apprehension is replaced with allure. While one of the characters, Amanda (it is not explicit as to whether she is a member of the PLC or not), declares “there’s a monetary zone of geography...which we’re not allowed to pass,” Allison instead insists that there’s “a whole new world out there” to discover. Allison has the resources to do so, having access to her own car without having to rely on Toby or other male characters which arguably disrupts the initial power dynamics of the backseat car scene. The white youth in Havoc are able to shift between the affluence of the Palisades and the impoverished “ghetto” because of their wealth (implying white privilege). By comparison, in Mi Vida Loca, Sad Girl, Mousie, Whisper and Baby Doll must borrow a vehicle from a rival gang member to leave the barrio and collect former gang member Giggles from prison where she has been serving a sentence for her former boyfriend’s crimes.

Despite the reconfiguration of the barrio space with sunlight and suggested pride, Echo Park is presented as problematic in terms of transition and mobility for the homegirls in particular. The ownership of vehicles is a distinctly male privilege as illustrated by Suavecito and the collection of Giggles. Discussing the scene where the homegirls travel to meet Giggles, Brigham and Marston note:

the shots of the homegirls listening to music with their heads out of their windows, seemingly free from worry and internal strife, driving down a highway outside of the city [...] situates the lush natural landscape as a place of harmony and possibility. But in the world of Echo Park, the image of the car as a symbol of liberation cannot hold.

The car enables movement between places, and this journey invokes the notion of the open (and romantic) road. But in the barrio space the reality is that mobility and liberation is limited. This portrayal of the disparity between the barrio space and the landscape outside of the city is presented by Alan Jacobs in the 2010 LA-based girl

---

107 Brigham & Marston, ‘On Location,’ p.239.
gang movie, *Down for Life*. Protagonist Rascal, a 15-year-old Latina, is seen smiling and laughing whilst on a bus departing her Watts barrio, or as she terms it, the “warzone.”

Rascal transitions between dichotomous spaces, informing the viewer through voice-over of “how nice it is here in the valley [...] lots of plants, no tags on the wall.” Much like the Echo Park homegirls, however, time spent outside the barrio is only temporary and she must return to her barrio roots. In the discussion of city space in *Boyz* and *Menace*, Massood highlights the “paradox inherent in the automobile.” She states, “While it promises freedom, it also signifies death as figured through drive-by shootings and car-jacking.”

Mobility, and therefore freedom, must be handed back to the owner of the car in *Mi Vida Loca*. A male owned car is paradoxically later used in a drive-by shooting in the barrio, resulting in the death of Big Sleepy (Giggles’s love interest)’s young daughter. This limitation in freedom and cyclical pattern of violence in the barrio is presented to the audience by Sad Girl’s contention in her opening narration that “what goes around comes around.”

Mobility is similarly limited in *Gang Girl*. Nayman, a black male gang member, offers teenagers Veronica and Lopez a “ride” in his automobile but Veronica declines: “I ain’t getting’ in no car with you,” suggesting ownership of her own movement. Lopez then claims “we could have got a free ride to Harlem, now I gotta scrape some money for the train.” Veronica and Lopez stand at a train platform but much like Shakira’s bus, no train arrives. This illustrates their entrapment and lack of social mobility.

In addition to the cost of undertaking driving lessons, Veronica’s opportunity to drive, let alone own a vehicle, is restricted. Statistically...
nationwide, whites continue to have greater access to cars while the availability of automobiles is “quite low for African-Americans especially if they are poor.” However, public transport facilities and the environment itself also shape car ownership figures. The use of public transport by commuters in NY is significantly higher than in LA, partly due to the lack of available space to keep cars, the proximity of work to home and the speed of transportation.

We see the accessibility to (but ironic lack of) of public transport in NY conveyed through Gang Girl’s use of transportation sites. A “Gun Hill Road” sign positions Veronica and Lopez at the train platform and simultaneously references America’s history of war. In 2009 a “gun battle” occurred at the Gun Hill Road intersection and during the American Revolution, the British and Colonists fought fiercely for ownership of the site. Discussing black city cinema of the 1970s in NY, Massood reveals that the “spatiotemporal parameters of the filmic ghetto were framed by an almost near-obsession with providing details of the cityscape.” Filming in the Bronx and including such clear shots of the Gun Hill Road sign comments on the (ongoing) history of spatial tensions. Diawara and Massood have noted the use and effect of literal signs in the ghetto action movie. In the South Central streets of Boyz, signs (including “Stop,” “One Way,” “LAPD” and “Wrong Way”) are visible in the film’s opening moments. The signs illustrate what Diawara terms the “enclosed space” of the inner-city and the regulation of mobility. The literal sign in Gang Girl could be considered redundant for non-NY-based audiences.

---

112 A. Berube et al., Socioeconomic Differences in Household Automobile Ownership Rates: Implications for Evacuation Policy (Berkeley, California: Early Faculty Research Series, University of California Transportation Center, 2006), p.197 Available online: http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bp4n2f6#page-1 [Accessed 05/06/2015]; Household and disposable income has considerable implications on the ownership of cars. According to Berube et al., “In 2004, roughly 24.7 percent of African-Americans lived below the federal poverty line, compared with 8.6 percent of non-Hispanic whites. Median household income in 2004 for black households stood at $30,134 per year, only 62 percent of the median household income for whites.” Berube et al., Socioeconomic Differences, p.203-204.


114 Massood, Black City Cinema, p.85.

who do not have understanding of the histories of the space; it is not a universal and recognisable highway sign unlike close-up shots of “One Way” street signs that Bailey also includes. However, the word “Gun” holds its own connotations of violence, and the sign is utilised in a scene in which Lopez and Veronica look out towards Manhattan and its skyline. Lopez terms Manhattan as “the city that never sleeps” and states “isn’t it beautiful.” She then follows this appreciation by asking Veronica “Do you think we’ll ever get out of the Bronx? Do you think we’ll ever work in that building, the Empire State building?” The young teenagers are left to battle their own war against poverty, discrimination, segregation and violence in a space that is geographically close but vastly different to places such as Wall Street.

Considering the factors regarding car ownership statistics and Gang Girl’s initial use of public transport places as filming locations, it is perhaps surprising that Veronica later has a car. However, her successful drug dealing in her neighbourhood can be seen to literally fuel her mobility. As Veronica’s status in the gang evolves to leader of The Croniks and she becomes known as Queen V, this is reflected by her ownership of a non-distinct car, which when compared to Toby’s Impala, suggests authenticity rather than commerciality. When compared to the girls of Mi Vida Loca, Queen V’s car owning status implies an increasing freedom to space outside the ghetto, yet this is only achievable through illicit enterprise, unlike Allison’s access to the “ghetto.” The car enables Queen V to take Lopez to a food outlet upon her release from prison for drug-dealing. The automobile also provides a space in which Lopez declares that she is no longer participating in gang activity. The car as a symbol of transition and mobility is underscored by Lopez’s revelation in this scene that she “ain’t down with The Croniks no more” as she moves beyond gang affiliation, turning instead to religion; something that Lopez could only “find” while incarcerated, away from the streets.

Gang Girl suggests that the “mean streets” of the Bronx must be escaped. Yet Lopez does return to these very streets upon her release, arguably signifying an attachment to the space but more obviously that there is no other space available to accommodate her impoverished, criminal status once removed from the prison. Although the homegirls of Anders’s film move beyond the barrio, the barrio is not presented as a place solely consumed by drugs, violence and danger; a picture of the Bronx that Bailey more clearly paints. When collecting Giggles from prison and
attending a night club, *Mi Vida Loca* demonstrates that places beyond Echo Park are reachable (by borrowing male cars) for the homegirls. However, the (repeated) return to the barrio suggests that this is the space in which the girls in the gang must remain. An Echo Park street sign is visibly positioned on Sad Girl’s bedroom wall (rooms and props that Anders informed me were “rented” from residents “to keep money in the neighbourhood”) suggesting that Echo Park is not simply a defined spatial zone but has become inescapable.¹¹⁶

Conversely, Sad Girl’s bedroom sign presents a strong sense of pride in the neighbourhood. When Sad Girl moved to the neighbourhood from Mexico all the signs in the stores were in English resulting in her inability to understand them but “Now there’s as much Spanish as there is English.” However, the barrio is not simply a place of practicality where you “can get anything you need.” Sad Girl insists “there’s no need to leave.” It is a place in which there is a real sense of belonging and pride. No visible “Stop” signs or police tape permeate the neighbourhood unlike *Boyz* but the presence of an Echo Park sign inside reinforces the notion of the barrio as a place of pride and “el barrio” as a “state of mind.” Although Allison and Emily cruise through the streets uninterrupted by traffic lights and no literal street signs exist in the Palisades, suggesting their mobility is greater than the homegirls’ of Echo Park, pride in their locale is non-existent. For the 16th Street members who do have access to a car (non-distinguishable like Queen V’s) and have pride in their neighbourhood (discussed shortly) mobility is restricted. Red traffic signals are in operation in the streets near MacArthur Park in the closing scenes. The traffic signals cause both the male members of the PLC and of the 16th Street to halt their pursuit of each other before a climatic shoot-out, building dramatic tension. While the movement of the male PLC members is unregulated by authorities, the mobility of the 16th Street in *Havoc* is regulated most obviously by the police.

**Parks and Prisons**

Drawing on cultural historian Robin Kelley’s 1997 analysis of the inner-city public park and play space in the urban neighbourhood and the Reagan-era, I now

¹¹⁶ A. Anders, *Personal Interview* [Recorded Interview] 22 March 2015, 1pm. Echo Park, LA.
turn to public spaces, analysing their filmic representation alongside private prison sites in a discussion of the ownership of space. The prison is a clearly regulated and restricted space but perhaps less obvious is the comparable sanctioning of parks as restricted by the state. Crack-cocaine in the late 1980s devastated low-income areas through both dealing and addiction, exposing a class and racial bias through disparate sentencing laws for drugs offences. “Responding to the draining away of good jobs in their area,” drug dealers Quinn writes, “turned to the territorialized drug trade.” Similarly, “street gang members responded to disinvestment in their communities by overinvesting in the very same turf.” While gang members and drug dealers were (over)investing in territory, the privatising of public space, “the passing over of its production, management and control to the private sector,” by the government in the late 1980s limited the space available.

Public parks and recreational facilities dwindled nationwide as budgets for such services were cut by the Reagan administration closely after “Thirty-seven states cut taxes or imposed spending limits in 1979.” The impact of reducing expenditure for public places could be seen state-wide: “about 41 per cent of park districts have either eliminated facilities or reduced hours since 1977-1978. Large cities have been hit more severely. The city of Los Angeles closed twenty-four recreation centres in 1981.” This economic and political climate led to the privatisation of city spaces, making turf wars all the more dangerous and spaces such as parks all the more sought after, particularly in LA where gang membership was statistically greater and the repercussions of economic cutbacks wider. Occupied largely by non-white males, the parks gang members inhabited became gendered, raced and classed and contributed further to “the idea of public space as dangerous for women.” Yet women, non-homogenous in their activities can also use public space as a site of inclusion.

117 Quinn, Nuthin’ But a “G” Thang, p.67.
118 Ibid.
121 Ibid, p.141.
Within all three narratives, parks are presented as important places. Echo Park, MacArthur Park and an unnamed park in *Gang Girl* are all places of temporary refuge for the gang girl. According to Kelley, women and girls “have less access to public spaces, [...] and are policed by family members, authorities, and boys themselves from the “dangers” of the streets.\(^{123}\) Kelley notes of the limitations of girl’s access to public spaces because of their traditional presence in the private sphere, and the gendered dangers that are considered to be present in the public space. Gender divisions in labour and the presence of parents to control girl’s movement is arguably less influential in the postmodern city and post-Kelley’s ideas, as parents of both sexes often work longer hours. Parents, in all three films are largely absent (or negligent). Allison’s parents rarely occupy the private sphere. She has to leave the home and enter her father’s place of work to have a conversation with him. Her activity and movement is unregulated by her parents, and she can be seen to develop a confidence and independence in solo exploration as the narrative progresses. We could therefore identify Allison (and the gang girls in each narrative) “As *bricoleurs*, female pedestrian subjects” who “re-write the city in idiosyncratic, unforeseen ways and detours that resist, from within, the disciplines of gendered space.”\(^{124}\)

As a young child, Veronica exits the private space to seek sanctuary from her drug-dependent mother’s beatings. The park, equipped with swings, offers her this space but blood splatters on the ground and the presence of drug dealers remind viewers that the space occupied by Veronica, whether public or private, is tainted with danger. Yet having been subjected to her mother’s violence indoors, Veronica does not carry with her what Koskela terms a “spatial mismatch in women’s fear: while violence is most likely to occur in private space, women tend to be most fearful in public space.”\(^{125}\) Instead, Veronica has greater freedom in accessing outside space from a young age and like the Echo Park homegirls, has confidence in using this space. Fox recognises such confidence in Anders’s gang girls noting how “the girl gang promenading around their territory,” demonstrate a “sense of


\(^{124}\) Collie, ‘Walking in the City,’ p.7.

confident.\textsuperscript{126} “Taking possession of space by using it repeatedly, and feeling at home in one’s environment” can generate what Koskela considers a spatial “confidence” amongst women, disrupting the idea of a gendered fear of urban space.\textsuperscript{127} Negligent, or in the case of Gang Girl, physically and verbally abusive parents, push youth away from the home into the outside space. Upon learning of her pregnancy, Mousie’s father in Mi Vida Loca tells her to “take her shit” and leave the family home. Anders is careful not to reduce the girls’ existence in the gang to a failure of parental responsibility as Mousie is seen with her Grandmother. But the park acts as an area that enables the gang girl to engage with fellow female gang members who demonstrate their own capacity for compassion and understanding towards each other which then affords them confidence in their outside space. Each film destabilises the notion of both public space and the gang as wholly masculine entities but parks, like the gang girls, are non-homogenous and offer varying functions.

Emphasis is placed on parks as integral to forming identity: Sad Girl and Mousie are “Echo Park locas.” Allison enters MacArthur Park and surrounding streets to leave what she terms the “phony” life of the Palisades behind. For Veronica, gang status is achieved after meeting drug dealers and gang members in the park as a young girl. William Sanders notes how parks “act as gathering places for people who have relatively little or undesirable personal space,” in low-come areas particularly amongst unemployed racial minorities.\textsuperscript{128} Parks are also money-making spaces, and thus sites of alternative economic empowerment. The park acts as a site of territorial claim and as a space of commerce, enabling drugs-related profit making and exchange amongst gang members. Members of The Croniks in Gang Girl use the park for their illicit business, Ernesto and gang girl Whisper work the corners of Echo Park and the 16th Street sell drugs on the outskirts of the park. Sanders contends that “while the Mexican-American gangs are primarily focussed on the barrio, the African-American gangs are primarily focussed on making money.”\textsuperscript{129} This notion of racial difference, barrio-orientated or by contrast business-led, is

\textsuperscript{127} Koskela, “Bold Walk,” p.305.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid, p.140.
substantiated by these filmic representations. Drugs enterprise or monetary desire is of importance in all three narratives. However, the local space for the Echo Park locas and 16th Street gang is held in higher regard, indicated explicitly in the geographical references in the gang’s naming when compared to the naming of The “Croniks”: a reference to high quality marijuana, “Chronic.” As female gang member Rated-R informs us, for The Croniks, “it’s all about money, and survival.” Outside drug trading may offer a source of alternative income, yet it also leads to the arrest of the non-white gang members. Allison by comparison snorts cocaine indoors in a Palisades nightclub and attempts to do crack in the privacy of her own bedroom, thus unregulated by parents or police.

Allison, fascinated by the 16th Street gang and with no parental ruling, travels to MacArthur Park in her convertible Mercedes, further establishing her middle-class position. Her (invisible) border crossing is indicated by the soundtrack shifting to diegetic on-screen Spanish music and by the “traditional” Mexican street food vendors and brown bodies that occupy the area and convey its Latinoness. This is a site where Davis reveals Salvadorean youth have been subjected to police “targeting” but more recently (in 2005, the year of Havoc’s release) MacArthur Park had “the highest reduction of crime statistics per resident in the United States.”

We get a sense of the displacing of crime to other areas beyond the park as Allison is seen walking, with the park visible in the background, to the darker (visually and metaphorically) streets of the barrio. The darkness of the barrio in Havoc suggests danger; a space that Allison as white female should not enter. Yet Havoc complicates such a simplistic visioning by imbuing Hector with a sense of pride in his neighbourhood.

Unlike Allison’s mocking of her Palisades community, Hector of the 16th Street, like Sad Girl, is proud of his barrio roots, pointing out that “real” people, including non-gang family members, live in this neighbourhood; “It’s my world right here, It’s my home. It’s where I live. I got my homies. I got my rucas.” As Michael Eric Dyson notes, “While gangs are a central part of the urban landscape,

---

they are not its exclusive reality.” This is something that Mi Vida Loca also points towards by including non-gang characters such as Sad Girl’s sister, La Blue Eyes, in the Echo Park barrio. In Havoc, Hector’s mocks the idea that he should instead make money in Beverley Hills and “sell some rock on Rodeo Drive,” underscoring the film’s tagline, “Some Lines Are Not Meant to be Crossed.” But his barrio evokes a sense of community and family that the Pacific Palisades lacks. Allison’s status as a rich white kid from the Palisades is something that she works hard to erase by moving across borders and between gangs. For the 16th Street members, geographical and social borders are continually reinscribed as the 16th Street gang members have their geographical ties adorned to their bodies with “16th Street” tattoos. While this conveys pride in their gang affiliation and place-bound identity, it also makes their movement regulated. Hector’s position in prison towards the end of the narrative reinforces the control of people of colour by whites despite the perceived autonomy of gang members as suggested by their tattoos.

For wealthy white Allison it is seemingly easy to escape criminal proceedings. Police stop Allison and the 16th Street in the barrio where a (white) female police officer asks Allison “You got some I.D.?” Handing over her I.D., the police officer remarks “Pacific Palisades” before sarcastically questioning, “You get lost looking for Hollywood?” Allison’s response that she “stopped to ask for directions” highlights her own awareness that she is “out of place” in the barrio, leading the police to arrest both Hector for drugs possession, and Allison for “loitering.” Helen Richards notes how the flaneur, a white male Parisian stroller of 19th century literature, “was the name of a man who loitered, but all women who loitered risked being seen as whores.” Like the flaneur, Allison has the leisure time to wander but as a young woman in an “undesirable” area, she is placed in a jail filled with female prostitutes. For Deborah Parsons, “the postmodern city is an open and migrational one, available to female as well as male walkers of the city street.”

For wealthy white Allison it is seemingly easy to escape criminal proceedings. Police stop Allison and the 16th Street in the barrio where a (white) female police officer asks Allison “You got some I.D.?” Handing over her I.D., the police officer remarks “Pacific Palisades” before sarcastically questioning, “You get lost looking for Hollywood?” Allison’s response that she “stopped to ask for directions” highlights her own awareness that she is “out of place” in the barrio, leading the police to arrest both Hector for drugs possession, and Allison for “loitering.” Helen Richards notes how the flaneur, a white male Parisian stroller of 19th century literature, “was the name of a man who loitered, but all women who loitered risked being seen as whores.”

Allison is in a position of power in the postmodern city in one sense as she

is able to observe the barrio and its inhabitants yet (even white) female movement is circumscribed. Hector arguably deserves to be arrested and excluded from the public space for his drug possession, while Allison is simply strolling.

Despite Allison’s father’s absence from home, he is in the words of one of her friends, able to wave “his magic wand,” enabling the arrest incident to quickly disappear. Allison’s interaction with gangsta and ventures “East” can be seen as a rebellion against her often absent parents, but it is the presence of her father that enables her to leave the jail. For the 16th Street gang to avoid prison they plan to use guns to silence Emily and Allison regarding the gang’s violent practices: the “sexed-in” initiation to the gang. However, the 16th Street members get geographically displaced when cruising the streets of LA. They mistake Bel Air for the Palisades only to be stopped by police at a gated community who instruct the gang members that they “don’t ever want to see” them in “this neighborhood again.” The curtailment of movement is presented as a protective function for whites in both cases. Allison’s short jail time removes her from the drug selling of the 16th Street and the exclusion of the Latino gang from Bel Air “protects” the predominantly white, wealthy residents. “Spatial govermentality, […] a system that provides safety for those who can afford it while abandoning the poor to unregulated public spaces,” is certainly in place here.134 However, the barrios and ghettos have been considerably regulated by police imposed curfews which have “become essential weapons” against non-whites.135 A legal form of illegal racial profiling, the Stop, Question and Frisk program emerged at the same time as the “War on Drugs” and has equally managed the movement of people of colour.136 While not frisked, we see police stop and arrest the gang girl in each of these movies including Allison, whose movement is stopped only when she is in non-white space and surrounded by Latino bodies.

The management of space in Obama’s America is most obvious in the continued rising number of prisons and disparate numbers of black and Latino

134 Engle, ‘Spatial Governmentality,’ p.17.
135 Davis, City of Quartz, p.286.
prisoners. “Rigid segregation and the unprecedented expansion of the prison state,” Michael Jeffries writes, “have literally locked disadvantaged black and brown people into neighbourhoods and behind bars without any chance to climb into the more stable middle-class.”137 We do not learn the outcome of Hector’s arrest, but Giggles’s four year prison sentence for a crime she did not commit but took the blame for, Veronica’s position of death row, Shakira’s prison stint and Lopez’s incarceration, underscores the disparate detention of non-whites from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In 2014, African American women were imprisoned at a rate more than twice that of white women while “Hispanic women were incarcerated at 1.2 times the rate of white women.”138 Allison’s early removal from the jail is shown to stem from her (white) privilege, underscored by her neighbourhood.

The prison site removes the gang girls from the parks and streets to a place where movement is regulated to an even greater degree. In each case, the management of space in the prison causes the gang girl to shed their gang affiliation. Although Giggles returns to the park, she no longer “throws” back the Echo Park hand signs to the rest of the gang girls. Ironically, the confinement of the prison space encourages each female prisoner to move beyond the limitations of the barrio and ghetto. For Veronica, however, whose car ownership suggests an increasing freedom, her later position on death row signals the ultimate end of mobility. Despite distinct differences between LA and NY, the place inhabited by the gang girl in these films is both mobilising and limiting. Although Shakira is able to exit the gang, her mobility is achieved through Veronica’s immobility. While Gang Girl demonstrates a growing sense of mobility for Shakira, Veronica’s transitioning identity from gang girl to born-again Christian is achieved by exiting one place of limitation to one where, governed by white power, her mobility and life will end. It is Shakira, enabled by Veronica’s story, who is allowed to move beyond the park and prison site. Post-religious awakening, Shakira informs us through voice-over that lessons taught by both Veronica and the Bible, have enabled her to go to college: she has a

“purpose” and graduates with “top honors.” In *Gang Girl* most explicitly, the park and local environment is presented as a negative contributing factor to gang affiliation, and the prison as a space that can remedy the ills of one’s impoverished neighbourhood underpinned by the film’s tagline “Salvation Cannot be Found on the Streets.”

In *Gang Girl*, salvation is achieved through the ultimate curtailing of mobility on death row and through the rejection of the plagued streets to indoor places of worship and education. While street knowledge enables the selling of drugs, “knowledge” gained indoors is presented as fundamental to moving beyond gang activity in the dangerous and racially marked neighbourhoods of urban America. In Bailey’s film, Lopez and Veronica undertake religious conversions when indoors and removed from the streets and inner-city parks. While “doing time” inside, Giggles learns that the homegirls require “new skills” and that computers are “the future” in terms of progression and job prospects, not the street corner drugs trade. Towards *Havoc*’s closing, Allison realises - when inside her Palisades high school classroom - that she cannot claim the barrio streets and 16th Street territory as her own. These films suggest that the gang girl must spend time indoors, away from the streets, if they are to move beyond its limitations.

**In Closing**

The discussion of space remains crucial today as “highly segregated pockets exist in all five boroughs” of NY while “vast portions of South and east Los Angeles are slipping from mixed populations toward single race populations.” Furthermore, the activity of the racially marginalised continues to be disproportionately curtailed by police. Consider for example a non-exhaustive list of non-white women recently subjected to police brutality when either inside or in close-proximity to their cars; Sandra Bland, Kamilah Brock, Breaion King, Emma Hernandez and Margie Carranza. (Self)segregation can enable occupiers of that

---

space feelings of security and opportunity for the creation and preservation of community, identity and pride; qualities that are absent in Havoc’s Palisades which although economically rich, lacks the vitality and community of Mi Vida Loca’s Echo Park.

The allure of Eastside for the PLC, is like Allison’s gang status, temporary. Returning to Merry’s ideas regarding the construction of “safe spaces,” Allison does finally “retreat” into her “privately secured” Palisades, abandoning the “public arena.”140 Discussing the white suburban consumption of the black ghetto, Karen Halnon rightfully acknowledges that “boundary crossing, however enticing and enchanting, is not a real or committed cross-over. It is a market-fueled journey that ordinarily ends with an arrival back to the safety and security of the White suburbs.”141 Such sentiment is played out in Havoc where the ghetto is exchanged for the barrio, but still referred to by white suburban youth at the “ghetto.” Gang girls are removed from the streets in Havoc and Gang Girl suggesting that outside space should not be occupied by these young women. Allison’s identity is shown to be more fluid, underlined by her ability to move between places to an even greater extent that the 16th Street males yet as female, her movement is still regulated by authorities and her body sexualised.

My analysis concludes that, when compared to Havoc and Gang Girl, Mi Vida Loca reconfigures the cinematic urban streets the most successfully and progressively (but not unproblematically).142 Anders allows the homegirls to continue to reside in the barrio, even when Giggles exits the gang. For the Echo Park girls, their ties to the barrio are too strong to leave behind. However, Giggles does have parental responsibility for her young daughter and therefore can be seen to have no other viable option but return; her gender and role as mother in one sense traps her in the barrio. At the same time, the Echo Park homegirls do not simply remain

140 Engle, ‘Spatial Governmentality,’ p.17.
142 In his unpublished PhD study, Kenneth Fox similarly found Mi Vida Loca the most progressive in terms of its representation of LA, when compared to American Me (1992), Stand and Deliver (1988), My Family (1995), and Born in East L.A. (1989); films that do not explore the relationship between gang girls and the city.
indoors when mothers; parenthood does not result in a rejection of public spaces. In the film’s conclusion, Sad Girl claims that when her young daughter grows up “Echo Park will belong to her and she can be anything she wants to be.” Unlike *American Me* where “There’s no fuckin hope for our barrio” with people like Santana, life in the barrio of Echo Park is not as futile as one might expect. The homegirls have confidence and importantly pride in the barrio, something which is further expressed through their appearance and stylistics which draw attention to their claiming of the streets and gang identity. In these movies, gang girls appropriate urban space as they do cultural items including makeup and clothes as discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter Three

“Looking all homegirl and shit;” Styles of the Gang Girl and Girl Gang

Introduction

By the late 1980s, the ghetto had become a lucrative business as cultural form. Signs and symbols associated with gangsta culture were being disseminated, celebrated and exploited across various accessible platforms including film, television, fashion and in particular rap lyrics and their accompanying music videos. Eithne Quinn notes:

The most dramatic source materials available to aspiring rappers were those taken from LA’s street gangs. Artists drew on the subcultural dynamism of the gangs’ style practices: the nuanced hand signs, vocabulary, and gestures, the special clothing and color-coding, and the territorial graffiti.¹ Artists were able to both convey and commodify a sense of street authenticity by reappropriating and reassigning meaning to cultural objects, translating styles from both the street and penitentiary into the mainstream. Although aesthetically distinct, we have seen how the streets afford the gang girls of Mi Vida Loca, Havoc and Gang Girl a degree of confidence and autonomy. The streets provide space for subcultural identity to thrive but the visual display of this identity - which we will see varies according to locale, class and race - continues to raise questions regarding the complex position the gang girl and girl gang occupy.

Cultural scholar Dick Hebdige’s classic study on subcultures, Subculture: The Meaning of Style (1979), reveals how urban UK youth reassign and reappropriate practices as expressions of, and responses to, social, political and economic conditions. While his examination focuses on British male groups, such as the Mods, Hebdige’s insight into the structure of subcultures is particularly pertinent when exploring more recent subcultural formations including contemporary street gangs in America. In response to state power, in particular the routine racial profiling

of young black and Latino males, gang members reappropriated and reassigned meaning to cultural objects, such as baggy jeans and bandanas. Hebdige locates groups, including British Punk, as youth subcultures that utilise style to communicate feelings of discontent. However, in his discussion, Hebdige acknowledges that “Some groups have more say, more opportunity to make the rules, to organize meaning, while others are less favourably placed, have less power to produce and impose their definitions of the world on the world.” This notion carries particular significance when examining the subculture of American girl gangs and gang girls and their potential to revolt against power structures through styles.

The absence and necessity of such an analysis has not gone unnoticed. In 2006, Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson acknowledged the now “embarrassingly obvious” gender “blindness” of Resistance Through Rituals (1975), a seminal work on subcultures to which Hebdige contributes. In the updated introduction to the revised edition, Hall and Jefferson claim, “we have since seen much more attention to young women in a range of public and domestic sites.” To illustrate this, the editors note of the advent of criminology studies pertaining to girls in street gangs over the last 30 years. Yet for their “purposes” what continues to be “missing from these ‘girl gang studies’ is any serious interest in cultural questions and the symbolic meaning of gang ‘style.’” James Diego Vigil has since offered a corrective to this contention, building on ethnographic work undertaken by Chicana scholar Norma Mendoza-Denton. Both scholars referenced in this chapter, explore the meaning of make-up use among gang girls of Mexican descent, with Lisa Dietrich also offering some discussion on this topic. Yet over ten years since Hall and Jefferson’s contention, detailed consideration of the meaning of girl gang styles beyond the brown body and in film remains “missing.”

The appropriation and subversive use of cultural items (such as clothing and hairstyles) by females is not a new phenomenon. During the late 1940s, American teenage girls termed “Bobby Soxers” emerged at a particular moment of female freedom fostered by WWII. The “wearing of the short bobby sock,” Tim Snelson

---

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid, p.xix.
reveals, was “characterised as a form of subcultural ‘bricolage,’ the appropriation and subversive use of a commodity as a mode of resistance, identification and communication between those within the subculture.” 6 This reappropriation of an everyday object provided Bobby Soxers with a degree of subversive potential, positioning young girls as a threat to the established order, as a “dangerous challenge to gender boundaries within the realms of leisure.” 7 Such a notion gives us impetus to study the styles of the gang girl whose gang membership seemingly suggests a “dangerous” transgression of gendered boundaries. The oppositional practices by female youth in response to cultural oppression are explored in all three filmic narratives, enabling the girls to represent their own marginalised status and subsequent self-empowerment through styles. Yet as this chapter illustrates, the mass commercialisation of subcultures in the mainstream distorts this notion of ownership and liberation.

This chapter acknowledges the dependence on mainstream knowledge of subcultural styles by all three filmmakers, who arguably capitalise on the marketability of the gang experience by translating the traditions, practices and styles of the gang into an easily accessible form of entertainment. Examining the relationship between American film cycles and youth subcultures of the 1950s, film scholar Amanda Ann Klein suggests that the diffusion of (white) 1950s youth subcultures to the masses via film (examples include The Wild One (1953)) rather than simply exploit the subculture, actually “offered teenagers a sense of community.” 8 Like Klein, I contend that these three case studies do more than simply profit from subcultures. The reality that there remain relatively few films representing the contemporary street girl gang and gang girl makes these films and their depiction of subcultural styles and this subsequent analysis, important. I begin this chapter by exploring the styles of the girl gang and gang girl in terms of the function and representation of makeup and tattoos, highlighting both the subversive

---

7 Ibid.
potential of these styles and the complication between self-expression and spectatorial voyeurism.

Styles enable a degree of empowerment, but as we will see hegemonic power structures respond to such styles with alternative modes of power. Tattoos form an important part of this discussion, and feature prominently in each narrative. Intersecting the analysis of other customs such as the clothing styles of the filmic girl gang, I examine the adoption and recontextualisation of cultural items by white youth. This leads to an examination of the issue of decontextualization and cultural theft. Finally, this chapter considers the naming practices and spoken styles within these movies. Throughout I seek to explore the extent to which the girl gang and gang girl can function as a site of resistance when they continue to operate under male networks of power, reinforcing Hebdige’s concern of the distribution of power and meaning in society. While Klein does discuss the ghetto action films as a subcultural cycle and consults Hebdige, her analysis explores the marketing and consumption of the movies. Like others, Klein does not apply Hebdige’s analysis to the styles (clothing, tattoos, hairstyles etc.) featured within these movies.

Looking Chola

It is well known that makeup and hair often play a vital role in the establishment of characters, whether transforming appearances (for example, Anne Hathaway darkened her hair for the role of Allison), establishing time periods or enhancing actors and actresses’ natural features. Makeup is plainly used in all three films, achieving an “everyday” aesthetic for Allison and Emily in Havoc. Despite producing Gang Girl on a shoestring budget, a makeup artist was employed by Bailey indicating the importance of the look of his characters. Veronica and Shakira do not appear to wear makeup but Lopez initially wears eyeliner, eye shadow and lipstick. Shakira and Lopez also wear black nail varnish when gang affiliated, a style popular in the mid-1990s among “Goths and club kids, subcultures of unimpeachable edginess.” Its employment in Gang Girl similarly suggests an

---


existence outside of the mainstream. Anders was drawn to the gang girls of Echo Park who were “so intense and also so intimidating with their makeup, hair and meticulous way of dressing,” revealing how their appearance sparked her interest in their stories: “I was like, ‘Damn, what is up with these girls?’”\(^{11}\) It is *Mi Vida Loca* in particular that illustrates the importance of cosmetics as subcultural style. Mendoza-Denton writes in her ethnographic study of Latina gang girls and makeup practices that “When the technology of femininity is used for unintended ends, there is a moment of rupture that can open up new possibilities within the system.”\(^ {12}\) Makeup can thus become a subversive tool. The forthcoming discussion of makeup is centred on Anders’s film which employed the skills of local gang affiliated youth in the visualising and applying of makeup to the actresses, most distinctly, Mousie and Sad Girl.

Before analysing aesthetics within the film, it is important to understand the history of the Chola style; a term deployed by youth to reflect their own street language and style. In the 1920s and 1930s, (male) Pachucos “developed styles and rituals concerning dress, manners, and social attitudes, which have become inherent in the social world of the barrios today.”\(^ {13}\) Pachucos slicked and tied their (long) hair back as a symbol of their subcultural identity; a style fashioned by Hector in *Havoc* which emphasises his distinct Latino roots. Pachucas, the female counterpart, also styled their hair, often in a high “coif” on top of the head in an obvious display of their cultural identity. Pachucas usually wore heavy and dark makeup, including eyeliner and lipstick, which was considered excessive by outsiders. “For several contemporary observers,” Catherine Ramírez notes, “the pachuca’s sexuality was hyperbolic and grotesque.”\(^ {14}\) The Pachuca, then, failed to be considered as “an agent of oppositional practices” in the words of Rosa Linda Fregoso, “despite her notable

---

contributions to the politics of resistance.” 15 Because “her body defies, provokes, challenges as it interrogates the traditional familial basis of Chicano nation” she has not been “celebrated by many of us.” 16 She rejected Chicana/o traditions as well as Caucasian beauty standards: long, straight blonde hair, blue eyes and light skin, features fulfilled by Emily in Havoc.

By reassigning the traditions of feminine makeup, Pachucas displayed subcultural codes through signified practices. As Vigil writes they rejected “the female aesthetic standards of mainstream society.” 17 For Mary Harris, the Pachucos are the “forerunners of today’s Mexican American gangs” and the (male) Cholo is often considered as the “cultural successor of the pachuco,” developing, since the 1970s, “a lifestyle and dress similar to the Pachuco innovators.” 18 Similarly, the Pachuca’s application of makeup - which provided a viable outlet for visible subcultural resistance to hegemonic forces and perpetuated beauty standards - was developed by Cholas and homegirls today, figures that Fregoso recognises should be considered as an “agent of oppositional practices.” 19 Mexican American culture is sometimes considered less influential than African American culture as we will see in Havoc’s presentation of white youth’s interaction with gang and gangsta culture. That African Americans on “the hustler end of the social spectrum” borrowed “heavily from the cholo style” indicates the importance of Mexican American practices and the necessity to dedicate space to its discussion. 20

The Chola style includes dark, thick lipstick, the heavy application of mascara, thin (sometimes drawn over with pencil) arched eyebrows, and dark eyeliner. The style regularly featured in Teen Angels magazine; a magazine no longer in print but hugely influential during the styling process of the film, as Anders informed me and made plain by its actual inclusion in the movie. Based in Rialto in

---

16 Ibid.
18 Ibid, p.312; Harris, ‘Cholas,’ p.290.
19 Fregoso, ‘Re-imagining Chicana,’ p.78.
the San Bernardino County (California) and first printed in 1981, the magazine was banned in 1992 at the California Youth Authority’s Ventura School. A facility housing youths age 13 to 25 that had often committed violent crime, it is significant that it was the only California YA facility to accept females at the time. For its readers, including a 19-year old Ventura inmate, Soloman Adegbenro, *Teen Angels* “covers issues young people are dealing with in a way that we can relate to.”

Featuring artwork by mainly minority youth, the magazine created a platform to share anything from clothing and makeup styles to relationship advice. For its (adult) critics, such as the Ventura County Sheriff’s Detective, Bill Stevens, “Gangs use it to advertise their philosophy” with the publication presenting “a falsehood that everything is cool” in gang life. For the authorities the magazine became “a primer for law enforcement officials who use it to spot trends among gang members and feature it in training courses and lectures.” Utilised by Chicana/o youth to document and disseminate styles and issues significant to their (sub)culture, authorities responded by using *Teen Angels* as “a new tool in their fight against Ventura County street gangs.”

Initially designed to offer marginalised youth creative and stylistic space, producing meaning and affording a degree of power, police then used the publication to curtail proud announcements of subcultural and gang identity.

Gang membership amongst Chicana girls in *Teen Angels* was often promoted by the Chola style that is sometimes referred to as being “gangstered down.” Dark hair is usually worn down, but often placed high on the top of the head (reminiscent of Pachuca styling) and the face is regularly framed with large hoop earrings: an accessory that is utilised in *Mi Vida Loca* (Sad Girl and Mousie), *Havoc* (Allison) and *Gang Girl* (Lopez and Shakira). In terms of dress, the Chola style consists of oversized jeans and shirts, items regarded largely as conveying a masculine

---

22 B. Stevens quoted in Ibid; L. Miramontes quoted in Ibid.
23 S. Joe, Ibid.
24 Ibid.
appearance, and was regularly fashioned in the numerous screenings of girl gang talk show specials. Meda Chesney-Lind and Lisa Pasko note that the “early part of the 1990s saw a curious resurgence of interest in girls, often girls of color, engaged in nontraditional, masculine behavior - notably joining gangs, carrying guns, and fighting with other girls.”

Television programmes capitalised on this “bad girl” discourse, with talk show programmes broadcasting feature specials on girl gang culture and female youth violence. In 1995, The Geraldo Rivera Show featured a special show on makeovers, subtitled “Uncovering the Hidden Beauty Within,” in which six girls involved (all but one African American or Latina) in gangs were visually transformed by makeup artists and stylists. Arriving in heavy makeup, where eyeliner extended beyond the eye line, the girls were re-styled head to toe shedding their gangstered down look. It was replaced with an aesthetic more compliant with traditional standards of feminine beauty including miniskirts, curled hair and less exaggerated makeup; actions that Mendoza-Denton notes were applauded by audience members.

Compared to both black and white females, Latina girl gang members featured most heavily in these special televised episodes during a period in which “African Americans and Hispanics comprised 93 percent of all the gang-related homicide victims.” At the same time, in 1993-5, Deborah Elizabeth Whaley notes that “there was a deployment of a set of discourses in the public sphere pertaining to bilingual education, immigration and transatlantic ties between the United States and Mexico, Puerto Rico and Latina and South America. The film industry seemed to capitalize on this moment” as “Latino culture and Latinos became profitable selling

27 Chesney-Lind and Pasko note how “popular talk shows such as The Oprah Winfrey Show (November 1992) Larry King Live (March 1993), Ricki Lake Show (October 1997)” and numerous others “devoted programs to the subject” of girls in gangs and girl violence. Chesney-Lind & Pasko, The Female Offender, p.36.
28 See Mendoza-Denton’s article “Muy Macha” for a more detailed discussion of the public spectacle of the gang girl and her televised makeover.
markets.”  

This encapsulates the ethos of Bill Clinton’s election in 1992 which promoted a multicultural America, in which focus was not solely placed on African Americans but ethnic and racial diversity. In 1994, the interlocking factors of gender and race / ethnicity and a fascination with both Latina/o culture and gang culture converged, forming the basis of Allison Anders’s film. Questioning the “sudden surge in media coverage and market for literature, films, ethnography, and television programmes of girl gang life” during the early 1990s, Monica Brown suggests that “at a very basic level,” the “exploitation of the image of the girl gang member is simply the next step in the spectacularisation of urban minority youth, perennially pictured as armed and dangerous.”  

Anders could be seen to simply capitalise on the marketability of the gang girl. *Mi Vida Loca* as the first feature film on Chicanas in the barrio introduced the makeup, hair and clothing practices of the Chicana gang girl to the mainstream. Yet Anders’s recognition of the essential differences in the styles of the girl gang, moves beyond the simple exploitation of these styles.

**Makeup and *Mi Vida Loca***

Sad Girl’s visual style, her makeup and tattoos, provide a clear announcement of her gang membership. At the beginning of the film, Sad Girl and Mousie are seen copying makeup and hairstyling techniques from a photograph of an older Chola (fig.1). The homegirls (including the real-life gang members) adopt certain facets of this style establishing a distinct aesthetic. This continues a tradition of attempting to assert an identity against a history of oppressed subcultures. While related to the Pachuca style, the homegirls’ style is not simply a replication of earlier styles; it emerges very much in a specific context. Whisper (an actual Echo Park gang member) for instance, has dyed bleach blonde hair which fails to conform to the standards of the dark haired Chola style (fig.2). Hair for racial minorities has been crucial in explicit visual resistance to hegemonic standards. Black women have countered what Lynette Goddard terms the “neocolonial discourses that frame natural black hair as nappy, unmanageable and ugly” by braiding, a style seen on a

---


young Veronica in *Gang Girl*. Resistance through hair styling has also emerged by moving towards natural styles (by not perming or relaxing hair), despite beauty standards (both within and outside black communities) positioning long, straight hair as the ideal. Whisper’s deviation from hair style principles in Anders’s film forms a (brief) topic of conversation between Rachel (an older ex-gang character) and Giggles; Rachel insists that in her youth, “we would die before we bleached our hair blond.” Whisper’s hair illustrates adaptations and experimentation to the Chola aesthetic which in itself demonstrates a resistance to norms established beyond the mainstream.

Sad Girl’s carefully applied Chola style makeup can be said to act as an emblem of resistance within the oppositional practices of the gang. She threatens the established order whereby both Chicano and mainstream society function through patriarchy, constructing “appropriate” values for women (and men). Sad Girl’s gang membership and her style are outside of such behaviours. For Vigil, makeup acts as a “mask, disguising a girl’s individual identity and replacing it with the identity of “gang member.” To some degree, gender is thus erased through this makeup mask; we associate makeup with women, but we associate gangs collectively as being (predominantly) male. Rather than acting as an affirmation of her gender, Sad Girl’s makeup acts as an expression and pronouncement of her gang membership and subcultural identity. By comparison, Giggles who no longer participates in gang culture does not wear the same style of makeup (or hair style) as the other girls; a marker of changing identity also utilised in *Gang Girl*. In Bailey’s film, Lopez leaves the gang and instead of wearing gold hoop earrings and her hair slicked back, wears her hair down with no visible jewellery. Significantly, although makeup in *Havoc* can be described as an “everyday” look, Allison and Emily wear less makeup and Emily’s hair is loosely tied in a bobble (distinctly less styled than in previous scenes) when neither the PLC nor the 16th Street seem like viable long-term options.

---

in the film’s dénouement. In Anders’s film, still images of Giggles (fig.3) prior to incarceration and exiting the gang, show her against a tagged wall, flashing Echo Park hand signs, wearing dark lipstick and a different hairstyle to her post-prison appearance (fig.4).

The mask analogy is fascinating when reading makeup as a somewhat peculiar erasure of gender but this does suggest that when “masked” the gang girl loses individuality. While the girls fashion certain features of the Chola style, they maintain individuality through personal styling; Sad Girl has distinctly dissimilar hair to Mousie who wears different shades of lipstick to Sad Girl. Furthermore, the idea that gender is erased is compromised by the fact that Sad Girl and Mousie compete for status as Ernesto’s homegirl. Sad Girl and Mousie belittle each other based on appearance in a bid to secure male partnership, suggesting a need for male confirmation of their attractiveness. Sad Girl tells Mousie that Ernesto “said he don’t want to be around your ugly face with all those fucking pimples.” The positioning of women against women is seemingly regressive, particularly when such an exchange is based on physical appearance. According to Lisa Dietrich, “Girl gang members perceive themselves as liberated from many of the constraints of traditional feminine behavior, yet they still want to be accepted by the homeboys as essentially feminine, sexually attractive girls.” Makeup thus underscores the tenuous position that the gang girl occupies as adopting elements of the Chola style suggests a discarding of mainstream feminine aesthetics, yet appearance continues to play a major role in establishing traditional gendered behaviours.

Sad Girl and Mousie, the two homegirls actively seeking (and receiving) Ernesto’s attention, are also the two characters whose makeup and appearance is most stylised and groomed when compared to the non-actresses, such as Whisper. The implication is that those who still retain elements of “standard” beauty aesthetics, whether that be Chola or Caucasian, are those who desire male attention. In one sense this establishes Sad Girl and Mousie’s status as characters, rather than real-life gang members. The write up of Anders’s movie in Vogue, a magazine largely concerned with lifestyle, fashion and beauty, underscores this idea with the real-life gang members seemingly belonging “to a different species from the good-

looking actresses in lead roles.” This reiterates ideas of social standing based on aesthetic beauty with Sad Girl and Mousie assuming the position of Ernesto’s homegirl(s). Their faithfulness to the dark hair, distinctive lipstick, hoop earrings, dark eyeliner and mascara is rewarded through male desire in a subculture where girls continue to function under male rule.

Choosing not to wear makeup, as Veronica and Shakira seemingly do in Gang Girl can be considered as liberatory. For bell hooks there has been a “sexist tradition” for all (white and non-white) women to wear make-up. Natalie Beausoleil notes that the contention amongst numerous commentators is that “makeup and other appearance enhancements are actually oppressive to women.” Yet to equate the wearing of makeup with patriarchal oppression fails to acknowledge that women can wear (or not wear) makeup for their own needs and desires, just as women can be sexual without their style or body being exploited. In Mi Vida Loca, Sad Girl and Mousie maintain Chola style makeup and hair after Ernesto’s death thus its purpose moves beyond simple relation to the male gaze, illustrated further by Whisper. Whisper defies what Susan Bordo recognises as the “Caucasian standards of beauty that still dominate on television, in movies, in popular magazines,” as well as the standards of the Chola style with her blonde (but still voluminous) hair. But she does wear Chola makeup albeit to a lesser extent than Mousie and Sad Girl.

Whisper is positioned more distinctly as someone who “works” the corner, is comfortable handling guns and “hangs” with Ernesto rather than seeking his sexual approval. Underscoring this further is Whisper’s conversation with homeboy Saddle, who after kissing Whisper asks if she wants to date him. Whisper responds, “I like you a lot, and you kiss pretty good, but this is business, a professional thing.” Whisper is more interested in selling drugs than seeking male attention. On one

level, her disinterest in Saddle could be aligned with distancing herself from the Chola style. A style evoking both femininity and toughness, Whisper certainly fulfils the latter as her “black tiddledywink eyes hint at realities far more harrowing than most movies ever acknowledge.” Sad Girl and Mousie arguably achieve both toughness and femininity, which in itself challenges constructions of (feminine) women as weak and gang girls as non-feminine as projected by the talk show makeover specials. On the other hand, Whisper’s rejection of Saddle’s pursuit, much like Sad Girl and Mousie’s continuation of the Chola hair and makeup after Ernesto’s death, indicates that wearing (Chola) makeup does not simply translate to a need for male attention.

The utilisation of makeup as subcultural style is an practice of some complexity. Sad Girl and Mousie’s wearing of makeup and desire to be aesthetically and sexually appealing does not simply deride the importance of the Chola style within the gang girl subculture. When Sad Girl flicks through the pages of Teen Angeles magazine the camera provides close-up shots of real-life Cholas and female gang members, complete with dark hair and heavy makeup. Sad Girl’s narration reveals that this magazine “shows how we are really like.” The publication, much like the Chola makeup, is an important component of the gang girls’ subcultural existence. The use of cosmetics and styling of hair provides the homegirl with an individual look, enabling her to remain visibly distinct from her male counterpart at once establishing and erasing gender. At the same time, this emphasis on styles risks voyeurism as audiences are encouraged to visually consume the racially marginalised gang girl with Chola cosmetics providing another dimension of fascination, much like tattoos, to gaze upon.

**Inked Bodies; Badges of Bravery and Slavery**

Historically, tattooing, like gang participation, has been regarded as a male dominated practice. This has resulted in what Karin Beeler terms as a “masculinist bias in tattoo culture and narrative.” Tattooing flourished within Chicano gang culture in the barrios during the 1940s and 1950s, as the emerging Pachuco subculture sought methods to announce their subcultural identity. Towards the end

---

41 Powers, ‘.. and justice for some,’ p.65.
of the 1960s, visual cultural was used to express pride in Chicano identity during the Chicano Movement. For Chicano gang members, body art transformed the already marked body (as criminal or deviant) as a resistance strategy to regimes of control. Although the nature of tattoos often differs according to race, with Chicano tattoos more frequently referencing religion (Catholicism) and African American gang tattoos less elaborate in detail, tattoos have similarly been used by blacks to convey gang affiliation and resist hegemonic forces; as a “badge of bravery and rebellion.”

Discussing “resistance identities,” renowned gang scholar John Hagedorn notes that “In ghettos, barrios, and favelas around the world, the dispossessed and their gangs” have “forged cultural responses to the dominant white culture and society.” Although Hagedorn himself does not recognise gang tattoos as one of these “cultural responses,” we can identify them in such a way as they similarly “seek to reclaim meaning, self-determination, and self-respect.” “Historically,” Beeler writes, “and even mythically, the tattoo has been associated with subversion, and it continues to serve this function in contemporary culture,” despite their wider acceptance in the mainstream.

The proliferation of tattoos amongst the middle-classes started in the 1990s with an increased exposure of tattooing through the entertainment industry. Tattoos thus evolved from an “anti-social activity in the 1960s into a fashion statement.” The popularity of tattoos amongst women increased in the 1990s, the same time that a shift occurred in the pop cultural landscape. During this period, Mary Celeste Kearney reveals “a new climate prevails where dependency on boys and romance

43 During this same period (from the 1960s to mid-1970s), art historian Amelia Jones informs us, “the body emerged into visual artwork in a particularly charged and dramatically sexualized and gendered way. For women artists, such as Hannah Wilke and Yayoi Kusama, the body as performative site disrupted women’s subjectivity, situating “the body/self within the realm of the aesthetic as a political domain.” A. Jones, Body Art/Performing the Subject (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p.13.
45 J. Hagedorn, A World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p.60
46 Ibid, p.83
47 Beeler, Tattoos, Desire and Violence, p.6.
have given way to a new, more confident focus on self.” In pop cultural texts, “a greater presence of feminists” produced material that “foreground girls” development of “individual identities and same sex-friendship.” Tattooing the young female body in popular culture was arguably one way of illustrating this new climate. The emerging popularity of tattoos in the mainstream amongst females and the increase of narratives featuring more confident teenage girls intersected in the narrative of Joyce Carol Oates’s novel *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (1993) and its 1996 filmic adaptation directed by Annette Haywood-Carter, *Foxfire*. Beeler’s in-depth analysis of the novel and film notes that despite being set in “different historical periods” (1950s upstate NY and 1990s Pacific Northwest, respectively) in both novel and film, the Foxfire flame tattoo “marks a particular event in the girls’ narrative.” In particular, the tattoo conveys resistance to sexual harassment and social constraints. As Beeler identifies, the tattoo “serves as a way of showing a change in the lives of several young women” who join Foxfire, a girl gang but not in a contemporary street sense.

Despite differences in novel and film that are explained by Beeler, anxieties surrounding the tattooed body are present in both texts. In the novel, the “flame tattoo is a symbol of resistance” yet “four of the girls make an effort to conceal it. Perhaps they do so because of the taboo surrounding body art in the 1950s, especially in under-aged women, or because they wanted to keep aspects of Foxfire a secret.” At the time of the novel and *Mi Vida Loca’s* release, tattoos were penetrating the mainstream but girls, according to Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, were still more likely to choose a tattoo that could be “concealed.” In Haywood-Carter’s movie adaptation, Goldie (an Asian teen adopted by white parents) is reprimanded by her adoptive, and largely negligent, father when he sees the tattoo that she has been covering. His response articulates the stigma attached to the tattooed body and

---

50 Ibid.  
52 Ibid, p.109, 110.  
54 Ibid.
indicates why Goldie would choose to conceal it. While placing his hand around Goldie’s neck, Goldie’s father bellows, “Why do you keep doing this? What are you some kind of freak?” Goldie illustrates the tensions of the tattooed female body. Her marking enables a degree of subversiveness but this non-feminine behaviour further situates her as deviant “Other.” *Foxfire* also illustrates the significance of the concealment of the gang tattoo on the female body which is recognisable in a number of contemporary street gang texts.

In *American Me*, Julie covers up the cross tattoo (a common tattoo amongst Pachucas/os) that is located between her thumb and index finger with makeup, concealing the symbol of her affiliation in *la primera* gang. As B.V. Olguín writes, in covering up her tattoo, Julie “covers up her ties to her barrio identity in favor of the mainstream literacy and legitimacy - a university education.”\(^5^5\) Additionally for Fregoso, “by masquerading and shielding the mark on her body, Julie demonstrates the extent to which social identity is not stable but is, rather, a production that is fluid and provisional.”\(^5^6\) In *Living the Life* (2000), a (critically and commercially unsuccessful) film that details the friendship and contemporary street gang membership of Mexican American dancers Kata and Anna, Kata is stabbed in the stomach by a fellow gang member.\(^5^7\) Her stomach previously displayed her gang allegiance in the form of a large tattoo but with a bandage wrapped about her midriff in the film’s dénouement, her gang tattoo is concealed, underscoring her decision to leave the gang. Since ancient Egyptian times, tattoos have adorned the body to be visually consumed by others. Yet the act of concealing the symbol of gang affiliation is not only suggestive of wanting to keep secret one’s membership to a gang but also proposes that one’s identity as a gang girl is not fixed. Both *Living the Life* and *American Me* present Jody Miller’s contention that “gang membership for girls is much more likely to remain a primarily adolescent undertaking,” in comparison to their male counterparts.\(^5^8\) At the same time, the concealing of the tattoo affords the

---


\(^{5^7}\) *Living the Life* (dir. Alex Munoz, First Look Home Entertainment, 2000).

tattooed some power; they can choose when their marking is displayed and who bears witness to it. In *Mi Vida Loca*, Sad Girl’s gang tattoos are not at any point concealed, suggesting both pride and long-term gang commitment but also raising questions surrounding power and control.

Sad Girl’s tattoos are positioned on her hands and face, expressing gang affiliation and commitment on two of the most visible parts of the body: these are not private expressions. In what Whaley terms as “a particularly striking cinematic moment,” the camera provides an intimate close-up of Sad Girl’s eyes (fig.5), as the “focus shifts from left to right, the camera then focuses on her right eye” which Whaley mistakenly identifies as having “two tears tattooed underneath.”\(^59\) The tattoo actually consists of three small dots in a triangular position under the left eye, not right. Ruth Struyk provides insight into the various visual means of recognising gang involvement. She reveals what some “common gang tattoos” represent, including the non-gang specific three dots in a triangle which “equals mi vida loca.”\(^60\) The tattoo is common within the Latino gang subculture and features in both *Living the Life* and *Down for Life* (2010) with the latter providing similar repeated close-up shots of protagonist Rascal’s markings in the opening sequence. For some gangs, including MS-13 (a gang established in El Salvador but active in East LA) the three dot tattoo represents regularities of gang life; “hospital, prison, cemetery.”\(^61\) Such a sentiment is expressed by ex-gang member Giggles who first informs the viewer that, “by the time our boys are 21, they’re either in prison, or disabled, or dead.”\(^62\) For Sad Girl, her markings more obviously convey a sense of pride in her gang identity.

At the beginning of the film, the camera shifts between close-up shots of Sad Girl’s eyes and hands which are being tattooed with “Sad Girl” across her knuckles. The buzzing sound of the needle penetrating the skin is apparent as a hand, tattooed

\(^{61}\) Ibid.
with “CASPER EXP” (in reference to the Echo Park locale and gang) fills in the lettering. Gangs, as Harris suggests, “are usually named after the street, housing project, or barrio from which the gang originates. Members identify closely with their neighbourhood or “hood” and it is this name they tattoo on themselves.”

Kopple illustrates this practice most visibly of the three films as some members of the Latino gang fashion tattoos with “16th Street” across the back of their shaved heads. Despite the more recent acceptance of tattoos as a legitimate art form since the 1990s, tattoos of the neck and face specifically, as featured in Havoc and in Bailey’s film, continue to be considered a fringe practice in American culture. They “signify criminality” and their visibility is at once fascinating and repelling to the mainstream. Simultaneously, such tattoos generate greater respect in the underworld of gangs for their public proclamation of gang affiliation.

Mi Vida Loca and Havoc invite a kind of social voyeurism both satisfying and privileging the curiosity of the public as the gang member colludes in their own objectification through tattooing. However, as Mi Vida Loca’s cinematographer Rodrigo Garcia intersects between close-up camera shots of Sad Girl’s eyes and knuckles, Sad Girl, rather than affirming a social hierarchical gaze from outside of the gang’s existence and narrative, is positioned to “look back” at what Whaley terms the “objectifying gaze.” Sad Girl looks at the camera, directly staring at the viewer. Her body (with tattoos and makeup) thus acts as a discursive site in which historical and cinematic traditions (of the white male gaze) are challenged. The body, as Foucault contends, is directly involved in a “political field” in which power relations have an “immediate hold upon it, they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it,

63 Harris, ‘Cholas,’ p.290.
64 The mainstreaming of tattoos as fashion accessories has become increasingly popular in the 21st century with fashion designers such as Henry Holland citing Mi Vida Loca as an influence for his latest collection of tattoo appliqués on dresses in March 2013. More recently, companies such as Kenco have capitalised on this stereotype of the tattooed outlaw gang member by launching an interactive multimedia advertisement campaign, ‘Coffee vs. Gangs’ (established in 2014). The campaign centres on animated images of tattoos on the male gang members’ body, and in particular the face, in a televised commercial warning viewers of the dangers of gang life in Honduras.
force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.”

Taking “immediate hold upon” her own body, Sad Girl chooses to “mark” herself through the ancient practices of body modification, resisting the Foucauldian notion of the “docile body,” forced into submission.

Foucault does not discuss tattoos as a self regulation of the body. However, for Foucault whilst resisting control from power, the body remains in a contested space, as power responds through alternative modes of control as we have seen in the banning of Teen Angels magazine. In her examination of the subversive potential of the tattoo, Beeler indicates “the conflicting image of the tattoo as a symbol of resistance and containment.”

Mi Vida Loca points towards this in a later scene which shows female gang member Whisper being arrested by LAPD officers (who can themselves be potentially barred from employment if tattooed) who photograph her tattoos as a means of easily recognisable identification for future encounters with the authorities. Power is thus reproduced in a new form. Thomas P. Keenan notes that “As far back as 1959, according to a news report, there was a file with over 200,000 people arrested each year by the Los Angeles Police Department, 90,000 of which are tattooed.”

Significantly, none of the homeboys present are having their photographs taken, it is Whisper who is subjected to this surveillance despite Giggles informing the police that “she’s a minor; it’s against the law to take her pictures.” This implies that the tattoo is even more subversive on a minor and that the gang girl body is subjected to a greater degree of surveillance than her male counterpart.

This problematic tension between resisting and creating power is something capitalised on in Havoc as the exotification of the “ghetto” explored in the previous chapter is extended to the visual representation of the Latino gang members of 16th Street. Once the PLC arrive in the barrio, they are confronted with Latino gang

---

68 Ibid.
69 Beeler, Tattoos, Desire and Violence, p.56.
70 According to the LAPD’s recruitment website, “Candidates with tattoos are evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Candidates with tattoos who are subsequently hired must ensure that the tattoos are not visible to the public while on-duty.” See: http://joinlapd.com/recruitment.cfm?section=faqs [Accessed 05/08/2016].
members who display an assemblage of key gang signifiers, including their baggy pants, bandannas, a “strut” walk and large, detailed tattoos (fig.6). They posses what Richard Rodriguez terms “the homeboy aesthetic.”

The 16th Street gang tattoos are immediately visible on the hands, torso, arms and the head, expressing gang membership and dedication (much like Sad Girl) on the most noticeable parts of the body. According to the LA Times, for Anne Hathaway, “The crash course in gang life was an eye-opener; some of the actors, she notes, covered up when they were off set the fake gang tattoos they wore for the film for fear of getting shot.”

Stereotypes of gang members are arguably naively reinforced here. Yet Hathaway reportedly stated, “I had no clue that that could go on,” removing herself from such actions and thoughts. The statement does however illustrate the importance and difficulties of gang tattoos as an announcement of gang affiliation.

In a similar way to Mi Vida Loca, Havoc highlights the ambivalent role of the gang tattoo; a symbol of self-ownership and a marking used in the reproduction of power by the establishment. In the scene where Allison and Hector are being arrested, the non-tattooed white Allison must show identification to a police officer but the male gang members are easily recognisable by their gang uniform and tattoos; their inscribed “16th Street” bodies act as their ID card. Tattoos work as non-conformist marks of resistance and as a preserver of cultural history. Simultaneously they confine the body to further objectification. The act of self-expression is problematical as the practice enables authorities to reproduce power in alternative modes and according to Hathaway’s fellow cast members, invites and incites gang violence.

---

73 Vigil notes there is also a “practical reason” for this elaborate art form amongst gang members more generally as tattoos help hide injection “marks” when they are “using” drugs. See J.D. Vigil, Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), p.115.
74 Chautard, ‘She's keeping her life in balance.’
75 A. Hathaway quoted in Ibid.
76 Promotional material for Havoc released in Europe highlighted the dichotomy between the non-tattooed Allison and the 16 Street gang member by placing the image of half of Allison’s face alongside the image of half of a Latino gang member’s tattooed head. Image available at: http://www.impawards.com/2005/havoc_ver3_xlg.html [Accessed 05/02/2014].
The 16th Street male body in *Havoc* becomes even more “gangsta” through the exposure of muscles, features that the white PLC members do not possess. Evoking masculinity, muscles, so obviously displayed by brown and black men in the prison yard of films such as *American Me*, are less pervasive in *Mi Vida Loca* suggesting a departure from the visual consumption of the male gang body. A non-tattooed Big Sleepy does not wear a shirt in some scenes, and a drug-dependent older Cholo, Frank, wears a sleeveless jacket showing his tattooed arms but otherwise tattooed or bare male bodies are absent in *Mi Vida Loca*. Black muscles are displayed in *Gang Girl’s* opening by Troy (who is not gang affiliated). The display of his (non-tattooed) large and defined biceps suggests an ability to protect Cynthia. Wrapping his arms around her at the bus stop, Troy claims that he will “come warrior style” at anybody who attempts to hurt her; Troy’s absence results in Cynthia’s subjection to Shakira’s violent attack. Bailey, who bodybuilds himself and works as a personal trainer, told an online bodybuilding and fitness hub, “I’m just an actor/filmmaker, personal trainer who looks and feels good.”

The self-exhibiting of his own muscles on-screen (in his role as Troy) convey Bailey’s pride in his own physical appearance. Bailey desires to be looked at with an appreciating gaze in what prison scholar Auli Ek terms a “panoptic manner,” with muscle accomplishment central to this gaze. Muscles signify strength and physical labour and have been used in film to convey the corporeal value of the black man; *Leadbelly* (1976) “begins in 1934, as the shirtless, muscled body of Huddie Leadbetter (Roger E. Mosley) glistens sweatily beneath the sun as he breaks rock in the prison yard.”

Inviting the gaze of audiences, *Gang Girl* and *Havoc* encourage us to look at the non-white male body that has previously been owned and is still today put to work by others and whose pain has historically been treated as spectacle in visually

---

consumed torture, for example, lynching. Troy is presented as physically hard but shows a softer side in his concern for Cynthia’s welfare. By comparison, in the character of Nayman - a violent black male gang member who sexually initiates Veronica into The Croniks in Gang Girl - and the 16th Street males of Havoc, the longstanding conception of the racialised male body as hard, sexual and dangerous is reinstated. Their visibly tattooed bodies physically overpower the gang girl either before and / or during sexual initiation. The tattooed and muscular male gang body is presented as deviant yet his body is initially alluring for the female characters. Upon their first sighting of Nayman, whose shoulder is tattooed, Lopez tells Veronica “you know he look good.” In the Western world, male tattoos are conceived as an art form. In stark contrast, tattoos on women have been treated as “trash.” Muscles and tattoos in Havoc and Gang Girl continue to work in the male gang member’s favour as they attract young women and express power.

The gang tattoo in Gang Girl also operates as a symbol of power when adorned on the female gang member. Like Mi Vida Loca, where Sad Girl eagerly tells Giggles to look at her knuckle tattoos, the tattoo in Gang Girl is explicitly referenced in the narrative. Its function as a tool of resistance is similarly important, but the tattoo is rendered troublesome through the historical and moral discourse that Veronica attaches to it. The tattoo worn by Shakira and Croniks gang members is a black, back-to-front ‘C’ tattoo with a dagger through the middle (fig.7). It first features in the opening scene and is framed by Shakira’s large hoop earrings. Despite the night-time scene, Shakira’s marking is repeatedly highlighted by the close-up camera position. One month later, after her violent attack on (the non-tattooed) Cynthia, Shakira meets Veronica in prison. The camera focuses on Shakira’s knuckles, which like Sad Girl’s are tattooed with (this time indistinguishable) lettering. Veronica states, “I noticed you got some markings on your hands. That’s The Croniks, right?” Recognising Shakira’s Croniks tattoos, Veronica interrogates the young offender, concluding, “all this life is going to give you is nothing.” Whilst Shakira considers the tattoo as a sign of familial belonging, Veronica contests this notion. Veronica contends that the tattoo operates as an earlier, historical

80 Miguel A. De La Torre notes how “Like African American lynchings, Mexican lynching occurred with the knowledge and at times full participation of law enforcement, specifically the Texas Rangers.” See M.A. De La Torre, The U.S. Immigration Crisis: Toward an Ethics of Place (Oregon: Cascade, 2016), p.80.
manifestation of tattooing as a form of punishment amongst slaves; they are in her words, “a badge of slavery.” The most common place for forcibly applied tattoos to be placed on slaves was the face, establishing and inscribing ownership of the individual in the most visible way.

The tattoo in Bailey’s film can be seen as an act of marked resistance, as an expression of defiance by the tattooed gang member. Yet the function of penal tattooing and its interpretation as a “badge of slavery” problematises this power / knowledge dichotomy. Participation in The Croniks, and gang culture more widely, demands compliance, the tattoo being one aspect of this conformity, facilitating police identification and arrest procedures. Furthermore, the tattoo carries with it the historical significance of the imprisonment of African Americans in particular. The gang girl body thus remains in a contested space, as power responds to methods of self-ownership as epitomised by Veronica’s position on death row. In this scene, the camera frames Shakira’s tattoo and Veronica’s cheek (fig.8) which is adorned with a prominent scar, a tattoo of sorts and an identification marker that in 2012 the FBI “announced plans” to add to “its Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System.” During slavery, “when an individual’s character was often read on their external body, a scar “spoke for itself” as a mark of bad character, or dishonor, regardless of how it came into existence.” Several times in this episode, Veronica instructs Shakira to “look at me,” heightening the visual displeasure of her scar and reinforcing her own criminal notoriety in an effort to “scare straight” Shakira.

Sad Girl and Whisper in Anders’s film, Shakira and the rest of The Croniks in Gang Girl and the 16th Street of Havoc all choose to mark their bodies with tattoos as an albeit problematic expression of resistance and as a confirmation of gang affiliation. While the tattooing of the female body defies gender traditions of inking the body, the practice generates complicated outcomes for the racialised male too (as illustrated in Havoc) but ultimately tattoos continue to work in male favour. The lack of the tattooed gang girl body in Havoc continues to associate tattoos with ‘maleness’ and non-whites. Allison and Emily do not demonstrate the same level of

---

81 Keenan, Technocreep, p.224.
commitment to gang life, their gangsta style is disposable and materialistic and expressed largely by the styling of the PLC in terms of clothing.

**Dressing, Performing and (Re)Appropriating Gangsta; Keepin’ it Real Cool and Sexy**

Gangsta rap artists in the late 1980s consciously exploited the ghetto and its fashions for financial gain, reinterpreting and revising the streets attracting a significant white suburban audience who invested in the lyrics, and styles, of gangsta rap which evoked both sexiness and toughness. Investment in gangsta culture by (young) whites has not been simply financial. Just as gangsta rappers have reappropriated gang clothing items to achieve a (saleable) gangsta style as featured in the ghetto action movie cycle (including sagging pants, oversized Pendleton shirts and bandanas) white youth could utilise gangsta to engage in racial politics as well as for their own needs and purposes. *Havoc* illustrates such a notion through the PLC’s rejection of white privilege and adoption of the gangsta style through clothes. As “wiggers” the PLC exhibit a fascination with black culture and the popularity of gangsta fashion; it is a style that led Hathaway to “completely” change her “walk and dress.”

The decontextualising of clothing styles that were used primarily to establish identity against a backdrop of discrimination raises numerous issues as this discussion demonstrates. When compared the 16th Street, The Croniks and the Echo Park homegirls and homeboys, the PLC’s dress is (literally) branded as throwaway and gangsta’s sexy aesthetic proves problematic.

In seeking to rebel against their whiteness, it is the PLC’s white privilege that enables them to buy-in-to gangsta life. Directly addressing Eric and thus the audience, Allison reveals: “So we dress gangsta...We talk shit. So what? It’s our thing. See, basically, the thing to remember...is that... well, none of it really matters. We’re just teenagers, and we’re bored. We are totally...fuckin’...bored.” Unlike the youth in *Mi Vida Loca* and *Gang Girl* who must financially provide for themselves and their families, the PLC’s time is not consumed with various forms of work, including child-rearing and illicit and / or legitimate business. The PLC’s boredom is filled by gang membership and gangsta styles. Toby’s gangsta persona and style is signified through commodified aesthetics. The Echo Park homegirls, unlike The

---

83 A. Hathaway quoted in Chautard, A. ‘She's keeping her life in balance.’
Croniks, do wear branded items, Nike Cortez shoes, which according to Eric César Morales pay “homage to the sandal-like cloth shoes, called güainitas or tecatitas, used by many migrant workers when doing jobs that require long hours of standing.” Even their branded items have a history of heritage. By comparison, Richard Mora recognises that Toby is wearing the “trappings of the commercially-constructed gangsta look – an ENYCE jacket over a white muscle shirt, three silver (or white gold) chains, one with a dollar sign medallion.” Jewellery, most obviously gold chains, are worn by male gang members in the other two films, but Toby’s diamond encrusted dollar sign emphasises his ability to purchase and perform the gangsta aesthetic because of his wealth and privilege.

While white participation in black culture does have the potential to mobilise, the staged performance by white youth of facets of black culture decontextualises and reinscribes power relations. This is illustrated most explicitly in Allison’s claim that gangsta is “our thing.” Furthermore, when asked by Eric, “How long have you identified with gangsta culture?” Sam’s response, “I mean, I hate fucking...rich-ass white culture. Shit’s fucking whack. You know? [...] It’s, like, all the good shit came from black people,” presents an appropriation, adoption and performance of a surface expression of a particular dynamic of black culture; gang(sta) culture. It is implied by Sam that black gangs have a more significant trajectory (and tangible culture) despite African Americans occasionally borrowing from Mexican Americas as noted previously. The question resurfaces as to why Kopple’s film does not centre on Kaplan’s original narrative of gangsta in South Central or black gang members more broadly. Sam’s dialogue seems to support Qiuana Lopez’s contention regarding the conflation of black and Latinoness, but it has been noted by DeMello that while “Chicano gangs of the 1940s on the West Coast [...] influenced mainstream Latino culture” they “never had the influence that African American gang style has today” particularly amongst non-whites. We are still left to speculate the reasoning for the transition to Latino spaces and gangs, but this African

American influence goes some way to explaining the PLC’s immersion in cultural stereotypes, adopting specific dress, language, and practices considered “black” in an attempt to subdue their whiteness.

Allison and Toby leave a house party where males are snorting cocaine off a girl’s breasts to go to Toby’s car. In his convertible Impala, a symbol of performance and an illustrator of the converging of gangsta and middle-classness, Toby’s jewellery is further visible against his exposed chest. This is a style fashioned by black hip-hop artist Tupac in the early 1990s. Tupac displayed gangsta’s sexual allure at the time of Kaplan’s screenwriting by exposing his tattooed torso adorned with chains to the world on numerous occasions. More relevant to Havoc’s time of release, black rap artist 50 Cent achieved a similar aesthetic on his Get Rich or Die Tryin’ (2003) album artwork. As well as literally exposing the eroticisation and commercialisation of the black body, artists such as Tupac illustrate the importance of possessions and material wealth, something that was not so crucially at the forefront of early gangsta rap lyrics concerned with police brutality and the rising incarceration of non-white men. Tupac’s billboard topping 1996 song “How Do U Want It,” a song performed by Allison during the party, places such emphasis on possessions: “Just like Aladdin bitch, get you anything you ask for / It’s either him or me -- champagne, Hennessey.” In Toby’s car, one layer of his visible display of gangsta, his ENYCE jacket is removed, but his display of material wealth through jewellery remains in place. He sits back in his vehicle / status symbol and tells Allison, “you’re so fucking hot,” whilst a now topless Allison performs oral sex.

In this topless scene, the gang girl body is delineated in terms of physical appearance. Writing in 2005 (the year of Havoc’s release), feminist scholar Ariel Levy notes how “spectacles of naked ladies have moved from seedy side streets to center stage, where everyone-men and women-can watch them in broad daylight.” At a time when “hotness has become our cultural currency,” girls give “erotic performances” while boys are “literally lying back and enjoying the benefits,”

---

87 50 Cent, Get Rich or Die Trin’ (Shady, Aftermath, Interscope, 2003).
88 Tupac Shakur, “How Do U Want It,” All Eyez on Me (Death Row, Interscope, 1996).
exemplified by Toby. Havoc was released during a period in which previous Disney starlets such as Britney Spears claimed “I’m not that innocent” in “Oops!...I did It Again” (2000) and Christina Aguilera released the Grammy award nominated single and controversial video “Dirrty” (2002), announcing her transition from pop princess to sexually charged young adult. In the displaying of Allison’s topless body, the notion of contemporary hotness is fused with the sexualisation of the female body in gangsta pop culture (for example, “hoes” and “bitches”) which the PLC are so obsessed with. Hathaway herself was arguably rebranding her public image from Disney princess in the lucrative Princes Diaries to gang girl in Havoc, an “anti-princess role.” The elevation from the role of submissive female to the sexual instigator has been considered by female popstars such as Madonna and Aguilera as a transition from “some lame chick in a rap video” to being “in complete command of everything and everybody.” Yet this “raunch culture” as Levy terms it, is not “essentially progressive, it is essentially commercial.” Indeed, one reviewer concluded that “Havoc will likely interest those that want to see Anne Hathaway’s boobs, but it doesn’t hold much other value.” The commerciality of gangsta and raunch culture meet in Havoc and Allison is arguably far from what Aguilera terms the “power position.”

In one scene Eric is filming Allison as he attempts to sincerely understand her motivations for gang membership. The visual presence of Eric filming Allison

---

90 Ibid, p.31.
92 As we will see in later chapters, this sexualisation of the female gang member does not simply equate in the other two movies, meaning that gangsta’s treatment of (young) women cannot be assumed as homogenous.
95 Levy, Female Chauvinist Pigs, p.29.
97 Aguilera quoted in Duerden, ‘The Good, the Bad.’
with his camera is an obvious reminder of public fascination with female stars (Hathaway) and gang life. In this scene, Allison initially wears a jacket over her crop-top and slightly sagging pants, teeming sexy with gangsta. Accessorized with a gold necklace and hoop earrings, Allison also wears and a black wrist band with the letters PLC inscribed in white; the gang name is rendered on materialistic goods (Emily also has a PLC embroidered t-shirt) rather than the body as in *Mi Vida Loca* and *Gang Girl*. Allison strips off her clothing in this scene, leaving the camera to voyeuristically linger on her body and exposed nipple. Allison declares that she can be “lots of different people” to which Eric asks, “isn’t this what it’s all about, the clothes and the talk?” Eric then claims that Allison is “acting like a porn star” as she rubs her breasts and places her hand down her pants. She is disinterested in engaging with Eric and his serious questions pertaining to gang membership. For Lauren Rosewarne, here Allison is “simply using her sexuality as a way to exert feminine power sexual power while disconcerting a man.”

Allison’s actions do disconcert the non-gang affiliated Eric, but he firmly tells Allison to cover up, curtailing her exposure and “porn star” performance and she is again placed under male control. Allison later admits to Eric that performing oral sex on Toby is indeed a “performance” which results in no authentic pleasure for herself. She directly stares into the camera declaring that only her love for best friend Emily is “real.” Allison’s character reminds the viewer that her actions are simulated sexuality and achieved only through detachment to reality.

This explicit removal from the “real-world” is echoed in *Spring Breakers* (2013). The film similarly explores white’s interactions with gangsta culture and the commercialisation of black culture. Alien who is white and wears cornrows (a hairstyle with African American origins) and has a custom gold grill (considered a feature of the (black) 1990s “Bling” movement) instructs bikini-clad former Disney stars to handle and shoot guns. Following a montage of images of alcohol being poured over breasts and drug consumption (sharing commonalities with *Havoc*’s house party scene), Candy and Brit attend a history class on Civil Rights. In the fully packed lecture theatre, Brit hand draws a love heart with a marker pen and writes “I

---

love penis.” Candy then draws a large penis on her notepad and then proceeds to pretend to perform oral sex while the professor can be heard giving his talk:

We’re going to talk about something that’s a little bit deeper. A little harder to get at, which is the Civil Rights Movement, or the Black freedom struggle, or what some historians call the Second Reconstruction, which I really like because it ties it to the First Reconstruction after the Civil War – to show that there is a continuum. There is a conscious struggle on the part of African Americans in the South to claim their freedom, their liberty.

Unlike the surrounding students, Candy and Brit display no interest in the topic, instead laughing to each other while the professor makes reference to Jim Crow laws and the racist South. Like Allison, Candy and Brit would rather perform than show an engagement with serious cultural issues. They all have a fascination with gangsta styles, but refuse to engage in serious cultural issues facing blacks and browns.

In her filming session with Eric, situational context, historical reality and any sense of political resistance regarding the proliferation of and participation in street gangs is negated. Allison’s reasoning for gang membership, a question posed by Eric, is that “teenagers think they’ll live forever.” However, Emily, Allison’s best friend, reveals to Eric that Allison’s (former alcoholic mother) is “always working.” When asked if her “latchkey parents” are the reason she decided to join a gang, Allison sarcastically replies, “Oh... poor little rich girl needs the gang as mi familia. That’s funny.” Despite an online blogger’s insistence that *Havoc* offers no “psychosis” for Allison’s interaction with gang culture and although the film omits any sense of historical or political context for gang membership, *Havoc* does provide a diagnosis of contemporary American life.\(^9\) The year of *Havoc’s* release, Bakari Kitwana identified “the generation gap between baby boomer parents and their children.”\(^10\) Kitwana’s discussion explains how “the globalization of the economy is affecting American life” which is “central to this generational gap.”\(^11\) Ineffective parental supervision, parental alcohol dependency and parents who are working longer hours and spend less time with their children, contribute to a “void” which as

---


\(^11\) Ibid.
Kitwana succinctly suggests, is being filled by popular culture.\textsuperscript{102} The prominence of gangsta in popular culture and its recognisable aesthetic enables the PLC to turn to such styles, made particularly accessible because of their wealth.

Turning to generated images of gangsta culture, not as a tool to mobilise resistance but to fill a generational gap - a “defining feature of the hood film,” is highly problematic.\textsuperscript{103} Despite some artists facing censorship and vilification for violent, misogynistic and cop-killing lyrics, gangsta rap’s profitability and consumption in the mainstream enabled a number of artists to earn considerable amounts of money. Similarly, filmmakers could capitalise financially on their projections and exploitations of gang life as the streets became easily accessible at the touch of a button. But the revenue generated did not filter down to improving the lives of the thousands of actual gang members who remained marginalised both socially and economically. By hiring local youth in the wardrobe and makeup department during production, this is something Anders provided a corrective to. Furthermore, Anders arranged a benefit screening with the aim of funding scholarships for local youth, introduced mentorship programmes and adopted the son of one of the homegirls who died shortly after \textit{Mi Vida Loca}’s production and to which the film is dedicated.\textsuperscript{104} Anders had some understanding of the struggles of Echo Park youth and her storytelling and use of their subcultural styles ultimately aided the neighbourhood in some respects. In \textit{Havoc}, Hector - who exists as an outsider from mainstream society - finds “fucking white people” like Allison are always trying to “look like” him. Hector’s dress is meant to convey a sense of “keepin’ it real” with sagging pants, tattoos, bandannas and slick long hair. But Allison lacks any real understanding of the plight of his community, diminishing the political, social and economic context that gave rise to the proliferation of gang membership and distinct gangsta styles.

Allison changes her clothing style depending on the activity that she in undertaking. When visiting her dad, she wears what could be considered typical

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
teenage clothing, brightly coloured tops and jeans. She adds large hoop earrings to her outfit after leaving a meeting with her father and when on her way to meet with the PLC. In a scene in which she ventures to MacArthur Park alone, she wears a cropped white hooded top, cropped black pants, trainers and gangsta-related accessories; her large hoop earrings, gold chain and a hat that she wears tilted on her head, a style common within hip-hop (fig.9). Her attempt to assimilate in to the unfamiliar territory is conveyed simply through her aesthetic which leads barrio inhabitants to stare at her white body in “street” threads. “Looking all homegirl and shit,” Allison’s “talk” and “walk ain’t real” according to 16th Street member, Hector. He later tells Allison that “there ain’t nothing real about you, the way you dress ain’t real.” He continues, “You don’t even copy ‘em from the real thing. You fuckin’ get it from the T.V. [...] I don’t know where you belong, but it ain’t here girl.” The notion of cultural theft is highlighted here, a media accusation launched against a number of white rap artists from Vanilla Ice to Australian female rapper Iggy Azalea who “represents an extreme and dangerous instance of the long-standing history of the appropriation of black cultural forms by whites.”

Hector accuses Allison of adopting a media-generated image of gang culture and engaging in imitation practices through the absorption of popular culture.

The white consumption and commercialisation of subcultural strategies, whether it be political reggae music explored by Hebdige, or gangsta aesthetics, can result in decontextualisation, replacing substance with pure style. Bill Ashcroft insists that when white suburban youth see:

 gangsta-rap music on screen [...] they have no understanding of the actual situational context - the videos are just images on the screen [...] This takes away the ‘reality’ of the historical context, and replaces it with ‘hyperreality’, a reality world in which the boundaries between dominance and resistance collapse.

In this Baudrillardian sense, the rapper, or indeed gang member that is seen on television or in film become “simulations in American popular imagination”


whereby “political resistance is diminished” and any expression of resistance, “one-dimensional [...] they no longer have a specific historical context through which they arose, and no longer refer to an individual expression and individual resistance.”

However, these packaged images of black and/or Latino youth culture by television programmes, films and music videos are, in the words of Zine Magubane (who discusses South African youth’s imitation of “gangsta lifestyles”), “often themselves emulations of carefully staged simulations of so-called authentic black urban life.”

It “ain’t the real thing” for Hector, whose clothes and those worn by the 16th Street are consciously chosen by Hollywood stylists for their apparent conveying of ghetto realness but are in reality exaggerated and commercial.

For gangsta to be acted and purchased, gangsta has to be perceived as alluring (dangerous) and “authentic” despite its constructions. Similarly blackness, and indeed whiteness, as social constructions must be recognised in order to be imitated. Levy contends that in order to “‘act black’ there has to be a belief that there was such a thing as blackness to enact.”

Gangsta as a facet of blackness means that these white youth cannot achieve such perceived authenticity because they are quite simply not black. Allison and the PLC do not want to be (biologically) black, but they want “realness” (gangsta) which they must ironically purchase. The staging of gangsta on television, film and in music enables a belief in the “authentic” because gangsta is performed by non-whites. When it is performed by whites as in *Havoc*, it does not form part of the social construction of whiteness and is thus “inauthentic.”

Veronica and Lopez’s perception of whiteness in *Gang Girl* is working in offices 9-5, where salads are consumed at lunchtime. Because of their distance from such an existence, whiteness is conceived and stereotyped as a life of economic stability, not gangsta. According to bell hooks, “collectively black people remain rather silent about representations of whiteness in the black imagination” yet Bailey

---

107 Ibid.
overtly confronts this subject. Veronica (and Lopez) performs a version of whiteness by pretending to be an office worker, dismantling the superiority of whiteness through parody and mocking the lifestyle and aspirations of middle-class white culture; “I did my Jane Fonda workout today.” In this scene Veronica foreshadows her incarcerated status, contending that in “five years time” she will be in “jail” rather than working 9 to 5. In addition to exposing that whiteness, like any other race, is socially constructed, the scene also works at a deeper intertextual level. It is more than just coincidental that the girls make reference to office work, Jane Fonda and “9 to 5.” 9 to 5 is a 1980 comedy film starring Fonda (and subsequently a Broadway musical debuting the year before Gang Girl’s release). David Sollish reveals:

The film is now an iconic story of three women from widely disparate backgrounds who join forces to overthrow their male superior and to turn their company into a nondiscriminatory and employee-centered working environment. One of the top-grossing comedies of the 1980s, 9 to 5 illuminated the post-feminist principle that women can reject the mother/whore dichotomy through social change.

The female Croniks similarly reject the mother / whore staple, but despite being from “widely disparate” backgrounds, the women of 9 to 5 are all white. They are also women that wear traditionally feminine attire to the workplace; skirts, blouses and (pink and floral) dresses. Performing this perception of whiteness while fashioning unbranded (as opposed to the PLC’s branded) clothing, Veronica and Lopez’s attire works in combination with their racialised status to connote their outsider position.

The Croniks’s clothing style disrupts traditional notions of femininity, something which is also evident in the contrast between Sad Girl’s clothing and the clothes of her sister, La Blue Eyes. La Blue Eyes is not affiliated with gang life and the floral dresses which she wears convey this particularly when compared to Sad Girl’s oversized shirts and t-shirts. The transition from young girl to gang member is also depicted through dress. In the opening sequence of Mi Vida Loca, Sad Girl and Mousie as young girls wear pink and white frilly dresses as they play with dolls. Similarly, in Gang Girl, a ten-year-old Veronica is shown in a park wearing a floral

t-shirt and is called “Princess” by a stranger. As a child, she also wears a pink dress as she sits on the floor at home before her drug-dependant mother beats her. These images are intersected with shots of the girls now involved in Cronik life, wearing baggy green t-shirts. Green was the preferred colour Bailey informed me because he “didn’t want to do blue, red or yellow because those represent Crips, Bloods and Latin Kings” respectively and green being a reference to the high-grade cannabis, chronic, to which The Croniks gang name plays on. The Croniks also fashion (green) sweaters and loose fitting pants (fig.10). These are styles which Vigil identifies as stemming “ironically and perhaps predictably [...] from public sources - military and penal” yet became fashionable beyond the streets. But this is not to suggest that because the girls’ dress originated from traditionally masculine sites, and are considered masculine by cultural conceptions (evidenced by Rachel in Mi Vida Loca who declares that all the homegirls “look like boys”), that they are merely emulating the males or indeed trying to act like men.

Both performances, that of race and of gender, are delineated only in terms according to cultural conceptions and social constructions as Levy indicates. Some girls in gangs do reject notions of femininity to construct what would be considered a more traditionally “masculine” identity or to use Miller’s term, become “one of the guys.” But sociologist James Messerschmidt reminds us that we must take care “not to decontextualize gender by simply suggesting that certain behavior automatically results in a masculine identity.” This is a vitally significant point that Bev Zalcock fails to recognise in her rendering of central girl gang characters as “honorary men.” Allison’s gangsta style for example is far from an attempt to be a man, rather it enables her to (over) perform her female sexuality. Gender is not stable and its performance, as Judith Butler suggests, is an identity tenuously constructed in time and crafted “through a stylised repetition of acts.” Thus, both males and females are capable of “doing” femininities and masculinities both inside and outside

---

113 Bailey, Personal Interview.
114 Vigil, Barrio Gangs, p.110.
of the gang. In his memoir *Blue Rage, Black Redemption* (2004), Stanley Tookie Williams (founder of the notorious Crips) discusses the emergence of the Criplettes in 1971. Williams defines the Criplettes as a “female version of ourselves.” He insists that his then girlfriend Bonnie and her friends “who didn’t fit the old profile of female gang members - masculine, dirty, scarred, or nasty-looking” felt a “need to impress” and thus “gave birth to a girl gang trying passionately to emulate us.” The idea that girl gang members act like men or simply emulate the males, particularly in terms of homeboy styles such as dress is a reductive contention.

Shakira’s attack on Cynthia in *Gang Girl’s* opening can be seen to partially stem from her jealously surrounding Cynthia’s new relationship with Troy, Shakira’s ex-boyfriend. Shakira’s envy indicates her desire to be seen as attractive and to be desired by Troy. Initially, both Sad Girl and Mousie are longing for Ernesto’s attention and later demonstrate great responsibility and capability in their roles as mothers; they do not want to be men or to be considered masculine. Sociologist Anne Campbell says of the non-white girl gang members in NY that she spent time with in the late 1980s and early 1990s that “with their appearance, their ability to attract men, their sense of responsibility as mothers left me in no doubt that they enjoyed being women. They didn’t want to be like men, and, indeed, would have been outraged at such a suggestion.” Rather than wanting to appear “masculine” then, clothing enables the “first signal that novitiates send out to advertise their social and personal identity.” Clothing serves as a sign of the girls “keepin’ it real,” demonstrating a loyalty to the streets through their clothing styles, embracing the external signs that signify their gang commitment.

Lopez’s decision to leave The Croniks and to end her commitment to the gang is signified most simply through visual styles, just as Giggles’s exit from the gang is in *Mi Vida Loca*. No longer wearing the baggy trousers, bandanas and green t-shirts associated with The Croniks, Lopez is dressed in a denim jacket and a plain white blouse while her hair - which she now wears down rather than scraped off her

---

119 Ibid.
face - covers The Croniks tattoo on her neck that was previously on display (fig.11). Shakira’s hair similarly changes style in the narrative’s closing after she burns her gang bandana. Upon seeing Lopez for the first time since she has been arrested and imprisoned for drugs crimes, Veronica asks “is that you, Lopez? [...] What’s up with your new look?” Interestingly, it is when Lopez dresses in a style considered typically more feminine (as she clutches her handbag) that Veronica questions her sexuality: “What, you gay now?” In a sense this dismantles the notion of the butch lesbian gangsta, exemplified by characters such as Cleo in Set It Off (1996). It is only when Lopez dresses in clothes that are not culturally perceived as masculine that her sexuality is questioned rather than her gangsta style suggesting sexual deviancy. Gang Girl challenges western patriarchal conceptions of femininity and sexuality through clothing and character responses to changing wardrobes.

While Lopez chooses to disassociate herself with The Croniks and their gangsta style, Veronica is required by law to wear an orange jumpsuit when incarcerated, exchanging the uniform of the gang for that of the American inmate. This creates a contested space of power dynamics between the uniformed guard and the uniformed prisoner, something further emphasised through the close-up images of the handcuffs and grey uniform worn by Shakira and the shirt-wearing prison officers in Gang Girl. Prisons, as Juliet Ash contends, are “secret places and the visual information we receive is selective.” Public fascination with the prison has been capitalised on by the Oregon-based Prison Blues; inmates produce garments for the clothing company whose slogan reads “Clothing Made on the Inside to be Worn on the Outside.” The frequent contemporary documentation of prisons in popular culture further illustrates the public interest in the “secret” site. “This form of representation of the clothed inmate,” the television shows, films and documentaries, “accounts, to a great extent, for the way the public gain knowledge of conditions inside.” The HBO television series Oz (1997-2003), an episode of which Kopple directed in 1999, has added to such dissemination. The more recent Emmy Award winning Orange is the New Black (Anders directed an episode of the sitcom in 2014)

124 Ash, Dress Behind Bars, p.165.
has also contributed to the public knowledge of women’s prisons through staged representation. The clothed inmate and public awareness of prison styles is made explicit in the television series’ title making direct reference to the iconic orange jumpsuit. Historically, prisoners were given clothes that were often too large for them and they did not receive belts for safety reasons. In turn, this oversized style became fashionable on the streets as gang members were able to conceal weapons in their oversized clothing. Prison clothing has then been commodified and consumed, informing the gangsta and street style. The orange jumpsuit itself has become a readily available commodity, regularly used by American youth for Halloween celebrations.

The accessibility of the orange jumpsuit in retail stores and online and its distribution worldwide as a key cultural reference point in the public imagination has caused concern amongst some authorities. One Sheriff from Saginaw County (Michigan) chose to remove the orange jumpsuit from the prison and replace it with a black and white striped uniform, similar to those used in the early 20th century prison system. Despite never seeing an episode of Orange is the New Black, the Sheriff stated in interview that “When the lines get blurred between the culture outside the jail and the culture within the jail, I have to do something to redefine those boundaries, because they’ve been blurred far too often in public culture.”

Like gangsta styles, the orange jumpsuit has become easily recognisable and commercial. The reappropriation of the orange jumpsuit from an image of criminality to an image of what the Sheriff calls fashionable “coolness,” parallels the dissemination of the gangsta style with a wider youth culture who equate it with cool and sexy. The PLC’s purchasing of gangsta styles without political meaning or interest in their cultural history heightens their status as superficial imitators, especially when placed against the non-branded clothing of the 16th Street, Echo Park homegirls and Croniks. Allison’s commercial gangsta style further positions her as commodity, as she transitions from operating under Toby’s control to Hector’s.

Clothing enables a degree of resistive potential across all three narratives, but

---

Allison’s investment in gangsta styles for temporary rebellion of middle-classness diminishes its resistive potential for those who created the styles.

Kopple illustrates the problematic nature of white youth reappropriating cultural items that have been previously seized by marginalised, oppressed youth. When white youth interact with distinctive styles in *Havoc* they create one-dimensional constructions of black and Latino gang culture and thus reduce the resistance potential of these items. Styles that are initially considered and conceived as cultural resistance to social, political and economic structures by marginalised urban youth become commercialised and disposable, reiterating the paradoxical status of these films and their distribution of subcultural styles. The adoption of gangsta by Allison and the wider public can be considered a testament to youth’s appreciation of it style, and the renewal of styles and an interaction with other cultural styles diversifies culture itself. A 20-year-old African American female from Hayward who was interviewed by journalist Nell Bernstein reinforces this contention: “It’s beautiful to appreciate different aspects of other people’s cultures - that’s the dream of what the 21st century should be.” Yet these “Saturday suburban ethnics” as sociologist Mary Waters terms them are also problematic. The young woman from Hayward continues, “But to garnish yourself with pop culture stereotypes just to blend - that’s really sad.” The PLC’s contention that “none of it really matters” and their ability to dispose of these styles further convolutes the idea of cultural appreciation and exposes white privilege.

**Speaking Styles and Naming Girls**

Clothes allow the PLC to easily buy into the gangsta aesthetic, but some gang practices require more than simple monetary exchange. Allison says “we talk shit” as the PLC adopt and then drop street vernacular when at home or in class at school, further exposing their performance of gangsta. Attempting to engage with the mainstreaming and commercialisation of rap music into popular culture, Toby’s effort to ‘spit’ lines while wearing his ENYCE jacket and chains at the house party, 

---

fail. It is Allison, dressed in a stomach revealing crop top and accessorised with large hoop earrings who sings Tupac’s “How Do U Want It;” a song that had three accompanying music videos, one of which was certified adult material featuring a sex party, caged dancers and famous porn stars. By quoting Tupac, Allison is presented as sexually confident as she grinds her body against boyfriend Toby and sings lyrics that suggest empowerment: “How do you want it? How do you feel?” Liberatory potential is, however, diminished as Toby declares “that’s my bitch.” For Lopez, “Toby’s verbal approval of her performance […] arguably uses gender to claim power” over Allison through the use of the demeaning “bitch;” Allison’s “acceptance of this reference term restores traditional gender roles.” According to Lopez, Allison’s sexual emancipation must be contained and operate within male-dominated street networks. Attempting to utilise gangsta as a rejection of middle-class life, Toby’s gangsta performance positions Allison as his object. Allison maintains a contradictory status as she continues to function under male control throughout the narrative.

When performing their version of whiteness, Veronica and Lopez exchange their usual street vernacular (for example, “who that big nigga?”) deemed authentic because of their race and place-bound identity, for what they consider a middle-class conversation; “I have to finish the projection papers for Mr. Wilkins and then I have to call my husband so he can pick up the babies from day-care.” They not only look different to the office workers that they are imitating but their vernacular sounds different too, resulting in their over pronouncing of words and imitation of middle-class “accents” to achieve their reading of whiteness. Sad Girl, Mousie and the 16th Street also use language to differentiate themselves from the mainstream as they switch between languages. While the majority of both films are spoken in English, short verbal exchanges between gang members are spoken in Spanish.

In retaining their own language style through speech, something that former gang member Luis Rodriguez was not allowed to do when at school, the Echo Park

---

loca y 16th Street gang resist assimilation into white culture.\textsuperscript{130} Spanish-speaking popular culture texts are less accessible to non-Spanish speaking whites especially when compared to the ubiquity of black street vernacular that is more readily available. While one of Allison and Emily’s friends, Sasha (it is not made explicit if she is a member of the PLC or not), can speak in Spanish, Allison and Emily are not, other than Allison’s passing use of “mi familia.” Allison has to ask Hector what certain words he uses mean; “What’s a primo?” She is unable to simply purchase such a style, positioning the 16th Street males, who often communicate to one another in Spanish when in the presence of Allison and Emily, in a position of linguistic power over the girls of the PLC. The use of Spanish in \textit{Havoc}, in addition to Hector’s elaborate tattoos and his distinct Pachuco inspired hairstyle, give emphasis to his distinct heritage, making plain the distinction between black and brown that, as discussed elsewhere, Lopez considers conflated in the movie.

\textit{Mi Vida Loca}’s use of subcultural language is something that scholars have praised Anders for but the reasons for its employment by youth remain undisclosed. The film “captured the language of youth” for Marie “Keta” Miranda while Fregoso notes of the “faithful rendition of the style, stance, posture, gestures, mannerisms, and speech of so many Pachucas-Cholas-Homegirls I have known throughout years.”\textsuperscript{131} Anders told me during interview that she was given a slang “glossary” by the kids of Echo Park to use during filming, which featured Caló words; a form of Spanish slang that heavily influenced the language of the Pachuca/os.\textsuperscript{132} The purpose of the glossary according to Anders was for parents to “understand their children” and their terminology. This linguistic style provides its users with a degree of authority over the mainstream viewing audience who are situated as outsiders.

Another method of communication between gang members is the exchange of hand gestures. Utilised by The Croniks and the Echo Park locas, the practice demonstrates a sign of belonging and unity, excluding non-members from their

\textsuperscript{130} According to Rodriguez, “If a Spanish word sneaked out in the playground, kids were often sent to the office to get swatted or to get detention.” L. Rodriguez, \textit{Always Running: La Vida Loca-Gang Days in L.A.} (NY: Curbstone, 1993), p.27.
\textsuperscript{132} A. Anders, \textit{Personal Interview} [Recorded Interview] 22 March 2015, 1pm. Echo Park, LA.
group and enhancing “an in-group identification.”

It is a process “initially associated with Chicano gangs and the Latino ‘Cholo’ aesthetic.”

By “throwing” ‘EP’ hand signs in *Mi Vida Loca* or by flashing ‘C’ formations against their hearts in Bailey’s film, the gang demonstrate the creation of their own code. They extend the physical signs of membership from non-verbal items that have to be added to modify the body (dress, makeup and tattoos) to include simplistic methods of identifying one’s territory and identity. Although forms of communication can provide the gang with resistance to hegemonic power structures, naming practices within the girl gang are more complex.

Whilst the camera interchanges between the framing of her tattoos, Sad Girl not only looks at, but at the same time speaks to the viewer: “My name is Mona but that’s not what they call me.” Although many aspects of Sad Girl’s gang involvement works against traditional notions of appropriate femininity, including the renegotiation of the tattoo as a masculine practice, it is homeboys Rascal and Sleepy that argue about “naming” Sad Girl (Mona) and Mousie (Maribel): “Everyone said Maribel should be Mousie cuz she was so little. Sleepy said “No stupid because then we’re gonna have to name Mona Sad Girl and she’s not sad at all.”” The act of naming is one of privilege and domination, and in *Mi Vida Loca*, this is an overtly male privilege; an aspect Przemieniecki fails to note when simply referring to “Sad Girl” as a moniker.

Patriarchal culture dictates their feminised gang names, whilst the males adopt names such as Rascal and Bullet. Anders illuminates in this moment that despite their gang member status, which undermines the notion of the gang as a masculine unit, the Echo Park Locas maintain a contradictory status as they continue to function under male control. The female voice is suppressed within the male-dominated culture. As Miller contends, “even young women in all-female gangs must operate within male-dominated street networks.”

---

135 Przemieniecki, ‘*Reel Gangs,*’ p.98.
naming process contributes to *Mi Vida Loca’s* discussion of the problematic tensions regarding the position of the Chicana gang girl. Sad Girl’s voice-over locates her in a privileged position, but her naming by the male gang members erases this privilege. Any sense of autonomy is removed as Sad Girl moves from subject to object. Mona’s assigned gang name, Sad Girl, is not a suitable or accurate indicator of her personality prior to becoming immersed in the gang milieu, but instead a marker of an intergenerational cycle of gang activity as names are passed down, and patriarchal control.

By stark contrast, in *Living the Life* the girls do not have gang names, they remain throughout the film as Kata and Anna. In Jacobs’s film, Angelica is nicknamed Rascal, a placa considered typically male as evidenced in its utilisation in *Mi Vida Loca*. Within the PLC, Allison does not have a nickname, perhaps suggestive of the idea that white gangs do not bring with them the same traditions, customs and / or authenticity as Chicana/o and black gangs. However, there is no evidence within *Havoc* that members of the 16th Street gang have nicknames either. By comparison, The Croniks do have nicknames, including Queen V and Rated-R - an indicator of her violent character - but there is no indication that there is any male authority within the naming practice. The more recent texts could suggest in their representations of girl gang naming (or lack of) that the females operate independently in their gang and are no longer under patriarchal control; unlike Sad Girl they are not named by males. When incarcerated, Queen V, who is also referred to as “V” by Lopez, is referred to by forename and surname by the male (black and white) prison officials, but not the black female prison officer. As “Veronica Johnson,” her name conveys her shedding of Croniks association, but her naming by the male authorities emphasises the states ownership of her body and underscores male control.

**In Closing**

Styles can be (literally) seen as a form of resistance, a type of oppositional practice by gang girls but not necessarily as a successful solution to the problem of male subordination or state power. Street vernacular and Spanish resist hegemonic discourses, yet naming in *Mi Vida Loca* positions the gang girl under male ruling; the girls have less power to impose meaning into the practice. Gang tattoos offer
subversive potential, to the mainstream and to gender traditions, but simultaneously enable outside surveillance of the body, something that is represented as problematic for both males and females. Yet tattoos, teamed with muscles, also reify a version of masculinity that ultimately positions males as powerful (*Havoc* and *Gang Girl*). Gang and gangsta dress establishes a sense of resistance to notions of displayed femininity as well as opposing the mainstream marketplace. The subsequent exploitation of such styles, by those inside and outside the mainstream, decontextualises subversive potential, and gangsta’s placing as sexy and cool in America’s youth market further situates the gang girl in a contested space.

Throughout his book *Subculture*, Hebdige interprets “subculture as a form of resistance” while acknowledging that “each subculture moves through a cycle of resistance and diffusion.” For Hebdige, “subcultural defiance is simultaneously rendered ‘explicable’ and meaningless’ as the ‘secret’ objects of subcultural style are put on display in every high street [...] Stripped of its unwholesome connotations the style becomes fit for public consumption.” Klein rearticulates this, recognising that once behaviours are exposed beyond the subculture itself, they “lose their subcultural appeal once they become too identified with the mainstream.” In March 2015, *Wonderland* magazine, an internationally circulated London-based publication, published the article ‘Lean Like A Chola’ in which Anders, costume designer Susan Bertram and Angel Aviles (who plays Sad Girl) discussed the impact of *Mi Vida Loca*’s style on popular culture. Since the film’s release, female celebrities such as Gwen Stefani, Rihanna and Selena Gomez have fashioned the Chola style during public appearances and/or music videos. “This type of media attention,” Morales writes, “has helped to disseminate the cultural traits of the Chola into wider population many of which are not gang affiliated.” As we have seen, Chola makeup, a style distinct to the girls, originally emerged as a resistive strategy

---

137 Hebdige, *Subculture*, p.130.
138 Ibid.
139 Klein, *American Film*, p.23.
to Caucasian beauty standards. The penetration of the style into the mainstream compromises the extent to which this gang girl practice can impose meaning onto the world and how much it can now be considered as an act of resistance.

The diffusion of the Chola style is particularly problematic. Miley Cyrus’s twerking (a dance style that traces back to African American form) generated considerable critical and media attention concerning cultural appropriation, in a similar way that the appropriation of other traditions of black culture have; reality star Kylie Jenner’s cornrows for example. Yet Sandra Bullock’s imitation of the Chola style at an awards ceremony for comedic purposes - including makeup, hair, tattoos, clothing and vernacular - or male “son of immigrants” and LA-based artist Michael Jason Enriquez’s 2012 “Cholafied” project in which images of celebrities are manipulated into the Chola style, has caused little controversy. For sociologist Frank Furedi, “the most genuine way of respecting another culture is by borrowing and assimilating its achievement.” But when Chola styles are used for entertainment value by people such as Bullock, the style which enabled the marginalised gang girl to display something distinct to her gender and culture is compromised. Originally a “look” that could be considered as a form of subcultural resistance, the Chola style is diminished in its mainstream capacity.

Each of these filmic narratives relies on the mainstream fascination with gang styles, in one sense reducing their resistive potential by offering these styles for mainstream consumption, while at the same time suggesting an appreciation of them. After the realisation that 16th Street gang life is considerably more dangerous than first perceived, Allison is sat in a classroom as the teacher discusses capitalism. He references an unnamed artist who, while in prison in the 1990s, “used his thug image to promote a successful record label.” Asked to comment on this, Allison, who is no longer wearing a crop top, hoop earrings nor her PLC wristband, and is wearing visibly less makeup (fig.12), responds that it is an example of “profiteering from illegal activities.” She then continues that “economics and ethics don’t mix.”

Individuals and governments, Allison contends, “both pursue their own self-interest...often uh carelessly.” Allison and the PLC pursue their own self-interests in gangsta, a style that has itself profited from a thug image and that is used in Bailey’s *Gang Girl* to convey street “realness.” The dissemination of gangsta, through music, television, fashion and other platforms raises ethical implications concerning gangsta’s ability to impose meaning onto the world rather than simply profit financially. In addition to gangsta’s aesthetic, part of this profitability stems from gangsta’s violent reputation, exploited in the ghetto action movie and discussed in the following chapters. When the violence and sex of gangsta converge, styles of the gang girl and their potential to impose meaning and produce power are further hampered by the fact that the girls continue to operate under (violent) male control, made plain by the gang initiation practice screened in the more recent movies.
Chapter Four

“It isn’t pretty;” Gun Strapped Gang Girls and Fighting Females - Violence
Part I

Introduction

From Damian Bailey’s “mean streets” to the actors’ concealment of tattoos in *Havoc*, we have seen how geographies and styles have been conceived as contributing to gang violence. It is now appropriate to turn to the representation and politics of violence in these three case studies which at once both recycle images and offer original approaches to filmic gang violence. Discussions of both contemporary street gangs and the ghetto action movie cycle of the early 1990s often consider violence as omnipresent both on the streets and on-screen. Josephine Metcalf notes:

> “Violent behaviour is an integral characteristic of contemporary street gangs, and has been regularly illustrated across different forms of gangsta popular culture. Graphic and shocking acts of violence are routine in, and expected of, both gangsta rap and ghetto action films.”

Although both mediums (audio and visual) present “shocking acts of violence,” the “type” of violence presented is often very different in form, suggesting that cultural acceptance regarding seeing and hearing (or reading) violence varies substantially. In the early 1990s, artist MC Ren rhymed about “ten niggas” who rape a child while NWA lyrically “tie a woman to a bed, rape, and then shoot her.” While male rap artists frequently espoused scenarios of violent acts against (black) women, in addition to the racially repressive authorities (exemplified in 1989 by NWA’s “Fuck tha Police”), the ghetto action film largely screened endless cycles of (black) male-on-male violence in the form of drive-by shootings, drugs-related violent acts and fatal turf wars.

---

That is not to say that episodes of violence against women are absent in these movies, such as the shooting of a female Korean shopkeeper in Menace, but that they are less frequent than one might expect. Differences in the types of violence enacted across screen and song can be considered in relation to the MPAA rating system in which directors are encouraged to submit films to secure a rating that confirms the viewing suitability in terms of audience age. While this leads some directors, such as Bailey, to not submit to the MPAA, others ‘downplay’ violence. Directors’ own personal views on screening violence as well as the acceptance of varying levels and sources of violence, and perhaps more obviously the subject of the film itself, contribute to the degree of violence shown in film. While differences in violence presented in the ghetto action movie (male-on-male) and gangsta rap (male-on-female) are identifiable, what is more explicit is how gendered, and raced discourses contribute even further to the depictions of cinematic violence. As the following two chapters propose, there are overt distinctions in the violence committed by girls in the gang compared to the violent episodes enacted by their male counterparts on film.

The discussion of violence is divided into two parts, with this chapter laying some of the foundations for chapter five, including the exploration of on-screen and off-screen violence and sociological scholarship pertaining to girls, gangs and guns. The study of violence is still an emerging field, with philosophical theorists Johan Galton, Slavoj Žižek and Vittorio Bufacchi contributing to (its growth and debating) the subject from issues of morality to theories of justification. Allocating such space to gang violence in this thesis is perhaps too predictable, yet as Bufacchi recognises, “The subject of violence is important on many levels: socially, politically, economically, anthropologically and morally.”\(^3\) The examination of the role of young women in relation to violence occurs across two chapters as I contend that there continues to be a cultural unease when viewing violent filmic women, and in particular when viewing the racially marginalised gang girl. Race and gender are integral to the way in which violence is legitimised and acted out as the non-white female is more effortlessly tied to violent acts than her oft-privileged white counterpart. Filmic gang girl violence, I argue, while not celebrated as an expression

of liberation, is justified to a greater extent than the violence enacted by the boys, largely due to the girls’ transgression of defined gendered roles. Chapter four thus considers the violence enacted by the males in these narratives to explore the gendering and racialised representation of violence, specifically examining how the boys handle firearms.

Since its inception, images of guns have pervaded gangsta culture and the extent to which guns retain their “maleness” in these filmic narratives is crucial. This approach requires briefly revisiting the ghetto action movies of previous decades to evaluate if and how Mi Vida Loca, Havoc and Gang Girl depart from the phallocentricity of the gun so integral to the cinematic boys in the hood. Returning to the boys also reminds us of the regularity of male-on-male violence (with some noted exceptions of black women shooting black men). In the gang girl narratives explored here, girls physically and verbally attack one another. This is an arguably regressive presentation of female friendships as disagreements between women are readily categorised as a breakdown of feminism. Although girls might not be able to universally unite, these films suggest that strong female relationships can overcome the desire for male attention and importantly (male) violence.

**Male Shooters in Black and White; Shooting the Ghetto Action Movie**

To consider the extent to which violence retains its racialised and gendered dimensions we need to examine the male characters and their relationships with the gun. We will see here Anders’s departure from the traditional ghetto action movie not simply by having girls pack weapons but in the handling of boys with guns too. By comparison, when men handle guns in Havoc and Gang Girl they accentuate (hyper)masculinity through phallic imagery. It is homeboy Ernesto who we first see handling a gun in Mi Vida Loca but it is noteworthy that while Sad Girl and Mousie call Ernesto by his birth name, his gang name (or placa), is Bullet. A phallic symbol of violence, “Bullet” contrasts greatly to the girls’ feminine gang names which as discussed elsewhere are dictated and assigned by the boys: Whisper, Sad Girl, Baby

---

4 To illustrate this, in 2012, Nigerian feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s speech “We Should All Be Feminists” offered a contemporary definition of feminism sampled and disseminated in popular culture by Beyoncé the following year. For Adichie, “We raise girls to see each other as competitors” in regressive and anti-feminist ways. See: B. Knowles, “Flawless,” performed by Beyoncé Knowles featuring Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Beyoncé, (Columbia Records, 2013).
Doll, Giggles and Mousie. However, Mousie and Sad Girl’s use of “Ernesto” instead of Bullet disrupts the assumption that the girls are drawn to him simply because of an allure of danger. In stark contrast, Hector’s gun entices Allison and Emily closer to the gangsta experience.

When the PLC arrive in 16th Street territory, Hector confirms Toby’s status as a racial outsider by pulling a gun on him during a drug deal. The gun is aimed into Toby’s groin, exuding Latino hyper-masculinity as dominating through phallic imagery. Here, Hector lives up to the “expectations of Latino male toughness” that have “permeated contemporary Mexican American gang culture” and his hardman gangsta image is reinforced through his muscular physique.5 This is the first scene in which the gun is featured, aligning East territory and the Latino male with danger and violence. In Gang Girl, Veronica is the first character to handle and aim a firearm renegotiating the masculinity of the weapon by putting the gun in the girl’s hand. However, when the black male has firearm possession, namely the muscular Nayman, the gun acts as weapon of command as Nayman places his gun to Veronica’s head. Veronica, faced with the threat of Nayman’s gun, is forcibly sexually initiated into the gang; an event discussed more closely in chapter five. What is noteworthy here regarding the male shooter is that while Veronica is “sexed-in” by multiple gang members who take turns to penetrate her, Nayman is visibly holding his gun against his groin. He places the mechanical phallic weapon over his penis which he uses as a weapon against Veronica in her initiation. Much like Hector’s placing of his gun next to Toby’s penis, the gun is used to reinforce one’s masculinity while humiliating the victim.

As a result of Hector’s gun-pulling, the emasculated Toby urinates on himself and is called a “bitch” by Hector. While Toby is clearly distressed by the incident, Allison is shown to be sexually attracted to and intrigued by Hector and his gun. Briefly discussing this scene in Havoc, Karen Hanlon notes how “that bitter dose of reality ends the “wigger’s” [Toby’s] fascination with Latino gangs.”6 However, Hanlon continues, “undaunted in their attraction to danger and the ostensibly raw masculinity offered by economically alienated Latino men, the girls

5 Metcalf, The Culture and Politics, p.84.
venture out on their own.” Economically displaced, particularly when compared to the wealthy Toby, Hector instead invests in his hypermasculinity; he might not possess Toby’s capital but his overly exaggerated masculinity is worth more in this situation. For Allison and Emily, Hector’s gun prompts desirability confirming stereotypes of the violent racially marginalised masculine male. In Gang Girl, Nayman’s gun instils fear and command, similarly reinscribing the notion of the inherently violent black male. Conversely, it is not Ernesto’s (or Bullet’s) weapon that appeals to the homegirls of Mi Vida Loca.

Ghetto action movies had already started to challenge broader cultural perceptions of black male youth as simply trigger-happy killers. As the “standard” gang tale of the early 1990s informed audiences, deprived urban neighbourhoods became disproportionately affected by cheap firearms resulting in escalating firearms-related homicides and gun-related violence. This is particularly so in LA, a city literally under fire and surrounded by cheap gun manufacturers dubbed the “Ring of Fire” companies. As Robin Kelley comments, the proliferation of inexpensive and powerful semi-automatic weapons is what “distinguishes the 1990s from the 1950s, or for that matter, from the 1980s.” Alongside the rise in gang activity, which surged in LA County from approximately 40,000 members in 1984 to 103,500 by March 1992, the proportion of gang-related homicides involving firearms increased from 71 percent in 1979 to 95 percent in 1994. Depicting these sentiments on screen, Boyz opens fire with the sound of gunshots and images of walls penetrated by bullets in South Central. Yet guns and their devastating consequences in the urban neighbourhood are aligned with political meaning in Boyz. Furious Styles questions

---

7 Ibid.
white capitalism and gentrification in the neighbourhood, conveyed in a frequently cited passage that begins, “Why is it that there is a gun shop on almost every corner in this community?” Despite the politicisation of the gun establishing a political maturity amongst older black males, on the rare occasion that guns are in the hands of women, gendered stereotypes are challenged to a certain degree but ultimately reinforced as women pay a price for firearm use.

In the 1991 gangster movie *New Jack City*, the competent black shooter Keisha is placed in a space previously reserved for black males. Keisha’s character is both feminised and masculinised: she wears delicate gold jewellery and yet the same white pant suit as her male counterparts. In defending her male employer, Nino, with gunfire, Keisha dies in a shoot-out at the hands of a black man. Unlike one of the male characters, Keisha does not attempt to save a young girl caught in the crossfire. For Jacqueline Jones, “That one “bitch” [Keisha] is elevated to the status of psychopathic murderer” in Mario Van Peebles’s movie, “hardly seems an achievement.” Ultimately Keisha’s transgression of gendered expectations results in her death. In *Set It Off* (released towards the end of the ghetto action movie cycle in 1996), the only character not avenging the racial profiling of black Americans by the state or reclaiming her children from social services is homosexual Cleo. For Kimberley Springer, *Set It Off* “traverses the border between the crime story and gangster genres.” Yet the film functions more overtly as an exploration of what Mary Ellison terms as the “concept of buddyism” as the narrative traces the friendship of the four female characters. Despite this, it is worth briefly noting how the film lays the foundations for the justification of black female gun handling and violent sensibilities.

While the other (more reluctant) female firearm users of *Set It Off* agree to commit an armed bank robbery for either personal or political reasons, Cleo shoots for both financial gain and pleasure. In film scholar Hilary Neroni’s words, it is only Cleo, a “butch” lesbian who “dances around with her gun” who is “involved in gangsta street life that is often depicted as the environment within which they all live.”16 “Like her masculine counterparts and Keisha in *New Jack City,*” media studies scholar Beretta E. Smith-Shomade writes, “she goes down fighting, like a man.”17 In this case, her sexual orientation mitigates her shooting as she is masculinised. For the other black female firearm users, “director F. Gary Gray and writers Takashi Bufford and Kate Lanier strive frantically to rationalize” their “murderous rampage.”18 While both men and women show a degree of political consciousness in relation to guns, women most willing to shoot in *New Jack City* and *Set It Off* are fatally gunned down. *Mi Vida Loca* moves beyond these conventions as both the politicisation and masculinisation of the gun (and shooter) are complicated.

The first scene that engages with a gun occurs when Ernesto and female gang member Whisper are discussing his drugs business. As Ernesto speaks of his illicit operation, he reveals his arousal when desperate female drugs clients seek their fix from him as he imitates their pleading:

“Oh, Ernesto, please. I need it I had a bad day; I had a bad week; I’m stressed...” Hey if the chick’s cute I might go easy, ‘cause the next time she’ll give me head for it ... But hey, I wouldn’t fuck ‘em. Not the white bitches ... not the junkies, naw. But it gets me hard just to say, all rato [later].

Immediately after, Ernesto takes out his gun. We are reminded how socioeconomic demands in the 1980s contributed to the proliferation of the underground drugs economy in barrio environments but also extended beyond the racially marginalised. As *Havoc* similarly reveals, drug consumption is not restricted to the barrio boundaries. Anders also implicitly connects the gun with its phallocentric

---

associations, reinforcing Ernesto’s sexuality and masculinity. This is comparable to the explicit establishment of Hector and Nayman’s masculine prowess by the placing of the phallic weapon in close proximity to the penis. However, Ernesto reveals that the gun does not work; its only function is for “confidence.”

This instantly serves to distance Mi Vida Loca from the traditional ghetto action movies in which the gun is in full working order. For example, the opening scene of Menace features an armed robbery leading to multiple deaths, setting up the film’s violent trajectory. Anders indicates how Ernesto depends on the visual threat of the gun as a symbol of power to instil fear into (white female) clients. Hector and Nayman’s threatening actions work on a similar level. Their weapons carry the potential to literally destroy Toby’s manhood and to end Veronica’s life, yet Hector and Nayman do not need to fire the firearm to create threat but merely present it. At the age of 15, Veronica is required to actually use her weapon. In an episode that goes without explanation, she shoots a white woman at close-range, seemingly as her first “rite-of-passage” into The Croniks. Significantly, Gang Girl, Mi Vida Loca and Havoc, reverse the historical power dynamic of white control of arms as a means of racial oppression.19 The ghetto action movies did not screen such scenarios, with blacks either shooting blacks or other non-white bodies. Traditionally and historically both the gang and gun use has been linked with maleness and similarly they have held racialised dimensions. Distinctively, contemporary street gangs have been associated with the racially marginalised male while gun ownership has historically been a white man’s privilege; Toby however is unarmed. The Second Amendment right to bear arms refers to a “well regulated militia,” an institution that was historically composed of white men. Importantly, sociologist France Winddance Twine reminds us that “while racial and ethnic minorities historically were denied the right to possess guns, during specific historical moments, white women have been encouraged to take up arms in the defense of white nation-building projects.”20 Despite attorney Alana Bassin’s acknowledgement that women were negated in the

Second Amendment and its ratification, some (white) women have had greater access and permission to use guns than non-white males.²¹

Prior to the girls packing guns in Mi Vida Loca, Ernesto handles his non-functioning gun first. However, the first shot fired is at the hands of one of the white “chicks” Ernesto sells drugs to. We see a correlation here with the broader historical and cinematic relationship of the gun with gender and race. The white female shooter precedes the non-white male shooter in cinema and he, the racially marginalised male, shoots before his female counterpart. Before the non-white female could fire guns in Anders’s film and New Jack City, the non-white male shooter existed previously in blaxploitation films of the 1970s. Black women did take up arms during this period of filmmaking as seen in Coffy (1973) but unlike Veronica in Bailey’s film, the black female was often highly sexualised, as underscored by Coffy’s titular character. White females aiming fire came into both the critical and popular arena in full force in the late 1980s, particularly in Hollywood’s characterisation of white female cops in films such as Blue Steel (1989).²² In the media more generally, guns had already started to be challenged as a symbol of maleness by nationally circulated publications such as Women & Guns.

Women & Guns magazine, “written and edited by women, for women” - notably, four white women - debuted in the same year of Blue Steel’s release.²³ Both the publication and the figure of the white cinematic law enforcer served as a profitable platform for the discussion of gun ownership amongst (white) women. 1989 was also the year that Twine identifies as the point in which the advertisement of guns, for example Smith and Wesson’s Lady Smith (a handgun designed for women and their handbags), deployed “feminist rhetoric to market guns to women as a ‘niche’ market.”²⁴ The NRA placed emphasis on protection (relying on perceptions of women as victims) in a campaign with the slogan “Refuse to Be a Victim.” Before this period of commercialisation, the notion of self-protection had already been well-circulated, as white markswoman Annie Oakley (1860-1926) reportedly “thought

women should learn to protect themselves, and a gun was the best way to do it.“As Oakley demonstrated, however, guns were not solely for protective purposes, they were equally employed for sport and entertainment purposes amongst white women. *Annie Oakley* (1935) brought to life the real gun-toting Oakley who far from the sexualised image of the armed woman in blaxploitation movies, “domesticated the gun” in Laura Browder’s words. But for the gun to become domesticated, it had to first be in the hands of (white) males, in genres such as the Western and as implicitly declared by the Second Amendment.

White men, and less frequently white women (see *South Central*, 1992), in the ghetto action movie are gun strapped cops, stopping and / or arresting youth simply for being black. In *Havoc* and *Mi Vida Loca* we see white armed officers stop and point at brown bodies because of their colour. The Second Amendment offers protection to the white police officers who perceive the young black or brown male, armed or unarmed, as a threat or menace to society. Their supposedly inherently violent tendencies repeatedly provide whites with further justification to exercise their right to bear arms. Unprotected by the state and instead subjected to racial abuse, gun carrying for the young non-white male illustrates entitlement to self-protection through the use of (illegal) weapons. By living outside the law and within white hierarchies of power the Second Amendment is redundant to the young non-white male. The white police officers of *Menace* abuse their power, using a police baton to beat a young black male. There is no consequence of this police brutality; a comment on the beating of Rodney King by the LAPD in 1991 and the subsequent acquittal of the police officers involved. Yet ghetto action movies were also keen to illustrate that police brutality was not solely at the hands of white police officers. A racist black police officer in *Boyz* places a gun against protagonist, and unarmed, Tre’s head revealing his misuse of power and firearms: “Oh think you tough, huh? Scared now, huh? I like that. That’s why I took this job. I hate little motherfuckers like you. Little niggers like shit. I could blow your head off with this Smith and Wesson and you couldn’t do shit.” Classism and racism instilled within the black police officer rejects ideas of “blackness” as a unifying force. Ernesto’s death at the

---

hands of an armed white female drugs client further dismantles stereotypes of race and class.

Shooting Ernesto dead, the white female performs the role that would have previously been occupied by a black male in the ghetto action movie or brown male in the barrio. Anders thus extends the use of firearms beyond that of the racially marginalised in what Susan Dever describes as a “symbolic reversal of media-hyped “reality,” white girl kills brown boy.” Dismantling the fear of racialised crime during the early 1990s, the scene further distances itself from the ghetto action movie tradition of male-on-male violence. By comparison, the pointing of Hector’s gun towards Toby actually reinscribes the male-on-male tract while Nayman’s gun in Gang Girl presents male-on-female violence. Ernesto’s performance of hyper-masculinity undermined by his ill-equipped gun in the previous scene with Whisper is further illustrated as mere performance as Anders refuses to engage in what Murray Forman identifies as the “notion that urban youth are always already armed and dangerous.” Anders thus moves beyond the traditions of the ghetto action movie and the handling of the gun while Havoc recycles conventions, especially as Hector is the first to draw a gun. While Veronica is the first character to discuss gun-use and to actually shoot, renegotiating the gendered dimensions of the gun, Nayman’s relationship with his gun reinscribes ideas of the dangerous black male.

Anders fractures the association between Ernesto’s gun and his sexual prowess (something which Havoc and Gang Girl arguably serve to uphold), but guns continue to be linked to maleness in Mi Vida Loca most simply by the fact that it is only the male gang characters that own firearms. The Echo Park homeboys are able to successfully shoot dead rival gang leader El Duran due to the misunderstanding over the whereabouts of a truck. They have access to guns unlike the homegirls who must borrow firearms. In Havoc, the girls do not handle guns as the firearm is firmly positioned as a male possession. Conversely, Veronica does have ownership of a gun as Bailey (arguably) further deconstructs the phallocentric weapon, suggesting that

---

women do own and are willing to use guns, providing that such activity can be somehow legitimised.

**Girls, Gangs, Guns and the Sociologists**

Statistically, firearms have and continue to be owned by a higher percentage of men than women. However, as I wish to highlight, scholarship (both sociological and film) pertaining to (white) female gun users since the time of *Mi Vida Loca*’s production, and in-line with the aftermath of Reagan’s deregulation, has developed. Stange and Oyster highlight that “the extensive social-scientific literature on guns and their use almost invariably fails to take gender into account.” This “masculinist perspective on guns and gun use” has been challenged in contemporary scholarship, as a “small, but nevertheless significant, proportion of guns are in women’s hands,” not only in the home, but also the workplace, the recreational realm and on the streets. Despite this, gangs and their relationship with guns are most frequently discussed in terms of (hyper)masculinity: the milieu of the gang has been recognised as encouraging hypermasculine qualities with “the gun metaphorically reinforcing both the power and sexuality of men.” Research carried out in the early 1990s, for example, aiming to examine the relationship between gun ownership, gun use, and gang membership omitted females from the study because according to Bjerregaard & Lizotte, “girls rarely own guns, whether for sport or

---


31 Ibid.

32 Metcalf, *The Culture and Politics*, p.79.
protection.”

Although this notion is somewhat generalised, gang researchers did consistently find that girl gang members were less violent than their male counterparts in research conducted before the 1990s. However, to negate females completely from research concerning gangs and gun use fails to acknowledge that while perhaps not at the same “alarming” rate, there were girls in the gang, and in society more generally, carrying and using firearms.

This reality was not only projected but hyped significantly by media outlets throughout the 1990s. The same television talk show programmes that translated the subculture of Latina and black gang girls into mainstream discussion topics (noted in chapter three) sought to take advantage of mainstream audiences’ simultaneous attraction and repulsion surrounding female youth violence as girls admitted, “we carry guns.”

According to Meda Chesney-Lind and Katherine Irwin:

“the United States has always had “bad girls” and a collection of media eager to show their waywardness. In the 1960s and 1970s, American bad girls were female revolutionary figures such as Patti Hearst, Friedenke Krabbe, and Angela Davis who brandished guns and fought alongside their rebellious male counterparts.

This popularisation of female “badness,” then, was certainly not a new phenomenon. However, the 1990s differed greatly in terms of arrest rates for juvenile girls; between 1994 and 2003 female arrests “generally increased more (or decreased less) than male arrests in most categories.”

It must be noted, however, that the greatest increases for young females were for non-violent drug crimes, including drug abuse violations, DUI’s and disorderly conduct.

34 A Leeza (NBC) television episode broadcast in the late-1990s with the subtitle “Girl Gangs: Badder than the Boys” featured a number of young ethnic gang girls who discussed their gang activity. For video clip, see: Doneuemf, Gangster Girls on a Talk Show Part 1 of 2. 10 July 2009 [Video] Available online: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xd4Cngl_Bfw [Accessed 13/12/2013].
Youth violence increased in the barrios and ghettos of urban America in the early-1990s. However, these statistics do not simply equate to an “epidemic” of girl gang or female youth violence more generally. Although offense statistics for overall crime increased, the arrest rate for murder and non-negligent manslaughter declined for girls by 67.6 percent (1994-2003) with aggravated assault falling by 25.8 percent. However, this reality became misplaced in the media hysteria. A combination of fact and fiction fuelled public interest in the aggressive, racially marginalised gang girl. Black and Latina girls were incarcerated more frequently than white girls compared to the previous decade, largely due to changing policies on youth crime as enforced by the Reagan administration’s “War on Drugs.” The fictional notion that girls of colour had not only achieved equality with the homeboys through their (gun) violence but were in-fact “badder than the boys” further contributed to the interest in the non-white gang girl.

At the same time that Anders conveyed and capitalised on this distinct epoch of youth violence and the public fascination with Latina “bad girls” in its earliest stages, feminist criminology re-evaluated the role of the girl in the gang. Although researchers continued to find that girls in the gang were not as aggressive as the boys, the former stereotype ascribed to them as mere support systems to their male counterparts, as “weapons carriers to the boys,” began to be challenged as girls in the gang moved into sight and became talking points both cinematically and theoretically. Sociological literature concerning gender and gun use has for the most part been male-centred but it is important to note that there has been an emergence in the last 15 years or so of scholarship concerning the violent (white) woman in film and in particular, the role of the gun in filmic narratives of the early 1990s (films such as *Thelma and Louise* and *The Silence of the Lambs*).

---

and film scholar Carol M. Dole recognises that “despite widespread support for strong images of women in the media, many mainstream film viewers and academic feminists alike have hesitated to celebrate cinematic women with guns, even those who uphold the law.”\textsuperscript{41} The girls in \textit{Mi Vida Loca}, \textit{Havoc} and \textit{Gang Girl} are lawbreakers rather than the female law enforcers of 1990s Hollywood. However, despite scholarship largely centring on the role of white female gun use in film (largely due to the fact that there are not as many raced equivalents in mainstream film but in part because of the continued privileging of whiteness), Dole’s contention is of significant importance. Guns play a central role in all three narratives yet female firearm use is similarly presented as non-celebratory in \textit{Gang Girl} and \textit{Mi Vida Loca} and is instead layered with varying levels of justification while blurring the boundaries between the perpetrator and the victim of (gun) violence.\textsuperscript{42}

**Blind Violence and Evident Religion**

Operating within the “romantic realism” framework that Anders applies to her own style, justification for gang girl violence and gun use could be, and indeed has been, labelled in simplistic, melodramatic terms. For example, Leslie Felperin contends that the homegirls of Echo Park are “reared on cheap romance, and the religion of the gun.”\textsuperscript{43} I contend, however, that through (evident) religious imagery and by keeping violence off-screen, Anders reveals a more complicated relationship between gang girl and (gun) violence. Significantly, \textit{Mi Vida Loca} departs from the signature element of the ghetto action genre not only by placing guns in the hands of girls, shifting the gendered dimensions of the cinematic lens, but primarily by keeping a significant amount of the violence off-screen. Viewers are not allowed to indulge in images of bodies penetrated by bullets (we never actually see bullets hit


\textsuperscript{43} L. Felperin, “\textit{Mi Vida Loca} review”, \textit{Sight and Sound}. 5(14) April, 1995, p.48.
any of the victims, just the aftermath). In Menace, a film considered “uncompromisingly violent,” Caine is fatally showered with bullets; blood froths uncontrollably from his mouth and the film ends with the image of his contorting body.44 For Watkins, “Menace illuminates an important feature of change that marks the broader popular culture landscape, the intensification of violence in American film and television.”45 By comparison, Mi Vida Loca invites audiences to participate in an inquisitive trip down Echo Park Avenue without the bloodshed - or at least, not as much of it as viewers might expect.

When I asked Anders in interview about the lack of on-screen violence in Mi Vida Loca (the film was Rated-R by the MPAA) and the reasoning for keeping violence off-screen, she responded:

I just think that violence ends the story, it ends the emotion. If you show a lot of graphic violence, then that’s all that people are left with in my mind. Show the impact of it, don’t show the violence [...] it has a bigger impact.46 Anders underscores ideas proposed by Žižek who, taking “sideways glances” at violence, proposes that “the overpowering horror of violent acts [...] inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking.”47 Violence, then, distracts us. In resisting and subverting the expectations of creating a film set in East LA during a time in which Anders states “the girls I was working with, they were getting shot at and standing alongside people getting killed,” she refuses to indulge the viewer in violent episodes that were so regularly and intrinsically part of the ghetto action movies that had gone before.48 Insistent that the film was about humanising the relationship between the homegirls and not about the media’s barrio-as-battlefield staple, Anders reveals that unlike the black and Latino male filmmakers that had previously and exclusively presented the gang-ridden streets, she did not want Mi

46 A. Anders, Personal Interview [Recorded Interview] 22 March 2015, 1pm. Echo Park, LA.
**Vida Loca** to be a “genre” film.\(^49\) This is achieved not only by the cinematography (discussed in chapter two) and episodic structure (the narrative is told in three vignettes) but undeniably through the lack of violent imagery. For Anders, the aim was to make violence that was screened “look really stupid” and over-performed; it was “operatic” for the filmmaker because aesthetically “realistic” violence would not allow viewers to move beyond it.\(^50\)

For Anders, *Mi Vida Loca* is melodrama: “I realized what I do is melodrama and that *Mi Vida Loca* was melodrama - Douglas Sirk in the barrio.”\(^51\) Keeping violence off-screen certainly operates within the romantic realist framework; violence is absent yet also present. But it also raises some important questions about violent filmic women and audiences. Anders told me that “real violence isn’t fun to watch” and when discussing *Gang Girl*, Bailey raised a similar point; real violence “isn’t pretty.”\(^52\) The primary question however is whether there is a particular discomfort when watching armed, racially marginalised women who kill on-screen.

In the scene that follows Ernesto’s gun handling with Whisper in *Mi Vida Loca*, Sad Girl and Mousie are preparing to come face-to-face with one another to settle their dispute concerning Sad Girl’s betrayal of Mousie’s friendship by having a baby with Ernesto. Here, Anders includes religious imagery and illustrates Sad Girl’s own discomfort with guns, reinscribing the gendered dimensions of firearms and violence. Whisper tells Sad Girl, “You’re going to need lots of luck” and passes her a scapular, before handing over male gang member Snoopy’s gun. The gun is thus linked to both religion and maleness. Forman recognises that the ways in which guns “are acquired are frequently overlooked or ignored in the script,” despite the importance of what the on-screen acquisition reveals in movies.\(^53\) Indeed,

\(^49\) Dever, *Celluloid Nationalism*, p.127; Anders, *Personal Interview*.
\(^50\) Anders, *Personal Interview*.
\(^52\) A. Anders, *Personal Interview*.; D. Bailey, *Personal Interview* [Recorded Interview] 2 April 2015, 10.30 am, NY.
scholarship specifically on *Mi Vida Loca* has also failed to discuss the acquisition scene in which the scapular and the gun offer equal modes of “male” protection. Sad Girl must borrow a male-owned firearm while the scapular is symbolic of devout Catholicism in which the worship of God requires the worship of a male. However, as the scene develops, it fails to support Felperin’s contention that the women of Echo Park participate in blind (random and religious) violence.

Sad Girl receives the gun while standing at the kitchen sink as Whisper passes the gun through the kitchen window from outside to inside. The gun transitions between the public sphere, the barrio streets (traditionally considered as a male site) and the private, domestic sphere (traditionally female). As the gun enters the home, the boundaries between the dangers of the street and the safety of the home become disrupted. However, Sad Girl’s admission that she has “never shot nobody” as she tries to return the gun wrapped inside a kitchen tea-towel (domesticating the gun) to Whisper, indicates her reluctance to use the weapon. While she may engage in religious practices, Sad Girl’s uncertainty about the necessity of the gun dismantles Felperin’s statement. The fact that none of the girls have their own gun and have to defend themselves by male modes of protection continues to reinforce the gun as a male entity. By illustrating her lack of enthusiasm in handling the weapon, Sad Girl is not positioned as trigger happy and the religious imagery suggests some degree of moral consciousness. This is a quality that sociologist Martin Sanchez-Jankowski recognises as missing from Hollywood projections as the “the nonwhite gang and its nonwhite women” are the “carriers of moral malignancy.”

In *Havoc*, the 16th Street similarly engage with religious artefacts but their on-screen violence rejects the idea of morality and returns to Hollywood’s characterisations.

Religious imagery in *Havoc* suggests the prevalence of faith amongst the Latino community. Images of Christ are visible in the shops that Hector and Allison walk past when she enters MacArthur Park without the other PLC members.

---

54 For Sánchez-Jankowski, the “sociological consequence is that images have a way of maintaining themselves in the public’s mind and in the absence of quality information and analyses, these images have become the primary prisms through which people construct an understanding of social reality.” M. Sánchez-Jankowski, *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p.301, 302.
Religious artefacts are similarly integral to the Latino gang member as we see a 16th Street member with a cross tattooed across the chest, and Hector wears what appears to be a cross icon on a gold chain around his neck. The proximity of these religious images to the heart can be interpreted in different ways. Gregorio Estevane notes how “criminals always seek a power edge, and what stronger ally of ultimate power can there be than God and his church as your gang ally?” Religious images can thus be interpreted as a need for power and/or a desire for protection with the scapular in Mi Vida Loca operating as a symbol of the latter; Whisper offers it to Sad Girl for protective purposes. An alternative reading of such symbolism discussed by Estevane is Chicano and Latino scholar Jose M. Lopez’s recognition of the “history of religious development in Latin America,” suggesting that gang members are “defining their religious inheritance with these images.” Much like the Chola makeup, the adorning and handling of religious icons can thus be identified as a way of establishing a history imbued with distinct cultural meaning. The 16th Street gang members and Sad Girl could utilise religious material in such a way but this is not made explicit; religious symbols make significant but only brief appearances. Rather what is implied by the religious imagery is that Sad Girl as a reluctant (female) shooter requires male protection, and Hector as violent (male) weapon carrier and gang leader desires power. By screening violence, Havoc makes visually explicit the notion of the violent non-white male, while keeping violence off-screen and hesitating at violent actions in Mi Vida Loca helps humanise the gang girl.

The media attention regarding Bailey’s casting of school principal Annisa Chalmers as Veronica / Queen V in Gang Girl as discussed in chapter six, suggests that gang girls who perform violence on-screen (without the reluctance of Sad Girl) are too threatening to accepted gender dynamics. Anders and Kopple offer brief moments of evident religious symbolism in their narratives but Bailey’s explicit religious framework (evaluated further in the following chapter) has largely failed to off-set the news media’s outcry surrounding the on-screen violence. Anders contended in interview that to show violence results in an inability to discuss it, but Bailey (who told me that he had viewed Mi Vida Loca before filming Gang Girl)

56 J.M. Lopez quoted in Ibid.
wanted to show violence in all its grittiness. Bailey employs the stylistics of the sideways gun stance (performed by the black male gang members in his film); a “cool” aesthetic made popular by *Menace* which has purportedly influenced subsequent “copycat” technique by criminals.57 This gun holding technique facilitates the framing of the gun pointers “menacing” face and weapon. Bailey also revisits the images of blood splattering intrinsic to such ghetto movies. To justify this, Bailey told me that he wanted to “show what’s real” amongst girl gangs.58 Here, Bailey is seemingly regressive in recycling conventions in a similar vein to his depiction of the dystopic city space. However, the inclusion of a religious conversion narrative in which Queen V transitions from violent gangbanger to educator of sorts in her mentor capacity while on death row, results in a distinctly different trajectory. Furthermore, it is racially marginalised young women rather than men that actually pull triggers and fall victim to gun, sexual and state violence in Bailey’s film. This expands the borders of violence to illustrate how it is not solely men who are vulnerable to, and perpetrators of, gang wars. Although Anders similarly conveys this notion, the way in which violence is screened varies considerably.

The representation of violence in *Havoc* sits somewhere in between *Mi Vida Loca* and *Gang Girl*, with some violent episodes occurring off-screen (a climatic shoot-out discussed shortly) and others (the sexual initiation of Allison and Emily, similarly discussed in chapter five) remaining on-screen. There are no traces of blood in *Havoc* but when asked in interview about her upcoming film and the transition from documentary to fiction film, Kopple contended that “It maybe wasn’t that different [from documentary] because we shot it in a real and gritty way.”59 Much like Bailey, Kopple’s statement suggests that she takes the gang(sta) narrative back to its “gritty” roots, but in *Havoc*, violent acts are largely committed by young men, returning to the traditions of the ghetto action movie cycle more closely than Bailey.

58 Bailey, *Personal Interview*.
As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, Kopple has not discussed *Havoc* in any great detail in interviews or expressed her thoughts on screening violence per se. She has, however, declared her “fascination” with male subjects and has revealed her thoughts on gun use, control and ownership.60 Her documentary film *Harlan County, USA* (1976) detailed coal workers’ rights in Kentucky where, according to Kopple, “people lived and died by their guns,” including women.61 Lois Scott, “the heavyset woman who takes the gun out of her dress,” was Kopple’s “role model” and “hero of what women should be - women who weren’t afraid to stand up, women who were courageous.”62 The “courageous” armed white woman is lauded by Kopple, whose reference to Scott’s dress feminises the gun (much like Oakley did) in what Kopple termed as an “atmosphere of violence.”63 Kopple was shot at during filming, an incident which led her to state “you have to change your tactics. If someone’s shooting at you, you’ve gotta shoot back. [...] I’m sure glad there were guns there.”64 For “a girl from Scarsdale” who “wouldn’t have a gun for any reason” (note the reference to “girl” gendering gun use) Kopple was later “carrying a .357 Magnum.”65 Discussing the incident, Kopple purported, “I don’t think they should ban the gun. It’s very important to have ourselves armed.”66

In 2011, Kopple further contributed to the gun control and rights debate in *Gun Fight*, her HBO documentary. When asked in interview about her hope for *Gun Fight*, she responded that she hoped it “inspires a common-sense conversation about gun ownership and gun control.”67 To illustrate this notion of “common-sense” Kopple noted, “For example, most everyone [sic] would agree violent criminals shouldn’t be able to purchase guns,” a category in which Hector and the 16th Street

---

62 Ibid, p.188.
63 B. Kopple quoted in Aghed, J. ‘Interview with Barbara Kopple (on *Harlan County, U.S.A.*),' in Brown (ed.), *Barbara Kopple*, p.94.
65 Ibid.
could be positioned. In another interview on *Gun Fight*, Kopple contended “I’m not a gun person” despite her earlier remarks regarding the necessity of guns in Harlan County. Kopple’s opinion could have quite simply changed over time, supported by her later insistence that gun debate “issues” are “not so black and white.”

The representation of violence and gun handling in *Mi Vida Loca*, *Havoc* and *Gang Girl* is in one sense literally “black,” brown and “white” with the character’s racial status and gender informing the portrayal of violence and the degree to which it requires legitimising. Although Bailey and Anders hold differing views on screening violence, and Kopple has complex views on gun issues, there remains certain consistent patterns of representation in portraying the (violent) filmic gang girl, including the dynamics of female friendship and family relationships.

**Bad Mothers and “Badder Girls”**

To provide a degree of legitimisation to the gang girl’s violent behaviour, familial factors such as absent or negligent parents are portrayed as a root cause of gang membership. Relaying her gang narrative to Shakira, Queen V’s violent past acts as both a warning to the viewer about the dangers of gang life and a cautionary tale to Shakira regarding her Croniks membership. Through flashback episodes, we must bear witness to the violent episodes that have led Veronica to her death row fate, including her mother’s abuse. A sequence returns to 1980, in which Veronica’s mother, Rachel, is seen snorting white powdered drugs off the kitchen table. It would be temporally inaccurate if we were to conceive this as crack which entered the ghetto in the mid-to-late 1980s, but Bailey provides clear explanation behind Veronica’s actions by commenting on the devastating infiltration and distribution of drugs into streets, and its addictive qualities.

Veronica’s voice-over narration reveals that all her mother “wanted was some damn drugs [...] coke, speed or alcohol.” Rachel assumes the role of the welfare queen and “bad black mother” characterised by the drug addicted Carole who will not sit with her hospitalised and critically (gun) injured son in the ghetto action movie, *South Central* (1992). As Ingrid Banks highlights, the “bad black

---

68 Ibid.
70 B. Kopple quoted in Savage, S. ‘Exclusive: Barbara Kopple,’ p.211.
mother” is the “very antithesis to what it means to be a mother in the nurturing sense.” At the time of South Central’s release, the characterisation of carelessness had gained broader momentum as the routine vilification of black mothers, and welfare queens attempted to, and succeeded in, amassing support for welfare cuts. This is seemingly underscored by Bill Clinton’s 1996 welfare reform the same year that ghetto action movie cycle’s production tapered off. Jeanette Covington notes how viewers were “urged” to see Boyz as it “repeated conservative mantra that unduly generous welfare payments produced the female-headed households that churned out these young, violent, fatherless black males.” Reworking this formula, Rachel produces a young, violent, fatherless black female. All Veronica wanted at the age of ten, she confides, “was a hug” yet all her mother ever did was beat her.

Veronica is subjected to physical and verbal abuse as a child. Her mother calls her a “little nigger” whilst whipping her with a belt as Veronica remains on the floor. Veronica is subsequently taken into care and removed from her mother’s addiction, abuse and neglect. Rachel, however, believes that “she not gonna turn out no different to me ... she’s going to be just like her mom and grandma,” suggesting a cyclical pattern of drug abuse and violence. According to Miller, “drug addiction among primary caregivers contributes to girls’ involvement in gangs.” Bailey revealed to me during interview that a reconciliation scene between Veronica and her mother did not make the final cut, highlighting how much emphasis is placed on the detrimental impact of Rachel’s abusive behaviour. Female gang members in particular, are likely to come from troubled families, witnessing or subjected to childhood abuse, parental neglect and / or regular drug use, and frequently a combination of, if not all of, these factors.

Anissa Chalmers, the actress playing the character of Veronica / Queen V, who herself was involved in gang activity at a young age, stated (via podcast) about her past that “There a lot of women that have

gotten raped. There are a lot of women who’ve had abusive parents. Unfortunately, I was one of them.”

Violent acts perpetuated by Veronica and Shakira are significantly more aggressive than acts carried out by the gang girl in *Mi Vida Loca* and *Havoc*. *Gang Girl* was released a year after the National Gang Threat Assessment report claimed, “female involvement in gangs continues to increase and evolve as females assume greater responsibility in gang activities and grow more independent from their male counterparts.” In 2008, a 15-year-old female member of the Bloods gang, African American Sharell Butler (Lady Red), was charged with the murder and manslaughter of two men in the Bronx, surprising residents who thought she would not have “had the strength” to do so. Reported increases in female gang activity, the continuing prisonisation of African Americans in the 21st century and the prevalence of violence amongst racially marginalised communities intersect in *Gang Girl* but do not legitimise girl gang violence. Rather, being a victim at the hands of her mother, who is consumed by her drug addiction and incapable of caring for her daughter, suggestively lays the foundations for Queen V’s delinquency, subsequent gang membership and drug dealing.

In addition to familial factors, gang scholars such as Laura Fishman, one of the first researchers to investigate African American female gangs, present racial and economic differences in female gang behaviour. According to Fishman, who studied the Vice Queens, an auxiliary gang to the all-male Vice Kings in 1960s Chicago and later reanalysed these findings in 1995, “black female gangs today have become more entrenched, more violent, and more orientated to ‘male’ crime’ due to “forced ‘emancipation’ which stems from the economic crisis within the black

---


community.”

Furthest removed from economic crisis (temporally and spatially) is Havoc’s Allison who does not handle guns or engage in many violent acts. It is noteworthy that in terms of economic and structural limitations, Gang Girl was released in close proximity to the financial crisis of 2008. In 2009, economic meltdown and surges in unemployment “reached double digits for the first time in 26 years,” at 10.2 percent, only 0.6 percent less than unemployment rates in 1982. However, unemployment amongst African Americans in 2009 hit 15.6 percent, in contrast to 9.3 percent for whites.

American film often reflects periods of social malaise, through violent anti-establishment narrative trajectories. For example, disenfranchised moviegoers of the 1960s (as briefly noted in the Introduction) were able to identify with cultural rebels of the thirties, Bonnie and Clyde, in Arthur Penn’s 1967 film, illustrating growing resistance to the law, the disintegration of hierarchical structures and the fragmentation of the conservative ideologies which had characterised the 1950s. As Penn utilised the fragmentation of American society during the Great Depression to comment on the situation of America in the late 1960s, Bailey, as cultural mediator, arguably employs tropes such as the failing “bad black mother” of the 1990s ghetto action movie to comment on the present. At the same time, the recycling of such images fails to move beyond black mother blaming. We learn that Lopez’s deceased father was an alcoholic but her Latina mother prays for Lopez and does not subject her to the beatings Veronica’s mother performed. That being said, Shakira’s “drunk ass fuckin’” Latina mother is presented as a bad parent who demands money from her daughter which serves to offer some degree of balance to the sole bad black mother, although she does not physically strike her child. In Havoc, Allison’s parents

---

80 Goldman, ‘Black Unemployment.’
are often absent and her mother a recovering alcoholic but she is not depicted as a bad mother; this is a role that is seemingly reserved for the black woman on film.

Stimulus for Allison’s gang membership is similarly shown to stem from dysfunctional family life. Although she is “sober now,” Allison would previously “find her mum passed out and she’d have to call an ambulance and shit...she was...she was fucked up.” Allison’s parents, who “don’t talk so much as leave clues for one another,” both “promise” to “Continue Therapy” as listed on their pieces of paper which are attached to the family fridge. Allison has to leave the family home, which her family never seem to occupy, to speak with her father at his workplace. In a meeting that is business-like, Allison spends just a few moments with her father, Stuart, whose first listed promise is to “Call home if work is keeping him late.” The generational gap as defined by Kitwana and discussed elsewhere in this thesis, provides reasoning as to why Allison seeks refuge in the gang. It is Allison who insists on returning to the 16th Street territory after the episode in which Toby is threatened with Hector’s gun, unlike Emily who is initially apprehensive about doing so. Unlike Allison’s parents, Emily’s parents and brother are present at breakfast time as they sit down together, presenting a snapshot of middle-class perfection. It is thus Allison who is eager to explore a “different world” which enables escapism from her empty house and absent parents. However, Allison is able to return to her mother and father for safety from the reality of gang life, an option that is not viable for Veronica who must instead turn to God for refuge.

Much like Havoc and Gang Girl, we know little regarding the upbringing of the male gang characters in Mi Vida Loca, although significantly, Ernesto does make reference to his mother and his need to (financially) look after her. By comparison, the homegirls are themselves young mothers growing up without their own maternal guidance. When Mousie informs her father of her pregnancy, she is told to leave the family home. Sad Girl by comparison lives with her father where she raises her child. The gang in all three narratives thus acts as a surrogate family bringing young women together who are shown to be without their own mothers.

**Friendship and Female Operations**

Together, the Echo Park homegirls mobilise themselves into action to decide what should happen with Ernesto’s truck after his death. Giggles almost functions as
a surrogate mother, encouraging the girls in the decision making process, and it is Rachel (an older ex-gang member) who dresses Whisper’s gunshot wounds. Yet women in the gang milieu are simultaneously pitted against one another to varying degrees. According to Lucretia Knapp, “Within traditional cinema, invested in male desire, women are also often placed against each other for the affection of the man.”\(^81\) Bailey supported such a contention in interview, asking “Why can’t we see a female bond” in films without women “getting bashed?”\(^82\)

Bailey suggests that female friendship films receive less than positive reviews when compared to films featuring male bonding because audiences require a degree of fallout between female friends. Despite his awareness (and criticism) of this, Bailey still indulges in this trope, like Anders. This idea comes into fruition most evidently in *Mi Vida Loca* in the lead up to a shoot-out between Mousie and Sad Girl. Physical and verbal attacks between young women in all three films underscore Susan Gubar’s sentiment that we are part of “a culture all too willing to exploit disagreements among women in a backlash against all or some of us.”\(^83\)

Despite the straining of female friendships, relationships are ultimately reconciled towards the narrative’s conclusion. The positioning of Sad Girl and Mousie against each other as they fight over a man insists upon a heterosexual status and rejects the masculinisation of the gang member while the rekindling of friendship suggests a powerful sisterhood which overshadows a need for male desire and violence amongst women.

Echo Park is a place where Sad Girl and Mousie’s childhood friendship is curtailed as Mousie is “fucked over” by Sad Girl who gets pregnant by Ernesto. But as Ann Brigham and Sallie Marston note, Echo Park functions “as the place of conflict, resolution, romance, and reconciliation.”\(^84\) Sad Girl and Mousie exchange verbal insults in the film’s opening because of Sad Girl’s betrayal of Mousie’s

---

82 Bailey, *Personal Interview.*
friendship. Informed that they are “best-friends since childhood” we arrive in Echo Park amidst a female feud. For Karen Hollinger, such films that represent “women’s friendship as plagued by jealously, envy and competition for men [...] teach women to behave or fear one another.”85 Yet as Dever details, “Yelling and love are not at odds on this film, where Mona [Sad Girl] and Maribel’s [Mousie’s] passionate friendship is declared at piercing decibels” the meaningfulness of their friendship is only heightened.86

In full melodramatic style, firearms are not as powerful as the friendship between Sad Girl and Mousie but the reality is that guns are required for drugs operations: Bernard Harcourt confirms that “youths who sell drugs also often feel the need to carry firearms.”87 We see both romantic and realistic representations of firearms, but the gun continues to be aligned with maleness. Once Sad Girl and Mousie do have possession of guns (Ernesto gives Mousie his non-functioning gun after the kitchen transaction scene) they are shown, just as the all-female gang, The Lizzies, are in The Warriors, to be incapable of using them. In a shoot-or-get-shot scenario, both Mousie and Sad Girl fail to pull the trigger on one another and it is instead the off-screen sound of a distant gunshot that can be heard echoing through the park as Ernesto is shot dead off-screen. Discussing the use of guns within Mi Vida Loca, Anders stated during interview that the film “put the guns in the girls’ hands. Put all the power in the girls’ hands really.”88 Symbolically, the placing of the gun in the hands of those previously negated from screen is powerful, but Mousie holding Ernesto’s non-operational gun suggests a false sense of power.

Interpreting this scene in light of Anders’s comments, Sad Girl and Mousie’s decision not to shoot each other suggests their friendship holds more power than the gun does in their hands. Anders told me:

There are probably some feminists that could say, well, Sad Girl and Mousie are fighting over a guy, that’s stupid. You know, that’s not what it was about.

86 Dever, Celluloid Nationalism, p.142.
88 Anders, Personal Interview.
It was about them, it was about Sad Girl betraying Mousie. Sad Girl betrayed what was between them. It wasn’t about Ernesto.\(^8^9\)

Rather than exploiting female fallout then, Anders conceives the feud to only reinforce the girl’s friendship. As Deborah Elizabeth Whaley contends, “the story of Mousie and Sad Girl is more than a reversal of stereo-imperialist, masculinist gang genre; it is about the close bonds that female friendship can yield.”\(^9^0\) Sad Girl’s narration underpins this: “we stood face to face at the logs, and all I ever knew about Mousie and all she ever knew about me flashed before our eyes. We had a serious past, her and me, and I guess that’s why we couldn’t do it.” Whether loaded symbolically with phallic connotations or loaded physically with bullets, both Sad Girl and Mousie recognise that the gun, an inanimate object so frequently imbued with such symbolic and physical power, is meaningless when compared to the bond between two homegirls. The gun has no emancipatory potential in either the kitchen or shoot-out scene, rather, it is the girls’ resistance to firearm use that is celebrated here. In this sense, the power is in the girls’ hands.

The reconciliation between Mousie and Sad Girl (which slowly builds after the failed shoot-out) is largely due to the intervention of former gang member, Giggles. Upon release from prison, Giggles insists, “Girls you don’t ever throw down with one of your homegirls over a guy. Guys aren’t worth it... we need new skills [...] we have to take control.” Despite Domino Pérez’s denouncement of the film for its inability to move beyond constructions of Chicanas as welfare dependent mothers, Pérez does recognise that Giggles “imparts a new wisdom that facilitates female self sufficiency.”\(^9^1\) She shapes “the consciousness of a new generation of women” acting as a “catalyst for change, presenting new options for cinematic Chicanas.”\(^9^2\) Rather than providing the younger girls with tales of notoriety, Giggles who has “served time” for her man, insists, “computers are the key to the future.” Giggles claims that the girls cannot rely on the homeboys and that they must function independently to become self-sufficient. As the narrative moves beyond the

\(^8^9\) Ibid.
\(^9^2\) Ibid.
Sad Girl-Ernesto-Mousie triangle, what “unfolds” is, in Fregoso’s words, “a sisterhood saga portraying young Chicanas whose lives are marked by camaraderie, affection, struggle, and survival.” The film is not “straight-up nihilist” unlike the ghetto action films that Watkins writes about.

Despite reading the shoot-out scene in a way in which guns ironically draw truces, the episode underscores the problematic handling of the gun. Regardless of race, no female character is shown to have the capacity to successfully utilise a gun. The white female drugs client who shoots Ernesto dead also inadvertently injures Whisper, physically disabling her, implicitly placing women against women. Welfare dependent and unable to afford hospital fees, Whisper is left using the aid of a walking stick. With Ernesto dead and unable to use money from his drugs business to provide for his two children, the girls are forced to start their own “operation” where guns continue to be the future, rather than Giggles’s suggested computer business. At the same time, the girls’ decision to work together in the narrative conclusion reinstates a sense of camaraderie amongst them as Sad Girl and Mousie are no longer rivals.

Young women are placed against one another in the opening scene of each narrative. After the camera surveys the vastness of LA, Allison and Emily engage in a car park fight with girls from a rival gang who exchange verbal insults regarding sexual promiscuity: “What’s that smell girl? Damn close your legs.” Within the first few minutes of the film, Allison is presented as both sexually desirable as she grinds her body against boyfriend Toby, and dangerous as she beats up another female. These two characteristics (sexy and dangerous) Lisa Funnell notes are “associated with female villainy” but importantly they are related in gangsta culture. Allison pulls another girl’s hair before repeatedly punching and kicking the rival gang member to the floor. This scene supports sociologist Ann Campbell’s contention that

---

“a cardinal gang rule is that men fight men and women fight women.” 96 In 2005, the National Gang Threat Assessment contended that “Although female gang members commit relatively little violent crime, violence among girls in gangs is on the rise.” 97 No indication regarding the racial makeup of the female gang member was given. Despite information concerning the race of the rising female gang being absent from such gang reports, what is apparent in Havoc is that conversations surrounding “bad” white middle-class girls were displacing previous discussions of non-white female “badness” with Latina characters functioning solely as background props at gang parties in Kopple’s movie.

Hollywood had already started to capitalise on the “bad” white female teen most notably with the release of Mean Girls in 2004. Placing young women against one another, the film exploited anxieties of white, financially secure teens as bullies and nasty girls with comedic value. Discussing media interest in, but not Hollywood representations of, the “bad” girl, Chesney-Lind and Irwin note how in the 2000s media moved:

from the image of the gun-toting gangbanger to the back-stabbing queen bee [...] As the media stories of girls and bullying exemplify, in the early 2000s we had a new type of bad girl. In contrast to the Latina or African American gang member growing up in the hood, the bad girl of the early 2000s was White, middle-class, and suburban, and had a promising future. 98

However, it is important to note that at the same time, family-orientated films from which Anne Hathaway emerged, including The Princess Diaries (2001), were also big commercial successes. 99 For example, The Princess Diaries 2: Royal


Engagement (2004) produced $95.1 million at the US box-office compared to Mean Girls’ $86 million in the same year.\textsuperscript{100}

These princess films established a well-conceived public image of the actress. “Stars,” as Richard Dyer suggests, “are made for profit. In terms of the market, stars are part of the way films are sold. The star’s presence in a film is a promise of a certain kind of thing that you would see if you went to see the film.”\textsuperscript{101} Alternatively, however, the cultivated image of a star is often renegotiated through the casting of stars against their “type,” subverting audience expectations. As Jonathan Heaf notes, “the image Disney had, in part, constructed” for Hathaway through this market function and ideological investment, “had to have something of a watershed.”\textsuperscript{102} When asked about how she felt about “beating” someone up in Havoc, as she does in the opening car park scene, Hathaway revealed that she “really felt disgusting at the end of that day, and it was not fun,” maintaining her “princess” status on some level.\textsuperscript{103}

The car park fight in Havoc is abruptly curtailed as both gangs disperse at the sound of approaching police sirens. Crucially, this is the only scene in which Allison and best friend Emily are seen to carry out any violent act and the only instance in which girls fight other girls. For the remaining narrative, it is the male characters, and most importantly, the Latino gang members who are the perpetrators of violence, with the white males responding to this violence; no female operations exist. The girls remain unarmed as guns are utilised to assert male power and control business as brown bodies are pitted against white bodies rather than girls-against-girls. Rather, Allison and Emily display no jealousy towards one another and instead demonstrate an affection and concern for each other; Allison loves Emily but is not in love with Toby, or Hector, suggesting that we can read the film as empowering in its depiction of strong female bonds.

\textsuperscript{100} Figures taken from IMDb.
This reading of the female friendship in *Havoc* is made problematic by the lesbian undertones evident in Emily’s affections towards Allison. On one level, this could be identified as a rejection of patriarchal power and heterosexual desire, refusing to indulge in mainstream cinema’s pitting of women against women. Emily declares to Allison that in the future they could be “looking back at all the guys we’ve loved and just like fucked and it turns out like the whole time like we were supposed to be together.” There is an ambiguity in Emily’s sexual orientation, heightening the titillation and sexualisation of the female body in *Havoc*. After Emily’s declaration, Allison proceeds to position herself on top of Emily (she is clothed in this scene unlike the episode in Toby’s car) while Emily lays (clothed) on Allison’s bed. Allison, now on top of Emily, states “I don’t think I could go down on you.” The friendship is at once sexualised by Allison and simultaneously rendered a non-sexual relationship. The inclusion of homoerotic tones further contributes to the public conception of the deviant, violent lesbian: “criminality and lesbianism have virtually always been associated in the popular and scientific imagination.” This relationship between criminality and homosexuality is evident in 1990s cinema including *Thelma and Louise* and Cleo in *Set It Off*. The vagueness in Emily’s sexual orientation thus suggestively contributes to her gang activity as her family unit, unlike Allison’s, cannot be blamed for her “deviancy.”

Lesbianism is absent in *Mi Vida Loca*, but much like *Havoc*, *Gang Girl* hints towards lesbian desire to provide partial justification for deviant behaviour. Prior to beating Cynthia to the floor because of her apparent jealousy regarding Troy and Cynthia’s relationship, Croniks member Shakira concludes that there’s “plenty more men...and women” for her to date. After laughing off her statement that implies her own bi-sexuality, Shakira beats and then towers over Cynthia’s fragile body. It is an image accentuated by the low-level camera angle adopted from Cynthia’s point-of-view on the ground, paralleling the later episode in which Rachel’s adult figure is positioned against Veronica’s small child frame. Claustrophobic camera angles serve to intensify the oppositional levels that the (female) victim and perpetrator occupy.

Normal-speed footage is intersected with slow-motion imagery, heightening the brutality of the beating. Slow-motion camera work has been utilised to enhance

scenes of violent action in cinema for decades, from the concluding shoot-out of Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* to Singleton’s *Boyz*. For Mennel, *Boyz* cinematically “fetishizes the repeated violent outbursts by showing them in slow motion.”\(^{105}\) Anders’s use of slow-motion sequences in episodes such as the shooting of Ernesto achieve an almost dream-like (or “operatic”) quality to draw attention to the consequences of violence or conversely to heighten the romantic elements of the film (the posting of La Blue’s love letters for example). By comparison, Bailey’s use of slow-motion returns to the fetishising of violence. The differences in the use of slow-motion cinematography are reflective of the difference in the directors’ opinions of filming and showing violence. Emphasising this distinction further, Shakira’s unprovoked attack on Cynthia, is captured, unlike the polished cinematography of *Mi Vida Loca* and *Havoc*, by a hand-held camera facilitating a sense of street-authenticity and accentuating the “reality” of violence.

In this scene, Shakira’s references to her alcoholic mother and the insinuation of lesbianism legitimise her violence two-fold. Like Cleo in *Set It Off*, Shakira is masculinised through both her gang clothing and ambiguous sexual orientation: a female Croniks member later informs us, “Shakira will fuck a nigger in a second, even a bitch.” Furthermore, Shakira’s violence is presented as stemming from a dysfunctional existence at home. Numerous cinematic tropes of the sexually deviant violent girl and the placing of (young) women against one another are reprised here in the opening scene. Throughout the film, young women are positioned against one another. After being placed in care because of her mother’s abusive behaviour and drug taking, the cyclical pattern of violence continues for Veronica who at the age of 15 shoots a rival girl gang member in the head, seemingly as a routine part of her female gang operations. As noted previously, Veronica pulls the trigger at a white woman, reinforcing the racialised fear of the violent black shooter unlike *Mi Vida Loca* where white girl shoots brown boy. The reason for the action is not overt but the abuse suffered at the hands of her mother offers some explanation for Veronica’s actions, as women (and young girls) are shown to be fearful of one another. When incarcerated, Veronica is slashed across the face by another black female inmate but it is a black female prison officer who helps her discover God. Lopez also

contributes to this religious re-birth discussed in chapter five, illustrating that strong female friendships can, as witnessed in *Mi Vida Loca* and *Havoc*, survive violence.

Lopez and Veronica’s friendship endures despite tension when Lopez tells Veronica of her decision to exit The Croniks. When Lopez declares “I’m through with being a soldier,” Veronica pulls out her gun and directs it at Lopez as she instructs her to get out of her car. After finding God herself, Lopez (who now works with young girls who have “no family”) encourages Veronica to seek solace outside of the gang and to curtail her operations. She, like Veronica, has been subjected to an alcoholic parent and male violence in her gang initiation: in Lopez’s words, they have had “no guidance” in life. While male violence against young women moves beyond the ghetto action movie formula, the situating of young women against one another, the bad black mother and the phallocentric connotations of the gun in Nayman’s hands in *Gang Girl* recycles cinematic conventions.

**In Closing**

The phallocentricity of the gun and the masculinist tradition of gang violence is at once deconstructed and upheld in these films. Female operations in *Gang Girl* and *Mi Vida Loca* goes some way to reconfigure the politics of violence and the representation of violence depicted in the ghetto action movies of the early 1990s. Keeping violence off-screen in *Mi Vida Loca* is the most explicit reimagining of filmic gang violence, yet Anders simultaneously relies on gendered tropes surrounding violence, such as the girl-versus-girl tract. While I have contended in this chapter that female friendships are presented as having enough strength to overcome violence, chapter five illustrates that when justification for violent behaviour is unachievable and where no true female solidarity existed in the first place the “good” girls with guns and the “bad” girls with guns are positioned against one another. While this is relatively familiar ground in male Hollywood, *Mi Vida Loca* and *Gang Girl* reveal that girl gang violence is far from monolithic.

Writing for *The Times* in the early 1990s, film critic Kate Muir suggests that “where once girls were often described by male gang members as ‘hos (whores) and bitches,’ [...] They have discovered that a gun means the end of physical
inequality.”¹⁰⁶ For Muir, who only briefly considers the much anticipated *Mi Vida Loca* at the end of the article as a reflection of the rise of gun-toting girls and girl gangs in the US, “Equal opportunities have caught up with teenage violence in America.”¹⁰⁷ Conversely, Chesney-Lind and Irwin insist that, “by arguing that girls were becoming as violent as the boys in the 1990s, the media suggested that Latina and African-American girls were being liberated from traditional gender norms and consequently participating in the violent gang world on equal footing with boys.”¹⁰⁸

As we will see in the following chapter, suggestions such as Muir’s are problematic. While Smith and Wesson aimed for females in the early 1990s, marketing firearms as “equalizers,” guns in the hands of these filmic gang girls do not simply equal liberation and equality, neither in terms of gender or political relations.

With episodes of girl gang violence largely absent in *Havoc*, this chapter has demonstrated how the film draws heavily on standard cinematic conventions, including the dangerous, armed and racialised “Other,” the allusion to the sexually deviant “bad” girl and the legitimising of her behaviour. Allison’s dysfunctional family unit remedies any potential audience anxiety that she is simply inherently violent. Arguably, Allison does not pose such a threat to the established order as she does not perform violence as frequently and explicitly as Shakira for example, but also in part because she is white. In all three films, there exists the attempt to legitimise gang girl violence, conveyed most clearly when compared to the stimulus behind their male counterparts’ violent capabilities. Yet the next chapter contends that non-white girl gang violence requires more explicit reasoning (violence serves a protective function or violence is due to victimization) than white gang girl violence in *Havoc*. Allison’s gang activity is considered as a transitory state and white males must react to rather than perpetrate acts of violence, unlike the dangerous and lethal Latinos.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.
Chapter Five

“Do it like a real lady;” Initiation, Revenge and Redemption - Violence Part II

Introduction

To examine only certain elements of gang violence would fail to provide understanding of its complicated role in film and gang life. Indeed, “Violence,” write Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois, “defies easy categorization. It can be everything and nothing; legitimate or illegitimate; visible or invisible; necessary or useless; senseless and gratuitous or utterly rational and strategic.”¹ An analysis of violence in its various forms, from “bad girl” behaviour through to death row and revenge narratives tells us much about changing contexts of production and evolving style politics. Therefore, I continue the exploration of these films’ differences in violence enacted according to gender, class and race in this chapter, beginning with an analysis of the initiation of the girl into the gang. As the previous chapter illustrated, reasoning is attached to the bad behaviour performed by the girls in the gang; wrongdoing and violence is not always evil these films suggest. This has the potential to be ethically troubling for the viewer, as violent acts are legitimised to some degree. The girls and boys of Mi Vida Loca both show an understanding of conscious wrongdoing, yet the girls’ use of firearms is justified because of their role as young mothers and protectors. The violent episodes of the male characters, in particular their domination and power in the sexual initiation of the gang girl in Havoc and Gang Girl, further contributes to the distinction between acceptable female violence and “evil” male crimes.

The violence enacted against the gang girl drives the (revenge) narrative in Havoc and Gang Girl, seemingly departing from the male-on-male violence most frequently featured in the earlier ghetto action movies and moving beyond the girl-against-girl trajectory. The representation of sexualised violence, state violence and the revenge narrative form the topic of discussion in the following pages. We see

how context informs the representation of violence, with Bailey’s movie reflecting increasing demands for its presence. In the words of cultural scholar Dave Boothroyd, “There is in affluent Western societies today a widespread fascination bordering on obsession with all things extreme.”2 “We are directed (and it seems drawn) towards the most extreme examples of violence in films.”3 Yet certain types of violence are still problematic for audiences, as illustrated by Veronica’s death row position. To some extent, these narratives play on gendered distinctions. The explicitly sexualised violence enacted by the 16th Street against Allison and Emily leads to a matter of honour in a male-on-male climatic shoot-out, confirming racial, classed and gendered norms; the middle-class white males must draw guns to curtail the violence of the dangerous working-class “Other.” Havoc is therefore arguably less-progressive in the politics and representation of violence furthered by the fact that less legitimisation is required for Allison’s temporary gang activity.

Anders can also be seen to revert to standardised conventions in the depiction of violence as the revenge narrative explored in this chapter leads to female-on-female violence in the narrative’s closing. The pitting of women against one another comes full-circle in Mi Vida Loca and complicates ideas discussed in the previous chapter, particularly the suggestion of a “sisterhood saga.” While Bailey’s film concludes with a female-on-female act of violence, meanings attached to violence are not fixed. Indeed, “violence can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality – force, assault, or the infliction of pain - alone. Violence also includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim.”4 In Gang Girl, Bailey explores how violence makes Veronica feel as both victim and perpetrator. Moving beyond the notion of revenge on behalf of the love for another (in Havoc male love for females, and in Mi Vida Loca female love for males, results in revenge shootings), Bailey presents revenge as an act of self-love. Unlike her mother, Veronica is not positioned as a dehumanised “monster” because of her conversion narrative and religious awakening (explored in the following pages) but also because the violence of the male gang members contributes to her violent acts.

---

3 Ibid.
However, when girl gang violence is its most explicit, despite levels of justification, the state must take control, responding to violence with violence by placing Veronica on death row. Although she has found God, Veronica’s violence must be repented and paid for. To understand such complex representations of violence, these films require further scrutiny.

**Initiating the Gang Girl**

Girl gang membership in *Havoc* and *Gang Girl* is depicted as stemming from dysfunctional family units. The lack of active parental figures in *Mi Vida Loca* can also been recognised as a stimulus for joining the gang. However, Anders is cautious of providing adults with too much screen time, focusing more closely on the youth of Echo Park, which in turn reduces the extent to which parents can be rendered as contributors to “deviant” behaviour. *Gang Girl* and *Havoc* by comparison, make this plain. Anders also differs in her depiction of the initiation of the girl into the gang. In *Mi Vida Loca*, Sad Girl and Mousie must demonstrate an ability to fight in an initiation practice whereby the homegirls “kick” Mousie and Sad Girl’s “asses for a whole minute [...] to prove they are down.” The actual episode lasts just a few seconds on-screen as we witness a group of girls push Mousie and Sad Girl in a dimly lit room. In this scene, violence is obscured to some degree as the dark lighting and bodies of the group of homegirls make the action somewhat indiscernible. It is instead the post-initiation euphoria of surviving the incident, visually expressed on Mousie and Sad Girl’s faces, that the viewer is allowed to view. The initiation process for Allison and Emily is distinctly different.

Allison and Emily seek a more exciting gang instead of the superficiality of what Allison terms the “phony life” of the Palisades and the PLC and ask to join Hector’s “crew.” In order to attain membership into the 16th Street world, Allison and Emily must “do it like a real lady” and play “a dice game.” Criminologist Jody Miller reveals that “one particularly troubling issue for some gang girls is the use of sexual initiations for entrée into the gang.” This particular practice of the 16th Street gang involves the girl rolling a dice and having sex with however many gang members that corresponds to the number rolled on the dice. It is one of a number of

---

initiation strategies that is used by male gang members to allow female membership, another popular method being “jumped-in” by other gang members. According to a California-based gang leader who “volunteered to describe the role girls played” in his gang:

Most of the time the girls will take the dice, ‘cause to them it’s probably the easiest of anything. There are two dice. If they roll eleven or twelve, fine, they’re going to get fucked by at least twelve of us. That’s what they want, that’s what they get.\(^6\)

Allison and Emily initially tell the 16th Street that this is “what they want” but the reality of the sexual initiation soon dismantles their desire for 16th Street membership.

Rolling the dice in a motel room filled with brown bodies, Emily insists “three’s cool. I can handle three, it’s just sex.” Allison rolls a one and chooses Hector as her sexual partner but once topless and on the motel bed with Hector on top of her, realises that she does not want to proceed with the initiation. While Allison was positioned on top of Toby as she performed oral sex in an earlier scene, here she is positioned under Hector, placed under his control as he situates his hands around her neck. Allison’s body retains its function for voyeuristic display here, as it did in the car scene with Toby, as violence is sexualised. Following each episode of “bad” behaviour, from snorting cocaine in a nightclub where she pretends to seduce a middle-aged man to attempting to join the 16th Street gang, is a scene in which Hathaway’s body is sexualised. Allison’s fascination with gang culture ends when the allure of danger transpires into the reality of danger. As the camera lingers on Allison’s semi-naked body, Allison tells Hector, “I’m sorry ... please.” After a few moments of silence, as the camera moves across the room to view Emily on the bed next to Allison with another 16th Street gang member, Hector removes his hands from around Allison’s neck and tells her that she can leave. A relieved Allison asks Emily if they can depart the motel to which Emily responds “No, I’m doing this.” Despite Allison attempting to physically remove her from the room, Allison is told to leave by a 16th Street member.

Refusing to go with Allison, Emily is adamant that she wishes to fulfil the initiation requirement. But once sat outside the bedroom, Allison hears Emily as she

shouts at the gang members to “stop” the sexual act and Allison runs into the room. Here, the Latino men are shown to be dangerous sexual aggressors as Emily has to physically push two of them off her. A deeply distraught Emily clutches Allison as the three gang members pull up their trousers and leave the room. Both Emily and Allison’s desire to negotiate access to the 16th Street gang through sex - which gang scholars often note, places young women at greater risk for continued sexual mistreatment, severe psychological distress and chronic drug and alcohol dependency - is abruptly curtailed. For Allison, the gang acts as temporary refuge (from the boredom of white suburbia), and unlike the men of 16th Street, she is able to modulate between white mainstream culture and aspirations of Latino gang culture. However, Allison is unable to detach herself from reality in the initiation scene as the performance and reality of gang culture collide.

The gang initiation (both sexing-in and jumping-in) blurs the boundaries of “types” of violence. The gang as subculture could be identified as enacting what Bourdieu terms “symbolic violence;” “the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity.” As Chicana/o scholar Daniel Enrique Pérez notes, “gangs depend on the creation and maintenance of docile subjects that conform to the codes of conduction within the gang nation.” Both initiation practices (“jumped-in” and / or “sexed-in”) involve submission of the body to the status of Foucault’s docile body noted in chapter three; a body that can be “manipulated, shaped, trained.” Foucault discusses docile bodies within the context of the disciplinary and power dynamic of prisons and social institutions such as schools, and neglects gender and race within his framework; factors which were simply not relevant (in France) at the time of his writing. Yet we can apply the notion of the docile body to the gang which operates within hierarchies of power as the body, particularly during sexual initiation, is ruled by dominant “Others” and made obedient.

Although physical violence is present, gang members themselves may not identify such practices as “violent” with initiation being a staple to gang culture, and male domination being routine. The notion of symbolic violence recognises that individuals may not distinguish certain acts as violent because of their apparent everyday occurrence. Furthermore, being jumped-in results in a sense of accomplishment for the Echo Park locas, comparable to Perez’s discussion of the jumping-in of the girls (by girls) in Murray’s novel *Locas* (1997) where “initiates actually derive pleasure from participating in this ritual.”\(^\text{10}\) By contrast male-on-female initiation is presented as a physical exercise in power that has psychological implications. The sexed-in initiation in *Havoc* cannot be labelled as purely symbolic violence when Emily screams “Stop!” and is no longer complicit in the act. In *Gang Girl*, symbolic violence exists in the sense that gang members must comply to certain rules. To succeed in drugs deals, for example, to maintain reputation and to sustain a street image. Sexual violence is presented as far more “real” and damaging than symbolic violence, particularly as Veronica is at no stage complicit in her initiation.

Prepared to fight male gang members to “be down” with them, a drunken Veronica is told that she must instead have sex with the four gang members present. Much like Rascal in Jacobs’s *Down for Life* (2010), Veronica and Lopez actually operate under male control despite the suggestion that they are autonomous girl gangs. The male gang members exercise power and domination through symbolic violence (traditional gender dynamics maintain male power that is perceived as habitual) and physical violence. This is underscored most clearly through the act of sexual initiation into the gang by a male gang member. Although Rascal’s gang initially appear to function exclusively as an all-female gang, the newest recruit is “sexed-in” by a male who ultimately controls the street gang network. During the initiation scene in *Down for Life*, which takes place in a car garage, the camera focuses on pieces of machinery and car engines suggesting the mechanics of the sexual economy of the gang and the sexually submissive role assumed by the female. The mechanical symbolism of the female body subsumed in the gang corresponds with Foucault’s notion that discipline “is no longer simply an art of distributing bodies, of extracting time from them and accumulating it, but of composing forces in

\(^{10}\) Pérez, *Rethinking Chicana/o*, p.150.
order to obtain an efficient machine.”

The mechanical metaphor of the gang initiation also indicates how symbolic and physical violence are interrelated; the physical act of violence emerges from symbolic violence as male domination is perceived as custom. In her discussion of “sexed-in” initiation, Miller contends, “when this occurs, girls are highly stigmatized and disrespected by other gang members.”

We do not see this play out in Gang Girl but the actual act of being sexed-in causes clear suffering and the initiation itself disrespects the female body.

During her initiation Veronica is visibly distressed. The camera frames her hands attempting to cling onto the table that she is bent over, capturing the disparity between Veronica’s terrified face and the male gang member’s sexual gratification in this raw scene. In contrast to Emily’s initiation in Havoc, we remain in the room with Bailey’s character throughout, encouraging a sense of empathy towards Veronica as her status as victim (after suffering violence at the hands of her mother) is reprised. We can identify this “type” of violence in Gang Girl as a type that is “defined” by Devin McKinney as “strong violence.”

Consulting McKinney in her analysis of violence, masculinity and the cinematic ghetto in the films Boyz, Once for Warriors (1994) and City of God (2000), Sarah McDonald identifies the violence within these case studies as “strong violence.” This is “in opposition to ‘weak violence’ with the nomination of strength or weakness referring to the role the onscreen violence has in engaging with the audience.” “‘Strong violence’ offers something more than a titillating act, it is not easy viewing.”

According to McDonald:

“weak violence” is without a doubt what mainstream cinema tends to produce in copious amounts. It is a style of cinematic violence that often serves no purpose in the film’s narrative; it is an act that can be watched passively and provokes no reaction other than a slight queasiness at the bloodshed played out on screen.

---

11 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p.164.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
The gunshot, bleeding body of Tre’s brother, Ricky, in *Boyz* and the initiation of Veronica can, although very different in form, be considered as “strong violence” whereas Allison and Emily’s car park fight could be labelled as “weak violence,” leaving little impact on the viewer.

The initiation of Emily and Allison perhaps sits somewhere in-between, as both titillating as the actresses reveal their bare chests yet the episode acts as much more than a passive moment. There is by comparison no titillation in Veronica’s initiation; a scene replayed through flashback, reminding the viewer of the brutal act’s consequences. As the initiator passes Veronica on to the next male, the scene ends and is followed by an episode in which Veronica is physically sick. Unlike the sexual initiation in *Havoc*, Veronica remains clothed (at least to the viewer); there is no sexualisation of her body for the camera to linger on or essence of sexual attraction between Veronica and the male gang members. While Rachel reprises the “bad black mother” stereotype, this refusal to sexualise Veronica’s body for viewing pleasure moves beyond the casting of the black female body in cinema as the hypersexual jezebel: she does not function as the sexualised “hoe” of gangsta rap lyrics or the ghetto action movie. Veronica’s character also refuses to sustain the images often traditionally reserved for the cinematic black woman including the matriarch or welfare queen. By comparison, the prevailing cinematic depiction of the hyper-deviant and sexually aggressive black male persists as there is no justification (beyond gang “rules”) for this demeaning and violent act.

This depoliticised violence is far removed from the “bad man” of African American folklore. Ronald Judy considers the “bad man” as a ‘heroic” figure of “legitimate moral resistance to white oppression.” In her study of gang memoirs, Metcalf reveals that:

> subsumed within the broad term “bad nigger” are various stereotypes and caricatures, including a politicized figure who enacts violence for revolutionary purposes, or a depoliticized and destructive thug who commits senseless violence. The different personas are not necessarily polar opposites; there is some fluidity and overlap between them.

While there are moments in *Gang Girl* that propose that deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in urban environments give rise to drug related activity, violent behaviour enacted in the initiation scene renders the male gang members as “bad niggers” with no knowledge of political significance.

We could attempt to identify such violence as potentially politicised because Bailey revisits a period of economic crisis (late 1980s) during another period of economic uncertainty (2009) for blacks, suggesting that like Hector - who points his gun at the economically stable Toby - the racially marginalised male’s violent behaviour responds to crises in economy.19 McDonald notes of her case studies that while:

> each cinematic project corresponds to its national context, what is consistent in all is the depiction of men as excessively violent hypermasculine, in an attempt to recover a public masculinity and to compensate for the larger sense of social and political dislocation felt by the men in these ghettos.20

The non-white male can therefore be seen to overcompensate for his lack of financial control by controlling others through violence. Yet the thuggish behaviour of the black males in *Gang Girl* responds to neither structural violence (the political and economic disenfranchisement of individuals through unjust governmental policies)

---


20 McDonald, ‘Constructions of Violence,’ p.129.
nor state power often referenced in gang memoirs, or the threat of gang warfare as represented in *Mi Vida Loca*. Hector briefly but explicitly references classed and raced differences (noted in chapter three) between the Palisades and the barrio, but the sexual initiators of *Gang Girl* do not illustrate any degree of political insight. The narrative tract itself might have political thought but the black male gang members’ violence does not. What their violent behaviour does enable however, is stimulus for Queen V’s revenge narrative.

“Women use weapons for love;” Honour, Revenge and (Self) Love

The compulsion for revenge is a crucial to all three films and to gang culture more generally. Revenge, Metcalf notes is “a common theme in warrior culture” and contemporary street gangs can be seen as an extension of this culture. As street warriors in a street war, honour and revenge are achieved most readily through violence. We have already explored elements of revenge in the failed shoot-out of Mousie and Sad Girl who seek vengeance on each other because of their love for Ernesto. The love of a male outweighs their friendship for a brief period of time, but their love for one another ultimately overcomes this. Furthermore, the homegirls’ love of their children is illustrated as impetus to carry weapons as this section details. Love of others and of the self is discussed further in an exploration of the revenge narratives within *Havoc* and *Gang Girl* which logically follows the evaluation of sexual initiation; this violent gang practice is responded to with violence. In *Havoc*, the male love of a female stimulates revenge while Bailey’s film is arguably more original as love of the female self provokes revenge.

Upon the knowledge that Emily has been taken “advantage” of by Hector’s “crew,” Sam (Emily’s boyfriend) plans to take “revenge” in Allison’s words and to “defend” her “honour.” Declaring “that shit’s fucking rape,” Sam, who claims that “I would die for that girl and I will kill for her,” Toby and PLC member Nick are seen handling guns in preparation for finding the “16th Street punks.” Unlike *Mi Vida Loca* and *Gang Girl* where the phallocentricity of the gun is renegotiated along gendered lines, albeit problematically, gun handling continues to be delineated as a quintessentially male enterprise in *Havoc*. Guns and the concept of “honour” enable

---

21 For a discussion of the representation and politics of violence in gang memoirs see Metcalf’s book.

22 Metcalf, *The Culture and Politics*, p. 86.
Toby to attempt to reconstruct his masculinity after his previous emasculation by Hector. According to Siegel and Welsh, “the culture that houses gangs associates honor with hypermasculinity and the use of violence to protect reputation.” While Sam’s declares that it is Emily’s “honour” that he is defending, revenge enables Sam and Toby to construct a hypermasculine status imbued with self-esteem. However, Toby, Sam and Nick’s display of machismo is problematic in its own way. As the PLC boys prepare to engage in a revenge shooting, recycling a long filmic history of the white “hero” destroying the criminal Mexican American, the performativity of their gang status is revealed. Visible taxidermy on the wall of Nick’s house and his revelation that an alligator is the only victim of his father’s gun demonstrates that the guns the PLC handle are used for hunting animals (quintessentially a middle-class and white hobby) that then become trophy ornaments. This is the first time any PLC member has handled a gun in the film, unlike the 16th Street gang who are depicted as confident weapon handlers. Further extending the copycat nature of their firearm use and enhancing the presentation of their gun handling as unauthentic and out of character, Toby points his gun down Eric’s camera lens in a sideways fashion (mimicking the gun stance credited to Menace) declaring “our life is a fucking film.”

Allison learns of Toby, Sam and Nick’s intention to seek revenge when visiting Eric. As Allison walks into Eric’s room, footage of the scene which opens the film is playing on his computer screen. Allison watches herself speak of the PLC’s fascination with gang culture as her statement that the teenagers are “totally fucking bored” replays. Allison tells Eric, “I remember her.” After the events of the 16th Street initiation, Allison now detaches herself from the badly behaved “character” that she previously performed. Eric then proceeds to show Allison footage of the boys declaring revenge. Frantically phoning Toby, Allison tells him that Emily was not raped, that it was an initiation ritual. Nevertheless, Toby and the boys continue on their mission to avenge. Arriving at a motel that they believe the 16th Street to be inhabiting, the gun carrying male members of the PLC are instead faced with screaming Latina mothers who yell “please don’t hurt my baby!” The mothers are positioned as protectors, terrified by the sight of the gun. The PLC boys are themselves seemingly disturbed by their own brandishing of guns so closely to

---

children and women and so they quickly exit. At the same time, the 16th Street members are busy cruising the streets and declare, “bitches going to testify against Hector, go after them. Hit them up, shut them up.” On one level, the 16th Street members are undertaking such actions, like the shooting of El Duran by the Echo Park homeboys, to retain their gang leader’s (Hector’s) honour, which in the gang milieu could be deemed justifiable violence. But for audiences such actions are rash and difficult to legitimise especially when the white PLC males are conscious of their wrongdoing. The 16th Street are presented as commanders of respect which given their marginalised status can seemingly only be achieved through enacting violence.

In order for the 16th Street gang to avoid prison, they plan to use guns to silence Emily and Allison regarding the gang’s violent practices. Unlike the male PLC members, the 16th Street are not concerned at the prospect of brandishing weapons and using them against (young) women. However, as novice as the PLC are with guns, the 16th Street lack geographical knowledge of the gated communities of the Hidden Hills halting them in their pursuit. The police stop and redirect the men out of the wealthy Beverly Hills. In these few moments, Havoc reveals the racial and class divides of gun ownership, motivations for violence (survival / revenge) and the differences pertaining to the racial profiling of characters and responses to white and brown crime. Alongside these scenes we see footage of Allison and Emily post-initiation. After being told by her parents that the police are “investigating a gang rape,” Allison visits Emily and her parents where she insists that it was not rape but instead their choice to have sex with Hector and his crew: “you sleep with whatever number comes up, their initiation thing. It was our decision. We asked for it.” Emily, distraught that Allison has informed her parents of this, responds they “took advantage of me...I wanted them to stop.” The Echo Park locas of Anders’s film are “jumped-in for a whole minute” by fellow girl gang members in a scene that lasts less than 15 seconds, resulting in the girls embracing after. By comparison, the sexual initiation of the 16th Street is shown to place the girl in an extremely vulnerable position physically and psychologically. Being initiated in this manner, and Allison’s revelation of this to Emily’s parents, causes Emily to cut herself with a razor and attempt to overdose on pills in her final scene, self-inflicting violence upon her own body. However, Emily’s suicidal actions are laughed off by both herself and
Allison; violence is no longer a “serious” threat for the girls now that they are removed from the dangers of the 16th Street and the PLC males are defending their “honour.” For the homegirls of Echo Park however, violence continues and the girls must protect themselves.

The homeboys’ revenge shooting of rival El Duran, who in Lil Sleepy’s words is “blasted for no good reason” is depicted as hot-headed and unjustified (especially when compared to the PLC’s own justification for revenge). While *Mi Vida Loca* dismantles the suggestion that non-white youth are always ready to shoot in the presentation of Ernesto’s gun, the shooting of El Duran subsequently complicates this notion. Because of such unnecessary actions and shootings, the homegirls are unable to “count on the boys,” because of their short life expectancies and incarcerated status. This is a sentiment supported by contemporary historian Kevin Starr who notes of the early 1990s LA-based male gang member’s “increasing capacity for violence that would leave the majority of them dead or serving prison terms before they reached twenty-one.”

As a subculture more generally gang members are also unable to rely on state protection. Sad Girl reveals:

> We have our own meetings now - our own operation and we defend our own neighbourhood. By the time my daughter grows up, Echo Park will belong to her, and she can be whatever she wants to be. The homegirls have learnt to pack weapons ‘cause our operations have become more complicated.

The girls pack weapons as a means of attempting to take control of realms that were previously controlled by the boys. However, in her analysis of the film, Dever makes a perceptive statement recognising that not all violence originates from the same source:

> We cannot assume, as gang films universally seem to do, that all violence in the barrio is the same, stemming from savage gang members killing each other. Taking life as it comes in post-Rodney King L.A. is a much more complex proposition; violence is everybody’s domain.

---


Briefly offering one of the few scholarly recognitions of the significance of the context of Anders’s film, Dever indicates the necessity to analyse the varying sources, stimulants and contexts of violence.

Although *Mi Vida Loca* highlights what Dever terms the “importance of separating individual from group behaviours,” Anders also makes a clear distinction between the types of acceptable violence that these youth exhibit.\(^\text{26}\) Making passing reference to Anders’s film, Hien and Hien note the importance of making such distinctions rather than assuming that male and female aggression, even if similar in form, has the same origins or meaning.\(^\text{27}\) They quote Sad Girl’s assertion towards the narrative’s closing (delivered through her voice-over) that, “when women use guns, we don’t use them to prove a point, we use them for love.” Here, Anders makes plain the difference between firearm use: the boys who blast “for no good reason” and the girls who “use them for love.” That Sad Girl’s final narration pertaining to weapon use intersects with dialogue concerning her daughter (that Echo Park will be eventually be hers) illustrates this. The viewer is informed that violence not only stems from varying sources but also suggests that violence and revenge has varying degrees of legitimacy.

In *Gang Girl* we see a continued rationalisation of female violence. However, guns are not utilised by The Croniks for the protection and love of children or males as in *Mi Vida Loca*, but to prevent members from leaving the gang and as weapons to avenge rapists, ultimately to achieve self-love. According to Lopez, the girls “got violated because we wanted to feel love” but “getting gang raped to sell drugs” Lopez informs Veronica, “wasn’t love” at all. Deconstructing the gun as a masculine symbol of sexual power, Veronica inserts the symbolic phallus into the mouth of a male gangbanger who forced her to perform oral sex, initiated her into the gang and just moments before, beat her to the floor demanding “respect.” Discussing the act of shooting and the Freudian interpretation of the gun as symbolic phallus, Simon

\(^{26}\) Ibid.

Bronner writes that “shooting the gun is ejaculation.” Seeking revenge for her sexual mistreatment, Veronica shoots the male gang member in the penis, simultaneously castrating and killing him. Because of her actions, one black male gang member declares, “I want her fucking head on a silver platter” but it is Veronica who successfully avenges each of the three male gang members who sexually initiated her into the gang. Like the rape revenge narratives of Kill Bill (2003) or I Spit on Your Grave (1978 and 2010 remake), Gang Girl enables Veronica to transition from victim to avenger.

While some episodes of violence appear almost routinely, such as the shooting of men by men in the Hollywood action movie, other acts of violence, such as the rape of a man by a woman are less commonplace in cinema, but not absent. In The Violent Years (1956) it is implied that a (white) female gang member rapes a (white) man off-screen. For cult film writer, Rob Craig, this episode “momentarily” reverses “the brute power of entrenched patriarchy.” While Sarah Projanksy notes of the “exhausting ubiquity of representations of rape in the entire history of film,” rape is more frequently committed by men in both film and society. Statistically, Ronald Flowers reveals that while girl gang members have gained a greater “predisposition for violence,” female rapists (more generally, not just those in gangs) constitute “less than 1 percent of prisoners convicted of rape.”

Veronica’s revenge raping of one of the gang members with a blunt instrument is thus uncommon yet not unique. The revenge, while achieving a rejection of victimhood, is problematic in terms of viewing experience. Audiences recognise this as a brutally violent act, yet are expected to sympathise with Veronica’s repeatedly victimised status as reasoning for this behaviour. Veronica is attempting to escape her position as victim yet viewers are expected to draw on her victimisation to reach a sympathetic understanding; Gang Girl’s press reception suggests viewers fail to do so.

---

Claire Henry discusses the contradictory nature of the rape-revenge narrative in the Swedish filmic adaptation of Stieg Larsson’s 2005 novel *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, released the year before *Gang Girl*. The film adaptation, Henry argues, “works to create a series of contradictory experiences for spectators - we are invited to ethical reflection, but also encouraged to develop ‘perverse allegiances’ with the avenging protagonist.”\(^{32}\) Protagonist Lisbeth Salander is raped twice by Bjurman, the guardian of her finances. While Henry suggests that Salander’s revenge is “effective” it is “equally problematic precisely because it mirrors her own rape.”\(^{33}\) Veronica and Salander’s refusal to capitulate to victim status forces audiences to confront ideas surrounding violence and gendered norms in a post-feminist culture. However, for Veronica who has killed beyond those who have victimised her (the shooting of the white woman at age 15), there is a (female) moral obligation that she must renounce her gang membership and take her place on death row.

**Converting and Educating the Gang Girl on Death Row; State Violence and Religious Redemption**

The prison site as one of containment and regulation for non-white bodies was discussed in chapter two and the relationship between gang members and religion in the previous chapter. But here I seek to explore the prison site as educative and simultaneously violent focusing on *Gang Girl* and Veronica’s death row status and her conversion narrative. Initiatives such as the Gang Resistance Education and Training programme, rolled out nationally in 1992 (at the peak of gang membership) in educational environments, aimed to prevent gang involvement by educating youth of the dangers of gang life. Already entrenched in gang violence, Shakira takes her place on the “Scared Straight” programme for her opening violent outburst against Cynthia. Established in America in the 1970s, “Scared Straight” introduced first-time juvenile offenders to prisoners serving life sentences in an attempt to confront, berate and intimidate, or “scare straight,” the young offender to comply with the law through the theory of deterrence. In 1978, the critically acclaimed and Academy Award winning documentary film *Scared Straight!*


\(^{33}\) Ibid, p.182.
followed 17 juveniles through the Juvenile Awareness Program. However, James Finckenauer’s 1982 study on the “Scared Straight” programme in Rahway Prison (New Jersey), revealed that juveniles who “participated in the program actually did worse than a comparison group not exposed to the program.”

Despite Finckenauer’s observations of the programme’s ineffectiveness in reducing delinquent behaviour, “Scared Straight” has continued to be implemented in American prisons into the 21st century. In 2011, an A&E television series, Beyond Scared Straight (the first episode of which focussed on a women’s prison and five young juveniles) continued to meet the mainstream demand for success stories and conversion tales; the public take pleasure in “bad-gone-good” trajectories. Bailey’s “Scared Straight” programme in Gang Girl aims to warn youth of the dangers of gang violence, something that pop cultural products had capitalised on previously. Dever writes that in American Me “Olmos’s ‘Scared Straight!’ approach is a warning to young men to get out or stay out of gangs because they lead only to psychical or physical annihilation.” Concerned with the theme of redemption, Bailey insists that the “Scared Straight” tactic is beneficial to Shakira and Veronica. However, despite the latter’s position on death row, violence does not simply end.

Bailey’s prison scenes continue to fuel the public fascination with the real and fictional prison site and with gangsta culture and death more widely. Death Row Records, founded in 1991, encapsulates this voyeurism simply in its name. As Yvonne Kozlovsky-Golan notes, the “emblematic protagonist of the American death penalty is male,” yet “women’s share in cinema’s death row population is ten times their share in that of the real world.” Social worker Kathleen O’Shea informs us that “those who “fit” the image of people on death row in the United States are disproportionately black and almost entirely male.” However, “Historically, public executions, especially the executions of women, were always a draw.” Indeed,

35 Dever, Celluloid Nationalism, p.127.
38 Ibid, p.68.
women constitute one-in-50 people sentenced to death, yet cinematic representation is one in five. While capitalising on public intrigue of the death row woman in *Gang Girl*, the prison site raises questions regarding the state’s response to violence with violence (the death penalty).

Veronica’s response to violence with violence is punishable, yet the state’s is not. As Veronica remarks, “six years is a long time to wait to die.” However, as a cautionary tale and warning to youth about the realities of gang life, for Bailey the possibility of paying for violence with violence is the ultimate deterrent. Equally, the conversion tract dismantles the notion of the gang member as purely violent. Discussing the conversion narrative underpinning gang memoirs, Metcalf notes how for readers, the memoirist and their “redeemed selves” counter the “well-worn structuralist stereotypes of criminal gang members and death row prisoners.”

Capable of more than violence, the conversion narrative must also be considered in terms of viewing audiences. The prison component of the narrative demonstrates that solely screening violence would be unlikely to satisfy audiences uneasy with viewing female violence, and would arguably cause more public scrutiny than the already deeply critical media reception discussed in the next chapter. Incarcerated, and removed from the “mean streets,” Veronica and crucially the audience, are further reminded of reasoning for her deadly sensibilities through a redemptive trajectory.

The use of flashback is confessional in its presentation of Veronica’s violent acts and those inflicted upon her. The repeated audio and visuals of Veronica’s victimisation by her mother, alongside her weeping, reinforces that underneath this violent persona, is a vulnerable, parentless young woman. She is plagued by the trauma of her mother’s beatings who she terms a “monster.” To come to terms with her own aggression and exposure to violence, criminal conviction (while problematic in its cyclical pattern of violence) is shown to contribute to Veronica’s religious rebirth. With the assistance of a black female prison officer who discusses her “favourite scriptures” with Veronica, Veronica is “reborn.” Despite being slashed with a knife by a rival female gang member while imprisoned (placing women-against-women once again and highlighting the continuation of violence in the

---

prison site) Veronica finds God. With the help of the newly religious Lopez and the prison officer, Veronica converts to Christianity, as *Gang Girl* offers an alternative trajectory of female solidarity. As noted in chapter four, religion can be integral to street gangs, imbuing a sense of power and / or protection amongst members, conveying one’s cultural history, or suggesting the underlying morality of a gang girl. It is logical to return to religion here as Veronica and Shakira’s conversions occupy the second half of the film’s narrative.

Initiatives such as Homeboy Industries (a support facility for former gang members) established by Father Greg Boyle during the peak of gang membership in LA in 1992, were founded upon the notion that Christian teaching can aid in the gang member’s exit from the subculture of the gang. Re-entry into mainstream society is achieved at Homeboy Industries through a combination of employment, the removal of gang tattoos and religious practice. Initially created, as the name suggests, for male gang youth, the programme has since extended to females in the form of Homegirl Cafe (2007) for example, reflecting the realisation that the gang is not simply a male entity. In these programmes, religion and education enable the gang member to transition from violent gangbanger to redeemed citizen. The education of Mexican American gang girl Eva in *Freedom Writers* - a 2007 film set in the early 1990s and based on a book written by a female teacher (Erin Gruwell) who worked in a disadvantaged school in Long Beach, California - is achieved in the classroom with the assistance of the white Gruwell. Although Gruwell’s teachings do no consult the Bible, Eva, whose gang activity is stimulated by her father’s wrongful imprisonment and whose status as an “Aztec princess” is positioned as integral to her fighting ability, is enabled to transition out of the gang because Ms. Gruwell “provides students with the tools to develop a moral compass.”


42 Ibid.
some degree in *Gang Girl* as although Veronica is unable to re-enter society because of her sentence, with the encouragement of a black prison officer and Lopez, Veronica seeks salvation in the Bible. Although in a “white” controlled space, Veronica is able to transmit her conversion to “Scared Straight” participant Shakira, and Shakira is equally enabled to find God through redemptive vocabulary: “forgive me, for all of my sins.”

Within the prison site, Veronica is enabled to impart wisdom in Shakira. Similarly, Giggles gains the opportunity when imprisoned to learn about the importance of computers and then relays this information, which she sees as life-changing, to the homegirls. Fathering children “is a source of power, for rep, like trophies on a mantel” for former Mexican American gang member Luis Rodriguez in his memoir *Always Running*, but without Ernesto, motherhood is a financial struggle for the homegirls. They must, as Giggles suggests, reconfigure their subordination, economically and socially, to the male gang members. In attempting to do so, Giggles arranges a meeting with the homegirls to determine the future of Ernesto’s lowrider truck. However, at the same time, the homeboys gather together to make their own decisions about Suavecito. The dichotomy between the practices and competing visions of the females and males is obvious here. The girls hold their meeting indoors as their children play on the floor whilst the boys are located on the heavily graffitied streets, drinking. Although Anders destabilises the premise of the hard, masculine ethos of the street gang by reimagining Ernesto’s gun, the girls, in this scene, remain in the private, feminine sphere whilst the boys inhabit the public domain. However, continuing the reconfiguration of space as discussed in chapter two, *Mi Vida Loca* presents the home “as the arena where, through the medium of talk [...] Giggles has symbolically channelled them into the collective public sphere of action.”

The meeting is both business-like and educational. Giggles assumes the role of the teacher and asks the girls to raise their hand during the decision making process. Giggles “does time” for her man, but upon her release she is enthused to motivate the homegirls to action and wishes to gain her own self-respect and honour through hard-work as opposed to violence, conveyed through the filling out of job

---

applications. Despite her efforts, violence ensues in Echo Park as rival gang girls seek revenge for the murder of El Duran by the Echo Park homeboys.

**The Final Shoot-Out; Girls Shooting Girls and Boys Shooting Boys**

The closing scene of *Mi Vida Loca* underscores the differences in legitimate girl gang gun use while illustrating that gun use is far from monolithic amongst these young racially marginalised women. Sad Girl insists that the Echo Park girls are “safe and practical” in their gun use. However, Anders further conveys the inability of women to use weapons successfully as the rival River Valley girls accidentally shoot dead Big Sleepy’s daughter when attempting to shoot Little Sleepy. In their efforts to avenge El Duran’s murder, a young child sat playing on a toy bicycle is caught up in the River Valley’s crossfire, a scene reminiscent of the conclusion of *Menace*. Yet in *Mi Vida Loca* a young girl dies at the hands of a female gang member. The ending is distinctly different to the death of gang member Caine in *Menace* whose bullet-laden body acts as a shield enabling the survival of a young boy. “We do not,” as Professor of psychology Wayne Wilson reminds us in his discussion of why consumers attach value judgments to murder, “expect women to come out with guns blazing and display a willingness to murder in the same style and flourish compared to men.” Thus the killing of the child, and in Dever’s words, the gun’s “lethal potential” to “destroy the very things it purports to protect,” renders the rival homegirls’ violence completely futile.

Violence may be identified as ineffectual, but it is not without meaning. Polly Wilding observes in her study of gendered violence in Brazil that “violent acts are rarely random, but are infused with meanings.” Feminist film scholar Karen Hollinger notes in her analysis of Anders’s presentation of female friendship “that violence enacted by a woman is just as destructive as that perpetrated by a man.” However, the meaning behind the rival gang’s gun use and the boys’ blasting of El Duran is not associated with the protection and love of a child. The young victim is

---

not presented as one who “deserves” to die, unlike characters such as Harlan, Thelma’s attempted rapist, in *Thelma and Louise*. ⁴⁸ Although the homeboys are mourning the loss of Ernesto when the shooting of El Duran occurs, their firearm use is incomparable to the use of guns with the aim of protecting the self and / or the child, rendering it ultimately “senseless” to those positioned outside the gang. In this final scene, the River Valley homegirls, rivals to the Echo Park members with whom the viewers have now established an allegiance, commit unjustifiable violence which continues to link female aggression, and the gun, to a man. “We watch the sequence,” as Dever observes, “in near silence.”⁴⁹ Although the Echo Park homegirls’ narrative “unfolds” in the words of Fregoso as a “sisterhood saga,” the River Valley homegirls are placed against the Echo Park homegirls in this scene as they deviate from accepted modes of justifiable violence.⁵⁰ The sisterhood established in the rekindling of Sad Girl and Mousie’s friendship is shown not to be a universal sisterhood amongst Chicanas. While Anders’s use of song in the film’s opening suggested what Dever terms as “unity with the larger Latino community,” the ending of *Mi Vida Loca* illustrates that female solidarity, in part because of the reality of gang warfare and partly because of the filmic and cultural desire to place women against women, cannot be established.⁵¹

Sad Girl and Mousie clutching hold of their children, and Whisper her walking stick, instead of guns as they leave the funeral of the young girl in the closing moments of the film, suggests that these gang girls wield weapons to protect those who cannot protect themselves. The homeboys of Echo Park exploit their ability to carry firearms, engaging in violent competition that stems from a temporary loss of control. By comparison, the girls’ firearm use is necessary to protect their children. As Wilding highlights, “if acts of violence fall into particular categories, or are labelled in certain ways, as ‘self defence’ as opposed to ‘anger’ for example, this can legitimise the actions of violent individuals.”⁵² This is clearly played out in *Mi Vida Loca* as well as mainstream cinematic discourses more

---

⁴⁹ *Dever, Celluloid Nationalism*, p.161.
⁵¹ *Dever, Celluloid Nationalism*, p.136.
generally. Discussing the “cinematic female law enforcers” of the 1990s, Dole reveals they always “wish to protect those weaker than themselves: never men, but always women or children, ideally female children.” The Echo Park homegirls fulfil this role.

The fact that the rival River Valley homegirls seek revenge for El Duran continues to link the gun to a male character yet moves beyond the boundaries of the girls in the gang seeking to protect only those who are younger and weaker than themselves. As Dever contends, “a gun is a gun in anyone’s hands,” but justification for gun use is variable. The boys’ hot-headed gun use and the rival homegirl’s revenge killing for El Duran simply fuel the cycle of burials, conveyed as the girls and audience witness the third funeral of the film in its closing. The funeral is extended from what Starr terms as the male “gangbangers” “ritual of passage,” to include female funeral goers and female victims. Viewers can only speculate that the Echo Park homegirls might also contribute to an endless cycle of violence and funeral processions as they raise children around guns. For Forman, the “evolution” in Thelma and Louise from “gun-shy homebodies to gun-savvy, pistol packing mommas is consistent with women’s capacity to adjust to new options, opportunities and circumstances as they ascend the social ladder.” This can also be recognised in Mi Vida Loca as the girls seek new opportunities in the absence of men and gun use is intrinsic to this development. However, the Echo Park homegirls, as Timothy Shary indicates “do not enjoy the thrill of violence” as having weapons in close proximity of the children makes Sad Girl (in her own words) “nervous.” They arguably do not achieve the same confidence in gun handling as Thelma and Louise.

Sad Girl and Mousie’s reluctance to use firearms in the earlier kitchen and shoot-out scene results in the rekindling of their friendship as they choose

---

54 Dever, Celluloid Nationalism, p.161.
55 Starr, Coast of Dreams, p.78.
camaraderie over firearms and Ernesto. By comparison their decision to utilise guns at the end of the film is considered acceptable toughness with justification for their actions incorporated into the dialogue. Their willingness to protect their children, fulfilling the mother’s traditional role as protector of her child, is juxtaposed against the irrational gun use of the rival homegirls who shoot dead the child (the ultimate symbol of innocence). As Wilding writes, “violence constructed as ‘legitimate’ produces less fear than acts committed by unruly actors, whose violence is viewed as unpredictable, disproportionate or indiscriminate.”  

The River Valley homegirls’ shooting of the young girl diversifies the representation of gang girls and refuses to present a monolithic narrative of the roots of violence. At the same time, Anders illustrates that there is a necessity for the Echo Park homegirls to arm themselves against others that are willing to kill for a different kind of love, that of a man, something that Mousie and Sad Girl refused to resort to in their duel.

Anders contended in interview that the moviemakers of the ghetto action genre “were saddled with go-to-school and do-right and everything-will-be-ok” moralistic tales. By comparison, Anders claims that she “didn’t have to make proclamations or solve the problem.” Mi Vida Loca’s conclusion concerning the use of guns certainly confirms this idea as the girls gather at the final funeral and the soundtrack reveals, “Girls It Ain’t Easy.” Remaining on the margins of society, at a safe distance from mainstream social order, there is a degree of legitimacy in the girls’ gun use who, as the film’s tagline reveals, must perform multiple identities as “Mothers. Warriors. Sisters. Survivors.” Inserting the word “Warriors” alongside “Mothers” in the tagline provides further justification for their violence. The idea that warriors employ violence for noble, legitimate reasons translates to the Echo Park girls’ gun use. As Marita Gronnvoll writes, “women warriors must operate within strict limitations if their violence is to be socially sanctioned,” thus Anders is

---

58 Wilding, Negotiating Boundaries, p.45.
59 A. Anders, Personal Interview [Recorded Interview] 22 March 2015, 1pm. Echo Park, LA.
60 Ibid.
61 4 Corners, “Girl’s It Ain’t Easy,” originally performed by Honey Cone, Take Me with You (Hot Wax, 1969).
careful not to position the girls as mythic (masculine) warriors that are proud of their violent capabilities and firearm use.62

The characters of Mi Vida Loca respond to the threat of “shoot or get shot” by arming themselves. Arguably there is little other viable option available and to borrow Kopple’s phrase noted in the previous chapter, they have to “change their tactics.” By comparison, the 16th Street members plan to shoot Allison and Emily - furthering the film’s presentation of non-white males enacting violence against the white female body - to maintain some form of control. It is comparable in a way to the Echo Park homegirls’ firearm use because the ultimate aim is survival but it is unclear as to whether this comes to fruition. The 16th Street’s armed pursuit of Allison and Emily suggests that it will disrupt the male-on-male climatic Hollywood shoot-out or same sex shooting of Mi Vida Loca, but this is quickly curtailed as the male PLC members arm themselves. Havoc, unlike Mi Vida Loca, ends in an ambiguous manner failing to reveal whether the 16th Street gang members or the PLC boys are shot. Instead the scene fades to black after their two vehicles and gangs pass one another and the viewer is left with the sound of shots fired as boys shoot boys.63 By keeping the violence off-screen here, in a similar way that Mi Vida Loca does throughout, the film is left unresolved in terms of the survival / revenge narrative of the 16th Street gang and PLC shootout. What is made clear, however, is that Allison’s experimentation with gang culture acts as a rite of passage and her participation in the PLC and initial desire of 16th Street membership is a transitory state from “bad” teen to young adult.

The 16th Street offer a “realness” that Allison is unable to achieve in the Palisades. Yet this “realness” relies on casting the Latino gang as violent, even when fleeting moments, such as Hector’s arrest, reveal a vulnerability of the brown male

63 In the unrated version of the film, the ending similarly fades to black but Allison performs a monologue speech which replaces the replaying of her earlier contention, “we are totally fuckin bored.” In the unrated version, Allison, looking down the camera lens, states: “I don’t know. Shit. I mean, I’m a ... kid, basically...with good S.A.T .scores. But you can waste a lot of time buying into stuff like that...crying over some shit you thinks important...for, like two seconds. I mean, if you give us a moment of...connection...one true moment...and it’s, like, suddenly...we know everything in the world. And that’s us. That’s all there is to us.”
body to the state. Police intervention is shown to be necessary to curtail such inherently violent behaviours. Offering an insightful reading of the unrated version of *Havoc*, Richard Mora declares:

> By the end of the film, the brown, abject cholos have completely revealed their deviant, hypersexual, dangerous, or debaucherous nature. White Allison, on the other hand, evolves and her subjectivity is highlighted by the fact that she can and has stopped experimenting with the deviant behavior she once found enticing.\(^{64}\)

Violence, as Mora suggests, is classed, raced and gendered. For Allison, the gang acts as temporary refuge, who unlike the males of 16th Street, is able to modulate between white mainstream and gangsta culture. Although Kopple briefly comments on disparities and, even more momentarily, injustices of the police system which places Latinos as dangerous and whites as exploratory, ultimately the film, as Mora suggests, only serves to reinforce these stereotypes, particularly in relation to episodes of violence.

More recently in *Spring Breakers* (2013) similar depictions of race and class have surfaced in relation to white girls who engage with gangsta culture and violence. Although the girls’ violence in *Spring Breakers* “allows the girls to challenge gender categories” Nampande Londe recognises that:

> Unlike *Sugar & Spice* (2001), in which the cheerleader protagonist robs a bank to provide for her coming child, or *Thelma and Louise* (1991) who respond to patriarchal sexual violence, the girls of *Spring Breakers* react not to trauma but middle-class boredom.\(^{65}\)

We have recognised this trope in *Havoc* and the two films offer a comparable and noteworthy commentary on the politics of violence. In the opening scene of *Spring Breakers* the girls commit a robbery of a restaurant, armed (unbeknown to their victims) with only water pistols, in an attempt to secure money for their Spring break - their rite of passage. Simply put by Londe, “Black crime is portrayed as dangerous,


\(^{65}\) N. Londe, ‘Spring Breakers: the Fantasy of Feminine Freedom,’ *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Sexuality*, Vol.1 (2014), p.91. It is worth noting that the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Sexuality* is an undergraduate, peer-reviewed journal. Londe’s article offers an original and important analysis of the representation of gender and violence in *Spring Breakers* which academics have not yet engaged with.
whereas white crime is playful and innocent.”

Discussing specific scenes of the film, Londe unpacks this statement:

Faith knows that her friends committed a violent crime to finance their trip, yet says: “I know you did a bad thing, but I’m glad you did it.” With guns, they tear through a wedding, straddling partygoers’ heads and smashing the groom’s head into his wedding cake, to Britney Spears’ ballad *Everytime*. Afterwards they smoke marijuana, grinning down upon three boys tied to a hotel bed. In contrast, the viewer never sees Big Arch or his acolytes smile; they remain menacing harbingers of doom.

Both *Spring Breakers* and *Havoc* place the non-white males of the films as the most dangerous perpetrators of violence. Big Arch is a non-smiling black drugs trade owner and Faith, whose name has religious connotations (suggesting morality), has a moral consciousness regarding violent acts, much like Sad Girl, Mousie and Veronica. But in *Spring Breakers*, Candy repetitively instructs the others to “just pretend like it’s a fucking video game!” “While from the girls’ perspective, the fantasy of violence diffuses it and makes it less immoral,” Londe rightfully acknowledges that “this renders it more disturbing for the viewer.”

While *Spring Breakers* does not endorse this white girl violence, in the same way that *Havoc* does not advocate either Latino or white gang violence, race and class-based assumptions surrounding racial crime places the white girl’s violence as out of character, as fantasy. In Korine’s film, Candy and her friend Brit climatically pull the trigger on black male criminals, including the “menacing” Big Arch, in a reversal of racial and gender media images (comparable to the shooting of Ernesto). After consuming alcohol and drugs, they kill under the instruction of a white male gangsta whom they find sexually alluring (as Allison did Hector) and who is shot dead at the hands of Big Arch’s gang. The film disrupts the girls-shooting-girls and boys-shoot-boys trope but they still kill for a man, Alien. While immoral, drugs, alcohol and male command offer some reasoning behind their violent act, and their killing of violent (black) criminals aids in alleviating the viewers’ disturbance surrounding white girl violence. The fact that Allison and Emily do not handle guns and only briefly engage in violent acts also alleviates the tensions of the momentary

---

66 Ibid, p.90.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
violence they perform, as does the comparable positioning of the non-white gangbangers as inherently violent as the 16th Street aim to kill them.

Although not justified in the same way that Anders presents the motivation of the Echo Park locas’ capacity for violence as a distinctly maternal dedication, Allison’s deviancy is shown to stem from a dysfunctional family unit (and boredom), and is not as dangerous as the Latino males who seek to silence her. Although her transgression is neither wholly celebrated nor demonized, Allison is not as “bad” as the boys. In this sense, Mi Vida Loca and Havoc are similar in their handling of girl gang violence - there is no sense of vilification (except of the rival River Valley girls) particularly when compared to Kopple’s representation of Latino male violence. Allison’s badness is only short-term, ending when the family unit is restored and Allison’s mother tells her that she loves her. The film suggests that Latino gang violence will continue to plague the barrios and more disturbingly, will influence white youth, but only temporarily.

By comparison, still entrenched in gang life, Croniks gang member Rated-R is shown to be psychopathic in the film’s dénouement, refusing to allow Shakira to leave the gang despite her newfound religious rebirth. Shakira’s declaration of her religious awakening, “I ain’t a Cronik, I ain’t even a gangsta. I’m a child of God now,” leads Rated-R to resort to violence, shooting her at close-range as women are (almost now predictably) placed against one another. Here, the code and honour of the gang, much like the 16th Street’s pursuit of Allison and Emily for the sake of Hector’s freedom, is presented as a non-viable reason for violent (female) behaviour. Much like the “epidemic” of both America’s gun culture and girl gang violence, Rated-R (whose name suggests viewing caution) and her violent, chaotic shooting of Shakira is medicalised in its presentation. Rated-R is rendered “mad” and “bad” as she shouts, over gesticulates and laughs while pointing her gun at Shakira, declaring, “I wanna blow your brains out right now bitch.” While three other girl gang members are armed and point their guns at Shakira, they decide not to shoot her and leave the scene, rebuking Rated-R’s instruction and positioning her actions as too “extreme.” Dave Boothroyd recognises that “we now live in a culture characterised by an extreme vision of sorts,” yet some acts are in fact too extreme Bailey
suggests. Indeed, discussing the discourse of female violence, Paula Gilbert notes how “society is afraid of extremes - of female murderers, who like feminists, test established boundaries.”

Surviving the shooting and rejecting the gang, Shakira reconciles with Cynthia in the closing moments of the film. Unlike Mi Vida Loca, where the pitting of females against one another is cyclical, Gang Girl ultimately ends with the union of young women, albeit this is essentially accomplished because of male intervention: God. Moving from an initial violent tract to one of pedagogical concern, Shakira, Veronica and Lopez are reformed. The film concludes with the Biblical lexes, “Veronica was right; all you have to do is surrender” as the closing titles declare, “To the youth of the world ... Love conquers all.” Speaking in 2008, before his inauguration as President the following year, Barack Obama declared that in “small towns” in the Midwest where a lack of employment has remained static for the last 25 years despite administration promises of regeneration, “it’s not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion.” Although speaking of a very different context, LA and the Bronx are far removed from “small towns” in the Midwest, violence amongst Mexican American and African American communities in a “post-racial” America is still prevalent as disparate employment and incarceration rates between whites and non-whites continue. For Bailey, religion is more powerful than the gun, but the conversion narrative is also a conscious way to provide absolution for Veronica and Shakira’s sins: their violation of traditional gendered norms.

In closing

The transgression of traditional feminine behaviour through the demonstration of violent capabilities in Havoc and firearm use in Mi Vida Loca and Gang Girl asks audiences to challenge notions of gendered categories. Compared to

---

their male counterparts, filmic girl gang violence is seemingly less irrational as viewers are offered justification and explanation for their behaviour; a protective function associated with motherhood, the loss of male figures, a dysfunctional family unit or more fleetingly, social conditions. *Mi Vida Loca*, *Havoc* and *Gang Girl* are quick to rationalise girl gang violence, but when this is not achievable, such as in the case of the River Valley homegirls and Rated-R, women are placed against women. Reflective of the reality of gang rivalry, this also leads to clear distinctions in the legitimacy of violence. The protecting of the child and avenging of rapists mitigates girl gang violence to a certain extent, but ultimately, while firearms and gang membership might imbue a sense of protection for these marginalised homegirls, they do not equal freedom. The pro-Chicano organisation, the Brown Berets, demanded in June 1968 “the right to keep and bear arms to defend our communities against racist police, as guaranteed under the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution.”72 Much like the Black Panthers, gun use for the Brown Berets was politically loaded.73 Although the non-white characters’ right to bear arms is complicated due to their criminal and marginalised status, the homegirls of Echo Park exercise (yet ultimately fail to fulfil), their individual right to protect those weaker than themselves, in particular, their young children.

*Mi Vida Loca* as a film boasts political significance in its creation of space for the discussion of Chicana girl gang life and its challenging of media representations of its subjects. Anders’s overall aim of “humanising” the homegirls is in itself political. Certainly the homegirls recognise their marginalised position and ex-gang member Giggles’ desire to work can be identified as politically resistive in meaning, particularly when “numerous employers and unions in the past had purposely excluded Chicanos from employment except for the most menial tasks.”74 The role of these young women in relation to firearms also partially stems from the state’s failure to protect these gang members due to their criminal and marginalised status. Police presence occurs only to arrest these youth or after a fatal shooting.

However, gun use for the characters themselves is limited in its political interest. Todd Boyd discusses how ghetto action movies such as *Menace* replaced the “political baggage” of *Boyz* with nihilism. Moving away from the ghetto action genre, Anders replaces both the overtly political message and nihilism with romantic elements underscored by Sad Girl’s “weapons for love” declaration.

Conversely, weapons in *Havoc* and *Gang Girl* are loaded largely to serve revenge but this can still be related to notions of love (of the self and of others, but not children). Although we are offered moments that suggest, in a similar vein to Anders’s film, that structural violence co-produces gang violence, and in the case of *Gang Girl* the state reproduces a cyclical pattern of violence, Bailey and Kopple similarly do not politicise their characters’ gun use or violence more broadly. When Eric attempts to discuss gang violence and asks Allison why “kids were gettin’ hurt,” Allison terms it “a stupid question.” Removed from any context of the decorating social conditions and responses to police incited violence that the early ghetto action movies sought to convey and detached from the turf wars that the inhabitants of Echo Park are subjected to, violence is sexualised rather than politicised as Allison proceeds to erotically display her body to Eric in this scene. Violence is further sexualised in the initiation and phallic gun imagery as Kopple reinscribes structuralist stereotypes of race, class and gender in the representation of violence.

Bailey by comparison positions his characters in the social conditions so readily identifiable in films such as *Boyz*, with bad black mothers contributing to instability and drugs fuelling non-sexualised violence. This suggestively politicises *Gang Girl*’s violence yet Veronica’s violent behaviour is identified as stemming from her mother’s violence and her gang initiation rather than structural violence more explicitly. Gang members are shown to be beyond merely violent but Bailey dismantles the political tract and instead positions religion above politics. Ultimately, the state, and crucially audiences, are relieved of any responsibility for the gang girl’s wrongdoing by presenting the prison as a place of education and conversion and as somewhere that Veronica, Lopez, Shakira and Giggles need to experience in order to exit the gang. In all three films the politicisation of violence, evident in *Boyz* as posters of Reagan’s 1984 election campaign posters are penetrated

---

by bullets, is replaced with a need to offer justification for female violence which similarly relieves audience anxiety and responsibility.
Chapter Six

Professional Critics and Online Consumers - Reception Part I

Introduction

The bulk of this project centres on my own critical analysis of the representation of the gang girl and girl gang in *Mi Vida Loca*, *Havoc* and *Gang Girl*, with the previous chapters investigating changes in representation over time and the social, cultural and economic context of each film. I now bring the thematically distinct chapters together to assess how these films have been consumed and received by the public. To enable my research to move beyond the reliance of an exclusive textual analysis or socioeconomic contextualisation, this chapter shifts analytically to Reception Studies, which “says that an audience’s interpretative practices explain a work’s meaning.”¹ While this chapter includes the sampling of a broad range of press material (including newspapers and magazines) pertaining to each film (a total of 100 pieces of press material were consulted), I also include the voices of those often negated from press reception in chapter seven; high school youth. This material derives from focus groups and questionnaire responses that I conducted in an East LA high school in 2015, allowing me to investigate the consumption of these films beyond the realm of film critics and reviewers, whose voices, while valuable, are not wholly representative of audience reception. We will see in the two following chapters how these three movies generated hugely conflicting readings moving beyond my own concerns regarding issues of male domination in the gang and, at the same time, patterns in reception emerged. Although sometimes received unfavourably, the discussions these films produced makes plain their status as worthy texts to study issues of representation, reception and the “real-world.”

Briefly discussing *Mi Vida Loca’s* press reception, we will see shortly how Susan Dever has already started the process of illustrating how influential film

---

criticism can be in forming the opinions and viewing strategies of others. Yet Carol Dole succinctly informs us that, “Magazine and television movie reviews are sometimes cited as representative of popular taste; but the validity of such an approach is limited by the fact that most reviewers are educated cinephiles who react to films differently than does the average viewer.”2 This is illustrated by analysing professional film reviews alongside schoolchildren’s critical readings in chapter seven, revealing how youth are keen to challenge movie reviewers who do not “make or break movies” in the words of Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, but “they can help create a positive or negative “buzz” around a film,” and act as gatekeepers to public opinion.3 “More than one-third of those living in the U.S. report seeking the advice of film critics and approximately one-third of filmgoers say they choose film based on favourable reviews.”4 This is why it is crucial to extend modes of analysis to press sampling; professional film reviewers can inform and influence consumer choices.

It is of equal importance to position the opinion of professional and non-professional viewers together to broaden the understanding of audience interpretation. Interconnecting professional journalism and film criticism alongside general audience responses and youth focus groups might appear unusual because of how different such approaches are. However, as notable studies such as Barker, Arthurs and Ramaswami’s discussion of the controversial movie Crash (1996) reveal, to really understand and engage with reception and consumption, interpretations need to be analysed alongside another to gauge how audiences and press share and contest opinion.5 While influential, the voices of those often paid and educated in film analysis can be challenged by viewers whose lived experiences rather than professional careers offer equally, if not more, fruitful readings of texts.

---

Methodology

Analysing the interactions between audience and text and the way in which viewers produce meaning from these films is at the crux of both reception chapters. The significance of studying the viewing strategies of audiences within the specific social, political and historical context in which they are consumed has been commented on by notable scholars, including Jacqueline Bobo. In her 1995 study, Bobo recognises that “members of a social audience - people who are actually watching a film or television program - will utilize interpretive strategies that are based upon their past viewing experiences as well as their personal histories, whether social, racial, sexual, or economic.”

Film criticism provides only limited insight into cinematic consumption in specific circumstances and often stems from a white male, middle-class perspective. To illustrate this, a study analysing the relationship between gender and online film criticism (but not race) conducted in 2016 by the Centre for the Study of Women in Television and Film (San Diego University) concluded, “In every type of publication, male reviewers dramatically outnumber female reviewers.”

A similar study of the race of film reviewers is yet to be conducted but the “white male majority” is well-recognised. In the press sampled (accessed via LexisNexis, IMDb and NewsBank Inc.) for Mi Vida Loca, two thirds was produced by men and for Havoc just one fifth of reviewers were women. In the press surrounding Gang Girl, the majority of press articles were written by women; these were not professional film critics but rather journalists.

As explained in the Introduction, Gang Girl does not form part of the focus group discussion. Bailey’s own declaration of its lack of suitability for children has

---

9 Newsbank Inc., and LexisNexis are international news databases and page numbers for articles were not always available.
already been noted and influenced my decision to omit the film from the audience project, in combination with the film’s unrated status. Furthermore, its screening to youth would have been unlikely to have been approved by my institution’s ethics committee. Its absence is an obvious limitation particularly when my own reading of the three films has placed the texts alongside one another, illuminating how style politics and the representation of violence and geographies can vary according to locale and context. Despite this, the material pertaining to Gang Girl’s reception by the general public, accessed through local and national newspapers and interviews, provides some of the richest material for discussion. To counteract the lack of audience study pertaining to Bailey’s film, online viewer responses on forums, blogs and viewer comments on YouTube trailers of Gang Girl, news articles relating to the film and reviews accessible on its Amazon.com product page have been meticulously consulted and documented in its discussion.\(^\text{10}\) Today, the “gang world” is purportedly “tangled up in a Web of digital information,” with social media sites and the internet aiding in the recruitment, promotion and, ironically, arrests of gang members.\(^\text{11}\) In the digital age, it is important to capitalise on the increasing use of the Web, including the online reviewing of films. In an attempt to diversify the responses to Gang Girl further and to seek a larger sample size of audience opinion, I set up two online blog discussions for Bailey’s film on the movie forums chud.com and aintitcool.com. These online discussions failed to draw viewer responses, underscoring the lack of commercial interest in Bailey’s film and its niche viewership.

This chapter begins by exploring some of the reception material for Gang Girl, examining the ways in which different audiences engage with such a socially loaded text. I acknowledge that throughout this thesis, Mi Vida Loca is readily used as a case study to illustrate the themes of each chapter. Positioning Anders’s film at the beginning of each discussion has allowed analysis to materialise chronologically,

\(^{10}\) There are, as Jason Smith details, issues associated with gathering audience responses online. The “internet presents problems of identity and authenticity,” “lacks a concrete setting and cannot be face to face” unlike the focus groups I conducted. At the same time, this removal from the researcher can produce less mediated responses. See J. Smith, ‘The Wicker Man Digest: A Web Ethnography of a Cult Fan Community,’ in J. Chapman et al (eds.), The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.230.

tracing patterns of representation over time in a linear fashion. As the reader will see, the press material surrounding *Mi Vida Loca* and indeed *Havoc* is incredibly rich. Yet the reception of *Gang Girl* by media outlets and audiences is arguably more fascinating in its tensions and debates and importantly raises ideas that can then be identified in the press reception of the other two films including contentions between the “authentic” versus the “unauthentic.”

In short, the reception chapters explore the complex, contested and varied reception to the representation of the gang girl and girl gang in film along the axis of critic, filmmaker and audience. I hope to illustrate how Cultural Studies in Lawrence Grossberg’s words “matters because it is about the future, and about some of the work it will take, in the present, to shape the future.”

The voices of marginalised youth, who (unknowingly) brought together the paradigms of culturalism and structuralism in their readings at a time when this divide is somewhat exhausted, should arguably be consulted more frequently, contributing further to our understanding of popular culture and beyond. Although the student voices do not come into play until the following chapter, this chapter begins by showcasing the importance of consulting opinion beyond the realm of the press.

**Sensationalised Scandal versus Sociological “Reality;” Reviewing *Gang Girl***

Prior to *Gang Girl*’s DVD release, in 2008 one online viewer commented on the movie’s trailer, terming Bailey’s forthcoming project as “a timely and relevant movie subject,” reinstating the necessity to include the film in this thesis. Post-release in 2010 another revealed, “At first I was appalled by the profanity I was hearing; but then I realized that this movie needed to be real and hard just like real-life is.” The “realness” of the film was commented on by a number of online commentators; “this is one of the best reality orientated movies I have ever seen” one viewer claimed. The film was said to “present to us the real drama gang girls from

---

14 User name “thebetterman,” 2010 in Ibid.
15 Ibid.
the Bronx face,” placing emphasis on the locale and the film’s authenticity.\textsuperscript{16} Another online reviewer of \textit{Gang Girl} noted, “Despite the less than top drawer production values the actors are quite good, given their seemingly minimal experience, and the story is believable and solid.”\textsuperscript{17} The notion that the story is “believable and solid” suggests an inclination of audiences to seek authenticity in film, to find tangible reality in a work of fiction as issues of authenticity and realism, which as the reader will see, pervade the reception of all three films.

One viewer went so far as to plead “Please let your kids watch this!” because of its reality-rooted narrative and didactic framework.\textsuperscript{18} That “God’s redemptive love is available to all” also placed significance on the moral meaning within the film, counteracting the film’s violent trajectory with one which “articulated a message of God’s saving grace to these young people that are facing an overwhelming gang presence out in these streets.”\textsuperscript{19} Applying sociological dimensions to the film, viewers of Bailey’s film noted of the importance of the subject matter in sociological (and gendered) terms: “Society tends to focus on our young boys and that’s great but we cannot forget about our young women as well.”\textsuperscript{20} In addition to moving beyond the filmic fixation with young males, the commentator also supported the notion that the film should be made available to youth: “This film is powerful and should be viewed by all our youth.”\textsuperscript{21} Three years after its DVD release, such opinion was vehemently challenged by the media.

In March 2013, \textit{Gang Girl}, although remaining unstudied by scholars, attracted public criticism because of the uncovering of elementary school Principal Anissa Chalmers’s role as Queen V / Veronica. Why it took three years for such a discovery to be made illustrates the niche market of the film and its independent,

\textsuperscript{17} User name “D. Levine,” 29 March 2010, Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} “thebetterman,” comment thread on \textit{Gang Girl aka Surrender}.
\textsuperscript{20} User name “J. Bailey,” 28 July 2010 in Amazon comment thread, \textit{Gang Girl}.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
small scale production and distribution; unlike *Havoc* and *Mi Vida Loca*, the film had neither A-list actresses or actresses nor a well-established writer/director. When local press did surface, *Gang Girl* was unfavourably received by media outlets, contrasting with the initial online viewers who largely regarded the film as temporally relevant, realistic and educative. News articles on Bailey’s movie featured in both the print and online version of the *New York Post (NY Post)*, a tabloid newspaper based in NY and under the ownership of Rupert Murdoch. The paper has been heavily criticised, not only by other media outlets such as the *Columbia Journalism Review* which deemed the publication a “social problem - a force of evil” in 1980, but also by hip-hop artists Public Enemy.\(^{22}\) In 1991 the hip-hop group released the song “A Letter to the *New York Post*” in which the paper was considered “bull” and “fucked up news,” largely in relation to the publication’s journalism concerning member Flavor Fav’s legal affairs, but also in terms of a wider critique of the paper’s coverage of blacks.\(^{23}\) Over time, the reputation of the *NY Post* has changed, and it is the publication’s sensationalist style that is more readily criticised today rather than its racial politics. Despite criticisms, it remains among one of the most widely circulating printed and online news publications in the US. In March 2013, the paper had a total average daily circulation of 500,521 and was number six in the top 25 newspapers in the US by weekday circulation.\(^{24}\)

The *NY Post* ran several articles of varying length with their initial coverage of the “Crass Act” of Anissa Chalmers making front-page news (fig.13).\(^{25}\) Featuring a half-page image of Chalmers-as-Queen V pointing a gun, the front-cover caption sensationally read, “Gun-toting gang actress by night.”\(^{26}\) Juxtaposed with this image and inserted in the right-hand corner was a smaller picture of Chalmers-as-Principal, with the text “Bronx PS.132 principal by day.” Inside the paper, four stills from the film - all of which featured Chalmers handling a weapon, were placed alongside an

---

25 S. Edelman & C. Giore, ‘Crass Act,” *NY Post*. 17 March 2013, p.1.; Figure used is a screen grab from the *NY Post* e-reader.
26 Ibid, p.5.
image of her school, the DVD cover and an accompanying article. The article was also available via the *NY Post*’s online platform (with variations in title and images used), and denounced Bailey’s directorial debut as a “bloody B-movie [...] filled with foul language, beatings, blood and sexual violence.” In the online article ‘Bronx School Principal’s Movie Role as Gun-slinging Gangsta Alarms Parents,’ Chalmers’s character was reported as a “vicious gangbanger who deals drugs, robs, rapes and murders.” Although Bailey was keen to tell me during interview that “we made national headlines with this,” ironically for Bailey, “bad” press and publicity to emerge from *Gang Girl* was its only publicity.

Re-postings of the *NY Post*’s coverage appeared on AllHipHop.com, highlighting the urbanity of the film and its aligning with the ghetto action movie of the early 1990s (sometimes labelled as hip-hop films by film critics). Given the setting of the film, it is unsurprising that the *NY Post* articles also appeared on *News 12 The Bronx* and the coverage by foxnews.com is expected because of Murdoch’s ownership. Perhaps unexpected is the reposting by the *Daily Mail Online* (UK), significant because it featured on the British website, but less than surprising because of its watered-down (when compared to the *NY Post*) sensationalist style. When controversy emerged in 2013 in relation to the film, the *Daily Mail Online* had an average global total for daily browsers of 8.2 million, almost double the “respected”

---


28 Ibid.


Guardian.co.uk.32 The sensationalist scandal of the gangsta principal was clearly deemed suitable for international coverage by an online platform that thrives off sensational news media. Privateofficer.org, a news source owned by an international security and law enforcement organisation, also re-posted an article.33 The advent of digital media platforms, internet access and blogging since Mi Vida Loca’s release is paramount to this international dissemination beyond the Bronx and should be acknowledged. It also suggests that the issues raised surrounding pedagogy and violence, as well as a universal fascination with the gang girl and American gangsta culture draws interest beyond the film’s immediate locale.

Bailey responded to the escalating criticism in articles such as ‘New York Principal’s Movie Role as Gangsta Angers Parents’ which began to circulate, stating in an NY Post article that he “wanted to showcase and warn about the dangers of female gangs in America.”34 Turning to the publication that ran the most damning critiques to issue his opinion, Bailey defended the film in a brief article titled ‘The Story Behind ‘Gang Girl.’”35 For Bailey, his movie was “not exploitation but a realistic view of what’s happening in America today [...] The media is avoiding the real issue: gang violence. We have no problem bombing other countries, yet the war is in our backyard with our youth.”36 Bailey, like the initial online reviewers of his film, located Gang Girl in “real” sociological terms, placing emphasis on its Americanness. In a similar vein, in its early stages, Kopple’s movie was considered as a “tough movie that deals with real issues” by Hollywood producer Stewart Hall.37

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 S. Hall quoted in Glucksman, M. ‘In Focus: Wrapping it Up,’ Filmmaker Magazine. Spring, 2004. Available online:
Although Bailey did defend his movie, it failed to curtail unfavourable opinion. Sandra Bookman reporting for *Eyewitness News* on Channel 7, revealed that the film had “raised more than a few eyebrows” amongst parents; one father featured on the news item, claiming that *Gang Girl* was “derogatory.” The programme also interviewed Dennis Walcott, then Chancellor of the NY Department of Education (DOE), who remarked that a principal “has the right to engage in other activities […] but you also have to be very conscious of your role.” Chalmers received a waiver to appear in the film from the DOE, but according to an agency spokeswoman, the DOE were unaware of the film’s content. Chalmers herself, who was under investigation by the City DOE for an undisclosed allegation, and the DOE press office, have refused to comment on the matter. In a podcast released in 2010 prior to press attention, Chalmers did talk about her past, framing her life as transitional:

I didn’t kill nobody. I’m not a murderer […]. A best friend and I did things that I don’t want the Feds to hear about when I was younger… But glory to God. I’m here. I’m alive. I’m well. I just praise God for the change that has occurred in my life.

Although Chalmers was keen to address her own evolution, the educational institute at which Chalmers remains principal since starting the role in 2006, has a history of continuing academic, disciplinary and behavioural “problems” which were initially reported by news outlets before filtering into *Gang Girl*’s discussion.

In 2011, the respected *New York Times* (*NY Times*) reported that an 11-year-old girl at the school was suing the police, claiming she was handcuffed following a fight in which, at the age of ten, she “punched and kicked another girl” and “pulled

---

39 Ibid.
out her hair.”42 The following year, an eight-year-old boy “sliced” a fellow pupil with a “double-edged razor [...] causing a deep laceration” that required six stitches.43 Although some parental concerns were raised regarding the school’s administration, the NY Daily News (the first daily printed tabloid in the US and the fourth most circulated daily newspaper state-wide) highlighted that “no one at the troubled school appeared surprised at the violence.”44 The minimal reaction and complete lack of surprise to the frequent episodes of violent acts carried out by young children at what the NY Post termed an “ultraviolent” school contrasts greatly with the media, public and parental reactions to Chalmers’s role in Gang Girl.45 Despite violent acts being carried out in real-life at the school, Chalmers’s acting out of violence was a greater cause of concern.

One parent said of the film in 2013, “It’s crazy. It’s real graphic [...] It’s not something you want your kids to see.”46 Another asked, “one of the students could find this on the Internet, and then what? How am I supposed to explain that to my children?”47 For one NY Post columnist, Chalmers’s role in the film called for the termination of her reported yearly salary of $129,920; “The Department of Ed. should dump this fool.”48 Furthermore, a teacher at Chalmers’s school took the opportunity to reveal the principal’s “intimidating” personality, whilst headlines such as ‘DOE raps ‘gangsta’ principal’ claimed that Walcott was “aghast at the images in and content of the film,” which were “totally inappropriate,” according to a DOE spokeswoman.49 No sense of Gang Girl’s morality or reality that initial commentators spoke of was imbued in such comments by the DOE. The NY Post did

42 F. Santos, ‘Girl, 11, Sues the Police, Claiming She Was Handcuffed,’ NY Times. 1 April 2011 [Online]. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/02/nyregion/02lawsuit.html?_r=0 [Accessed 02/02/2015].
44 Ibid.
45 A. Peyser, ‘Say the End to this Principal,’ NY Post. 18 March 2013, p.12.
46 Edelman, ‘Bronx School.’
47 Ibid.
48 Peyser, ‘Say the End,’ p.12.
offer some balance to the discussion in one article, stating that parents were “disturbed by it despite a redemptive ending in which Chalmers’ Queen V character turns to Christianity and serves in the Scared Straight Programme.”\(^{50}\) The redemptive conversion of Queen V was noted in numerous online comments, but only featured in one of the *NY Post’s* articles, with the rest concentrating on Chalmers’s role in the education system. Indeed, education bloggers were scathing in their suggestions that Chalmers was “just paving the way for children to follow in her footsteps and glorify gang life.”\(^{51}\)

Despite criticism from “outraged” teachers, bloggers and parents, a small minority did defend Chalmers, raising questions concerning racialised and gendered violence.\(^{52}\) While an *NY Post* reader from Manhattan critically asked “Where are these DOE employees coming from?,” one parent insisted, “she’s a great principal. Ronald Reagan waved a gun in Western movies, and he became president of the United States.”\(^{53}\) Film scholar Susan Jeffords reminds us that Reagan, who was “chosen as *Time* magazine’s “Man of the Year” in 1980,” and his “path to the White House was paved at least in part by his experiences as a popular film star.”\(^{54}\) For Jeffords, Reagan “cast himself as hero, but many in the country seemed to be reading from the same script.”\(^{55}\) Reagan and his administration successfully positioned themselves as “distinctively masculine, not merely as men but as decisive, tough, aggressive, strong, and domineering men” at a time when white masculinity was purportedly jeopardised by the advance of the women’s movement in the decades prior to Reagan’s election.\(^{56}\)

It is too naive to assume that criticisms aimed at Chalmers were simply because she was a female, and that had a male principal assumed a similar role he would have generated less scandal. Terms used by the press and parent referred to

\(^{50}\) Edelman, ‘Bronx School.’


\(^{52}\) Edelman, ‘Bronx School.’


\(^{55}\) Ibid, p.5.

\(^{56}\) Ibid, p.11.
Chalmers as a principal rather than as a female, yet comparisons made to (white) males implicitly suggest that race and gender are crucial in determining the acceptability of performed violence (as explained in previous chapters). Reagan’s performance of violence reaffirms much-lauded white masculinity while Chalmers’s performance seemingly reinforces constructions of blacks as inherently dangerous and defies gendered roles. However, it is noteworthy that neither Bailey’s status as a black filmmaker nor the race of the cast were referenced in the press sampled; only one online blogger referred to Chalmers as a “black principal.” This suggests that we are operating within a “post-racial” society. Yet comments including “It’s a movie, is Arnold’s role in the Terminator blamed for Gang Violence in Los Angeles?” and “I see Bloomberg and Giuliani [both were Mayors of NYC] in multiple episodes of Law & Order...don’t hear anyone critiquing them” highlight how white men in positions of power are allowed to perform violence with little consequence. Another online user sarcastically noted, “then John Wayne must be responsible for a hell of a lot of problems out west.”

The parent’s response regarding Reagan was read aloud to a panel of three on CNN Newsroom (NY), illustrating how the film’s controversial status generated interest beyond online platforms. Peter Shankman (a white male branding and social media consultant), Loni Love (a black female comedian and co-host of Emmy Award nominated US television show The Real) and Craig Crawford (a white male journalist and blogger) joined host Brooke Baldwin (a white female) as part of the

[58] User name “Gamer,” 19 March 2013 in Kyles, ‘Bronx Principal’ comment thread.
programme’s “hot topic” discussion in March 2013. Crawford supported the parent’s notion stating:

Ronald Reagan acted with a monkey and then became a president. I mean, at least this principal didn’t join the gang. It’s not like she joined the gang. It is just a movie. Even though it’s violent and I don’t know what the school can do about it.61

Despite this declaration that “it is just a movie,” when asked by Baldwin as to whether Chalmers should “lose her job as principal?” the school’s failing status was used in reply, with Crawford underscoring that “Her school is currently getting D and F ratings.”62 Mistakenly identifying the movie as Surrender, Gangster Girl, The Bronx Times (a paper that boasts readership figures of 250,000) similarly noted of the failures of Chalmers’s school which “has a D grade overall, and an F for environment.”63 Baldwin’s further query, “Should that even matter? Let’s say it’s a great school,” was answered by Shankman: “If it was a great school, if it’s her off time, she could get away with it. Maybe in her off time she would be better spent bringing her up from an F to a D or C as a school in general.”64 Loni Love, who has herself appeared in movies including the 2014 action thriller Gutshot Straight which includes strippers, (male) gun toting, male-on-male violence and poker playing, added:

there’s two things I don’t want my principal to be, actually three, a stripper, a porn star, a B-list actress and a prop comic. That’s four things, I’m sorry. Become a drama teacher if that’s what you want for the YMCA, but don’t do this. The schools are failing. She needs to work on that first.65

Interestingly, Love’s comments implicitly frame educators (by placing her alongside the stripper and porn star) in gendered terms, but no reviewers commented on Bailey’s role as male filmmaker. By contrast, Anders, as noted elsewhere in this thesis and elaborated on in the following pages, was criticised on racial grounds, while Bailey was not chastised on gendered grounds. For commentators of Gang Girl there was no discussion or questioning of Bailey’s capability to faithfully

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
capture girl gang life. Gender is, however, clearly important, as indicated through the comparisons with Reagan and Schwarzenegger for example, but like race was not explicitly commented on by parents, the *NY Post* or CNN panel members.

Baldwin contended that “[...] it’s not what she does, but who Queen V is played by that has officials outraged. You see this actress is a real-life elementary school principal in the Bronx.” It was the “reality” of Chalmers’s role as principal that caused concern for the CNN panel members and *NY Post* articles, rather than any “reality” behind girl gang life or sociological conditions that Bailey attempted to emphasise. The criticism surrounding his actress, rather than the consideration of any merit that his film might hold, caused Bailey to defend Chalmers:

For the media to portray my film as another cheesy, violent, downgraded B-movie hurts me to [sic] no end. The fact that my actress is suffering turmoil just for being an actress is very upsetting. [...] It is not for kids, but if your kid stumbles upon it, talk to them about it.

Bailey was troubled by the reception of his film. Anders raised no concern with me taking *Mi Vida Loca* into the classroom. She was interested to hear such plans. Bailey by comparison, in response to public criticism concerning schools, schoolchildren and his film, has distinctly positioned *Gang Girl* as “not for kids” in his online statement. Such a statement contrasts greatly with the early online reviewers who insisted that the film should be shown to kids. Bailey’s response to criticism is interesting in its suggestion that viewers were unable to separate Chalmers’s role in film as an actress from real-life (“my actress is suffering [...] for being an actress”) just as he told me that during filming, the “cops stopped us because they thought it was a real gang.”

This supposed inability to decipher between real and reel was critiqued by some viewers who commented on various online re-postings of the *NY Post* articles. One comment on the *Daily Mail Online*’s re-posting stated “..do these people not understand the art of acting? Was her performance so stellar that they were unable to discern that it was all pretend?” Commentators such as Baldwin and Crawford did however make this explicit; Queen V is played by a “real-life” elementary principal.

---

66 Ibid.
68 D. Bailey, *Personal Interview* [Recorded Interview] 2 April 2015, 10.30 am, NY.
69 No author, ‘Principal of Violent Bronx.’
“it’s just a movie” (my emphasis). But for some this did not matter. Love commented:

Because you’re dealing with children, I can understand if she was in like Fortune 500 Company or something, but because she’s dealing with children, I think it’s something different. And kids are so impressionable and they get on the computer and they find this horrible movie. I’m mad because it’s more a horrible movie. So the kids may be scarred for life with seeing this movie.70

Love’s statement and parental responses to the film which questioned how they would explain the film if their child were to view it - “She should really think about the children first” - appeared to place the child as unsophisticated reader.71 In stark contrast, chapter seven of this thesis reveals schoolchildren to be highly sophisticated in their viewing strategies. Commenting on a 2013 News 12 The Bronx article ‘P.S. 132 Principal Anissa Chalmers Stirs Controversy in Film ‘Gang Girl’” one male stated “I’m pretty sure the students can figure out the difference between acting and reality.”72 However, it would be irresponsible to subject children to material deemed “not for kids” and these concerned adults are referring to young elementary age children attending Chalmers’s school and of a much younger age to those that participated in my project. It is Chalmers’s role as responsible educator that has been called into question by simply featuring in Gang Girl rather than direct criticism of Bailey as filmmaker, although Love did (repeatedly) insist that it is a “horrible movie.” Sensationalist scandal plagued Gang Girl’s press reception and warned the public against viewing. Similarly, press applied sensationalist frameworks to Havoc, at times insisting upon viewer caution, but most frequently encouraging viewership through the lens of voyeurism.

70 Love, ‘U.S. And Iraq.’
“Forthright nudity by nubile leads;” Reviewing Havoc

Havoc has unsurprisingly been reviewed more frequently than Gang Girl, featuring mainly in widely circulated national and international publications (because of its mainstream appeal in terms of a well-known cast). Despite its lack of theatrical release and thus its “unworthiness” for press attention, Havoc was also considered by local LA newspapers. The fact that the film featured up-coming cast members and went to video rather than movie theatres has itself intrigued reviewers and stirred conversation in interviews. Discussing the film’s DVD status, Howard Gensler of the Philadelphia Daily News revealed that Hathaway “had little to say, but she did know going into the movie that the movie might never get a theatrical release.”73 Hathaway reportedly noted, “There was always a chance [it would not get a theatrical release] because it was an indie and we never had any distribution.”74 “To an extent the diminutive indie” media scholar Michael Newman informs us “is simply a synonym for independent with an added connotation of fashionable cool.”75 Havoc’s “coolness” did not however translate to cinematic release or wide distribution. This contrasts greatly with the release of Mi Vida Loca which was distributed widely but also targeted at “local” audiences, resulting in the substantial amount of local press reviews of Anders’s film when compared to Havoc, and Gang Girl.

Prior to Havoc’s production however, the project had already attracted media attention with the selling of Kaplan’s original script to New Line Cinema in 1995; the LA Times ran an article interviewing Kaplan about her screenwriting and its purchase.76 In 2003, after the death of Kaplan, the newly titled Havoc was briefly referenced by the Daily Variety, an LA-based Hollywood and Broadway daily edition of Variety, and later that year the same publication revealed in a short article that Hathaway and Phillips were “to wreak ‘Havoc’” in “film on urban Latino gang

74 Ibid.
culture."

Highly anticipated in the run-up to production, upon video release the film failed to generate the same level of enthusiasm amongst reviewers. While Mi Vida Loca was the subject of varying articles covered by the LA Times and despite the publication covering the purchase of Kaplan’s story, Havoc received a two-sentence “review.” In a compiled list of DVD releases, the film was termed an “uncomfortable look at rich teens seduced by the gangster life.” This was one of only a handful of press pieces that made no mention of Hathaway’s breasts, the film’s nude scenes or sex more simply, although the use of “seduced” does hold certain sexual connotations.

The framework most frequently applied to the reception of Havoc was one which centred discussion on nudity and sex. Variety writer Lisa Nesselson wrote of the “tantalizing, lesbian-flavored moments” in the friendship between Allison and Emily, ensuring that “guns, group sex and crack cocaine” were referenced in a review that claimed “Forthright nudity by nubile leads Anne Hathaway and Bijou Phillips should make this a popular video item when it hits Stateside.” For Laura Tiffany of Home Media Retailing (a California-based weekly magazine covering the home entertainment industry, now Home Media Magazine), “Selling Points” of the film included “Violence, sex, hip-hop, this is like catnip for teen viewers. Word of mouth will carry this, and viewers will want to see Hathaway’s much-talked-about naughtiness.” Hathaway’s apparent transition from Disney Princess to flesh-flashing teen was considered to have enough saleability even without the financial backing of an advertising campaign. For the NY Daily News who covered the violent

---

incidents at Chalmers’s school, Hathaway “gets down and dirty” further suggesting the publication’s tendency to draw readership through sensational scandal.81

These types of reviews arguably illustrate the mainstream press’s awareness of (youth) markets especially during this period. In his review of Havoc, Lewis Digby (BBC) concluded, “It’s a bit like Shakespeare, as retold by Paris Hilton.”82 For Ariel Levy, heiress Hilton (whose celebrity status soared after the premier of the reality television series The Simple Life (2003) airing just three weeks after the release of Hilton’s widely circulated sextape) was “the perfect sexual celebrity for this moment.”83 At a time when public sexual displays in pop music videos and film were very much mainstream, publications often positioned Havoc as voyeuristic. In one of the film’s most damning write-ups, Bill Iddings of The Muskegon Chronicle (a daily newspaper in Michigan) warned audiences to stay clear, contending that it was “Lurking on store shelves, poised to tempt voyeurs who think it’d be a kick to catch Anne Hathaway at her worst and, yes, naked.”84 Unlike Bailey, Kopple did not publicly respond to any of Havoc’s criticisms.

In addition to such reception, press sampling revealed that the analysis of Havoc did at times go beyond Hathaway’s breasts. Discussing the journey of the film from Kaplan’s The Powers That Be to Havoc, writer for The Chicago-Sun Times, Richard Roeper, reinforced how Hathaway’s casting “set the Internet on fire, with much talk among fanboys about Hathaway’s multiple nude scenes.”85 “With the titillation meter at 10,” Kopple and Gaghan’s involvement with the film was also frequently cited in reviews including Roeper’s. As Academy Award winners, their credentials as screenwriter (Gaghan) and documentary maker (Kopple) were well-

established by the film industry. Numerous reviews made note of their individual successes, something noticeable in *Mi Vida Loca’s* reception too. Writing for entertainment publication *Variety*, Todd McCarthy deemed *Mi Vida Loca* as “a particularly disappointing follow-up” to Anders’s previous work; others contended that the film fell short of Anders’s much celebrated *Gas Food Lodging* (1992).

One of the reasons Bailey attracted little criticism or press interest before the Chalmers controversy could be considered in terms of his unknown status as a filmmaker. Unlike Anders and Kopple, there was nothing for the press or film reviewers (who often demonstrate their knowledge through citing other movies) to compare *Gang Girl* to, both in terms of films pertaining to black girl gang activity and Bailey’s own body of work. To criticise Anders and Kopple is arguably easier because they had established themselves in the industry. Much like the criticism of *Mi Vida Loca*, reviewers often maintained that *Havoc* failed to reflect previous achievements for writer and director. Yet for Roeper, co-host of the movie review television series *At the Movies* with Roger Ebert (2000–2008), *Havoc* did not fall short of Kopple and Gaghan’s earlier successes. Rather, Roeper moved beyond the trend established in other reviews to critique the film against such work as *Traffic* and *Harlan County, USA* (Kopple’s first Academy Award winning documentary). Resisting the centralisation of Hathaway’s body as spectacle, Roeper instead thought *Havoc* an urgent dissection of white youth culture, echoing early online reviewer comments on *Gang Girl*. Roeper contended, “Whether it’s Brentwood or the North Shore, 1995 or 2005, pampered Caucasians pretending to be ghetto-hard is a social reality worth examining in film form.”

For Roeper, from Kaplan’s initial screenplay in 1995 to *Havoc’s* eventual release ten years later, the film and its subject matter - the imitation of gangsta culture by white youth - deserved discussion. Roeper positioned the film as social commentary, a contention made clear by others too. In his mixed review of the movie, Gensler claimed *Havoc* “dips its toe into some interesting cultural issues” yet

---

86 Kopple is a two-time Academy Award winner and Gaghan also won an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay for *Traffic*.
88 Roeper, ‘Ten Years Later,’ p.11.
renders Allison’s rap scene “totally ridiculous.” For the British-based Film4, the “polished production values and excellent performances give this inner city tale some weight as it tackles the clash between rich and poor, suburbs and ghetto.” In addition to its “openly titillative agenda,” another British publication, Empire magazine, declared that the film “seeks to expose the rebellion of American youngsters,” making reference to the wigger phenomenon. This is significant because the British reviewer flags “American youngsters” rather than youth more generally which emphasises the fascination with, and distancing from, American (gang) “problems.” British publications were keen to highlight America’s faults when reviewing Mi Vida Loca too, with B. Ruby Rich, an American writing in Sight & Sound (a British publication) adding a rare sociological framework to the film. Rich opened with a discussion of “Newt Gingrich and punitive politics as now in charge in the US.” The positioning of the film as an American product, much like the reviewers of Gang Girl and Havoc who emphasised the Americanness of gangs, was not exclusive to British reviews of Mi Vida Loca. American Todd McCarthy contended that “Anders has not done nearly enough to animate her subjects or to place them in a meaningful context vis-a-vis American society.” American films were also referenced by reviewers of Kopple’s film, further situating Havoc’s subject matter as quintessentially American.

Writing about Havoc but making references to “indie” films including Larry Clark’s Kids (1995) and Catherine Hardwicke’s Thirteen (2003) (films about young people that while considered controversial, gained critical acclaim), in the Washington Post, Michael O’Sullivan acknowledged Havoc’s examination of white adolescence engaging in “controversial” activities; underage drinking, underage sex, drug taking, and in the case of Kids and Havoc, the imitation of other cultures. Despite claiming that as a story Havoc “doesn’t really go anywhere,” O’Sullivan contended that the writer (whether Kaplan or Gaghan as rewriter) had an “ear” for

89 Gensler, ‘Hathaway Reveals,’ p.53.
93 McCarthy, ‘Review: ‘Mi Vida Loca’.’
94 Empire also made references to Kids and Thirteen.
“the way that white adolescent children of West Coast privilege talk, adopting -- and just as easily discarding -- the patois of the street like a pair of momentarily stylish shoes.”

For O’Sullivan and Roeper, Havoc had varying degrees of storytelling success. Storytelling capability, the reader will soon see, was similarly questioned by reviewers of Mi Vida Loca. For reviewers of Havoc, no explanation of the white youth’s gang behaviour was required while the activity of the Echo Park homegirls and homeboys drew concern.

“Granted, it’s not the stuff of headlines, but just maybe it’s the stuff of life;”

Reviewing Mi Vida Loca

Reviews of Mi Vida Loca can be found in local, national and international press revealing the universal fascination with the girl gang. At the time of the film’s release, US media outlets published headlines that contributed to the moral panic surrounding contemporary street gangs. To illustrate this, the independent Californian daily newspaper The Index-Journal ran the headline ‘Girl Gang Members Becoming More Independently Violent’ in September 1994. In contrast to the journalism that capitalised on the narrative of (non-white female) youth violence in LA, the reception sampling of Anders’s film reveals that, in general, reviewers resisted, like Anders herself, the monolithic trajectory of gang violence. An anomaly to this can be found in Marc Horton’s review for the Edmonton Journal, a Canadian publication founded on Conservative political thought. In a review entitled ‘Hood Women Bad as Those Boys’ Horton concluded, “Mi Vida Loca is basically a tables-turned Boys in the ‘Hood where the women are all on the edge of a violent act.” Horton also suggested that the concluding scene is “exactly like any other drive-by shooting on film, regardless of the gender of the finger that pulls the

96 AP Special Features, ‘Girl Gang Members Becoming More Independently Violent,’ The Index-Journal. 23 September 1994, p.15. At an international level, British media also seized upon the images and headlines generated stateside, making references to the girl gangs and ghettos of LA to comment on the perceived rise of girl gang violence in Britain. In 1994, the article titled ‘Sugar ‘n’ spice. . . but not at all nice’ in The Sunday Times detailed the rise of female gang violence in British cities, further sustaining the moral panic that had reached international proportion but remained at its peak in LA. See: I. Burrell & L. Brinkworth, ‘Sugar ‘n’ Spice. . . but not at all nice,’ The Sunday Times. 27 November 1994.
trigger.” Previous chapters of this thesis dispel such simplistic readings of *Mi Vida Loca*, yet Horton’s review illustrates how pop culture, and in particular gangsta (pop) culture products specifically, can, and frequently are, rendered “low brow” and lacking in serious artistic merit.

*Rolling Stone*, a mainstream American magazine covering popular culture, reviewed Anders’s storytelling “against a backdrop of sex, drugs, violence and music,” not in terms of applying a sociological framework but the actual narrative content itself. Unlike Horton’s review, *Rolling Stone* acknowledged, “In the hands of the usual hacks, this tale of Hispanic girl gangs in Los Angeles could have been *Babes in the Barrio*. None of that trash for writer-director Allison Anders.”

Contrasting to press surrounding *Havoc* that placed emphasis on sexualising Hathaway’s body, *Rolling Stone* was keen to highlight that the homegirls of Anders’s film were far from sexualised but still relied on the movie’s adult themes (sex, drugs etc.) to draw in readers. The lack of explicit sexual imagery and graphic violent content in the film is reflected in its reception, particularly when compared to the other two films, with critics stressing Anders’s departure from attention grabbing headlines. In a 1994 review for the *Washington Post*, a national American newspaper circulated most widely on the East Coast, Hal Hinson concluded, “Granted, it’s not the stuff of headlines, but just maybe it’s the stuff of life.” For Hinson and others, including Caryn James (*NY Times*), Anders:

98 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
Many praised Anders who “made-visible” the female characters that had so long been marginal; in the words of Marjorie Baumgarten (a film critic for the Texas-based independent newspaper the Austin Chronicle) Mi Vida Loca “brings the periphery to center stage.”

In a similar vein to some early reviewers of Gang Girl who noted of Bailey’s departure from social and filmic fascination with young males, a number of professional film critics drew similar opinion of Mi Vida Loca. For the well-established film critic and film and documentary maker, Myron Meisel (The Film Journal), while the “turf” of LA gangs had “been visited in any number of recent films, Mi Vida Loca presents a unique take that makes it a fresh experience, without parallel in our current cinema.”

For others, including mainstream presses such as People, a celebrity driven magazine whose inclusion of Mi Vida Loca illustrates the wide appeal of Anders’s film, Anders’s storytelling failed to match the subject matter: “Anders hasn’t figured out how to make a story of it all. The movie never builds up any emotional or narrative steam.” Much like the press sampling of Havoc revealed, the director’s ability as storyteller was criticised. Despite James’s generally complementary review of Anders’s film in the NY Times, “there are too many voice-overs. And at times the dialogue strains to make its point.”

World-renowned film critic and the first to win a Pulitzer Prize for film criticism, Roger Ebert echoed such views of Anders’s film: “The storytelling is not very well organized.” Yet Ebert recognises, unlike others, that “Perhaps in not forming into a story, the movie does a service, by not forcing a conclusion where none should exist. The gangs have no beginning or end. They exist, and continue, as new faces appear and old ones disappear for good reasons and

---

104 M. Meisel, ‘Mi Vida Loca,’ The Film Journal. 97(7) 1 Aug 1994, p.23.
106 C. James, ‘Mi Vida Loca My Crazy Life.’
bad.”  

Just as some commentators of Gang Girl were keen to point towards the lack of acting experience of those involved, professional film critics of Mi Vida Loca were fascinated by Anders’s use of non-professional actors and actresses. Rather than offering a unique opportunity for the actual homegirls and homeboys of Echo Park to participate in storytelling, the use of gang members, in combination with relatively unknown professional actors and actresses, resulted in “banal dialogue” for the San Bernardino County Sun (California).  

When asked why she mixed “actors and non-actors” during an interview with fellow female filmmaker Bette Gordon (for a publication that places artists and writers in conversation with one another, BOMB magazine) Anders responded “it gave the film the kick and authenticity I felt it needed.” As discussed elsewhere in this thesis, Stuart Hall contends that popular texts should not be considered in simplistic terms such as “authentic” versus “inauthentic.” Anders herself reveals in terming her work “romantic realism,” that Mi Vida Loca fails to subscribe to such simplistic categorisation; the two terms “romantic” and “realism” are often considered as opposed to one another. Some reviewers did consider the film in such terms, with Anders offering a “surprisingly romantic view” while showing that girls in the gang are “equally prone to drug dealing and destructive rivalries that destroy their male peers.” It was however Anders’s “realism” that was explicated most frequently: “you can certainly tell that a lot of homework has been done in “Mi Vida Loca,” with the film’s authentic textures including the casting of several real-life gang members.” Many viewers agreed with Anders’s contention that the inclusion of the homegirls and homeboys gave the

108 Ibid.
film “authentic” credibility. For San Francisco Gate writer Edward Guthmann, “She’s [Anders] Anglo-American, and yet the flavor, the rhythm, the slang and the visual detail that she captures feel authentic -- to this viewer, anyway -- as though she were an insider telling her story from experience.” For some, however, Anders’s film was much more problematic, with issues of representation and authenticity stemming from Anders’s much referenced “Anglo” status.

I began this thesis with Kevin Thomas’s review of Mi Vida Loca for the LA Times and as one of the most scathing criticisms of the film, I return to it now to consider the article in greater detail. ‘The Road to ’Mi Vida Loca’ Paved with Good Intentions’ is noteworthy because the LA Times has a mainstream, widespread readership and a history of gang-related reporting. Metcalf notes in the press sampling of gang memoirs that throughout the late 1980s the newspaper provided “spectacular news coverage of gangs.” Subsequently, the publication gave much attention to gang memoirs in the early 1990s and it is the paper in which discussions of Mi Vida Loca feature most prominently. Thomas himself is an internationally esteemed, and the longest-running, film critic for the same daily paper in the history of US journalism. Thomas wrote for the paper between 1962 and 2005 and was also elected president of the LA Film Critics Association in 1985. Referencing Thomas’s review of Mi Vida Loca in which he concluded that Anders “goes on to confirm rather than dispel our impression that these two young women and all their friends are none too bright,” Dever writes:

even the savvy who read between the lines of Thomas’s good intentions may still have been put off by his review, choosing to stay away from what promised to be another depressing portrayal of the barrio. Others may have interpreted the piece as just another bit of media-inspired “proof” that

---

impoverished youth are without “dreams or aspirations,” and that those without jobs have no desire to work.\textsuperscript{116}

Dever indicates the importance of professional film reviewers, particularly well-known critics such as Thomas who reach a wide ranging readership, because of their influence on the general public’s decision to watch movies.

Thomas’s respected position as film critic aside, his review of \textit{Mi Vida Loca} is worthy of further examination not only for the reason that it is positioned against those that celebrated \textit{Mi Vida Loca} for its exploration of girl gang life but because Thomas applies a sociological framework that is largely absent from other reviews of the film. Thomas insists:

“\textit{Mi Vida Loca}” desperately needs to suggest the impact of the historical, social, economic, religious and cultural forces that shape the lives of these young women and their behavior and values. It just isn’t enough to depict their touching loyalty to each other and their loving devotion to their children.\textsuperscript{117}

For Thomas, the reasoning behind the proliferation of gang membership and the circumstances of areas such as Echo Park in the early 1990s is omitted; there lacks a discussion of Reaganomics and Rodney King. As mapped elsewhere in this thesis, Anders certainly moves in a different direction to the politicised nature of films such as \textit{Boyz}. There are no bullet-laden posters for Reagan’s 1984 election campaign, nor is there a Furious Styles-esque speech on the proliferation of firearms or footage of the Watts Riots as in \textit{Menace}. Anders replaces this overt politicisation by depicting the “touching loyalty” between the homegirls and emphasising their mothering abilities, values that are absent from the ghetto action movie, and qualities that for Thomas are not worthy of storytelling without the sociological framework. Yet as the previous chapters of this thesis illustrate, Anders does comment on the (changing) social conditions of the barrio but it is the characters themselves, and how they survive, that the narrative prioritises.


\textsuperscript{117} Thomas, ‘The Road to ‘Mi Vida Loca.”
In his review, Thomas poses a series of questions, many of which the film itself does answer despite Thomas’s contention that Anders is “avoiding all the questions”:

Do they have dreams or aspirations? Did they ever have jobs or want them? (None seem to be employed.) How much pressure is there on them to join gangs? Is criminal activity an individual affair or organized or both? Is there no viable alternative to gangs in the community? How easy or difficult is it to leave them? Do these homegirls and homeboys ever do much of anything except hang out? In the entire group is there not a single individual capable of making a concentrated effort to escape gang life and its perils?118

If we were to answer Thomas’s questions in simplistic terms, Giggles does have aspirations; we see her filling in job applications. Ernesto does have a job; he works at the local market alongside his drugs business. Giggles does “escape” gang life and La Blue Eyes offers a “viable alternative” to gang life. In asking such questions, albeit rhetorically, Thomas condemns what he considers to be absent from the film, dictating what the content should have been. When considering what Anders does include, Thomas terms the film as “downright offensive” because of what he views as a reliance on stereotypes.119

Much like Bailey who was hurt by media responses to his film, Anders was “disturbed” by Thomas’s remarks.120 Challenging the validity of Thomas’s criticism, and responding to the questions he raised, Anders’s response in an article published in the LA Times, ‘Critics Shouldn’t Dictate ‘Loca’s’ Artistic Content,’ revealed how Thomas’s “shockingly unfair review” of the film had deeply “disturbed” her, more so than any previous and more vicious review.121 Specifically, it was Thomas’s evaluation of Anders’s filmmaking based on race that caused Anders most concern. In his review, Thomas claimed that “more than anything else, Mi Vida Loca makes the case for how important it is that ethnic and minority filmmakers get the opportunity to tell the stories of their own people.”122 Anders responded:

---

118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
122 Thomas, ‘The Road to “Mi Vida Loca.”’
I couldn’t agree more with Thomas that there needs to be more diverse voices heard in the film community. But, unlike the vision he has of what films they’d produce might show (stories of their own people), I’d be thrilled to see a black man take on making a film about my life. No one, unfortunately, will get to see these movies, as long as film criticism is dominated by white males who insist every film conform to their experience of entitlement. And if I am to be confined to only make films about my own race, gender, and class, then I demand to be reviewed by white working-class gals from Kentucky who were raised by single mothers and were themselves single welfare mothers.\textsuperscript{123}

Thomas’s criticisms and Anders’s response (which Thomas did not respond to) raise a number of questions regarding appropriation, including what are the consequences of white filmmakers (including Anders and Kopple) writing and / or directing across racial (and in Kopple’s case, also class) lines? Would Anders - a welfare single parent from Kentucky - be granted permission by Thomas to produce a film on affluent white youth from the Palisades (like \textit{Havoc})? For Garcia, Young and Pimentel, “White authored constructions of black life perpetuates racial power relations - namely whiteness,” and such texts “however well intentioned, are generated within discourses of inequality and vested interests that might not converge.”\textsuperscript{124} In the introduction to \textit{From Uncle Tom’s Cabin to The Help: Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narratives of Black Life} (2014) the editors ask the question “What’s at Stake When White Writes Black?” but we can raise similar questions of \textit{Mi Vida Loca’s} and \textit{Havoc’s} filmic portrayal of brown bodies too, particularly given Thomas’s positioning of Anders as “well-meaning but misguided.”\textsuperscript{125}

In 2015, “Jesús Ángel García” (author of “a transgressive novel” \textit{badbadbad} (2011), published by “extreme crime fiction imprint,” New Pulp Press) penned an open letter “coming out” as a white person “born from privilege” but who had used a Latino “pen name.”\textsuperscript{126} In that letter, “Garcia” wrote:

\textsuperscript{123} A. Anders, ‘Critics Shouldn’t Dictate ‘Loca’s’ Artistic Content.’
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid, p.1.
By publishing and performing under a Latino alias, I co-opted Latino identity and cultural cachet without ever having lived—in the most real, day-to-day sense—what it means to be Latino in the United States today. I implied that my voice was a Latino voice, and by doing this, I essentially robbed Latinos of their own voice and, perhaps, of opportunities to have their voice heard. That’s a problem.127

“García” apologised for “cultural appropriation,” something that Anders and Kopple have not had to do because they have never claimed that their voices are Latino.128 Thomas’s review of Anders’s film, much like “García’s” statement, stresses that Latino voices need to be heard in a bid for storytelling authenticity. Yet when films by minority filmmakers such as Bailey or director of Living the Life, Alex Munoz (who is of multiracial heritage: Chamorro, Mexican and European) fail to amass critical interest (for the movies themselves), Anders’s point that “No one, unfortunately, will get to see these movies” appears to hold some weight.

In Closing

Sampling a number of press responses has revealed how these three films were similarly received with regards to issues of realism and authenticity. From Chalmers’s graphic display of violence, to Anders’s employment of “real” gang members and Hathaway’s performance of gangsta, authenticity was a major topic for commentators. Although Bailey’s film was received less favourably to the other two movies by the press, responses to all three movies indicate the extent to which texts produce complex and diverse meaning. Taken together, the press reception sampled here offers some evidence of gender influencing how film is received. Those that scrutinised the work of the female directors and offered the most denouncing reviews of their work were (white) men (Iddings, Thomas and McCarthy). By comparison, those that largely praised (but also raised issues) with Anders’s project were often (white) women (James, Baumgarten and Rich). There are anomalies to this, as Myron and Allan Hunter similarly applauded aspects of Mi Vida Loca while Roeper provided the most positive review of Havoc (possibly influenced by Gaghan’s involvement). However, it is interesting that Bailey’s film similarly suggests distinctions in gendered reception. Although it was Chalmers who was the subject of press discussion and not Bailey, Gang Girl, directed by a man, was received

127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
negatively by a woman, Love, and defended to some degree by a man, Crawford. We could recognise this as a real-life example of women against women, as female commentator denounces female actress, or simply as an example of how texts draw alternative meanings.

We have seen how the notion of authenticity permeates the reception of the three case studies but while Bailey did not come under fire for representing girl gang life on film from a male perspective, for Thomas, Anders’s whiteness was a barrier to authentic storytelling. Unlike Thomas who demanded Anders fill in what he considered the gaps of a sociological framework, demonstrating a desire for Anders to explicitly state why the non-white youths of Echo Park were caught-up in gang life, for the white youth of *Havoc*, no such explanation was required. Rich white kids’ interaction and imitation of gangsta culture was simply reflective of such behaviour for reviewers of Kopple’s film.

In the same way that interviewing the directors of films offers only partial, mediated insight into the filmmaking process, omitting the opinions of others involved in the development (cast, crew etc.), press reviews also negate the consumption of films by the general public. Chapter seven illustrates how the schoolchildren were keen to provide reasoning for the gang activity of both the white and non-white gang members, at times challenging Thomas and other “professional” film critics and demonstrating their high social capital. The ongoing gendered and racialised dimensions of film production are mirrored by disparities in film criticism as recognised by Anders in 1994. It is therefore appropriate to consult underrepresented voices to seek understanding of these texts in everyday, rather than (white) professional, contexts.
Chapter Seven

Classroom Consumption - Reception Part II

Introduction

Reception Studies allows for heterogeneous readings of these three movies, revealing how audiences move beyond issues of male power. After analysing elite opinion makers’ views alongside online audiences in the previous chapter, the polysemous nature of the gang girl text has been illuminated through the different discursive frameworks imposed on a text. Focussing on the press reception of the three films prior to exploring the East LA students’ interpretations in this chapter could be seen to privilege the voices of those who seek to influence viewer consumption through high cultural capital. Using the terminology of French sociologist of culture Pierre Bourdieu, professional film critics can be seen to hold a “high cultural” capital in that they are educated in their field and its language.1 Such a notion is confirmed by Morris Holbrook in his noteworthy article ‘Popular Appeal versus Expert Judgments of Motion Pictures’ (1999): “certain connoisseurs possess a high level of pertinent cultural capital that legitimizes their competence to play a special (domain) role such as that of professional critics offering expert judgements.”2 However, this does not mean that the “expert judgements” of journalists and professional film critics cannot be challenged.

Those who possess a high social capital can lack resources to economic or cultural capital but potentially have privileged access to certain information compensating for the lack of formal film education in this case. Real-life lived experience of the Bronx or East LA for example, positions non-professional audiences and reviewers with social capital that is arguably not achievable by those concerned with the “reel.” The schoolchildren consulted herein thus see themselves

---

as offering “authentic” readings of the films as do the general audiences of *Gang Girl*. We have seen how the opinion of those considered to possess a high cultural capital - professional reviewers and journalists - has been challenged by the directors (Anders and Bailey) themselves. Here, I turn to focus on the viewing strategies of East LA high school youth, their readings of others’ criticisms and how they use these movies in “real-life.” Given their geographical proximity to the setting of these films and their age range (similar to that of the characters in these films), what these youths do with these films is crucial to understanding the meaning of these popular culture products to different audiences. Possession of high social capital and social circumstance positions these youth as non-typical audiences, much like the professional film reviewer who possesses high cultural capital.

Broadening the audience study to engage with a more diverse viewership (in terms of race, age and geographical positioning) could potentially have offered consideration of “typical” audiences too. Yet what follows is an important study of the meaning and usages of these movies to marginalised audiences (in terms of age, race and class), often represented on-screen yet omitted from audience study. Although some valuable work has been done to investigate the viewing strategies of alternative (non-white) audiences of *Mi Vida Loca*, most notably Marie “Keta” Miranda’s ethnographic work with gang girls in Oakland discussed elsewhere in this thesis, there continues to be an unbalanced understanding of the reception of Anders’s film and no reception study has been conducted on *Havoc*. Extending audience studies to East LA youth has its own imbalances and limitations which will now be detailed forming part of the discussion on methodology before turning to the audience reception itself.

**Methodology**

Prior to conducting the focus groups in East LA, the project was piloted at a high school in the UK with a group of male and female youth aged 16-18. After viewing *Mi Vida Loca* in their educational setting, the pilot focus group participants responded to questions that I had prepared. Despite the UK school being far removed from East LA, this proved a crucial process in formulating the questions and questionnaires for the focus groups later conducted. Furthermore, while not forming a detailed part of the material for discussion in this thesis, much like the press
sampling which centres on American reviews of the film, the viewing strategies of the UK youth underscored how viewers interpret film differently according to varying contexts. Located in a predominantly Mexican American neighbourhood, 95 percent of the participants in the project identified themselves as Mexican American, limiting the racial scope of study and I acknowledge the potential weaknesses which stem from this.

The students that did participate were asked if they wanted to take part in the project by their teacher, and were given information sheets and consent forms (to be signed by themselves and their parents if under 18-years of age). Those that returned permission slips were included in the study. 30 students participated in classroom focus groups and completed a questionnaire. A further 65 schoolchildren filled-out questionnaires circulated by their teacher after they viewed each film. In total, 95 questionnaires were completed by students in the 9th and 12th grade (aged 14 to 19). In terms of gender, the project offers a relatively balanced sample: 55 participants identified themselves as female; 40 as male. Deemed a low-income area by the percentage of enrolled students who qualify for free school meals, the study is also restricted by the socioeconomic status of participants. Though this is not a scientific reception study, the sample size reinforces that this project is far more than merely anecdotal. It reveals the extent to which these youth, whose viewing habits are understudied, paradoxically position these films as either educational and gang preventative or alternatively as sensationalist and / or stereotypical. Importantly, it illustrates how youth as media critics also move beyond these simplistic binaries.

3 These transnational audience perspectives will hopefully form the basis of further research pertaining to these films.

4 During the planning stages of the fieldwork, I was in detailed conversation with two schools in East LA and two schools in the Bronx regarding focus group participation. Despite efforts to secure high schools that would diversify the geographies of the project, in the latter stages of planning three schools, both in the Bronx and one in East LA, were unable to accommodate my fieldwork. I also made contact with high schools in the Palisades and West LA but this also failed to materialise into focus groups.

5 See Appendix One for a list of sample questions included in the questionnaire. On the advice of the school teacher, questions were worded slightly differently for the 9th grade students. I also added supplementary questions for those who did not participate in the focus group discussions but completed a questionnaire. For these reasons I have not appended a single questionnaire but rather a sample of questions that were used.
Consulting non-professional audiences and intersecting press reception alongside the students’ responses, examines and cross-analyses varying positions within the cultural field. Within such a field Holbrook remarks, “the relevant participants include (among others) the artists or producers of works, the critics of these works, the audiences for the works, and even the works themselves.”6 As producers of their works, Kopple, Bailey and Anders occupy a position somewhere in-between that of the critic of high cultural capital and the schoolchild / general audiences of high social capital. For example, Anders – a skilled filmmaker and writer - told me during interview that she never “proposed to be real-life” in her melodrama, yet also emphasises her time spent consulting with the community during filming and her knowledge of the neighbourhood.7 Widening analysis to include young audiences reveals how high school youth offer complex readings of the films, at times supporting the opinions of the producers of these works and challenging professional critics, ultimately broadening my own understanding of the texts by moving beyond issues of male power. It reinforces David Buckingham’s contention that “it remains important to assert that children are often highly selective, discriminating, and sophisticated viewers.”8

**Alternative Audiences; Schoolchildren versus Film Critic**

Consulting with the community in which she resided for a lengthy period, Anders aimed to give a “realistic” portrayal of the barrio and its inhabitants, taking advice from youth in matters of costume, makeup, location and dialogue. Anders was keen to highlight this during interview, but she similarly informed me, as she has done others previously, of elements of the narrative that derived from other life experiences. For example, the El Duran plot stemmed from Anders’s own unrequited love affair. Anders has been criticised for intersecting her Anglo-American “experience” with Chicana/o culture by academics and professional film critics. When ethnographer Miranda took ten “excited” Latina youth from Oakland to the screening of *Mi Vida Loca* at the San Francisco Film Festival in 1994, she found that “when other members of the audience were critical of Anders – as an outsider, a

---

6 Ibid.
7 A. Anders, *Personal Interview* [Recorded Interview] 22 March 2015, 1pm. Echo Park, LA.
Euro-American, representing Latina youth – the Latina teenagers didn’t seem to side with that criticism.” According to Miranda, film reviewers and critics (who she did not actually cite) “tended to emphasize Anders’s outsider position in the Latino community,” but the Oakland homegirls were more concerned with Anders’s “logic” behind aspects such as Sad Girl and Mousie’s fighting over Ernesto. One gang girl declared, “Why did you show them fighting like that? Throwing down over a boy? Uh-uh, we don’t do that.” Kevin Thomas similarly asked in his review of the film:

> What’s going on here? Two lifelong friends, both with infants, prepared to snuff out each other’s lives all because of their love for a glib charmer whom we have every reason to assume would take up with yet another woman in a flash.

Yet Anders essentially supports the Oakland homegirl’s assertion with Thomas further missing the message. Giggles tells Sad Girl and Mousie, “You don’t ever throw down with your homegirl over a guy.” While Thomas and the Oakland youth raised some similar questions from distinctly different viewpoints, the homegirls offered alternative criticisms to those posed by academics. Put succinctly by Thea Pitman, Miranda’s Oakland “girls’ disinterest in criticising Anders on the basis of her ethnicity does offer a sobering and valuable alternative to so much of the academic discourse devoted to the subject.”

In a 1994 LA Times interview with two homegirls who briefly featured in Mi Vida Loca, one of the girls stated “you know, everyone’s upset and it’s just a movie. I don’t know why everyone’s all, you know, bent out of shape about it. Everyone’s putting the movie down. Why don’t they give it a chance? Really look at it. I liked the movie. I like Allison.” Of course such response and bias could simply stem

---

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
from her role in the production. Having been given the opportunity by Anders to participate in the movie-making process, it is unlikely that those involved would criticise the filmmaker and Echo Park resident who they developed a (working) relationship with and who rewarded them financially. Monica, the other homegirl interviewed, added “I give her [Allison] a lot of credit ‘cause she did a lot for us. She was there when we really needed something.”

Aware of the criticisms of *Mi Vida Loca*, the girls defended both filmmaker and film, suggesting that Anders was beneficial to both the filmmaking and Echo Park community, supporting Anders’s earlier claims of her poignant role in the neighbourhood. Examining the reception of *Mi Vida Loca* with individuals beyond the media circle and scholarly sphere illustrates that not all are preoccupied with Anders’s whiteness.

When speaking with East LA high school youth regarding Thomas’s review, students were vocal in their responses to his damning critique. After circulating excerpts of Thomas’s review amongst one group of students, and without giving any detail of Thomas (in terms of his race, age, or the publication in which the review appeared), a 15-year-old male remarked: “This movie reviewer must have grown up in a rich neighborhood because that was one of the most accurate parts of the movie. Of course not everyone is welfare dependent but a large number are.” Significantly, a large proportion of the students dismissed Thomas’s criticism of the film as “offensive,” stating instead that welfare dependency continues to be a factor of life in East LA today with one 14-year-old girl revealing “not all Latinos are in gangs but we do live in a barrio and I myself am welfare dependent.” Others recognised that while they themselves did not find Anders’s film offensive, they could understand that potentially other viewers may find elements insulting. Distancing herself from gang life as a number of students were keen to do, one 14-year-old girl remarked:

I don’t personally find it offensive, and I don’t think it shows them as aimless. There’s also the girl [La Blue Eyes] who goes to school so there’s different perspectives. But then I’m not in a gang. Maybe someone in a gang would find it so or people that are fed up of Latinos only being seen as being in gangs by other people. But there is a truth that there are a lot of Latinos who have this lifestyle.


15 Monica quoted in Ibid.
In this case, the student expressed how crucial context-specific viewing is, suggesting that for some, *Mi Vida Loca* could be simply seen as another capitalisation on the staple (and stereotypical) Latina/o gang member type. Their awareness of the prevalence of this stereotype supports Anders’s statement regarding the knowledge of the homegirls and homeboys she was working with: “They are very savvy about how they are portrayed in the media. They would ask me if I was going to make a movie like ‘Colors.’”16 At the same time, the student acknowledges that this projection is rooted by the reality of the high percentages of Latinos involved in gang activity. As (non-professional) film critic, this viewer also challenged Thomas’s criticism, pointing out the character of La Blue Eyes as a “viable alternative” to gang membership.

Working with students across age ranges and year groups revealed how youth drew different meaning from *Mi Vida Loca*: the schoolchildren were not simply a homogenous group in their opinion, illustrating varying opinion between not only film reviewers and students but the youth themselves. It was also the younger schoolchildren who tended to challenge Thomas’s review. These youth often drew upon lived experiences to express how Anders captured the reality of many and how Thomas’s critique failed to acknowledge this: “My cousin is currently in jail. If he is good he’ll get out when I finish college;” “In my family my uncle is from MS13 and my dad’s family has gang connections;” “My dad was in El Hoyo Maravilla;” “I have relatives in gangs, when I watch *Mi Vida Loca* it feels like I’m there.” Such statements originated from both male and female schoolchildren. By comparison, the older students demonstrated a greater affinity with Thomas’s judgment, with one 17-year-old female stating, “I completely agree with this assessment. I find it a bit offensive that we [Latinos] are portrayed as people with no future. The film might portray the lifestyle of a few but surely not of our entire race.” Echoing this notion, another female added “It sets this stereotype that other cultures think of us,” with an 18-year-old female concluding; “I think it sets a scene that everyone in this area is like those characters, therefore setting everyone in those borders.” When conversing with their teacher, it was interesting to hear that those who I spoke with in the 12th

---

grade are “the ones who are going to college;” many had ambitions of continuing education beyond high school and the grades to enable them to achieve such a future.

In one sense, it is to be expected that the older participants were more critical in their viewing and reading of film (because they have spent longer in the educational environment in which critical interpretation is often cultivated), while the younger 9th grade students were keen to offer knowledge of gang activity. According to a study conducted in 2008, “Less than half (48%) of first-time 9th graders in 2001-02 graduated from high school four years later” in the LA Unified School District. The differences in the assessment of Thomas’s review across age ranges illustrates film scholar Susan Hayward’s acknowledgement that “studies of viewer-reception, initiated in Television Studies, have pointed to the eclecticism of viewers and acknowledged the difference in readings of the film depending on class, age, race, creed, sexuality, gender and nationality.” Even minor differences in age range made considerable differences in viewing. However, unlike the press reception which suggested that criticisms could be tenuously traced to the gender of the reviewer and of the filmmaker (men critiquing texts by women, women critiquing texts by men) distinct differences between the viewing strategies of the male and female students failed to materialise. In terms of age, the older students found Thomas’s assessment more appropriate. Yet the younger students revealed a greater level of gang awareness (in terms of familial association, gang activity in the neighbourhood and in its projection in popular culture), thus their tendency to critique Thomas illustrated that for them, gang culture continued to be a pervasive issue and Anders’s depiction was not offensive but a “reality.” The older students were arguably more “embarrassed” by gang activity in their family, while the younger participants could have simply been telling me what they thought I wanted to hear (as an “outsider”), providing tales of gang activity and “boasting” about their street knowledge. Yet the schoolteacher confirmed that many of these students had gained this information through family experiences.

While approaching Thomas’s review with varying opinion, stressing the importance of exploring individual viewing strategies, none of the students raised concerns regarding Anders’s race (despite me telling the students that she is white). Concerns about race were focussed on the actual content of the film as opposed to race of the director. Like the girls from Oakland who viewed the film at the time of its release, these high school youth (who are removed temporally from the film’s setting but are geographically closer to Echo Park than Miranda’s participants) were more concerned with narrative content. Students’ analysis at times incorporated issues of racial representation; the stereotyping of Latinos in film and by the media more broadly. While Anders was considered by some to be creating “borders” in her representation, this was not contributed to her being white. Significantly, the only time Anders’s biological status came into play was when one male student claimed that “maybe she made the film about female gangs because she is female herself so could relate to certain struggles;” students recognised production values as well as cultural values. Surprisingly Anders’s sex was of little interest to the students; it could be possible that they are unaware of continuing gendered (and raced) disparities regarding film production. For one 16-year-old student, “Women now have way more power than they did before and you can see this in any activity or profession, even in gangs.” Women are more regularly present on-screen (especially on television) than at the time of the film’s release, arguably suggesting a greater level of gendered equality and making Anders’s sex less important to these students than I anticipated it to be.

What was important for these students was the didacticism and realism of Anders’s film. Importantly, like other commentators including Thomas, these young viewers took Anders’s filmmaking seriously, illustrated by the moralistic frameworks that they applied to the film: “I think she made the film to educate kids on the dangers of gangs.” By comparison, *Havoc* has been regularly brandished as highly sexualised (“bad”) entertainment by professional reviewers, yet Kopple’s status as a white filmmaker has not been subjected to the same criticism amongst the press. When discussing *Havoc* with the schoolchildren, they were keen to add sociological frameworks to it. The students frequently sought to explain narrative content by relating it to their own experiences which contrasted to the film reviewers whose profession requires some detachment from their personal circumstance.
Audiences and Authenticity

The authenticity of Havoc was a frequent concern for professional film reviewers yet they often failed to recognise how the authentic and inauthentic could function simultaneously, something the students readily acknowledged. Laura Tiffany’s review considered Havoc to be “fairly unbelievable—the accents, the slang, the rapping” as Hathaway’s character and her “girlfriends” party and “play at being gang members,” concluding that the film is ultimately “too glossy.”19 When I asked what they thought of this assessment, students in the classroom were ambivalent in their responses. For some, the 16th Street “party” scenes were “pretty realistic, how everyone looked their clothes and everything, everyone looked tough. I think how they showed the guys dress was right. I’ve seen people dress like that round here,” illustrating the tendency of audiences to validate representation through personal experience as well as the importance of visual styles. By comparison, the “scenes where they [Allison and Emily] sing songs and act like thugs, like wannabes, trying way too hard” underpinned Tiffany’s point and the contention by the 20-year-old African American female from Hayward (interviewed by Bernstein in 1995) that white youth imitating black and Mexican culture were “posers.”20 One 16-year-old male commented “It does look ‘fairly unbelievable,’ but then it is people who are trying to be people who they are not.” Like Roeper and O’Sullivan, the unauthentic PLC was considered an authentic reflection of white youths’ interaction with other cultures.

Because music was not discussed in great detail in the professional reviews of Havoc, I wanted to see if this lack of interest translated to these young viewers. I anticipated that music would attract attention because it plays an important role in everyday youth life (especially given the number of available music channels on television and platforms such as YouTube). However, I underestimated the schoolchildren’s capacity to dissect the meaning of music in such complex ways. Film reviewers did not cite the artists or songs included in Havoc, favouring instead the use of “gangsta rap” or “rap.” This suggests that they did not know such detail which would in some ways underscore (gangsta) rap’s young demographic. Some of

the schoolchildren revealed their knowledge of the soundtrack by directly referencing artists and songs featured in the film. While a number of the younger students considered the music to be simply “cool,” some students also attached meaning to this “coolness.” They were not only able to recognise the songs, but crucially gave reasoning for their use, showing their understanding of gangsta’s appeal. Allison and Emily’s “fascination” with gang culture, the rapping, the slang, was noted as deriving from the notion that “being gangsta is seen as being badass and cool” as one 14-year-old male termed it. Bakari Kitwana notes that there is nothing new in white youth “emulating Black cool,” yet the intermingling of hip-hop with prison and street culture in popular culture has furthered this absorption amongst America’s youths.\textsuperscript{21} Interestingly, only one student (another male, 16-years-old) explicitly recognised the rap music in \textit{Havoc} as “mainly black gangsta rap” adding “there’s some Cholo rap in it too.” Gangsta culture and its evoking of “coolness” was not explicitly aligned with one particular racial group by these high school youth. It was not explicitly positioned as a facet of purely black or Latino culture. The term “gangsta” has become synonymous with (male) blackness and the students’ noting of the “gangsta” artists that feature on the soundtrack, Jay-Z and Tupac, could suggest that the youth similarly equated “gangsta culture” with blackness. However, the students simply recognised the music of these artists illustrating their cross-racial audience. The imitation of such culture was, however, explicitly located in racialised dimensions.

When asked what the students thought of the music in \textit{Havoc}, one female (17 years old) commented: “The music was mainly rap, which is usually stereotyped as ‘gangsta music.’ Many rap artists tend to display themselves as ‘gangstas’ to sell music, so this music seems to suit a group of white kids trying to be ‘gangstas.’” This observation articulated the understanding of the commercialisation of gangsta. Participants seemed to be all too familiar with the idea of “unauthentic” white youth imitating gangsta culture out of a desire for “authenticity.” A 17-year-old male responding to the same question remarked, “The music emphasises their [Allison and Emily’s] fakeness. I’ve heard almost all the music before.” By comparison, the music of \textit{Mi Vida Loca} was thought of as music that “we would listen to.” For this

student, Anders’s film captured an authenticity of the music habits of East LA youth, even over 20 years since the film’s release. The class teacher later informed me that these children were highly influenced by their parents’ choice in music and questionnaire responses revealed that ten percent of the project’s participants had viewed Mi Vida Loca with a family member on a separate occasion prior to watching the film in the classroom environment. By contrast, only one male participant had viewed Havoc previously.

That the music of Mi Vida Loca resonated more with these students but that they had heard of and could readily identify the genre and some of the artists featured in Havoc reinforced the penetration of gangsta beyond the black ghettos. While Allison and Emily’s wanting to be gangsta illustrated their lack of “authenticity” for these schoolchildren, importantly the students also acknowledged how gangsta collapsed the boundaries between “authentic” and “unauthentic.” While Allison and Emily’s “fakeness” was conveyed by their rapping of gangsta lyrics, their clothing and speech, students also revealed their knowledge that gangsta culture, particularly gangsta rap, has itself relied on a “display” as the student termed it, not necessarily an authenticity. Such sophisticated understandings and readings of the film could be recognised as stemming from the educational setting in which the project took place; it is expected that children are taught to read texts critically by their educator. However, the students continued to demonstrate nuanced readings of the films, in both their confidential questionnaires and across the discussion groups.

Students were quick to contextualise Allison and Emily’s gang activity, considering, much like sociologists, familial factors, class and race. The students wanted to root Allison and Emily’s inauthentic behaviour in “reality” in an attempt to make sense of it. Their gang membership and desire to interact with the Latino gang was not always considered as simply an attempt to be black or Latino; to be authentically gangsta. A number of schoolchildren supported Kitwana’s assertion alluded to elsewhere in this thesis that “white youth are not simply consuming pop culture messages wholesale” but claiming and re-appropriating elements for their own needs.22 For some, wanting to be part of Hector’s gang was framed in terms of Allison’s opening dialogue, “we are totally fucking bored.” Many commented on the

22 Ibid, p.3.
notion of boredom, giving this as reasoning behind gang participation. More frequently, their gang membership was considered as an escape from “reality,” from a life in which “Allison’s dad is never there.” “They’re meant to be the rich white kids that have it all, but they are lonely and the gang acts like a family” one 17-year-old female student added. These statements suggest that neither “middle-classness” nor “gangsterism” fulfil their glamorous and wanted representation. Furthermore, students were eager to authenticate the narrative by sourcing meaningful messages and “realities” within the film.

I asked the schoolchildren why they thought the girls in both films joined gangs - a question similarly posed by Kevin Thomas in his review of Anders’s film - because I wanted to see if the students found this aspect of storytelling to be negated, as Thomas did. For the high school students, the notion of creating an alternative family in the absence of a biological one was also noted in the reasoning for Sad Girl and Mousie’s gang membership; “they want to feel part of something;” “I think they joined a gang because they wanted a family. There are no parents around. It’s the same in Havoc, their parents are never home.” This was something that some professional reviewers of Kopple’s film similarly pointed towards. Variety noted how the “bored rich kids” seek “the prospect of “belonging” that is sorely missing in the kids’ sterile families.”23 When discussing Havoc, the students and press sampled relied mostly on the on-screen presentation of Allison and Emily’s gang membership, the absent parents and explicitly referenced “boredom.” Thomas wanted Anders to explicitly document the impetus behind gang membership, whereas her less than explicit approach enabled the students to bring together their knowledge of gang culture and their reading of the film. Some students saw the Echo Park homegirls’ gang membership as “protection for themselves, their children and their neighbourhood” and “because it is their culture;” “they have grown-up around it so it’s probably the next natural step to join.”

Despite the existence of white gangs in one form or another throughout American history, such as the white school gangs of the 1940s, gang culture was noted as being much more prevalent in racially marginalised communities, made even more apparent by the students aligning of Sad Girl and Mousie’s gang activity

as “their culture.” The students were keen to highlight however, that this was not necessarily their culture. When discussing Gang Girl, audiences were similarly interested in positioning the film in real-life contexts detailing their knowledge of gang activity in the Bronx, yet media outlets were less concerned with issues of social context and instead focussed on scandal surrounding schoolchildren and school principal, Anissa Chalmers.

**On-Screen versus Off-Screen Violence**

By turning to the audience reception of violence, we can see how the students offered complex readings of Kopple and Anders’s films and we can assess the extent to which professional film critics produced similarly nuanced readings. Returning to the reception of Gang Girl’s representation of violence reminds us of differences in viewing interpretation, further indicated by the coverage of the principal-actress-scandal by the LA-based digital news website, Opposing Views.24 Press reports such as the UK’s Daily Mail Online deemed Gang Girl “gruesome,” echoing Loni Love’s sentiment that the film was “horrible.”25 But an early reviewer of Gang Girl, Tiffany Black (a black female) who was given the DVD by Maverick Entertainment (the distributor) to review, claimed:

> Initially I couldn’t find interest in it because of all of the killing and violence, but I realized that in order for the story to be told, we had to be taken through all the violence to get to the wonderful outcome. And the extremities of it all (the grittiness of the killing) is what really makes it plain that Jesus Christ will forgive you for anything. 26

This notion that on-screen violence is required to truly illustrate the message of the film supports Bailey’s contention (and contrasts with Anders’s) detailed in chapter four; that grittiness conveys the harshness of the streets. What Black’s statement also

---


implies is the degree to which violence distracts the viewer, making it difficult to “find interest in it because of all the killing.” Scenes of *Gang Girl* that were referenced by the *NY Post* included “‘Open, motherf-ker. You like the way that tastes, n----r?’ she snarls, shoving a gun into a man’s mouth. She then blows him away.” This inclusion supports the article’s title of the “gun-slinging gangsta” but the fact that no reference is made to the religious language utilised by the characters (and that the conversion narrative is only briefly noted) reveals the media’s privileging of violence over redemption.

Compared to *Mi Vida Loca* and *Havoc*, the violence in *Gang Girl* is far more explicit. Had violence been kept off-screen to the same degree as Anders’s film, we can assume that Chalmers would not have been subjected to such criticism. A high percentage of reviewers of Bailey’s film discussed violence in some form, whether in progressive or regressive terms, partly supporting Anders’s ideas pertaining to the screening of violence and its limitations in enabling viewers to move beyond it, again whether in a positive or negative framework. Bailey himself underlined such a notion stating, “None of the media have mentioned it was a hit with numerous “Scared Straight” programs, gained fans around the world and was a hit in jails, touching lives.” Though undoubtedly protective of his own film, Bailey reveals how the media were disinclined to engage with concerns beyond the unforgettable violence. Yet some viewers of *Gang Girl* suggested that Bailey did in fact keep violence off-screen, with a male commentator stating that “it imaginatively portrays violence, the violence is off-screen.” Another male contended that “the movie is very violent in its telling, yes, but you do not see it graphically on-screen - it’s off

screen and left more to the imagination.” The differences between the male viewer’s comments and Black and Love’s female perspective suggests distinct gendered variation in perceptions of “explicit” violence, yet the online nature of other responses makes it difficult to determine the gender of reviewers unless clearly stated and thus difficult to validate this notion on a wider scale.

Further complicating the tenuous idea of gendered readings of violence is the reality that there was little difference regarding views on, and criticisms of, violence expressed by the male and female schoolchildren. Rather, they told me that they had “seen more violent films” than *Mi Vida Loca* and *Havoc*. These included *American Me* and *Blood In, Blood Out*, a text that a third of the participants claimed to have viewed. Anders informed me that the youth she was working with during production were knowledgeable of *American Me* and *Blood in, Blood Out* but according to Anders their “favourite” was *Boulevard Nights*, a film that was referenced less frequently by the high school youth in questionnaire responses, possibly because of its 1979 release date. Released prior to *Mi Vida Loca*, reviews of *American Me* and *Blood In, Blood Out* did not make reference to Anders’s film but in some sampled reviews of *Blood in, Blood Out*, reference was made to *American Me*. Interestingly, unlike the students, Ebert and others did not make reference to films featuring male Mexican American gangs in reviews of Anders’s film. This suggests that commentators viewed *Mi Vida Loca* as an original product, while the schoolchildren drew on other barrio gang narratives to validate their ideas regarding Anders’s “less violent” approach.

When discussing *Mi Vida Loca* with the students, memorable scenes included ones in which the homegirls were sitting inside and talking about what to do with money that could be made from the sale of Ernesto’s truck after his death “because it showed the girls making important decisions together.” Another scene referenced

---

31 A. Anders, *Personal Interview* [Recorded Interview] 22 March 2015, 1pm. Echo Park, LA.
32 See for example, Roger Ebert’s (1993) review of *Blood In, Blood Out* under its alternative title *Bound By Honor*. 268
was one in which non-gang member La Blue Eyes places the love letters from El Duran in the lake, after his fatal shooting. These responses are particularly noteworthy because the students mainly focussed on scenes in which the characters were dealing with the aftermath of violence, rather than scenes in which the shooting and death actually occurred, unlike the *NY Post’s* focus on *Gang Girl’s* “beatings, shootings and rape.”33 Press sampled recognised that *Mi Vida Loca* offered far more than gang and gun violence to its audiences. Meisel wrote, “while the turf had been visited in any number of recent films, *Mi Vida Loca* presents a unique-take that makes it a fresh experience, without parallel in our current cinema.”34 Meanwhile the *Milwaukee Sentinel* wrote, “To describe Allison Anders’s film ‘Mi Vida Loca’ as a ‘Girlz N the Hood’ is accurate but incomplete. Anders avoids the pitfalls that other filmmakers might have exploited. She resisted the film’s sensational elements.”35

The high school students did not make such references to the ghetto action movies, suggesting that the barrio orientated gang movies drew greater interest and points of comparison.

For many reviewers, traits of the ghetto action movie could be recognised, but Anders redirected her movie to offer something noticeably different. Allan Hunter reviewed the film in 1993 after its Cannes showcase, noting how Anders provided “a more tender alternative to the blistering anger and nihilism of the homeboy movies.”36 Anders was concerned that the movie was mispositioned at Cannes as “a gangbanger movie, some kind of Girlz N the hood thing” potentially causing audience “disappointment when the violence failed to materialise onscreen.”37 For its lack of violence, Hunter noted that the film was “likely to suffer commercially for its sensitivity.”38 Compared to films such as *Boyz* and *Menace*, Anders’s movie did fail to be a box office hit of the same commercial value. However, for some reviewers, the film was as a continuation of the ghetto action

---

34 M. Meisel, ‘Mi Vida Loca,’ *Film Journal*. 97(7) 1 Aug 1994, p.23.
movie formula. In opposition to Hunter and Rich, Douglas Armstrong (*Milwaukee Journal*) read Anders’s film as a “Girlz N the Hood;” a “movie powered by violence.” For the high school students, Anders was certainly fulfilling the former (expressed by the *Milwaukee Sentinel* and Meisel), and what became clear was that they considered the silences in violence, where Anders refuses to indulge the viewer in blood and bullets, as vitally significant.

Students, much like professional film reviewers, frequently considered Anders’s approach to violence in relation to other films, as seen in the above references to gang movies. Yet the schoolchildren also handled violence in ways considerably distinct to, and arguably with more sophistication than, the film critics. Talking about the lack of on-screen violence, one female student perceptively remarked:

> You get a more powerful message across when you don’t show something like that. Showing the gruesome and the blood and all that, takes away from the actual message of losing someone or the event that takes place. And when you show people things like that people tend to focus on how bloody it is and how it looks.

Echoing Anders’s own ideas on violence, students generally rendered the off-screen violence as a valuable technique, allowing reflection. The British students participating in the pilot study reached similar complex understandings of violence, while reviewers failed to offer such insight into *Mi Vida Loca’s* politics of representation. Referencing the James Bond film series, students insisted that action scenes which consisted of numerous on-screen deaths were less meaningful than scenes in which Bond was himself dealing with the loss of a loved one. Interestingly the students drew upon Bond, a British film character, rather than American film to substantiate their thoughts, revealing the importance of viewing context even when forming similar opinions after watching the same film in class. Some of the younger East LA participants from the 9th grade did, however, consider other motivations behind Anders’s lack of violence. One 15-year-old male questioned whether this could have been prompted by the rating system: “Maybe by not showing too much violence, she [Anders] thought that the film would get seen by more people.” Film reviewers did not propose such ideas and neither did they consider whether Anders

---

had the facilities to make the violence “look real” as one student did, again highlighting the necessity to “authenticate” the text and the importance of viewing context. Far removed from the time of production, the student questioned what technologies would have been available to filmmakers in the past. These responses illustrate how young people think behind the scenes in terms of production and audience, in addition to the film itself. Keeping violence off-screen certainly led students to discuss and debate the topic.

At times, film reviewers referred to specific scenes within Anders’s film to support their reading of violence but with the risk of plot spoiling, detail was often sparse. One episode that drew interest from the press, and the only incident considered memorable by the students in relation to violence, was the scene in which Big Sleepy’s daughter got shot. For one student it was not easily forgotten “because it was shocking that a little kid died and it stays in your head cos it’s at the end.” This sentiment was echoed by many and the scene was the most frequently cited by participants (including the British students): “The last scene when they shoot the little girl stood out because I thought she was going to shoot the boy [Lil Sleepy].”

Press sampling revealed this same sense of surprise in the closing scene with the Chicago Tribune commenting, “There’s a viciousness to the street scene that Anders tends to avoid - though to her credit, there’s a climactic, uncompromising burst of violence that calls everything said into question.” When I asked students why they thought Anders concluded the film in such a way, responses considered Anders’s motivation as wanting to show youth “how gangs affect everyone.” “She [the child] is just an innocent bystander and her dying shows that no one is safe.” Anders (unlike Bailey) distanced herself from a moralizing discourse by stating that she “wasn’t trying to warn kids to stay out of gangs” but was instead “trying to show people what they [the kids] were like.” By comparison, the students, much like some of the online reviewers of Gang Girl, applied a moralistic framework to the film as a whole, and in particular the final shooting.

41 A. Anders quoted in Wilmington, W. ‘Girlz N’ The Hood.’
Because *Mi Vida Loca*'s conclusion intrigued both reviewers and students, I wanted to analyse the film’s ending in closer detail with the schoolchildren. The *Phoenix New Times* considered Sad Girl’s closing statement, “Women don't use weapons to prove a point, women use weapons for love,” as a “distinction between the male and female gang-banging ethos.”\(^{42}\) I was intrigued to see what the students made of Sad Girl’s words and although the responses illustrated ambivalence in opinion, gendered distinction and simplified gender boundaries were common throughout. One female student stated:

> I think when a man carries around a gun, he will use it for any purpose, like he’ll get mad and he’ll use it or he’ll see it as defending himself and use it. But when you give a woman a gun she won’t use it till she has to. It will be her last resort.

Students, then, supported the idea of “distinction between the male and female” but drew on standard cultural perceptions beyond that of the subculture of the gang. Referring to the closing scene, another student commented: “It is rare that girls shoot someone but the girl actually kills the little girl.” Such answers could position the students as unsophisticated yet these statements verify King and McCaughey’s contention that “cultural standards still equate womanhood with kindness and nonviolence, manhood with strength and aggression.”\(^ {43} \) When I asked students what they thought Sad Girl’s meaning of “love” was, a male student stated that “I don’t think the love of the gang is strong enough for her to use a gun. The love for her children would be strong enough for that.” However, another female participant was keen to point out that the action following immediately after Sad Girl’s declaration could lead to other interpretations of when women will use weapons for love. As the student noted, “you could see their use of guns as protection and as a love for their kids but the little girl gets shot cos the girl loved El Duran so she only uses a gun cos of him.” I flag this response in particular because the student highlighted how at this point, the gun continues to be linked with a male character, reinforcing the idea that violence stems for different sources but there continues to be gendered dimensions.


\(^{43}\) N. King & M. McCaughey, ‘What’s a Mean Woman like You Doing in a Movie like This?’ in N. King & M. McCaughey (eds.), *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), p.2.
Comparing the consumption of *Mi Vida Loca’s* representation of violence to *Havoc’s*, it was interesting that none of the students commented on Allison and Emily’s fight scene at the beginning of the film. Having said that, it is not surprising that the scene failed to generate discussion amongst students and reviewers because the analysis of violence highlighted how “weak” violence (i.e. no “serious” assault occurs) fails to engage with the viewer. Its inability to generate interest confirms my earlier contention that the car park fight scene fulfils this “type” of violence. All too brief and “weak” to make an impact it was instead the portrayal of the 16th Street and the initiation that were commented on. Some agreed with Mora’s contention that Kopple capitalised on the stereotype of Latinos as dangerous, violent individuals: “it makes us look bad, like thugs. There’s no Latinos that are not gang members in the film.” This was in contrast to students’ recognition of characters such as Giggles and La Blue Eyes in Anders’s film. Perhaps surprisingly, the Latino characters of *Havoc* received little mention in the press, interesting when compared to the in-depth conversations that their representation prompted amongst students.

I anticipated that reviewers would choose to capitalise on the stereotyped media and popular culture representation of the dangerous Latino and the public fascination with the violent “Other” or at least critique such a depiction. At the same time, such disinterest is expected because the spectacle of Hathaway’s body overshadowed interest in factors other than her nakedness. That being said, Film4 praised the casting and character of Rodriguez describing him as “Smouldering in a role that could have been nothing more than a cardboard cut-out stereotype, Rodriguez provides *Havoc* with some much-needed street cred.” For others however, Rodriguez’s character failed to move beyond typecasting. For Total Film, Rodriguez “breathes menacing life into a woeful racial stereotype.” In a review for Reel.com, Hollywood filmmaker Gary Goldstein wrote, “Though Freddy Rodriguez is convincing as the tattooed, pony-tailed gang leader,” emphasising the importance of styles, “it’s a one-note, grossly stereotypical part that’s more offensive than

compelling.” 46 Significantly, Kopple’s race was not rendered as the root cause of this representation by either Total Film or Goldstein.

The students were far more critical of the representation of the 16th Street gang members than they were of Mi Vida Loca’s portrayal of the homegirls and homeboys, but as Anders’s “outsider” status failed to draw interest, so did Kopple’s. The filmmakers’ whiteness was not a topic of concern for the participants. However, the gang initiation scene of Havoc - an episode not explicitly commented on by reviewers - drew some interest. The initiation scene, like Mi Vida Loca’s, was framed in real-life contexts. The jumping-in scene in Anders’s film resonated with some because “my cousins are also from some gangs and they didn’t get shot at but they got jumped-in and one my cousin’s has also jumped someone in.” Similarly, the sexed-in initiation of Havoc provoked responses such as “I’ve heard this actually happens” (18-year-old female) and “this is something that gangs actually do” (18-year-old male). Reviewers of Gang Girl also made connections between gang violence, social contexts and individual experience: “NYC is rife with gang activity right now and our youth are deep in it! I used to work with youth in Harlem and it’s so bad on certain blocks the kids can’t cross from the uptown to the downtown side of the street!” 47 Place-bound knowledge such as this was framed in negative contexts to emphasise the “reality” of violence in NY neighbourhoods.

Other scenes from Mi Vida Loca that were deemed memorable included “The scene of the Calvary Cemetery because a lot of people I know have been buried there because of gang involvement.” Again, the student illustrates the importance of the viewer’s geographical positioning in relation to understanding the “reality” of gang violence; professional film reviewers were much more general in their geographical labelling of the barrio of Echo Park. This response from a male student was not an anomaly, and it is worth analysing such admissions with a degree of caution. Street and gang knowledge or displaying a sense of knowledge could be seen as projecting an image of “coolness.” However, these statements derived largely from confidential

questionnaire responses to detail the most memorable scene of the film. Students were not relaying this information in oral form to an audience, neither their peers nor myself. When discussion was stimulated by violence, it was scenes that participants could situate in personal context which were most frequently cited, as well as episodes that dealt with the aftermath of violence.

Violent scenes were not deemed gratuitous by students and interestingly the violence in *Havoc* failed to generate as much discussion as the lack of violence in *Mi Vida Loca*, seemingly confirming Anders’s ideas on the screening of violence. This must be considered within the context of the students viewing in an education setting. The teaching of *Mi Vida Loca* in “Relation to Academic Goals” as detailed by the teacher, was to enable the schoolchildren to “view the troubles of gang life, particularly teen pregnancy, violence and especially the need to be able to sustain oneself and succeed outside of gang life.” Such pedagogical objectives were clearly being achieved by these youth who regularly framed the films as educational: “They inspired me to continue doing my best and to build my own future and reality;” “They are useful films because even if you think they are stereotypes as gang members, we can just work harder to break that.” It is worth reiterating that some early reviewers of *Gang Girl* did suggest the film should be screened to youth, but in stark contrast Bailey’s film was firmly situated as exploitative rather than educational by the press. The students offered more nuanced interpretations of the representation of violence in the classroom than the press surrounding *Gang Girl*. This is largely because of the tabloid media’s necessity to produce sensationalist content. Demonstrating spatial knowledge was evidently more important to the youth of East LA than the discussion of violence, clearly illustrated in discussion of the Cemetery.

**East Coast and West Coast Geographies and Audiences**

I began this thesis thematically with a discussion of setting and an exploration of the significance of geographies and space. I return to its importance here in terms of how crucial audiences’ geographical positioning is to viewing strategies. As Dittmer & Dodds insist in their discussion of fandom and pop cultural
texts, “we must be more aware of the cultural geography of reading.”

The geographical setting of the films was a common interest in their press reception. Review titles located the films geographically, from specific neighbourhoods, the Bronx and Echo Park, to more general references to LA (Havoc). Mention of the Bronx were most obviously utilised because of the NY Post’s local readership. However, citing the neighbourhood in the international press implies a degree of global knowledge of the conceived “problems” (highlighted by some of the reviewers of Gang Girl) of the area and its filmic depiction as a gang “place” in films such as A Bronx Tale (1993). For Kopple’s film, references were made throughout to other white wealthy neighbourhoods including Bel Air and by citing other pop cultural texts including Malibu’s Most Wanted. Such references reinstated the positioning of white youth in prestigious neighbourhoods and made plain the juxtaposing between these places and the oft-cited East LA or “downtown.” The word “barrio” was utilised most frequently when reviewing Mi Vida Loca, in publications both California-based and further afield, securing the barrio as a site of public fascination and inner-city streets as spectacle.

Reviewers’ use of “barrio” informs us of their reliance on public perceptions of place but fails to acknowledge actual inhabitants’ experiences. For the students, Echo Park was a familiar place which had personal meaning and stimulated personal memory, undercutting any simplified assumptions of the neighbourhood. When I asked students if they thought LA was represented “accurately” in Mi Vida Loca and Havoc a number of students raised the issue of gentrification; “Echo Park stands out to me because I have great memories there and because of how different it looks from then to now.” For one student, “Mi Vida Loca is perhaps a realistic representation of the past but not of now because of gentrification.” When interviewing Anders in the neighbourhood in 2015, she too noted of how “this is a very, very gentrified Echo Park” and a place where “big corporations” have moved.

49 For example, see Roeper’s review for reference to Malibu’s Most Wanted.
in. One of the reasons that the schoolteacher uses *Mi Vida Loca* in the classroom is to show a “feminist perspective” of gangs on a module in which ex-gangbanger Luis Rodriguez’s *Always Running* (1993) is also read. In addition to this, the teacher uses the film to illustrate issues such as gentrification and the students certainly demonstrated familiarity with the subject. Like the local youth who aided Anders in selecting “safe” filming locations because of their knowledge of gang territories, these schoolchildren illustrated similar levels of geographical awareness that failed to be displayed by film reviewers.

The students revealed their knowledge of the real-life 18th Street gang that *Havoc* alludes to and at the same time they demonstrated a real sense of pride in their neighbourhood. Much like the lack of scholarly consideration pertaining to Anders’s display of barrio pride, press material did not discuss how the barrio operates for its dwellers. However, in 2008 the *LA Times* did revisit the film in a discussion of the “best” 25 characterisations of LA in the past 25 years of filmmaking, purporting that Anders’s film illustrates “the tight-knit affections many Angelenos feel for the specifics of wherever their enclave may be within the larger fabric of the city.”

Indeed, just as Anders claimed that the homegirls and homeboys she was working with were incredibly proud of their community, these youth were too, supporting the newspaper’s contention. While recognising locations in both films, it was Echo Park, where many said they had spent time during their childhood, which the students were excited by. They noted how Anders’s film went against the media image of their neighbourhoods as simply a gang infested dystopia, something that reviewers of *Gang Girl* did not attempt: gang activity can be “seen all over New York City,” especially “in the area of the Bronx.” To illustrate this, students talked about the brightness of *Mi Vida Loca*, much like Brigham and Marston. At the same time, students noted of the graffiti present in the film and in their local environment. These youth recognised issues within their community but they did not define the

51 A. Anders, *Personal Interview* [Recorded Interview] 22 March 2015, 1pm. Echo Park, LA.
neighbourhood in purely negative terms, unlike audiences of *Gang Girl* who often reinscribed negative spatial geographies to justify the importance of the film’s sociological subject. By comparison, Anders’s defying of negative media (and pop culture) images that have plagued LA’s impoverished neighbourhoods to a greater extent than the Bronx, was highlighted by the students.

The locality of Echo Park, a place that one student claimed “we all know,” drew most attention and most discussion, rather than episodes of violence and sex, elements that stimulated reviews of *Havoc* and *Gang Girl* in particular and were less frequently used to draw in readers for *Mi Vida Loca*. Place-bound identity came before conversation of violence for these youth who (perhaps unsurprisingly) found the depictions of their own locality compelling as they could recognise and identify with images of places where they grew up. The students confirmed how “The agency of the audience is, in many ways, structured by the space(s) in which texts are read.”

Anders’s film represented to them local identity which meant that they could use the “reel-world” to place themselves in the “real-world.”

Knowledgeable of the setting of *Mi Vida Loca*, students highlighted inconsistencies in filming locations: “The funeral scene stood out to me. The film is based in Echo Park but the church, it’s not there at all. It is in East LA. I go to that church.” Professional reviewers would likely not know this unless LA-based and geographically well-informed which reinforces the necessity to move beyond press sampling. Hathaway herself revealed the (literal and figurative) distance between the film’s downtown LA scenes and her own upbringing in interview in 2004 stating that “gangsta life was never part of my upbringing, so out on the street, I was hearing and seeing things I couldn’t believe, things that just seemed too fantastic to be true.”

The British students I spoke with were similarly unfamiliar with Echo Park and downtown LA having not visited the city, stating that what they knew about LA had derived from second-hand information. This indicates the importance of the East LA youth’s geographical familiarity and reinforces how context influences viewer response. Rather than view the funeral itself as memorable, for this youth it was the

---

54 Dittmer & Dodds, ‘Popular Geopolitics,’ p.449.
discrepancy in the scene’s spatial placing that was noteworthy, confirming Murray Forman’s notion referenced elsewhere in this thesis that the hood comes first.

Panning shots of downtown LA and images of MacArthur Park in *Havoc* resonated with personal experience; “I grew up in MacArthur Park up until fourth grade when we moved to East LA. I remember and recognized many places in the movie.” For those who had not visited MacArthur Park themselves, some had family that had visited the area or were able to identify landmarks such as downtown more generally. Scenes that stood out to viewers included episodes where “Hector is walking on the street at night with Allison and says that normal people live there too. It stood out to me because it’s true, a place like that doesn’t only have delinquents.” Although some of the students were keen to highlight that Kopple’s movie fails to show us any Latinos who are not in gangs, this statement recognises that Kopple does in fact suggest Latinos can exist outside of the gang milieu. While reviewers of *Havoc* relied on received ideas about place (both East LA and “white” neighbourhoods) the students undercut this by identifying this scene with Hector as a contradiction to stigmatised space. The Palisades did not stir much conversation amongst students but unlike the professional critics, they did not reduce the spaces to binary opposites. This is perhaps due to a limitation in the students’ knowledge and experience of the Palisades, underscored by the lack of discussion generated by its filmic presence. Speculatively this was also in part due to the participants’ awareness and displeasure in their own environment being labelled in stereotyped and reductive ways as illustrated by the student’s use of “delinquents.”

Other scenes concerned with place-bound identity in *Havoc* offered further critique of racialised spatial barriers with a self-identifying Chicana student (16 years old) offering an enlightening reading of the film:

The part where the white gang was first going downtown LA and they see the police and they were surprised to see police because it shows that there’s more cops in downtown LA is memorable. Also the part where the guys from 16th Street were going to kill Allison and Emily but the cops see them and stop them, it proves police prejudice.

Reading the film as social and political commentary, this student illustrated how the film encouraged serious thought, rather than offering simply frivolous entertainment as articulated by numerous press reviews. Cultural scholar Henry Giroux argues that
within a discourse of critical pedagogy, “images do not dissolve reality into another
text: on the contrary, representations become central to revealing the structures of
power at work in schools, society, and in the larger global order.”56 For many
students, the geographies of the films and their representation offered an opportunity
to voice critical opinion on socioeconomic contexts, placing the texts in the “real-
world,” identifying and critiquing power structures.

For others, Mi Vida Loca provided an occasion to reminisce. The film’s on-
screen geographies generated emotive responses, allowing students to return to the
past. By comparison, “elite” reviewers were reliant on the dominant readings of
Echo Park (often to note how Anders re-imagined the neighbourhood) at the time of
the film’s release because they had no historical or geographical ties to the space.
They could not use the text in the same capacity as the schoolchildren because the
film did not prompt such memories. For the students, memorable scenes of Anders’s
film included ones in which “Mousie and Sad Girl make up at the park. I have a
picture of my mom and my aunt in the same park and position with me and my
cousin playing on the side” one 15-year-old female revealed. The students’ viewing
of both films was far from simply passive and went beyond the recognition of
identifiable places. It established the relationship between the past and the present as
watching the movies today led students to return to personal memories that had
geographic ties. Scenes in the park were considered “special” to participants whose
childhood memories and identity were recalled in relation to place. We have seen
this relationship in Gang Girl’s audience reception too, with the film’s importance
emphasised by a viewer’s memory of Harlem’s troubles. Compared to Havoc and Mi
Vida Loca, the reception of Gang Girl positioned the Bronx as a wholly negative and
gang infested place. This either aimed to stress Gang Girl’s narrative value for youth
entrenched in violence, or conversely to reinforce its potentially harmful content to
young children engulfed in inner-city problems. Although Hathaway was reportedly
told during filming that “you’re a good looking girl walking in a bad
neighbourhood” and that she should “accept the protection” offered when filming in
such locations, the schoolchildren did not reduce spaces to such simplicities.57

56 H. Giroux, Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence, and Youth (NY: Routledge, 1996),
p.53.
In Closing

Speaking with high school youth offered valuable insight into viewing strategies. Uninterested by the directors’ race, they were instead enthusiastic about the geographies of the films, the social commentaries they provided and their educative meaning. While Anders and Kopple have not framed their films as explicitly “moralistic” - although in the early stages of production Kopple did contend that film “teaches that the most innocent intentions can have consequences” - the schoolchildren certainly applied such readings to their viewing.58 But within these readings they also recognised that Mi Vida and Havoc were commercial pieces of “entertainment;” “I think they made the films to teach and warn us about gang life and also to show other cultures that life in East LA isn’t all the same. But then they also want to make money from their films and use bits of our culture to do that.”

Positioning popular culture texts as both (enjoyable) entertainment and educational could be criticised by those who are sceptical of the degree to which students can engage seriously and learn from popular culture. But for others Samuel Brower notes - including Jeffery Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell who use Tupac’s lyrics as a means of connecting “their students to social struggles” in what they term “THUG LIFE” pedagogy” - culturally relevant texts empower students, enabling them to challenge the conditions of their community and “implement the cycle of critical praxis.”59 Students were aware of and keen to challenge structuralist stereotypes of minority youth as gang members and they considered these films as further impetus to do so in their own life. The young adults illustrated differing opinions on the films’ representation of gang members (some critical of Havoc, some believing Anders was challenging stereotypes, some reinforcing) but in each case the schoolchildren demonstrated how the texts operated in both a structuralist (clearly aware of what is at stake with typecasting) and culturalist sense. These youth

saw the films as cultural products that could challenge views on gang members and/or as texts that could aid themselves in challenging stereotypes.

Bailey’s film has not been met with such recognition by the press. Rather as a “Bloody B movie” the film has more readily been deemed exploitative rather than productive. Insisting upon an educational and didactic interpretation of his story, the media have failed to frame the film in such a way; the conversion narrative and religious framework was only briefly noted by the *NY Post* amidst the discussion of the violent episodes enacted by Chalmers. A number of online viewers have however supported Bailey’s declared intentions, identifying the redemptive and sociological frameworks as highly important, illustrating the differences within press and audience reception and the necessity to examine both. As the most explicitly violent film of all three, *Gang Girl* continues to raise questions surrounding the violent non-white gang girl and a cultural unease with viewing audiences. Chalmers’s educational role highlights the violence-versus-pedagogy debate and while *Mi Vida Loca* and *Havoc* were seen to utilise violence in a way that educated the schoolchildren, *Gang Girl*’s presentation of violence has been deemed unable to stir educational conversation by some: “How I am supposed to explain that to my children?”

The sensationalist form of the *NY Post* clearly shapes *Gang Girl*’s press material, yet the press sampling of *Havoc* illustrates that at times non-tabloid press also attribute sensationalist characteristics when reviewing film to draw in readers; references to Hathaway’s nakedness support this. Sensationalism was not something the schoolchildren and general audiences of *Gang Girl* relied upon in their reading, suggesting a contradiction between how the press often position these films, and how audiences actually read them. This also hints towards generational differences between young people more familiar with “raunch” culture in everyday life and the older professional film critic who is arguably less immersed in this climate. There are anomalies however, as some audiences did view *Gang Girl* in the same vein as the *NY Post*, reinforcing how texts enable multiple meanings to derive from them. Reviews of *Mi Vida Loca* largely resisted sensationalising the film in simplistic terms, instead commenting on varying aspects such as narrative technique, realism and Anders as (white) filmmaker. These topics were not necessarily ones which produced in-depth conversation amongst focus group participants and when
discussed did not necessarily complement views held by the professional critics, but there were similarities in press reception and audience reception at times, including some agreement with Thomas. The subjects that most seriously engaged the students were the discussions of (off-screen) violence and locale. These topics were raised in each film’s press reception, but held significant importance to these youth (aware of gang activity and geographically positioned in inner-city neighbourhoods) who furthered my understanding of the meaning of place and revealed young people’s sophisticated handling of topics sometimes handled unsophisticatedly by the press.

The schoolchildren and audiences of *Gang Girl* tended to insert personal, lived experience into their readings to validate, authenticate or challenge filmic representation and press reception. Drawing connections between personal scenarios and text was exclusive to the audience reception, highlighting the differences between general audiences and those who are paid to review the product. In some instances, audience reception complemented press reviews. At other times, audiences read the filmic representation of violence, styles and geographies in ways that professional film critics simply have not because texts generate different meaning in different contexts. The realism and authenticity of these case studies were of significant importance for both reviewers and audiences. In 2015 Bailey similarly used real-life events to validate the ongoing necessity of his movie, informing me of a girl gang attack at a McDonald’s restaurant in Brooklyn just “two weeks ago.”

These girl gang / gang girl films are not only important and continually relevant because they present often neglected sectors of society, but because they enable marginalised people to express ideas that are important in everyday life. Although the “authentic” and “inauthentic” binary is considered reductive, questions regarding the realism and authenticity of these films allowed youth to examine and interrogate the current political, social and cultural landscape of the world today: “They might not always be accurate, but they show so many things. Like why are some people in gangs but others are not and why do so many movies show us [Latinos] as being in gangs? They are useful to us and other cultures and help us learn.”

---

Conclusion

Representing the “Real-World”

Unlike the male ghetto action movies or (broader) contemporary street gang movies, these girl gang films place gang girls’ experiences at the front and centre of the narrative. They shift from the public discourse of the male, criminal gang member to provide audiences with representations far more complex than a mere counterpart character. Within these texts, young women do not surrender to the auxiliary ghetto girl staple, nor do they simply undertake the role of the mother or girlfriend of the male gang member. The girls’ gang activity is represented with much greater intricacy than had previously been afforded on-screen. These girl gang texts employ narrative conventions of the hegemonic male gang discourse well-established in popular culture – detailing gang experience through the principal themes of locale, style politics and violence - but do not simply imitate their narratives. Rather, these girl gang / gang girl movies have established their own scripts with commonalities which at times repeat culturally-given discourses about femininity but simultaneously contest ideas regarding gendered ideologies. For example, there is a theme of love as viewers might expect in a women’s centred narrative (but not necessarily in a gang tale), yet this does not solely manifest in the form of a heterosexual relationship, or indeed as a relationship between two people. These films not only redefine what it means to be a gang girl but also reconfigure and reject some wider gendered discourses including, but not limited to, the man as protector, man as provider and domesticated woman tract. Gang girl identity can itself challenge these traditions but without specific girl gang narratives, this notion fails to translate to screen, as underscored by the ghetto action cycle.

Over the course of this thesis, the regular racialisation of gang discourse has been illustrated, yet these films, particularly when considered alongside contemporary male-directed and male-subject street gang films, illustrate how gang discourse is gendered to an even greater degree. Gender, rather than race, class or production values and / or context, is the common denominator influencing the way
in which gang terrain is negotiated in these films. While the texts regularly redefine what it means to be a girl in a gang, particularly contesting how the contemporary male street gang film has otherwise documented this experience as a relatively disempowering discourse through which gang girls are props, these films also rely on gender differentiation and perpetuate gender asymmetries through representation. Diversity certainly exists amongst the gang girls on-screen, and these films recognise and expose gang girls’ heterogeneity but they also perpetuate expected gendered behaviours. Essentially, the filmic construction of the gang girl is a vehicle through which gender is reproduced.

When beginning this research project, I anticipated that by the time of its completion, another US film either concerned with contemporary girl gang members or examining an all-female gang would have been released. Given the recent development in the screening of the girl gang and gang girl in the European sphere, I expected the US film industry would capitalise on the critical successful of films such as *Girlhood* and *Black.*1 These European products and their directors have been recognised in the US for their contributions to cinema whereas products made in America, projecting facets of girl gang activity on home soil, have failed to amass the same accolades. At the time of writing these conclusions, there has been no further output of such gang girl or girl gang focussed films in American cinema. In the words of Sad Girl’s portrayer, Angel Aviles, “Even now, 2015, they’re not making films about these women” in Hollywood.2

In 2016, filmic representations of the contemporary street gang girl and girl gang continue to be limited. By comparison, the continuing interest in the male gang member in American filmmaking is apparent with the release of *Five Star* (2015). Much like Anders, the film’s (white) director, Keith Miller, employs the use of non-

---


actors. A real-life member of the Bloods gang, James “Primo” Grant, plays Primo, an African American gang leader of the East NY Bloods. For Bailey, and Anders, reasoning for the ongoing sidelining of the gang girl experience was “a good question,” with neither in interview with me able to shed further light on her neglect, speculatively because they have both provided correctives to this. The lack of financial and critical success of the three films studied here, especially when compared to films focusing on male gang members (Five Star and its actors and director were nominated for and won various awards at film festivals), can be identified as one potential reason for their less than commonplace production. An important proposition put forward by Przemieniecki is that “Hollywood’s interest in making ‘street gang’ films has waned, shifting the focus to terrorists and drug traffickers and dangerous groups” in cinema, corresponding with the “post-9/11 media depictions of what and who is dangerous.” This is a considered point, but we have in fact seen in this thesis how violence (or the threat / danger of the street gang) is not the sole component of gangsta’s filmic representation, and is far from the only topic consumed by audiences.

Rumours of a sequel to Anders’s film have surfaced at several points since Mi Vida Loca’s release. In August 2016, I was excited to hear Angel Aviles and co-star Seidy Lopez reveal that “there’s a script” written by Anders for a sequel “which will be called Smile Now, Cry Later.” Much like Mi Vida Loca, the film’s title references a common Hispanic tattoo but this time around the movie will be about “Sad Girl and Mousie’s kids:” “that’s all we can say.” With details surrounding the film and production very much under wraps at the time of writing, I am eager to speak with Anders about the forthcoming film. Like fans who responded enthusiastically to the news of the sequel and who have “been waiting since the 90s!” for this film, I look forward to finding out more detail regarding its script and

---

3 D. Bailey, Personal Interview [Recorded Interview] 2 April 2015, 10.30 am, NY.
4 For detail regarding Five Star’s nominations and awards won, see IMDb.
6 angelawakened, Mousie and Sadgirl answer your number one question. 11 August 2016 [Video]. Available online: https://www.instagram.com/p/BI-X4uXjHBK/?taken-by=angelawakened&hl=en [Accessed 12/08/2016].
7 Ibid.
production. The extent to which girl gang life and Chola styling remain crucial, if and how the now gentrified Echo Park is fundamental to the storytelling, whether the film will include the real-life gang members that were so essential to *Mi Vida Loca*, and how it is received, all remains to be seen. If and how the economic recession of recent years feeds into the socioeconomic context of the film will also be a point of fascination.

I am equally interested to see when and how future filmmakers treat the gang girl and girl gang. We have seen similarities in their representation throughout this thesis which can be traced back to earlier characterisations. The initiation of the gang girl remains as crucial in *Havoc* and *Gang Girl* (an original case study that has so far failed to draw scholarly interest) as it was in Dertano’s *Girl Gang* and *She Devils on Wheels*; films that much like the three case studies of this thesis, present the complex nature of girl gang membership. Exploring the history of the girl gang on film has proved important with *Mi Vida Loca*, *Havoc* and *Gang Girl*, three seemingly dissimilar texts, revisiting some conversations that existed previously. The incompetent gun handling of Walter Hill’s Lizzies resurfaces in Anders’s film, and the illicit lesbian desire of the girl gang members, as showcased by Hill, manifests in both Bailey (consider Shakira) and Kopple’s (Emily) texts. *Havoc’s* press reception rearticulates issues of titillation already seen in *Girl Gang* and Lewis’s depiction of the “Man Eaters.” Certain consistencies in the screening of the gang girl and girl gang on-screen suggest that any future films will generate some similar representations.

Such patterns (including how the girl gang remains under male control) stem from factors including the realities detailed in sociological accounts of girl gang membership, audience expectations, and raced, classed and gendered stereotypes. At numerous points within this project, aspects of each text that complicate customary gender dynamics and renderings of women in film and society more broadly have been noted. The use of makeup and the confidence of young women in public spaces are just some examples. At the same time, cultural perceptions of “expected” gendered behaviour continue to permeate these films including, but not exclusive to, the legitimising of violent acts performed by (young) women and the placing of

---

8 Ibid.
women against one another. We can identify similarities in these films as rooted in wider filmic and cultural standards but generic conventions should also be discussed.

Although the three case studies do not constitute a cycle of films or genre, they can best be described as an aspect of a production trend. As noted earlier, Anders did not want her film to be perceived as a “genre movie” in relation to the ghetto action cycle. Anders does not simply repeat plots or narrative technique and Mi Vida Loca does in many ways depart from both historical filmic representations of girl gangs and images presented in the ghetto action movies. Indeed, she arguably does this the most successfully when compared to Havoc and Gang Girl, reimagining projections of young women as well as masculinity. However, the subject matter and themes of these movies, including other films referenced in this study such as Living the Life and Down for Life, groups these texts together with recognisable issues. However, how these topics are handled differs greatly, informed in part by production values and largely by context.

Examining representations through three in-depth case studies reveals how the social, cultural and economic context of each film is crucial to the on-screen presentation of the girl gang and gang girl. From Mi Vida Loca through to Gang Girl, changing political and cinematic landscapes manifest in the handling of the subject. Each film provides a commentary on contemporary concerns, beginning with barrio “issues” of the early 1990s, ending with the public fascination of women on death row and cultural appropriation considered in-between. I began this thesis detailing distinct differences in the representation of locale between LA and NY, and how gang members’ relationship with space is informed by a sense of place-bound identity. Locale we have seen also influences specific style politics, with the representation of makeup, clothing and tattoos deriving from place and a combination of raced, gendered and classed discourses. Context and locale is of equal importance when examining how audiences engage and draw meaning from these texts as the last two chapters have shown.

Compared with the students’ responses to Mi Vida Loca and Havoc, the press reception of Gang Girl centred largely on violence, partly because of its increasing on-screen presence when compared to Mi Vida Loca in particular. Growing on-screen violence committed against (and by) gang girls can be traced across the three
films, in part due to differing directorial opinion regarding the screening of violence but also because of changing filmic trends and audience demands in an “extreme” digital age. We can confirm then that representations of the gang girl and girl gang do change over a period of time. Throughout this study, I have highlighted how the race and class of the gang girl is central to the differing representation of her character. Allison’s whiteness and wealth results in the presentation of her gang membership as transitory and temporary and ultimately “inauthentic.” Allison is able to purchase gangsta because of her white privilege yet white entitlement equally shapes the actions of the male PLC members and so it is essentially Allison’s gender that defines her gang experience. Havoc, a film underestimated by many film critics was considered as an important text by one schoolteacher I met who plans to use the film in future teaching, alongside Mi Vida Loca. Przemieniecki warns of the potential “damage” of Hollywood’s gang-related movies.9 However, the findings in this thesis might be of interest to educators who could utilise the gang girl / girl gang film as educational tool, suitable for prompting conversation on poignant political, social and cultural issues.

Kopple’s film is a relevant text today, for both teaching and learning. One 17-year-old student informed me, “It’s rare that we get to see young white people in gangs. I can’t think of any other movies that show it and I think it’s important that we, and other cultures, get to see this.” Havoc is important for this reason and because the film raises conversations about white privilege that remain significant today. In 2008, Abigail Fisher, a white undergraduate student, applied to the University of Texas and when unsuccessful in her application, claimed that she had been discriminated against on racial grounds. For Fisher, the university’s admissions policies (whereby race is considered in student intake to ensure racial diversity) “prevented her admission,” and led to filing a lawsuit against the institution.10 The Supreme Court heard Fisher v. University of Texas in 2013 and the case was sent “back to the federal appeals court with instructions to decide it under existing law.

Affirmative action, the court said could be used for purposes of diversity, but only when no alternative way of reaching that goal is available." Appeals were made against the decision in 2016 but the court upheld its decision. Historically, the same institution refused entrance to racial minorities because the Texas State Constitution prohibited integrated education. *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950) challenged such racial segregation and the “separate but equal” policy, questioning white privilege. Fisher’s suit, “sponsored by Edward Blum, a wealthy conservative entrepreneur,” flags concerns of white privilege; Fisher’s case “only worked to reinforce white privilege by identifying the experiences of Whites as the normative standard by which all others will be evaluated.”

The argument that the university violated civil and constitutional rights fails to acknowledge the ongoing privilege of whites in various aspects of life as evidenced in *Havoc*. In January 2016, presidential candidate and former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, spoke at a Brown & Black Democratic Presidential Forum in Iowa. She was asked by a Latina Drake University student, Thalia Anguiano, if she could “tell us what white privilege means to you and can you give me an example from your life or career when you think you have benefitted from it?” Clinton’s response recognised that she “was a lucky person” and noted of differences in lifestyle between herself and others in her childhood. This reply to her question reportedly left Anguiano “a little disappointed,” “I feel like she didn’t answer it.” A month later, Clinton gave a speech at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem (NY) stating, “White Americans need to do a better job of listening when African Americans talk about the seen and unseen barriers that you

---

15 Anguiano quoted in Workneh. L, ‘Hillary Clinton.’
face every day.” She continued, “We need to recognize our privilege and practice humility, rather than assume that our experiences are everyone's experiences.” Speaking in front of a predominantly black audience, it is not surprising that Clinton refers to African Americans in relation to white privilege but Havoc details how white privilege affects brown lives too. To conclude, as some reviewers have, that Havoc’s only value is Hathaway’s exposed body derides the film’s important dissection of class and race relations which the students were able to recognise. One of the legacies of cultural theorist Stuart Hall, in prison scholar and social activist Angela Davis’s words, is the ability to “recognise the production of knowledge in venues other than academic ones;” an idea that both the online and classroom critics underscored.

The audience and press reception dynamic of this study illustrates how viewers bring with them certain preconceived, but not homogenous, notions of gendered, raced and classed behaviour. But young audiences are equally capable of acknowledging where (and why) these texts rely on and / or subvert stereotypes reinforcing structuralist paradigms yet this project provides new knowledge on the culturalist relationship between readers and movies and between filmmaking and the socially marginalised girl gang / gang girl. Scholarly work on Mi Vida Loca (particularly Fregoso and Dever) and Havoc (specifically Mora and Lopez) has offered detailed and perceptive readings of these films. Yet such studies have not thoroughly examined these texts in their cultural, social or political context, so crucial because - as we have seen - context informs representation. This thesis has built on the foundations of studies on the ghetto action movie cycle such as Watkins’s, but has explored the specifics of the contemporary street gang girl(s) and her representation in film, which scholars have failed to explicate. This new line of inquiry furthers Bev Zalcock’s recognition that the filmic gang girl character requires academic attention but has moved beyond her simplified reading of gang

17 Ibid.
18 A. Davis in Goldsmiths, University of London, Professor Angela Davis: Policing the Crisis Today. 28 November 2014 [Video]. Available at: https://vimeo.com/113119921 [Accessed 14/08/16].
girl characters as “phallicised females.”¹⁹ Rather, this thesis has explored the paradox of empowering and stereotyped representation.

Representation has progressed as girls take centre stage in movies as contemporary street gang members rather than as young women who exist peripherally, as in Boyz for example. Ironically then, the contemporary street gang has been empowering yet in each case study, male domination exists in some form. Although issues of male power have been key to my readings of each thematic, a feminist reading of these movies would have been inadequate in tackling their complexities. By conducting reception work, I have learnt that these texts offer more to viewers beyond this concern. Reception Studies, Janet Staiger notes, “is a radical attempt to understand how texts and artworks are consumed in order to act with more knowledge in political situations, to change, where necessary, or where possible, the consumption of cultural products.”²⁰ As active agents in their own history, the students considered Havoc and Mi Vida Loca as texts that could help in their own pursuit of overcoming stereotypes and contribute to social and political change. The students also illustrated that their interest in these movies went far beyond violent episodes, perhaps surprising given their young age but illustrative of their ability to produce sophisticated readings of film and reasoning for their voices to be consulted more frequently. For Lawrence Grossberg, Cultural Studies “tries to understand the present; it tries to make visible other trajectories into other futures, and to formulate strategies to get us from here to there.”²¹ I hope that the work undertaken here provides some impetus for future reception study, particularly the consulting of often negated sectors of society. Although at times labelled perhaps reductively as merely “participants” in this “study,” the schoolchildren offered specialised, knowledge-based readings, revealing how these films operate in the “real-world.”

The extent to which all three texts do or do not represent the “real-world” illustrates the usefulness of the films in generating discussion regarding contemporary society. For future audience study, comprehensive transnational

comparisons would further elucidate “How do differently located people interpret the same text?”22 Wider sample sizes and greater racial diversity would be beneficial to examine how these films are consumed on a broader scale. References made throughout this thesis to a range of other films help to elucidate moments in these narratives that subscribe to convention and those that contribute to original discussion. Further comparative study with more films (including those consulted in this study) would also allow for the findings of this thesis to be applied to movies that continue to be neglected by scholars. The important work carried out here proposes that we should consider filmic examinations of the gang girl and girl gang as vital contributions to facilitating conversations regarding the intersections of race, class and gender in the present day.

I anticipate that Anders’s Smile Now, Cry Later will similarly stir important conversations and receive significant academic attention. Its comparative analysis with Mi Vida Loca through a Cultural Studies approach and press and audience reception study will be essential to a future project. For now, the 2015 release of F. Gary Gray’s NWA biopic, Straight Outta Compton (Compton) provides a useful means of reflecting on some of the issues raised in this thesis. Returning to the late 1980s and early 1990s, the film depicts male gang warfare - and the less (scholarly, culturally and publicly) discussed Crips and Bloods gang truce that occurred in the aftermath of Rodney King’s beating - on the streets of the city of Compton, South L.A. Residents of Compton itself, a “low income area” that has “been heavily dis-invested in,” had to view the movie outside of the theatre-less neighbourhood where an undesired reputation has helped generate media headlines and capital for movie makers like Gray; Compton is the highest (domestic) grossing black directed film to date.23 It is a film that I would very much like to take into classrooms with the aim of elucidating what the neighbourhood and film mean to Compton’s inhabitants. At

present, it is evident as to what the area and film meant to some “outsiders” before the movie’s release.

In *Compton*, O’Shea Jackson Junior, in his portrayal of his father and NWA member Ice Cube, walks the violent ghetto streets (in almost a cyclical fashion) that Ice Cube had 24 years previously in *Boyz*. Movie reviews and news reports on films such as *Boyz* and *Menace* produced what S. Craig Watkins considers “an accusatory tone: ghetto action films targeting youth moviegoers encouraged violence and juvenile delinquency.”24 Episodes of real violence at movie theatres after the release of *Boyz* and *Menace* placed these popular culture texts under public scrutiny and as the source of moral panic (much like the press surrounding *Gang Girl*), particularly amongst the white middle-class.25 In returning to the ghetto as a site of violence in 2015, we also return to similar fears of reel violence inciting “real” black violence, illustrating the complex power relations and inequalities in the US today and ongoing significance of *Policing the Crisis*.26

Upon *Compton’s* release, the LAPD increased “security in the areas of the movie theatres” including the Southwest Division and Universal offered to reimburse theatres taking extra security measures.27 Against a backdrop of a (middle-aged white) gunman killing two women in Louisiana during a screening of *Trainwreck* (a 2015 romantic comedy starring a predominantly white cast) just two months previously, it is noteworthy that media reports emphasised the extra security that was being implemented solely at screenings of *Compton* in predominately non-white

---

26 The significance of *Policing the Crisis* in recent times has been noted by Angela Davis. In a keynote address at the 2014 ‘Stuart Hall International Conference: Conversations, Projects and Legacies’ (Goldsmiths University, London), Davis detailed how “Policing the Crisis resonated with the widely reported events in Ferguson, Missouri”, in reference to the police killing of young African American Michael Brown. See: Goldsmiths, University of London, *Professor Angela Davis [Video]*.
neighbourhoods. The cinematic return to the black male ghetto in Compton remains crucial in addressing ongoing racial injustices. As I write these conclusions, more black men (including Alton Sterling, Philando Castile and Keith Scott) have been shot dead by white police officers in America. In an effort to figure racial politics at the forefront of the public imagination, the Black Lives Matter campaign has gained universal momentum and “In a matter of weeks, the movement shattered what remained of the notion of a “post-racial” America and reoriented the entire national conversation on anti-Black racism.”

Black women, including Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi who founded Black Lives Matter, have been crucial in activism seeking to curtail the plight of racial minorities. Hillary Clinton’s “Mothers of the Movement” (2016) has provided the mothers of racially marginalised individuals killed by gun violence and/or police brutality a platform to publically address these issues. As we have seen in the three case studies, the relationship between mother and child immediately affects the way we interpret the gang girl figure. Those involved in Clinton’s initiative include Cleopatra Pendleton-Cowley, the mother of Hadiya Pendleton; a 15-year-old African American schoolgirl shot dead in Chicago by young black male gang members in 2013. Although black women and girls are vital to activism, and are killed and affected by the aftermath of violence, there is a tendency to centralise on the troubles of the young black male. In 2015, the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) coined the term and hashtag #SayHerName in an effort to bring attention to police violence against black women and girls. Critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, one of the founders of the AAPF, reminds us that “Although Black women are routinely killed, raped and beaten by the police, their experiences are rarely foregrounded in popular understandings of police brutality.” Statistically, non-white males commit more violent crime and are subjected to police brutality more so than their female counterparts. In Mi Vida Loca’s conclusion, Sad Girl repeats Giggles’s words, “By the time our boys are twenty-one, they are either dead,

28 Ibid.
30 K. Crenshaw quoted in AAPF, #SayHerName: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women, #SayHerName Brief (2015). Available at: http://www.aapf.org/sayhernamereport [Accessed 05/04/2016].
disabled or in prison,” a statement that is still as pertinent now as it were in the early 1990s. The stories and experiences of women themselves, especially beyond the trajectory of “picking up the pieces” are thus often unheard; something that the case studies in this thesis rectify by exploring and complicating images of young women’s lives.

Although preoccupied with the all-male NWA, black women as mothers, girlfriends, “bitches” and “hoes” are as crucial to Compton’s storytelling as they were in the early 1990s. In revisiting the era surrounding the ghetto action movie, Compton recycles its handling of black women and screens episodes of black male-on-male violence. Yet the filmic version of NWA’s history omits real-life episodes of violence against black women such as the assault of female journalist Dee Barnes by Dr. Dre. The same year of Compton’s release saw the viral circulation of a 15-year-old black Texan girl, Dajerria Becton, thrown to the ground by an armed white male police officer. Much like the public interest in the gang girl and girl gang, Becton’s youth was key to the public scandal that followed. The incident, viewed on YouTube over 12-million times, resulted in public outrage and protest (much like the beating of King in 1991), and the police officer’s resignation. Violence against black males by white police officers is far from accepted but has almost become routinely expected, whereas the beating of (black) and especially young female bodies is arguably more shocking. Speaking about Compton’s revisionist history, Barnes herself has stated that “The truth is too ugly for a general audience.” This is exemplified by the fact that press surrounding Gang Girl failed to explore the violence committed against Veronica’s character; to discuss it would mean facing realities of such episodes.

Although press surrounding Compton revealed that reviewers were keen to bring to light its exclusions, Barnes suggests that audiences are not actually prepared for such horrors. When Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work

31 The seven-minute YouTube video was published on 6 June 2015 and as of 28 March 2016 has been viewed over 12,614,000 times. Brandon Brooks, Cops Crash Pool Party (Original). 6 June 2015 [Video]. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R46-XTqXkzE [Accessed 28/03/2016].
Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996 suggesting that welfare receivers (like the Echo Park characters of Anders’s film) had become too reliant on the state, white sympathies towards marginalised ghetto and barrio inhabitants were largely curtailed. To screen black and brown male violence against female bodies in particular, as Havoc and Gang Girl do, forces viewers to uncomfortably acknowledge that problems persist in the ghettos and barrios of urban America; perhaps this contributes to these films’ lack of success. Down for Life (2010) features more violent gang girls than Anders’s film and violent sexed-in initiations by males as seen in Havoc and Gang Girl. Despite having a well-established cast, including rap artist Snoop Dogg, Down for Life has been unsuccessful both financially and critically. Certain types of violence are debatably more troubling for viewers than others.

Mi Vida Loca, Havoc and Gang Girl demonstrate how race is intrinsic to the representation of gang girl violence. In the films studied here, non-white gang girls (Mi Vida Loca and Gang Girl) are more effortlessly connected with violence than the white girls (Havoc) who have to infiltrate the barrio to find “real” danger yet are able to transition out of gang life without redemption or a position on death row. The real-life association of non-whites with criminality frequently leads to brutal arrests and the shooting of non-white bodies. However, the way in which such incidents are reported varies considerably. Violence against brown bodies is often sidelined in national and international press. Mi Vida Loca, Havoc and Gang Girl make small, yet significant contributions to creating space for the exploration of brown lives that the media and Hollywood continue to neglect. In a study of inequality in US popular films from 2007 to 2014, “Hispanic/Latino characters” were found to continually be the most “underrepresented group;” “surprising given that Hispanics purchased 23% of U.S. movie tickets.” With a history considered more problematic and brutal given the slavery narrative, blacks have been afforded more screen time and generated greater attention in political movements. Consider, for example, the

---

(scholarly and media) interest (and perhaps sympathy) given to the Civil Rights Movement when compared to the Chicano Movement. In his contribution to the Brown Lives Matter development, Miguel A. De La Torre highlights how the “continuous black/white dichotomy that has predominantly shaped the discourse of U.S. conversations concerning race problematic.” We “cannot diminish the importance of black lives matter” because “for centuries they have not mattered much” but brown lives and the discriminatory practices against them still need attention.

The shootings and deaths of Latinos by US police often fail to generate as much wide-scale attention as those of black citizens. De La Torre notes, “The ethnic discrimination, abuse, and death brown bodies constantly face is alarming. And while the national narrative mainly focuses on the plight of African Americans, the social location of Latinxs [a gender neutral alternative to Latino and Latina] seldom pierces the U.S. conscious.” The shooting and death of 17-year-old Jessica Hernandez in 2015, thirty-four-year-old Ricardo Diaz Zeferino in the same year and the shooting of 13-year-old Andy Lopez in 2013 received substantially less international coverage compared to incidents of police shooting and killing blacks. The shooting of 12-year-old African American Tamir Rice in 2014 drew mass media attention across the world, the same year that news of the killings of blacks (including Eric Garner, Michael Brown and Akai Gurley) by the authorities were broadcast internationally. Comparatively, the shooting of Lopez in California - a shooting which has notable similarities to Rice’s death - failed to cause such global interest or fervour. While the mainstream (including celebrities) is quick to use the styles of the Latina/o community as we saw in chapter three, they are seemingly less interested in raising questions regarding systemic injustices against the same community. By comparison, Mi Vida Loca, Gang Girl and Havoc use - and in Havoc’s case explicitly show the mainstream’s interest in - subcultural styles and practices that originate from non-white communities, whilst also showcasing problems that stem from white hierarchical power structures. While the “current

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid, p.76.
social, economic, and political structures are undergirded with the recognition that only white lives matter,” these three movies tell us otherwise.\textsuperscript{37}

With issues of immigration considered by whites as major concerns for the Hispanic community (and Hispanic voters polling immigration within their top five concerns), it is perhaps not surprising that discriminatory police practices are sidelined and perhaps less vocalised as a concern when compared to black’s relationship with the authorities.\textsuperscript{38} Yet post-9/11, there has been “an outgrowth” of “fear of brown-skinned outsiders as well as a continuation of decades-old patterns of anti-Latino immigration hysteria and discrimination” and the 2016 Presidential campaign has only rearticulated the tenuous position that brown bodies occupy in the US today.\textsuperscript{39} Donald Trump has expressed desire to build a “great, great wall” to restrict border movement of Mexicans, or as Trump has termed them, criminals, rapists and drug dealers: “[Mexico] are sending people that have lots of problems, and they are bringing those problems to us. They are bringing drugs, and bringing crime, and their rapists.”\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Mi Vida Loca, Havoc} and \textit{Gang Girl} inform us that such “problems” do exist in areas inhabited by browns and blacks, but spaces occupied largely by whites, such as the Palisades, are far from utopic. At the same time, these films offer considerably more than simply tales of turmoil within these spaces as we have seen in chapter one.

At a time when Barack Obama occupies the White House, the discussion of race, gender and space remains as crucial as it was during the Civil Rights Movement. This year, the lack of racial diversity in the Oscars nominations led to a

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, p.77.
\textsuperscript{38} According to the Pew Research Center, the economy, health care, and terrorism placed higher priority than immigration (the fourth concern) for registered Hispanic voters in 2016. See: Pew Research Center, \textit{Hispanic Voters and the 2016 Election} (7 July 2016). Available online: http://www.people-press.org/2016/07/07/6-hispanic-voters-and-the-2016-election/ [Accessed 18/07/2016].
backlash against and boycott of the Academy Awards ceremony.\footnote{30} #OscarsSoWhite and the noting of racism within the movie industry also led to discussions of gender inequalities. Current debates suggest Hollywood is still ultimately patriarchal and not sufficiently diverse enough to reflect the diversity of America itself. In 2015, just nine percent of women directed the top 250 grossing domestic films.\footnote{41} The possibility that Hillary Clinton will replace the first bi-racial President and become the first woman occupying a position that, until 2009, was reserved for white men has similarly stirred conversations regarding gender relations in the present day. Clinton, arguably in a bid to seize young, black and female supporters, has publically praised the “great” artistry of pop artist and self-declared “modern day feminist,” Beyoncé, who has attended major fundraisers for the political candidate.\footnote{43} In her 2016 visual album Lemonade, Beyoncé calls attention to the experiences, plights and strengths of black women and includes references to black women directors, Kasi Lemmons and Julie Dash. The work by these women has been critically acclaimed for addressing oft-forgotten and / or misunderstood aspects of black female life. Dash’s Daughters of the Dust (1991) not only inspired Beyoncé’s visuals but in 2004 was placed in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress and in 2016 received a re-release and restoration 25 years since its release, much like Boyz.\footnote{44} By comparison, Mi Vida Loca has influenced the styles of the pop cultural market but all three films investigated in this thesis have failed to achieve such recognition despite

\footnote{30} This could appear contradictory given that in in recent years Mexican men have won the award for Best Director: Alfonso Cuarón won the 2014 Academy Award for Best Director (Gravity) and Alejandro González Iñárritu won the award in 2015 and 2016 for Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) and The Revenant, respectively. However, these films are all white subject based.


\footnote{44} In October 2016, the British Film Institute re-released Boyz as part of a celebration of black filmmaking.
addressing crucial matters of contemporary society that other films fail to understand.

In 2015 Spike Lee’s *Chi-Raq* - a satirical handling of Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata* in which a sex strike is imposed and led by women in a bid to end male fighting in the Peloponnesian War - black women in the modern-day gang “infested” Englewood (Chicago) “deny all rights of access or interest” in sex to end black male gang and gun violence. On the one hand, black women hold power (albeit through their bodies) and mobilise themselves into action in scenes that are reminiscent of the Echo Park homegirls making decisions about Ernesto’s truck. At the same time, black women in *Chi-Raq* are affected by, but not presented as involved in, gang activity despite the active presence of females in gangs such as 17-year-old African American Gakirah Barnes who was shot dead on the streets of Chicago in 2014. The case studies I have explored in this study negotiate space from within, diversifying filmmaking both behind the camera and on-screen in terms of gender, class and race. *Mi Vida Loca*, *Gang Girl* and *Havoc* offer complicated and at times problematic representations of race, gender and class. But they are films that, much like other films featuring girl gangs and gang girls, are often overlooked despite their important social, political and cultural politics and their continuing relevance.
Figures

Images used are screen grabs from the films.

**Fig.1 - Mousie and Sad Girl Copying Styles**

**Fig.2 - Whisper’s Style**
Fig. 3 - Giggles Before Prison

Fig. 4 - Giggles Post-Prison
Fig. 5 - Sad Girl’s Eyes

Fig. 6 - 16th Street Styles
Fig.7 - Shakira’s Tattoo

Fig.8 - Shakira’s Tattoo and Veronica’s Scar
Fig. 9 - Allison’s “Gangsta” Style

Fig. 10 - The Croniks Style
Fig. 11 - Lopez Post-Prison

Fig. 12 - Allison at School
Appendices

Appendix One

Sample Questionnaire Questions

1. Is this the first time that you have watched *Mi Vida Loca* and *Havoc*? If NO, which movie have you watched and who did you watch the movie(s) with?

2. Are there any particular scenes of *Mi Vida Loca* that stand out to you and why?

3. Why do you think the characters in *Havoc* are so fascinated with gang culture?

4. What did you think of the music used in *Havoc*?

5. Who do you think is the target audience for *Mi Vida Loca*? (For example, do you think the movie is aimed at a particular race, gender, age, gang or non gang members? etc.)

6. Who do you think is the target audience for *Havoc*?

7. The National Gang Report (2013) states that “females are increasingly taking more active roles in gangs.” From your experience, do you think this is the case in Los Angeles?

8. Have you ever watched any other gang films? If yes, how do they differ from *Mi Vida Loca* and/or *Havoc*? For example, did they focus on girls in gangs? did they have the same setting? were they more or less violent? were they more “believable?”
Bibliography

Books


**Chapter in Book**


### Journal Articles


Dyson, M., ‘Between Apocalypse and Redemption: John Singleton’s Boyz N the Hood,’ Cultural Critique, No.21 (Spring, 1992), pp. 121-141.


White-Stanley, D., “‘God Give Me Strength’: The Melodramatic Sound Tracks of Director Allison Anders,’ Velvet Light Trap, No.51 (Spring, 2003), pp.54-66.


**Theses and Stencilled Papers**


**Reports**

African American Policy Forum, #SayHerName: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women. #SayHerName Brief 2015. Available online: http://www.aapf.org/sayhernamereport [Accessed 05/04/2016].


**Speeches**


Audio Interviews

Anders, A. *Personal Interview* [Recorded Interview] 22 March 2015, 1pm. Echo Park, Los Angeles.

Bailey, D. *Personal Interview* [Recorded Interview] 2 April 2015, 10.30 am. New York City.

Newspaper & Magazine Articles (Offline)


No author, ‘Gang members help out filmmaker for 'Mi Vida Loca’ Or 'My Crazy Life.’ It’s the promising director’s third film,’ *The Kansas City Star.* 12 August 1994.


No author, ‘Girlz N' The Hood Movies: Director wanted to depict Hispanic female gang life on the big screen to underscore big urban problems,’ *Orange County Register.* 23 July 1994, p.4.


No author, ‘The Issue’: Bronx Principal and Her Controversial Role in the Film 'Gang Girl,' ” NY Post. 19 March 2013, p.22.


Meisel, M., ‘Mi Vida Loca,’ The Film Journal. 97(7) 1 Aug 1994, p.23.


Peyser, A., ‘Say the End to this Principal,’ NY Post. 18 March 2013, p.12.


**Online Sources**

**Newspaper & Magazine Articles**


Barnes, D., ‘Here's What’s Missing from Straight Outta Compton: Me and the Other Women Dr. Dre Beat Up,’ *Gawker*. 18 August 2015 [Online]. Available at:


Duerden, N., ‘The Good, the Bad and the Dirrty,’ Blender. 15 November 2003. Available at:

Edelman, S., ‘Bronx School Principal’s Movie Role as Gun-slinging Gangsta Alarms Parents,’ The NY Post. 17 March 2013 [Online]. Available at:

Eden, N., ‘Lean Like a Chola,’ Wonderland. 3 March 2015 [Online]. Available at:


James, C., ‘Mi Vida Loca My Crazy Life (1993) Teen-Agers on the Edge and Over It,’ NY Times. 15 July 1994. Available at:


Rose, S., ‘From Molenbeek to Hollywood – why Belgian thriller Black is the new La Haine,’ *Guardian.* 11 August 2016 [Online]. Available at:


348


**Websites**


**Blogs**

Average Joe, ‘The black principal of a New York City elementary school rife with bullying and violence is an amateur actress who starred as a murderous gangster in a low budget movie,’ Diversity is Chaos. 17 March 2013. Available online:


**Facebook**

Multimedia

Television Broadcasts


Videos

angelawakened, Mousie and Sadgirl answer your number one question. 11 August 2016 [Video]. Available online: https://www.instagram.com/p/BlX4uXjHBK/?taken-by=angelawakened&hl=en [Accessed 12/08/2016].


Damian Bailey, Gang Girl aka Surrender directed by Damian Bailey Film Trailer. 5 January 2008 [Video]. Available online: https://youtu.be/9l6CXG1pviE [Accessed 02/02/2015].


355


**Songs and Albums**

4 Corners, “Girl’s It Ain’t Easy,” originally performed by Honey Cone, *Take Me with You* (Hot Wax, 1969).


KRS-One, “MC’s Act Like They Don’t Know,” *KRS-One* (Jive Records, 1995).


**Filmography**


*A Bronx Tale* (dir. Robert De Niro, 1993)


*Chinatown* (dir. Roman Polanski, Paramount Pictures, 1974).


*Colors* (dir. Dennis Hopper, Orion Pictures Corporation, 1988).

*Crash* (dir. David Cronenberg, Alliance Communications [Canada]; Recorded Picture Company [U.K.], 1996).

Down for Life (dir. Alan Jacobs, B.D. Fox Independent, 2010).

E.T. the Extra Terrestrial (dir. Steven Spielberg, Universal Pictures, 1982).


Gang Girl (dir. Damian Bailey, Maverick Studio, 2010).

Gangs of New York (dir. Martin Scorsese, Miramax Film, 2002).


Guns and Greasers (dir. Lawrence Semon, Greater Vitagraph).


Gun Fight (dir. Barbara Kopple, HBO, 2011).

Harlan County, USA (dir. Barbara Kopple, First Run Features, 1976).


High School Hellcats (dir. Edward L. Bernds, American International Pictures, 1958)


I Spit on Your Grave (dir. Steven R. Monroe, Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2010).


Kids (dir. Larry Clark, Miramax Films, 1995).


King Kong (dir. Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, Radio Pictures, 1933).


Living the Life (dir. Alex Munoz, First Look Home Entertainment, 2000).


Mi Vida Loca (dir. Allison Anders, Sony Pictures Classics, 1994).


Scarface (dir. Howard Hawks, United Artists, 1932).


She Devils on Wheels (dir. Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1968).


*The Violent Years* (dir. William Morgan, Headliner Productions, 1956).
