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Cinematic Representations of Homegirls: Echo Park vs. Hollywood in Allison Anders's *Mi Vida Loca*

Abstract: Allison Anders in *Mi Vida Loca* (1993) presents various aspects of gang life: from becoming a gang member, through various examples of female sisterhood and betrayal. Not resorting to gangexploitation, *Mi Vida Loca* is the “first commercial film to focus entirely on Chicana gang members” (Fregoso 97). Anders’s project, well-grounded and well-designed, attempts to do away with numerous stereotypes concerning homegirls in L.A. and to portray a credible picture of gang life in Echo Park. At the same time, Anders’s approach is relatively “partial in its one-sided view of la vida loca,” which inevitably leads to further stereotyping of Chicana homegirls (Fregoso 97). The purpose of the article is to analyze assets and disadvantages of Anders’s representation of Chicana female gang members focusing on the dynamics of the interplay between Hollywood (i.e. Anders’s project) and the barrio—in that case Echo Park, L.A.

Keywords: pachucas/cholas/homegirls, gangexploitation, Echo Park, Allison Anders, *Mi Vida Loca*, political friendship, alternative citizenship in counternation

In recent years there has been an increased interest in representations of Chicano/a gangs and gang members, which is a result of the growing visibility of this ethnic group in the U.S. This has led to the “spectacularization of Latino gang life” (López-Calvo 81) and a new discursive system referred to as “Latinism” by Charles Ramírez Berg, a concept he derives from Edward Said’s Orientalism and explains as “the construction of Latin America and its inhabitants and of Latinos in this country to justify the United States’ imperialistic goals” (qtd. in López-Calvo 81–82). However, until very recently productions presenting gangs and the scholarship on this topic have both disregarded female gang members, preferring to focus solely on *pachucos*,¹ *cholos*² and homeboys. Moreover, the representations of *pachucas*, *cholas*, and homegirls that have appeared so far abound

1 Mexican-American adolescents belonging to the gangs at the beginning of the twentieth century.

2 Another term for a gang member.

in many stereotypes and disfigured images. Critics who examine the history of female participation in gangs have identified numerous misreadings with regard to these representations of women in gangs.

First of all, they refute a popular notion that women's participation in gangs is a recent phenomenon and indicate that women have been gang members for a long time. Nevertheless, because such activity contravenes patriarchal normativity regarding proper female behavior, female gang members have often been presented as bad girls who are socially maladjusted, unintelligent and promiscuous (Campbell 100; Moore and Hagedorn 179, 177).³ Their behavior and activities have been decontextualized and examined against the middle-class paradigms of female behaviors, thus perpetuating stereotypes of gang girls even further.

Furthermore, many studies of female gang members have disregarded the diverse categorization of gangs and the variety of reasons behind gang membership. Monica Brown, referring to this phenomenon, maintains that popular analyses represented in such studies have ignored "a great diversity of female gang members and female gangs, with varied relationships to male gangs and varied motivations for joining" (89–90). The majority of early studies did not provide precise categorizations of gang membership, presenting homegirls solely as female auxiliaries of male gangs while overlooking other types of female gangs. Moreover, critics examining Chicano/a communities and Chicano/a gangs, including James Diego Vigil, Joan W. Moore, Marie "Keta" Miranda, Lisa C. Dietrich, and Monica Brown, have emphasized the fact that "street socialization" in Chicano/a communities is an effect of particular historical, social and spatial conditions and the resulting "multiple marginality" of people living in such communities, which is often ignored in studies that focus on the outcomes rather than analyze the reasons for the status quo (Vigil, *The Projects* 5; 4).

Consequently, the current interest in homegirls and media hype around the topic of female gang members not infrequently draws from long-prevailing stereotypes and continues to propagate disfigured images. As Brown observes, such "exploitation of the image of the girl gang member is simply the next step in the spectacularization of urban minority youth, perennially pictured as armed and dangerous" (86–87), and this is especially true with regard to women from ethnic minorities. Whether depicted as hypersexualized or desexualized, Chicana female gang members defy traditional male-imposed female roles and, because they can also resort to violence, their behaviors are treated as an aberration from the norm. Therefore, they have come to be seen as dangerous, "Other," aliens, or "savages,"

3 Early scholarship on *pachucas* and homegirls studies includes works by Thompson and Lozes (1976), Rice (1973), Ackley and Fliegel (1960), Cohen (1955), and the report by the Welfare Council of New York City (1950) (Campbell 100).

contributing to what Mike Davis calls the “gang scare” that “criminalize[s] gang members and their families as a class” (*City of Quartz* 270; 278). Finally, they can easily be placed in the role of scapegoats, whose presence poses a threat to the well-established rules and norms of the patriarchal society.

Allison Anders in *Mi Vida Loca* (1993) attempts to do away with these long-established stereotypes and to do justice to Chicana homegirls traversing the public spaces of L.A. In her film, Anders presents various aspects of gang life—from becoming a gang member through various examples of female sisterhood to betrayal. *Mi Vida Loca* is “the first film about Chicanas and about girl gangs to achieve wide distribution” (Hollinger 192) and reach larger audiences. As Susan Dever notes, the film “responds to the media and police-incited moral panic of the late 1980s and early 1990s in Los Angeles, where outbreaks of white middle-class fear of impoverished youth of color resulted in spectacular police repression” (132). Anders’s aim in *Mi Vida Loca* is to address these growing concerns by challenging popular presumptions regarding Chicana homegirls.

Therefore, though the film has been advertised by HBO Showcase as a “gangxploitation movie” (Hollinger 192), it does not live up to that description, as Anders endeavors to challenge stereotypes surrounding homegirls and their representations in the media. As the “first commercial film to focus entirely on Chicana gang members” (Fregoso 97)⁴ Anders’s project is well-grounded and well-designed. The screening of the film was preceded by careful and detailed research that included consultations with gang members of Echo Park in Los Angeles, both before and during the production of the film. Consequently, she treats homegirls seriously and succeeds “in eliciting meaningful identifications with ‘real’ historical subjects” (Fregoso, *Mexicana Encounters* 99).

The director calls her approach in the film “romantic realism” (Hollinger 192) and the main aim of deploying this technique is to “capture the external nuances of the characters’ experiences while at the same time penetrating into their inner emotional lives” (Hollinger 192). This approach and style has been compared to “the social realist tradition of Latin American cinema” (Hollinger 192), even though, as Hollinger maintains, “Anders distances herself from the gritty look of social realism” (192). Nevertheless, the departure from gangxploitation is something unusual in this type of projects and constitutes one of the assets of Anders’s film. At the same time, her approach is often criticized for being relatively partial in the presentation of gangs, which then leads to the further stereotyping of Chicana

4 Other projects depicting different versions of Chicano gang life (with a different degree of stereotyping of homeboys presented) include *Colors* (1988), dir. Dennis Hopper; *American Me* (1992), dir. Edward James Olmos; *Blood In Blood Out* (1993) a.k.a. *Bound by Honor*, dir. Taylor Hackford; and *Gang Warz* (2004) dir. Chris T. McIntyre.

homegirls. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyze Anders's cinematic representation of Chicana female gang members, focusing on the dynamics of the interplay between Hollywood (i.e. Anders's project) and the barrio—in this case, Echo Park, L.A.

Mi Vida Loca tells the story of girl gang members from Echo Park, L.A.—the main characters include Sad Girl, Mousie, La Blue Eyes, Giggles, and Whisper. The film is divided into three parts: “Sad Girls, ¿Y qué?” “Don't Let No One Get You Down,” and “Suavecito.” In general these three parts present the issues of female friendship and various challenges that can threaten sisterhood. In addition, they also describe problems of the Chicano/a community and intergang rivalry. The main plot of *Mi Vida Loca* focuses on the story of Sad Girl and Mousie (played by Angel Aviles and Seidy Lopez, respectively), who have been friends since childhood until, as Fregoso summarizes, their “friendship ends when they both end up mothering babies by the same homeboy, Ernesto (Jacob Vargas)” (“Hanging Out” 1). Their story gets even more complicated when Ernesto is shot dead by one of his disappointed customers, a white female drug addict, and the girls have to find ways to support themselves and their children. From then on, the two women have to learn how to manage as single teenage mothers in unfavorable conditions—in a barrio “where boyfriends, fathers and husbands end up in prison or in the grave” (Fregoso, “Hanging Out” 1). Consequently, their lives oscillate around survival but, what is even more important, they also try to rebuild female bonds of solidarity that will help them overcome numerous challenges. Apart from Sad Girl and Mousie's story, there are two other major subplots in the film. The first subplot “features an epistolary romance between [Sad Girl's sister] La Blue Eyes and El Duran, the member of the rival gang from the River Valley, while he is in prison” (Fregoso, “Hanging Out” 1). The last story in the final part is the tale of Suavecito, a lowrider truck which becomes Ernesto's lifelong obsession. This subplot both acquaints the viewer with male gang members of East L.A. and their behaviors as well as provides an insight into important cultural aspects of contemporary Chicano/a youth, including graffiti, murals and lowriding.

Anders's film and her representation of Chicana homegirls have several advantages. First of all, the film does reflect the reality of living in the barrio or that of gang life in several aspects. As Marie “Keta” Miranda observes, *Mi Vida Loca* “captured the language of youth. The prominence of tattoo and graffiti art, and [Anders's] use of music to render the story line, skillfully expressed the subcultural style of Chicana youth in gangs” (1). Such faithfulness in the depiction of life in the barrio can already be seen at the very beginning of the film, as viewers watch the skyline of Los Angeles behind the freeway, which is a symbolic and real, spatial border dividing Los Angeles into different communities, into “us”—Chicanos/as living in the barrio—and “them.” Then, the camera focuses in on the Chicano/a

neighborhood, depicting what it looks like in detail, while in the background local music is played by a Chicano band, The Crusados. They “invite viewers to enter the barrio, [yelling]: ‘Let’s take a trip down to Echo Park Avenue!’” (Dever 136), reemphasizing with those first lines of the film the aforementioned division into insiders who live in the barrio and outsiders who are just about to start a trip down these streets and find out what they look like for themselves. The Crusados’ lyrics paradoxically both introduce the binary opposition of two sides of L.A. or its neighborhoods and, as Dever suggests, “remind locals of the interconnected culture and history of all L.A.’s Latino neighborhoods” (136). To show this interconnectedness, Dever argues that:

Their invitation is a recontextualization of the words of Thee Midneters’s hit that invited ‘60s listeners to ‘Take a trip down Whittier Boulevard!’ This reference to the two widely known groups (and the two distinct neighborhoods) simultaneously speaks to the unity with the larger Latino community these groups have engendered, as well as to the impossibility of some kind of essentialized, autonomous turf within any single barrio. While The Crusados have ushered us into a specific gang territory, bounded by specific street names with which gangs tend to mark their turf, all of us—gang members, filmmakers, spectators of all kinds—have links to other people and places. This linkage, Anders says through her credit sequence, is part of the eclectic nature of community itself. Yet, however syncretic, however democratically cruised by anyone, the streets Anders focuses on constitute a decidedly local space within a global context. As her subsequent sequences suggest, and as one of Echo Park’s homeboys will remind viewers, ‘You can come into our neighborhood as long as you respect us.’ The filmmaker’s highlighting of community codes has set the stage for this respectful meeting of outsiders and insiders. (136)

These introductory scenes are followed by several snapshots of Echo Park neighborhood, with a peaceful-looking park and a lake which projects an idyllic image. Immediately afterwards, Anders undermines her role as author through a voice-over that informs viewers who is going to be the narrator/narrators. These scenes are followed by shots from a neighborhood that are no longer so idyllic—we see a market, streets, a maternity shop, vending carts, ads, electrical wires overhead, graffiti tags, etc., which all add up to create a picture of the “*rasquache*, make-do neighborhood” (Dever 138). Finally, as Dever indicates, these scenes in general and the narrator’s voice in particular reiterate the division between “us” and “them,” “insiders and outsiders [who] here exist separately” (137).

Anders’s insistence on truthfulness in her presentation of reality in Echo Park is also visible in the way the characters are dressed, made-up, as well as the manner in which they walk and talk. Fregoso has noticed Anders’s efforts to reflect the reality of the barrio and homegirls living there, appreciating

its “verisimilitude, its attention to the details of everyday life, and its faithful rendition of the style, stance, posture, gestures, mannerisms and speech of so many Pachucas-Cholas-Homegirls [she has] known throughout years” (“Hanging Out” 1). Through their looks homegirls from Echo Park postulate the aesthetic that manifests their unwillingness to look white, which is constantly emphasized by make-up, clothes, style, etc. Even more so, by adopting such aesthetics they are also supposed to look threatening, which can be achieved, for example, by the specific use of eyeliner. In fact, such an attitude is quite popular among homegirls—Norma Mendoza-Denton has interviewed some gang girls for her project on female gangs style and cultural practice, and one of her interviewees has revealed that the idea behind such style is that “[e]verybody looks at you but nobody fucks with you” (156). In addition, it presumes being more macha, and “being macha is not about being masculine, but about taking charge of one’s self ... and not being controlled” (Mendoza-Denton 169). Finally, such looks show homegirls’ “refusal of the hegemonic paradigm” of looks and fashion (Mendoza-Denton 160) that differentiates them from adult Chicanos/as from the barrio and outsiders.

Aside from depicting adherence to a non-white aesthetic Anders attempts to reflect other features of homegirls’ style in a detailed way, insisting, in this case, on an adherence to reality. The director herself admits that in order to render her representations of homegirls truthful she took advantage of her gang consultants who “advised her on everything from the style, gestures, and speech of her characters to the music she used on the sound track” (Hollinger 193). This effect is reinforced by the fact that the director introduces real gang members into the film—for example, Whisper is played by Nelida Lopez, who is an actual member of the Echo Park Locas. The appearance of real gang members works both in accordance with the “socialist-realist tradition of Latin American Third Cinema” (Fregoso, “Hanging Out” 2) adopted by Anders while adding to the truthfulness of the director’s rendering of homegirls in the L.A. barrio.

Furthermore, in her effort to present a credible picture of gang life in Echo Park, Anders deploys multiple narrators who present different points of view and perceptions on their roles in the gang. In this way the spectator has an opportunity to learn about life in this barrio from multiple perspectives. Hollinger maintains that such a technique contributes to “*Mi Vida Loca*’s episodic narrative structure, with its fragmented, loosely constructed plotline” (200), which, at the same time, “has a substantial distancing effect” (200), due to the fact that “the multiple voice-over narrational device prevents the spectator from primary engagement with any one character” (200). Instead of identifying with only one character, the spectator is offered “different points of view for potential audience identification... [which] allows viewers to stand back and adopt a more thoughtful perspective in regard to the issues raised by the film than they would if they were strongly implicated

in the emotional experiences of a single character" (Hollinger 200). Consequently, the viewers are encouraged by the director to both engage in the story and remain objective, following it through the eyes of different characters. Owing to this technique, *Mi Vida Loca* encourages its viewers to draw their own conclusions based on facts presented from different perspectives, rather than provides them with ready-made opinions and judgments.

Finally, in her adherence to the reality, Anders presents how cultural identity is constructed: in her film, Anders depicts the ways in which both individual and collective identities are formed. She also endeavors to indicate how multiple social, temporal, historical, and spatial variables influence the formation of these identities. *Mi Vida Loca* allows the viewer to identify both internal and external forces and variables that help fashion homegirls' identities. It also delineates the specific interplay of spatial and cultural factors in the process of identity constructions, drawing the viewer's attention to the interdependence of "forces of transculturation [from within] and from without" (Dever 138). Anders illustrates this interconnectedness by referencing the changing dynamics in the relationship of the two languages used in the barrio—English and Spanish and the gradually dominating role English is playing there, which is reflected in both private conversations and the public sphere, including store signs, advertisements and banners.

In addition to the advantages of Anders's representation of female gang members mentioned above, the director does not spectacularize gang life, nor is there any glorification of violence in *Mi Vida Loca*, distinguishing it from other films depicting this lifestyle. As Fregoso notes, "in commercial films, gang violence is so heavy-handed to the point of titillation that it has become a staple of the gang genre" (Hanging Out" 1). Moreover, she continues, "[i]n these films, viewers will see a great deal of macho bravado with the usual fare of violence between rival gangs or between gangs and police. This on-screen violence is more often glamorized and emptied of its tragic social and human consequences" ("Hanging Out" 1). Unlike the representations Fregoso mentions in her article, Anders does not resort to this approach, even in scenes where the presentation of violence could be somewhat justified. For example, the scene depicting jumping in to the gang is relatively short, with the very act of being jumped in—or, in other words, beaten by gang members as a form of introduction to the gang—not as violent as some researchers describe it to be. Furthermore, almost no violence is shown at all on screen, but rather happens "behind the scenes," as in the case of Sad Girl and Mousie's fight, or Ernesto's death. The viewer hears the shot, which can be confusing, as one does not know who was killed—whether it was one of the homegirls or Ernesto with Whisper. But the next scene presents Ernesto's funeral, saving the spectators the gory details of the shooting. A similar approach is taken in the final scene, when Big Sleepy's daughter is shot in a drive-by.

Finally, to conclude this analysis of the assets of Anders's representation of homegirl life in *Mi Vida Loca*, the film can be described as "a political friendship film" (Hollinger 195), as it portrays both "a sentimental female friendship" (Hollinger 195), particularly between Mona (Sad Girl) and Maribel (Mousie) and "the realm of political group friendship, as it comes to center on the homegirls' attempts to unite under the leadership of Giggles [who]... becomes the guiding force behind the homegirls' attempts to take care of themselves by organizing a female gang" (Hollinger 195). In fact, this cooperation between the homegirls as well as their mutual support for each other—while challenging the roles that have been ascribed to them by homeboys—seem to be the core of Anders's film. It is seen both in the reconciliation of Sad Girl and Mousie and the formation of the gang with Giggles as their new leader. Consequently, the gang is represented as a place that "provides meaning and identity for these girls" (Quicker 56) and, as described by Quicker, "it is a place where their status is unambiguous, but it is much more. It is a substitute for all those other things that they do not have, a place where they can receive warmth, friendship, understanding, education and protection" (56).

It can be said that, in a way, Anders shows that gang membership allows for what Brown calls "alternative citizenship in a counternation" (xxiii). Such an alternative is necessary because of the dichotomy of "subjects and citizens" (Brown xxv) that excludes homegirls from citizenship—they have "no public sphere to locate themselves" (Brown 84) and they live in "forgotten territories within the nation" (92). Los Angeles and California as they are presented in *Mi Vida Loca* are far from paradise, especially for Chicana women who experience multiple marginalization "within their local communities, by the state, and in their private relationships with men" (Brown 81). Therefore, becoming a gang member is an alternative for a Chicana girl, since the gang "fulfills fundamental needs not accorded by the state" (Brown xxiii), which include such diverse aspects as a sense of belonging and economic support.

Nevertheless, acknowledging the gang's role as formative and supportive space for her characters, Anders does not hesitate to show how gangs "simultaneously liberate and oppress women" (Portillo in Chesney-Lind 158), which is particularly visible in scenes devoted to the debate over Suavecito after Ernesto's death. The homeboys from Echo Park do not even want to take into consideration the fact that the truck should be sold and the money distributed to the women who have been dependent on Ernesto—his mother and the mothers of his children. Instead, the boys insist on keeping Suavecito with the gang and entering the contest of lowriders, completely disregarding the difficult situation in which the women have found themselves upon Ernesto's death. Marginalization of women in the gang can also be seen in several scenes which depict debates on power distribution in the

gang. Significantly, the women are either absent from these discussions or their opinions are not taken into account.

Therefore, they have to learn how to cope with discrimination within a gang, while female sisterhood becomes an alternative. Even if they sometimes have difficulty reaching an agreement over some aspects of their life, as it is during the discussion about Suavecito, the help and support they find among themselves become the source of their power as well as an inspiration to change the status quo. To illustrate this role of female bonding Anders makes Giggles the driving force of transformations among the homegirls. Giggles herself is a complex character, as she has sacrificed her life for a man by serving a prison sentence for him. However, during her time spent in prison she has learnt her lesson and, upon finally being released, is ready to change her life completely. She talks about her experience and wants to share her ideas with the other homegirls, who, at first, look suspiciously at her lessons and zeal. They cannot quite accept the main message she wants to pass along, namely that “Guys ain’t worth falling down over” and their strength should be driven by female solidarity and sisterhood. Giggles’s project and her new attitudes are a great example of what Brown calls “forging alternative reality” (83) to challenge the multiple oppressions these women encounter in their everyday life.

In spite of the aforementioned assets of Anders’s representation of the experience of homegirls from Echo Park, her approach has encountered severe criticism in some circles. *Mi Vida Loca* has been discussed, critiqued, and criticized both by mainstream journalists and authors and representatives of the Chicano/a community. First of all, mainstream criticism was reflected in the reception of the film—it was not very popular among general audiences, most probably due to its lack of an affirmative ending, since, as Hollinger maintains, “[b]y 1994, when *Mi Vida Loca* was released, female friendship films had already established a set of conventional audience expectations for the cycle” (198). These include both a happy ending and a positive/affirmative message that such films should convey—which *Mi Vida Loca* misses. Anders’s project lacks “a simple glorification of female bonding” (Hollinger 196) and proposes an ambivalent *finale*: Mona’s words concluding one of the final scenes suggesting that guns can be used by homegirls for love is juxtaposed with Big Sleepy’s daughter’s tragic death in a drive-by shooting, which, in a way, undermines Sad Girl’s explanation and her justification for the use of arms. Due to such an ending, the film has often been described as “fatalistic or nihilistic” (Hollinger 196).

This accusation has also been voiced with reference to Anders’s rendering of the theme of gang life in L.A.’s Chicano/a community. As Hollinger notes, “mainstream critics have condemned the film for offering a stereotypical portrait of urban minority teenagers living aimless lives that involve irresponsible sex,

teenage motherhood, crime, and drugs" (194). They have indicated that, instead of challenging stereotypes regarding homeboys and homegirls, *Mi Vida Loca* perpetuates disfigured images of young Chicanos/as and misconceptions concerning their behavior. In her analysis of *Mi Vida Loca*, Fregoso compiles critiques that have appeared in reviews published after the film's release, both in the U.S. and abroad, as well as identifies the main accusations critics have posited such as "paternalism, negative stereotypes, nihilism, depiction of teenagers without ambition drifting downward into chaos and dead-end lives" ("Hanging Out" 2). Therefore, what seems to be repeatedly criticized in these reviews is a disfigured image of a Chicana homegirl perpetuated by Anders through her presentation of Echo Park Locas. And, in fact, to a certain degree these accusations are justified, since such a depiction of Chicana female gang members and their role both within the community and in the gang disregards the complexity of their situation and the variety of alternative lifestyles a Chicana homegirl can lead.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that Anders does base her presentation of the barrio on real life problems people living there encounter on a daily basis. For example, as Brown observes, teenage pregnancy, as it has been evoked by one of the critics, is often "expected reality, one that can cement a woman's place and meaning within a given social milieu, at least temporarily, if not permanently" (99). Furthermore, it is often also a way out of loneliness and the reality of abuse, and provides "a more stable sense of gender identity" (Miranda 96). Finally, as Fregoso maintains, "hopelessness and helplessness is in fact pervasive among inner-city youth" and unless something is done to solve "the very serious structural problems of the inner city, a positive or uplifting ending to a gang film is like empty moralizing or, better yet, like ice water for chocolate" ("Hanging Out" 2). Therefore, Anders's depiction of L.A. Chicano/a gangs may, to a certain extent, perpetuate stereotypes about the barrio, while, at the same time, indicating certain issues and problems within this community that should be challenged and overcome.

As far as the "fatalistic or nihilistic" (Hollinger 196) ending is concerned, Hollinger reiterates what Fregoso suggests in her review of *Mi Vida Loca*, maintaining that "the film's ambivalent ending seems to represent instead a realistic, thought-provoking attempt to show that the problems with which it deals are in reality far from solved" (Hollinger 196). Mona's last words indicate that the homegirls from Echo Park "have assumed a position of agency and refuse to remain passive victims of their environment" (Hollinger 196), even if "the direction they have adopted is presented as fraught with mortal danger" (Hollinger 196), as is confirmed by the shooting at the end of the film. It can be considered a disadvantage that *Mi Vida Loca* does not have an optimistic ending, but it also testifies to Anders's refusal to end the film with either a happy or a completely

tragic ending. Instead, Anders chooses an “in-between” alternative with the portrayal of “women who have the energy and determination to change their lives, yet are tragically caught in a cycle of violence that their romanticized worldview only works to support” (Hollinger 196). Therefore, Anders avoids a simplistic approach and “opts for a complex and ambiguous ending that seems intended to open up a discourse on women’s position in gang culture rather than merely offering a blindly affirmative statement of female solidarity that would in effect shut this type of discourse down” (Hollinger 196). The director realizes that the situation of homegirls cannot be categorized through popular dichotomies, hence the film cannot have a definitive and closed ending. Consequently, the way Anders concludes *Mi Vida Loca* should not be considered solely as fatalistic, as such an interpretation of Anders’s approach is limited, disregarding other ideas she points to with such an ending.

However, apart from the two major accusations mentioned above, other aspects of Anders’s representation of homegirls can be criticized as well. This substantial critique has come from the Chicano/a community and gang members themselves. While both mainstream and Chicano/a critics have criticized *Mi Vida Loca* “as a paternalistic and voyeuristic investigation of what is presented as an ‘alien’ subculture” (Hollinger 193), Rosa Linda Fregoso, as a representative of the Chicano/a community, focuses on another aspect, namely Anders’s “inability to capture the substance of Chicana gang culture” (Hollinger 194). She argues that the plot relies too much on Anders’s “own autobiographical experiences to form her stories” (qtd. in Hollinger 194), which includes the subplot about a love affair between La Blue Eyes and a prison inmate, or the Suavecito theme. As she maintains, this “reliance on non-Chicano/a material led Anders to distort the lifestyle of the Chicana homegirls she was trying to portray by reducing them merely to ‘pretexts for [her] own fantasies” (qtd. in Hollinger 194).

Homegirls watching the film during the SFIFF also considered that issue to be problematic. They did not share the critique of mainstream critics, with their emphasis on the distorted picture of homegirls that Anders presented in *Mi Vida Loca*. Instead, as Marie “Keta” Miranda explains, they protested against “the cultural logic that Anders seemed to have missed” (1). They objected to the idea of female rivalry over men and also challenged the way in which the homegirl life had been depicted by Anders. They considered Anders’s portrayals to be unrealistic because she misinterpreted “what it means to be a gang member: the variety of girls who join, issues of protection and loyalty, the gang as a voluntary association” (Miranda 1). Some other gang members noticed that in coming up with the theme of gang rivalry over an expensive custom truck “Anders entirely misses the point of gang warfare” (Hollinger 194), as in most cases such fights are conducted out of economic reasons or over dominance in certain areas and

neighborhoods, including turf wars. Therefore, the girls addressed three major issues they disagreed with and argued that: “1) Homegirls don’t get pregnant from the same guy, they have more respect than that; 2) A homeboy does not obsess over a lowrider truck at the expense of his kids; 3) Rival gangs fight over turf, never over a car” (qtd. in Fregoso, “Hanging Out” 2).

In addition to the criticism mentioned above, Anders has also been accused of some other acts of negligence; for example Hollinger argues that she “completely overlooks the importance of intergenerational female relationships in Chicana culture” (194). The truth is that viewers barely see any representatives of the older generation at all. Mousie’s mother appears at the beginning of *Sad Girl’s* story, which is in retrospect to the girls’ childhood. Then Mousie’s father is shown when he learns about her pregnancy, after which he tells her to move out of the house. Consequently, when Maribel moves in to live with Ernesto the viewer gets to know his grandmother. There is also one more scene where Mona’s father appears briefly and, apart from that, representatives of the older generation are present only at the funerals of community members.

Such an underrepresentation of intergenerational networks provides the viewer with a distorted picture of the community, as these relationships are extremely important for survival in the barrio and it seems that Anders’s personal experience once again influences her portrayal of the community she presents. As Hollinger criticizes, “Anders seems to have projected onto the homegirls’ lives the lack of parental guidance she found in her own life” (194) because “[i]n interviews, for instance, she has stated that she identified with her young female characters because she felt she shared with them a lack of parental presence” (Hollinger 194). Consequently, Anders portrays the homegirls from Echo Park as teenage girls who have been left completely to themselves and cannot rely on any mature or adult person, even in the most difficult circumstances of their lives. Moreover, through such a portrayal of the community the director disregards informal bonds that verge on kinship, often existing in such communities due to the shared plight and common grievances people suffer and, consequently, the need to provide support for each other. As a result, a very important aspect of the Chicano/a community is left ignored and inadequately represented in the film.

The last aspect that needs to be mentioned in this part of the critique is Anders’s representation of the role of gangs for women and the role of women in gangs. Marie “Keta” Miranda, talking about the role of *pachucas* and homegirls, indicates their importance for challenging “cultural nationalist concepts of community by re-creating forms of feminine Chicana solidarity through bonds of friendship, solidarity and mutual trust” (in Fregoso, *Mexicana Encounters* 96), whereas Catherine Ramirez emphasizes that these women “formed alternative national identities challenging sexual and gender norms, transgressing gender norms,

thwarting behaviors and expectations, defying dominant boundaries of domesticity and femininity” (in Fregoso, *Mexicana Encounters* 96). This role of gangs is also noticed by Brown, who indicates that one of the effects of female gang membership is “challenging and complicating the traditional relegation of women to the private sphere” (85). By entering the street and transgressing the private-public division “girls in gangs are able to find female-dominated spaces that allow for alternative constructions of femininity and community that are not controlled by males” (Mendoza-Denton 162). Some of these aspects of gang life are present in *Mi Vida Loca*, especially on the example of Giggles’s resolutions and her attempts to unite homegirls for the cause. It can also be seen in the case of Whisper, who wants to start her own operation, earning money to support herself as well as help out her friends. Finally, Mona’s last commentary also indicates that the homegirls from Echo Park are going to take matters into their own hands. Nevertheless, these are just isolated examples of some female individuals’ approach to life and it seems that the potentially liberating role of the gang remains underappreciated in the film.

In analyzing various aspects of the representation of homegirls in *Mi Vida Loca*, it seems that Anders’s presentation of the homegirl life in L.A. distorts the reality of barrio life; and a Hollywood story about Echo Park has little to do with real experience of life in East L.A. However, some of the accusations mentioned above can be (and have been) challenged, if not refuted. First of all, Anders herself has addressed the issue of Mona’s plausibility as well as Maribel’s conflict. During the San Francisco International Film Festival she admitted that her consultants from the gang rejected the main plotline with Mousie – Sad Girl’s rivalry over Ernesto (Fregoso, “Hanging Out” 2). Nevertheless, she also admitted she had heard the story about girls fighting over a boy and “made it the major plot of the film because she was concerned about the divisions among women that arise because of men” (Fregoso, “Hanging Out” 2). Therefore, the conflict over Ernesto was meant to serve a specific purpose—through the depiction of this fight Anders wanted to illustrate how fighting over boys can impair the bonds between women, destroying their solidarity and weakening the power of sisterhood.

The problem with capturing the essence of the Chicana gang experience as well as the inauthenticity of Echo Park’s portrayal have also been countered by Susan Dever, who has provided both the opinions of her friends and the homegirls she interviewed. Quoting their commentary, she notes:

While Mona’s (Angel Aviles) and Maribel’s (Seidy Lopez) story in Act I has inspired fierce debate in academic and journalistic circles, Act II’s protagonist, Giggles (Marlo Marron), who struggles to find work after serving an undeserved prison sentence, has been greeted with a curious silence. Elena, my friend Esperanza’s twenty-year-old niece, explained the lack of attention this way: “[Critics] either

didn't even notice what was going on with a woman trying to get a job when that's almost impossible, or else they did see and it made'em nervous that Chicanas are gonna take over business like we're supposedly taking over L.A.' (128)

Therefore, according to Dever, criticism should not be focused so much on the question of the (un)reality of Sad Girl and Mousie's conflict, since, in this way, some other important aspects of the film, like the aforementioned issue of Chicana liberation, might remain unnoticed or become diluted.

The accusation regarding the underrepresentation of intergenerational bonds in the Chicano/a community and family has also been challenged by Dever and homegirls themselves. Dever observes that because there are different family models and relationships represented in the film, it cannot be argued that Anders completely disregards the ties of sisterhood and support between different generations of Chicanas. Instead, her specific presentation of such bonds rather serves a specific purpose. Dever explains:

Some of *Mi Vida Loca's* families are troubled; some are not. We learned in Act I that Maribel's parents aren't much of a resource. Her too-young, impoverished dad (played in ironic cameo by Kid Frost) throws her out of the house when she becomes pregnant, but she eventually finds comfort with Ernesto's grandmother. Mona's father, a Mexican immigrant and Elvia Rivero fan, represents another kind of family, a compassionate widower in a loving relationship with his daughter.... Act II introduces Rachel (Bertilla Damas), Whisper's thirty-something married sister. Her presence is key, and surpasses the largely symbolic roles of the other parental figures. A former gang member herself, Rachel has left the hardship of *la vida loca* to move with her police lieutenant husband (Ric Salinas) toward the middle class. Pregnant with her own incipient family, she mothers Whisper, doctors the young woman when she becomes wounded by gunshot, and cautions her sister's friends against the kind of violence that took the life of their brother, Creeper. During the four years their sister-in-law Giggles has been 'locked up in prison for something stupid she didn't even do,' as Whisper recounts in voice-over, Rachel has acted as full-time mother to her niece, who is Creeper and Giggles's child. A tattooed madonna, Rachel replaces traditional melodramas' proverbial *madrecita abnegada*. She is the image of the 'older, compassionate, and understanding wom[a]n' who, despite Fregoso's claims regarding the absence of such women in the film, has 'resisted and survived '*la vida dura*' in order to sustain her extended family. (148)

These examples provided by Dever indicate that Anders does present various generations of Chicana women and the different bonds between them. However, "there is no mythification of *la sagrada familia*" (Dever 147) in *Mi Vida Loca* and that may be the reason why Anders's representation of *la familia* and the

role of sisterhood came under criticism. This conclusion is also supported by one of the homegirls whom Susan Dever interviews. In this interview, Carmen, homegirl from L.A., admits that even though homegirls notice extended families formed by different gang members, critics are, in fact, looking for another "*Mi familia* movie" (Dever 151), with a specific portrayal of the Chicana lifestyle, family, and relationships. Therefore, when Anders's representations do not meet their expectations or ideas about these institutions, they cannot accept her approach.

Finally, the criticism of the representation of homegirls, expressed in Chicano/a circles, can be explained by the fact that Anders is both a (partial) insider to the barrio and an outsider at the same time. She worked hard on her project and was meticulous as well as diligent in preparation for the film. However, her ambivalent position as a person who used to live in the barrio, but at the same time is a white woman, a director, not a Chicana, and eventually, a person who moved out of the barrio a few years before, somehow predestines her to be treated with suspicion by insiders. Dever acknowledges this ambivalence when she grants Anders due respect for her diligence in tracing "external particularities of one's culture," while at the same time pronouncing the director's failure "to capture the essence of that culture" which, according to her, leads to a "very alienating experience" (200).

However, such conclusions were only partially shared by homegirls and younger Latinas/Chicanas during the screening of the film at the San Francisco International Film Festival (SFIFF) in 1994. The screening evoked disagreements between the critics and homegirls invited to watch the film. The two groups focused on completely different aspects in their criticism, with the homegirls not supporting the critique of Anders as an outsider per se (Miranda 2). Young Latinas/Chicanas who reviewed the film online did not support this criticism, either. Instead, customer reviews have praised *Mi Vida Loca* for its depiction of life in Echo Park⁵ and have recommended it "to anyone and everyone who wants to learn about chicana [sic] gangs" (www.endomusic.com).

5 For example, "miami" describes the films as follows: "i think this movie is one of the best chicana films out there.. i grew up in echo parc for 6 years of my life.. and im only 15 now and echo parc is really like this i mean its crazy i mean [it]...exaggerates a lil at some stuff but it mostly speaks the truth about how growing up chicana isnt all fun.. its hard and its even harder growing up in the barrio and that you gotta go thru stuggles and you cant let noone get you down and you have to be proud of what you. i think this movie is one of the best movie out there..and the names LMAO barrio gangs really have names like that my bestfriend's name is Sadgirl and they call me Gigglez.. in our locas.." (www.endomusic.com).

All in all, while the representation of Chicana gangs in *Mi Vida Loca* certainly lacks multiple perspectives and misses some points, the viewer should take into account the challenges Anders faced in making the first commercial film on gangs, which has also been reflected in the aforementioned reactions to the film. Examining Anders's representation of the homegirl life, it needs to be remembered that as the director of the first commercial and mainstream film on Chicana homegirls, Anders had many challenges to face. Considering that the film has, to a large extent, served the purpose of presenting the specific community of Echo Park and its inhabitants from a sympathetic angle, as "*Mi Vida Loca's* intimate portraits of individuals within communities humanize the media-embattled barrios" (Dever 127). What also has to be considered is the fact that Anders's film is not a documentary on female gangs per se but an artistic creation, which certainly does not allow the presentation of distorted images but at the same time prevents documentary-like representation of Chicana homegirls. Moreover, it is significant that Anders developed *Mi Vida Loca* into a broader cultural project, organizing "benefit screenings to fund scholarships for local youth" (Dever 135), in this manner repaying the community that helped her create the script. As a result, according to Dever, "[b]y linking Anders's role in her community with filmic evidence of interaction, we can better appreciate how the film—and the filmmakers—conceive of 'getting along' in multicultural Los Angeles" (135). Anders herself testified to that, claiming that her goal in making the film was "to humanize people who don't get represented on the screen" (qtd. in Hollinger 201). Therefore, as Hollinger suggests in her conclusions about *Mi Vida Loca*, it is important that a project like this has been created, as it draws attention to the issue of female gangs and as such "should not be ignored simply because its director refuses to pander to mainstream tastes by offering a fantasy ending and providing easy identification with characters" (201). Moreover, she continues, "[i]t should also not be rejected by the Chicano/a community simply because Anders let her own experiences interfere too much with her presentation of another culture. There are too few filmic treatments of intraethnic female friendship for one that achieves so much to be so readily dismissed" (Hollinger 201).

To sum up, it should be remembered that Anders's project has both assets and disadvantages. It is true that her depiction of life in East L.A. is consistent and comprehensive; nevertheless, at times the Hollywood story of Echo Park does not exactly reflect the reality of the barrio. Therefore, based on the analysis of *Mi Vida Loca* and various responses to the film one may come to the conclusion that new texts and films are needed to do away with one-sided perspectives in order to "disrupt monolithic national culture that creates delinquent citizens" (Brown xxvii) and "resist homogenizing notions of Chicana gang life" (Brown xxxiv). These new texts and projects should reveal a diversity of motifs behind joining

the gang—"on community, individual and situational levels" (Valdez 8–9). They should also show how gang membership "crosses boundaries between private and public" (Miranda 79), how the street can be "a site of negotiations and transactions between private and public" (Miranda 81) and how participation in a gang allows one to "disrupt domestic roles and expectations" (Miranda 82), indicating in particular how "homosocial bonding in adolescence provides freedom from the social expectations of marriage" (Miranda 95; Valdez 3) and how this idea of *comadrazgo* becomes "an interstitial or liminal space before the actualization of the gendered 'compulsive heterosexual' social roles" (Miranda 103). Finally, they should depict "patriarchal dynamics that render [women] invisible" (Brown xxxiv) and postulate the need to "change the system from within" (Brown 107). All these aspects should be taken into consideration, otherwise there is a risk that new projects will perpetuate overgeneralizations, oversimplifications and distorted images of certain groups and communities. In the case of *Mi Vida Loca*, maybe the screening of the film should be accompanied by watching *It's a Homie Thang!*, "a distinctive auto-ethnographic documentary about girls in gangs" with its "major message to be dialectic of difference and similarity—we are not like you/we are like you" (Miranda 5). Such an approach would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the problem of gangs in the U.S. and in this way, as López-Calvo suggests, "Latina writing and filmmaking" could "symbolically claim (public) space not only from hegemonic social groups but also from men in their own community" (122). Nevertheless, regardless of the aforementioned arguments, it is worth watching *Mi Vida Loca*, because despite its drawbacks it does contribute to the discourse on female gangs in the U.S.

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