

Chapter 3

Latinos and Latinas

The Color of Skin Is the Color of Crime

Luis J. Rodríguez

In this chapter, the author of Always Running presents how various images of Latinos come into conflict with the reality of Latinos. Referring to these images as a "war against people of color," Rodríguez presents a powerful account of how his experiences as a Latino were significant in the shaping of his now so vastly different reality. He highlights the experience of youth, especially deported youth from the United States to El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico, and proposes the need for places where juveniles can be safe and appreciated. Specifically, Rodríguez advocates for genuinely caring adult mentors in juveniles' lives. The result is a powerful depiction of Latinos' images, their realities, and the efforts needed to ensure that the realities of their lives replace the negative stereotypes of Latino youth in U.S. society.

The faces of the young men and women before me were hard and discomforting. They were brown-skinned; some had shaved heads. One of the girls, called "Baby Crazy," had tattoos on her lips and cheek as well as harsh mascara and dark lip paint. Her arms had tattoos in old English lettering and in the barrio style, including the initials of her gang and the names of her boyfriend and two chil-

dren. One of the young men had tattoos across his arms, back, and chest. On his face he had a tattooed tear below one eye and the three dots signifying "Mi Vida Loca" below the other eye; the initials of his gang were on his chin. The others were similarly marked, some with scars of bullet wounds and knifings. They wore the loose and oversized clothing known as the "Cholo" style. They had names such as Diablo, Pelon, Villain, and Whisper.

They were Latino gang members, dressed in the same L.A.-gang style that has brought chills to many an outsider. Latino youths have come to represent the growing U.S. "gangsta" culture that has been portrayed in movies, the news media, and books (albeit mostly in distorted form).

As extreme as their dress and demeanor may have been, they were also young people capable of great love, loyalty, laughter, and responsibility. Those particular young people were not on a street corner "slangin" dope or flashing hand signs. They were, in fact, at a major conference with members of government, police, and social agencies in El Salvador, speaking out on behalf of estranged youths in their country while also lending their expertise to help obtain a measure of peace in the streets.

I was in El Salvador in late May 1996 as one of four invited international guests to present ways to work with youths, to empower them, and to utilize their vast energies for positive change. Donna DeCesare, a New York City-based photographer, and I helped bring these particular youths to the table. Donna and I had been meeting with these young people, interviewing them and taking their photos for a collaborative book project we were working on. It was this work, in particular Donna's slides and photos, that helped open the doors for this important dialogue.

Our research began in 1993 when Donna and I received a Dorothea Lange-Paul Taylor Journalism Prize from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. From 1993 until 1996, we visited several barrios in Los Angeles and El Salvador—including prisons, hangouts, schools, churches, marketplaces, and homes.

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Just prior to this, my memoir of gang life, *Always Running, La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.* (Curbstone Press, 1993) appeared, creating intense interest in gang youth, particularly L.A. gang youth. The L.A. Riots of the year before had sparked tremendous media attention on why black and Latino youth joined gangs—and what could be done about this.

My particular insight came from a young life mired in this reality: I was shot at half a dozen times as a youth (by the grace of God, I was never hit). I overdosed on drugs, including heroin, three times. I stole since the age of 7. I lived several places between South Central L.A. and the East L.A./San Gabriel Valley, often due to evictions, and once after my sister stabbed her husband when I was 9 years old. My best friend was killed when I was 10. I joined a gang at age 11, began drug use at 12, and was arrested for stealing and fighting beginning at 13. I was homeless after being kicked out of the house and school at 15. I was placed in an adult facility when I was 16. I was arrested for attempted murder when I was 17. At 18—tired, broken, and addicted to heroin—I faced a six-year prison sentence for fighting with police officers. And by then 25 of my friends had been killed.

That should have been the end of Luis Rodríguez.

But something happened. Somehow I found the internal resources to pull myself out of the drugs, jail, and violence when the community rallied on my behalf and got a judge to give me a lesser sentence. A year later, I got off drugs, cold turkey, and began a new life as a revolutionary thinker, artist, and leader.

Always Running tells this story. It is also the transcendent account of a poet/artist who, with the help of a small, socially engaged core of community leaders and teachers, overcame his own deeply held pathologies to take on the great challenges of an oppressive and exploitative reality—and, finding his own particular destiny with words, dedicated himself to making positive contributions in transforming that reality.

The image and reality were definitely in conflict—who'd expect such a self-destructive

young man could become someone who would later write books and address communities on how to find peace and a balanced existence, and point out that true peace can be achieved only when the so-called perpetrators of the violence are included and empowered to make peace?

We know that the mass media, particularly in entertainment, have a growing fascination with portraying black and Latino youths as cowards and vicious killers. This is far from gangsta chic. In fact, actual gangsters of European descent, such as John Dillinger and Bonnie and Clyde, and fantasy ones like those in the *Godfather* movies or Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, have most often been portrayed in a more glowing and understandable light, with their motivations made clear, despite the despicable things they may have done.

In Chicago, where the mayor and the police department have refused to sit down with African American and Latino gang youths, there used to be a restaurant and club called Al Capone's with the face of the 1920s gangster emblazoned in front. We know that the first Richard Daley, as well as many of his cronies, had been members of a gang called the Hamburgs that existed primarily to keep the blacks out of the Irish community of Bridgeport.

Over the years, revelations of corruption, the framing of innocent people, and even murder have surfaced in the Rampart Division of the Los Angeles Police Department. This is the same area where many of the Latino youths described above had lived before being deported to El Salvador. The police used terror and deadly force to battle gangs in this community. But you cannot fight gang warfare with gang warfare. The department's anti-gang units became a better organized and better armed gang. Many people did not care and actually sanctioned, criminal activities by the police. Their perception was that gang members were the "scum of the earth"—so what if laws were broken to put them away?

Alex Sanchez, 28, one of the most active gang youth workers—and a former gang leader—became a focus of the LAPD's campaign to eradicate gangs when he was im-

prisoned a few years ago for possible deportation to El Salvador. This despite the fact that Alex had emerged as a leading architect of peace through the organization *Homies Unidos*. Alex challenged his deportation with widespread support; he was eventually allowed to stay and continue his work. Why are we losing such valuable cadre? Obviously, there are cross-purposes at play here.

The large number of law enforcement imperfections in Los Angeles (extending beyond the Rampart Division) and across the country continue to be directed against people of color. Over the years in New York City, officers shot and killed a number of unarmed people, including an African immigrant named Amadou Diallo. Prisons and juvenile facilities continue to warehouse a disproportionate number of black and brown prisoners. But most of these youths are not hardened criminals or unredeemable. What they needed was a caring and cohesive community that could provide meaningful work, adequate psychological treatment, and educational opportunities. Instead, what they got was more police and more prisons.

Presently in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and parts of Mexico, the government and police have instituted *Mano Dura* ("Firm Hand") policies against L.A.-deported youth—resulting in many arrests just for being tattooed, death squad murders of alleged gang members, and police beatings. In Honduras in 2003 and 2004, hundreds of gang youth were killed in two prisons when guards allegedly allowed them to burn in suspiciously set fires.

Again, we've accepted the false premise that these kids deserved to be abandoned, pushed aside, or even killed. I can't accept that—and neither should anyone else.

Gender, Crime, and Spirit

Oppression, including racial oppression, has many layers, many houses, and many conveyor belts. When whole communities are colonized, attacked, ignored, or criminalized, it tears at the fabric of family, relationships, love, work, and our humanity.

In the poorest communities, men are unemployed, hanging out on street corners, stealing, fighting, and going to prison. Women end up holding up whatever is left of raising kids, with little resources and tons of resentment. Most women, single mothers among them, do an incredibly heroic job. But a few women fall into the traps of drugs, crime (usually prostitution and stealing), and jail. More and more poor black and Latino women are involved in gang life, heavy drug use, and prison.

I recall in Chicago in the mid-1990s, the notorious case of two teenaged female Latin Disciples who murdered two rival gang members in the Latin Kings by luring them to a restroom and then shooting them. As the saying goes, when the women fall down, all of community is destroyed.

Men have to step up to take up more of the emotional and practical burden of being parents, guides, mentors, and teachers. Women need actual resources to develop their gifts, their minds, their dreams, and their health.

We need strong men and strong women.

There is also a need to bring authentic and vivid spiritual practices back into the home, the schools, and the community. Poverty is a devastating thing, but one of the most devastating results is the poverty of spirit. People feel deadened inside, motivation and interests decline, drugs are used to fill the void, and all hope, help, and meaning vanish.

Truly authentic spiritual connections must be made to strengthen the resolve, will, and internal capacities innate to every living soul. This is why the arts are crucial to any peace work in violent and drug-infested communities. This is why I work with organizations such as Chicago's Youth Struggling for Survival and Seattle's Mosaic Foundation, and why I helped create *Tia Chucha's Café & Centro Cultural* (a bookstore, café, art gallery, performance space, workshop center, and cybercafé) in the northeast San Fernando Valley section of L.A.

Tapping into the creative reservoir we all carry as human beings—but also as communities—allows us to tap into the abundant nature of our spirits, and therefore to find the most powerful means out of the chaos,

uncertainty, and violence gripping our neighborhoods.

We don't need more police or prisons or more laws—we need more poetry, arts, dance, song, ritual, and truly genuine, community-based initiatory experiences.

Image and Reality: The Color of Skin Is the Color of Crime

In the past, racist pundits such as Charles Murray and Michael Levine have used the large number of black and Latino people in prison and among crime statistics to prove their alleged inferior and criminally inclined qualities. Forget the 500 years of slavery and racist oppression; forget the growing levels of poverty and deepening economic displacement; forget the social barriers that have made decent jobs and higher education virtually nonexistent for most inner-city blacks and Latinos. The color of skin is the color of crime.

For more than 10 years since the release of *Always Running*, I have been to some of the so-called worst schools, including Roosevelt High in East Los Angeles, the most overcrowded high school in the country. I've walked the halls of schools such as L.A.'s Garfield and New Jersey's Eastside that were later depicted in the movies *Stand and Deliver* and *Lean on Me*. From Seattle to Miami, Hartford to San Diego, and Chicago to Atlanta, I've been there. In "gang" schools. In schools with police officers on every floor and metal detectors at the entrances.

I have also been to various juvenile detention centers and prisons, where many young people were hungry to hear what I had to say. They connected to my story. They wrote me letters and came up to me to express how my work has changed their lives.

They were looking for adult mentors, teachers, and guides who could respect them, listen to them, but also show them the ropes. If more people were committed to doing this—reaching out in a genuine and consistent manner—more young people would have help in finding positive and meaningful lives.

I have met with so-called killer kids (including a sweet-faced, long-haired teenager

who had been convicted of murdering her sister in Omaha). The image of crime is dark. The image of crime is poor. The image of crime is pain. Yet I also heard voices crying out for caring. Voices capable of great intelligence. Of great comprehension. Once I read poetry through a teeny slit in the door of an accused teenage murderer who closed his eyes and swayed with my words.

Don't get me wrong. I've also done workshops with upper-class white and privileged children in communities such as Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. All kids are great to me—regardless of their station in life. But that's the point. All kids are great. All kids are capable of great beauty. Of powerful transcendence. All are gifted and intrinsically valuable human beings.

But what soul do we murder when we declare that the color of skin is the color of crime? What stereotypes do we resurrect with every *COPS* show that depicts white, burly men of power pushing around, and often degrading, impotent, mostly drugged, and beaten-down people of color? What are we saying when heroes in movies are primarily white, male, and upper class? Yet every day we are bombarded with the same connection: The color of skin is the color of crime.

Image Versus Reality: Conflict in Truth

Those young Salvadoran gang youths were heroes to me. They had seen much tragedy; they had seen wars in their homeland and in the streets of a city to which they were forced to flee. They also saw more violence after being deported or sent back to a place where they no longer felt connected.

Were they capable of great violence? Yes; I have seen this, too. For example, from 1980 until 2000, there were 12,000 gang youth killed in the streets of L.A.—more than any other city. But I also saw how some gang youth were willing to risk their lives (they were risking their lives everyday anyway) to change the world around them. How they were tired of the killings and maiming. How they wanted to become proper fathers and mothers in a place that would accept them,

hear them, and allow them room to take part.

I saw people pull themselves up to bring peace, to organize, to study, and to help tear down the economic, social, political, and cultural barriers.

As I have often said, when it comes to human beings, looking deeply at all the factors at play, there really is no such thing as "senseless" violence. In today's complicated, transitional, confusing, and changing times, violence makes a lot of sense. To understand the impulses, motive forces, and factors that create violence, and then to accurately (even if dramatically) portray this violence through art, is critical for a more comprehensive sense of what we are dealing with. It is also the foundation for efforts to do something real and positive about violence. But that is far from what we see in the images on TV, in movies, or in many books.

Unfortunately, being in a war doesn't help. War in the world is a justification for war in the street. When we ask youth to stop being violent, to put down their weapons, and to not seek revenge, yet continue to see war as a viable option for revenge, power, and economics between governments, religions, and political organizations, we are hypocritical and untrustworthy. The more imaginative, healing, comprehensive, and peaceful we can be with world-shattering concerns, the more we can be this way in our homes, our schools, and our neighborhoods.

The present-day distortion in the media of crime and color only fuels the basest emotions among us, enhancing our fears and ignorance. The results today of this disinformation are more prisons, more curtailment of our civil liberties, and more cuts in programs and in educational and job opportunities (erecting barriers to the new technologies as the whole concept of work is being transformed before our eyes)—which, in case it isn't clear to anyone, creates the environment for more crime, more violence, and more fear.

In the 1990s, when the Chicago Bulls were winning several National Basketball Association championships, a number of young people, many of them in gangs, took to the streets in my Chicago neighborhood. I've

known these same youths in calmer settings. But on those nights after the Bulls won they were rowdy, yelling and throwing bottles. Several police officers in riot gear chased and beat down a few of them; a couple of officers were beaten in return. Again, under other circumstances, these young people would blossom. In relationship to police, to "alien" power, they were at war. I'm sure this situation is also true for many police officers, who include decent family men and women. But in their relations with gangs, they are often violent and abusive.

We need more settings in which these young people can be expressive, wise, and appreciated. They will thrive, I know.

I would rather have a tattooed, scarred hand near mine as we work to bring out the best in our people and the best of the expanding technologies than a manicured, clean hand that wants only to remove what it fears, bringing out the worst of everything in the process. You can't tell nowadays what you're dealing with just by image. You have to go deeper. You have to relate. You have to risk opening up and being next to and among those whom everyone else has abandoned. Then you will see the real place where change and peace can come from. Then you can understand why, in most cases, the image and the reality can never be reconciled.

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Discussion Questions

1. Why did the images of youths attending the conference in El Salvador and the reality of what they were trying to achieve appear to be contradictory?
2. Compare and contrast the media's portrayal of youths in Latino gangs and youths in gangs of European descent, including specific examples you have encountered.
3. Explain what is meant by the statement "The color of skin is the color of crime."