Always Running

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LUIS J. RODRIGUEZ

Luis Rodriguez grew up in South Los Angeles in the 1960s. As a teenager, he was active in the Lomas gang, one of the largest Latino gangs in Los Angeles. In 1970, he and other gang members marched through East Los Angeles to protest the Vietnam War, and in the following years, he became active in the Chicano movement. While continuing many of his gang activities—including violence and heavy drug use—he organized student walk-outs and protests. At the age of eighteen, he decided to quit drugs and study political philosophy for the rest of his life. In the 1980s, he began working as a freelance journalist, covering topics as diverse as Chicago's nascent Poetry Slam scene and the Contra War in Nicaragua. In 1993, he published his memoir *Always Running*. Since then, he's written poetry, children's books, novels, and a second memoir called *It Calls You Back*. In 1997, his son Ramiro (to whom *Always Running* is dedicated) was arrested and sentenced to eight years on three counts of attempted murder; however, he was released in 2010. In 2014, Rodriguez was named the Poet Laureate of Los Angeles.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the years following World War II, there was a sudden influx of immigrants into the United States from Latin American countries, especially Mexico. Particularly in the 1960s, Mexican-Americans entered the United States in record numbers, settling primarily in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and California. Causes of the immigration spike include increased poverty and violence in Mexico, and the relative prosperity of the United States. The consequences of this immigration spike were numerous. A vibrant Chicano (Mexican-American) culture arose in the Southwestern United States, and Chicano political activists such as César Chávez and Reies Lopez Tijerina fought for Mexican-American civil rights. Some important political causes for the Chicano civil rights movement included the unionization of farm workers in the central valley of California and the reform of the public school system, which activists argued disadvantaged Latino students. Another consequence of Latino immigration, however, was a surge in gang violence in Los Angeles, among other cities. Especially in the '70s and '80s, with the rise of the crack epidemic, gang violence increased alarmingly. Two other specific historical events are hugely important to Luis's memoir: the Watts Rebellion of 1965 and the Los Angeles Riots (or "uprising," as Rodriguez says) of 1992. On August 11, 1965, a black man named Marquette Frye was arrested by LAPD officers for drunk driving. In the ensuing struggle, Frye was seriously injured, and the officers used excessive force to subdue him. As rumors of the LAPD's brutality circulated, angry crowds formed to protest the police's racist policies and actions. The California National Guard was called to intervene, supposedly to keep the peace, but over the next six days the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles became a virtual war zone. Protesters did tens of millions of dollars of property damage, and more than thirty people were killed in the struggle between the protesters and the troops. The Los Angeles Uprising of 1992 began in a similar fashion: a black man named Rodney King was pulled over for speeding, and four police officers brutally beat him. After the four officers were acquitted of any wrongdoing, a riot broke out throughout the city, begun primarily by black and Latino residents of the city. Over the next few days, more than sixty people were killed.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Rodriguez's memoir bears an interesting resemblance to Father Gregory Boyle's *Tattoos on the Heart* (2010), another memoir about gang violence in Los Angeles, though written from the perspective of a priest, not a gang affiliate. Like Luis, Boyle takes a harsh view of gang culture, though his take on gangs lacks Luis's Marxist interpretation. Speaking of which, Luis makes reference to several political texts that were especially popular in the 1960s. These include *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) and Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (also 1965), a memoir on black oppression that incorporates many Marxist ideas. And of course, it's worth reading Marx himself before diving into Rodriguez's memoir: *The Communist Manifesto* is both Marx's most famous text on working-class oppression and the book that arguably has the greatest relevance to Luis's education. Finally, although it's not a literary work, readers are encouraged to watch Agnés Varda's documentary-essay *Murmurs* (1981), a beautiful and insightful film about Chicano culture in Los Angeles in the '70s and '80s.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.
- **When Written:** Early '90s
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles
- **When Published:** 1993
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Los Angeles, mostly in the 1960s and 1970s
- **Climax:** Luis runs into his old nemesis, Chava

- **Antagonist:** Gang violence, the LAPD, racism
- **Point of View:** First person (Luis Rodriguez)

EXTRA CREDIT

Political artist. Luis Rodriguez is the definition of a Renaissance man—a person whose expertise spans multiple areas. In addition to being a great writer and a talented artist, he's been actively involved in politics for most of his adult life. In 2014, he ran for governor of California as the representative of the Green Party, and came in sixth, higher than any other independent candidate.

Honors and awards. In 2012, Rodriguez's second memoir, *It Calls You Back* was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His works have also been ranked among the year's best by critics from the New York Times and The Guardian.

PLOT SUMMARY

In the early 1990s, the writer, artist, and political organizer Luis Rodriguez is inspired to write a memoir about his early life in Los Angeles after he learns that his son, Ramiro, is getting involved in "La Vida Loca," as he calls it—the life of a *cholo* or gang affiliate.

Luis spends the first two years of his life in Juarez, Mexico. He's the son of Alfonso, a quiet, intelligent principal, and María, a fiery, half-Native American woman. When Luis is two, Alfonso moves his family—including Luis, Luis's older brother Rano, and Luis's two sisters—to Los Angeles, where they live in a poor, mostly Latino neighborhood.

Growing up in Los Angeles is a challenge for Luis. His neighborhood is dangerous, and in school he's mocked by his teachers for not knowing how to speak English. He spends most of his time outside, playing with his friends Earl and Jaime. Early on in life, Luis learns that the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) isn't to be trusted. When he's just a child, he witnesses LAPD officers chasing his friend Tino and yelling "greaser." Tino tries to climb a building to escape the officers, and ends up falling to his death.

Luis is attracted to the gang lifestyle because he associates it with protection from the LAPD. He and his good middle school friend Miguel Robles form a "club" called Thee Mystics, essentially a gang. In middle school, Luis begins to use drugs, becomes sexually active, and drifts away from his brother Rano, who is becoming more interested in running and music.

At the age of thirteen, Miguel Robles convinces Luis to join The Tribe, a large, "big-time" Los Angeles gang. As part of his new membership in the gang, Luis begins wearing Tribe colors and spending time with other Tribe members. He also gets into fights with rival gangs, sometimes getting seriously hurt.

Finally, Luis comes to realize the extent to which he's a victim of racism. One year, LAPD officers arrest him and his friends for drinking on the beach, and brag that they're doing this in order to fingerprint Luis and his Latino friends so that they can monitor them later on.

Luis's criminal behavior becomes increasingly dangerous. He and his friend Yuk Yuk rob houses and sell the goods to their business partners. He also begins to suffer from serious depression, which he later learns is extremely common among gang members. In school, he's moody and always getting into fights. However, Luis finds relief in listening to music. He also begins writing poetry and teaches himself how to play the saxophone.

At the annual Fiesta Day parade, Luis meets a beautiful young woman named Viviana, who belongs to the rival Sangra gang. Although he knows he's acting like a traitor, Luis spends time with Viviana, and eventually kisses her.

That year, Luis is a sophomore in high school. One day at a football game, LAPD officers harass him and his friends, and in retaliation Luis and the other Tribe members start a riot. They attack white bystanders even though they know that these are innocent people who mean them no harm.

Luis begins using drugs, including meth and heroin. One night, he inhales clear plastic and becomes so high that his heart seems to stop. His friend Wilo prevents him from inhaling any more of the clear plastic—an action which, Luis later realizes, probably saved his life.

The Tribe is beginning to fall apart, since its leaders are either dead or in jail. Luis and the remaining members decide to merge with the Lomas, a large and powerful gang. As part of his initiation, Luis is savagely beaten for three minutes, and then ordered to attack (and possibly kill) an innocent person with a screwdriver. Luis follows orders. The year is 1970, and Los Angeles is rife with political activism. Luis meets a young man named Chente Ramírez, who becomes his mentor. Chente encourages Luis to become politically engaged, telling him that he has a connection with all the exploited and impoverished people of the world—not just other Latinos. While Luis is inspired by Chente, he also continues with his gang activities, even firebombing a rival member member's house.

With Chente's encouragement, Luis participates in an anti-Vietnam war protest. At the protest, Luis is arrested. In high school, he becomes involved with the school's Chicano cultural club. He auditions to become the school's mascot, an Aztec, as the club reasons that it's better for this character to be played by a Latino who can bring dignity and authenticity to the role. Luis also begins to stage protests and walk-outs in response to what he sees as his school's indifference to Chicano culture and Chicano students. While this frequently puts him at odds with his principal, Mr. Madison, it also pressures Madison to hire Chicano teachers and introduce Chicano culture classes to the

school's curriculum.

One night, Luis and other Lomas go to attack some white bikers who previously attacked one of Luis's Latino friends. Luis arms himself with a rifle, but the LAPD arrests him before he can find the bikers. He faces trial but is not convicted of any crime because the bikers refuse to cooperate with the police.

Miguel Robles is arrested and shot by LAPD cops. Luis is infuriated by the death of his old friend, who had been "going straight" for more than a year at the time of his death. The police officers who killed Miguel are not convicted of any wrongdoing. Shortly afterwards, two of Luis's gang friends, Indio and Santos, are killed under mysterious circumstances. The leader of the Lomas, who is called Puppet, wants a retaliatory strike on the rival Sangra gang. However, Luis protests that this will only cause more violence, and notes that the killings could have been the work of LAPD cops trying to incite gang warfare. Puppet becomes so furious at Luis's opposition that he punches Luis in the face. Afterwards, Luis begins to distance himself from the Lomas.

Luis finishes high school and goes to Cal State-L.A. for college. He signs a contract to publish a book, and also arranges to design the murals for a local building, but his career is sidelined when he witnesses two police officers beating up a woman, and intervenes. Luis is arrested for attacking police officers, and ultimately sentenced to a few months in jail. During this period, he meets a woman named Licha, with whom he has yet another brief romantic relationship.

After his release, Luis reunites with Chente, who continues to inspire him to fight for justice. Luis tours the country, organizing rallies and protests. He also becomes involved with a young woman named Camila Martínez, who later becomes the mother of his eldest son, Ramiro. One night, years later, Luis runs into a former Sangra warrior named Chava. Chava is now a frail, middle-aged man, but he's still full of hatred and rage. Luis is disgusted by the sight of Chava, but is also sympathetic. This, he realizes, is what he could have become had he continued to be a *cholo*. He realizes that he no longer hates any *cholos*—he just wants to help them move past their anger and self-hatred.

In the memoir's epilogue, Luis notes that his son, Ramiro, has been avoiding gang life. Like his father, Ramiro reads poetry and listens to music to deal with his emotions. Luis concludes by celebrating the aftermath of the Rodney King beating, during which Latinos and blacks across Los Angeles worked together to protest oppression in their city.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Luis Rodriguez – Luis Rodriguez is the protagonist, author, and narrator of *Always Running*. Beginning in the early 1990s, when he's a husband, a father, and a successful writer and community organizer, Luis pens a book in which he reexamines his early life in Los Angeles. As a teenager, Luis becomes involves in the city's notorious gangs. Throughout the 1970s, he is affiliated with a handful of Los Angeles gangs, first The Tribe and later the Lomas. In his capacity as a gang member, he uses drugs, viciously beats rival gang members, gets into fights with other gangs, and at times participates in some unfathomably horrific behavior (at one point, for example, he assaults an innocent person with a screwdriver). Plainly, Luis does not fit the typical description of a "good guy," and he never claims to, or even asks his readers for forgiveness. At the same time, Luis is shown to be a sensitive, highly intelligent young man with a strong moral desire to help people. He organizes political rallies and protests for worthy causes like Chicano rights, racial equality, and ending the Vietnam War. He also develops his talents as a poet, an artist, and a musician. In the end, Luis summons the courage and the discipline to do what few of his peers ever succeed in doing—escaping the life of a Los Angeles gang member. So perhaps it's possible to understand Luis's delinquent behavior without forgiving him entirely. He makes some horrible choices, but they're choices that many Americans, because of their privilege, are never in the position of having to make.

Chente Ramírez – Chente is one of the key figures in the memoir, and undoubtedly one of the biggest influences in Luis Rodriguez's life. A charismatic Chicano politician, writer, teacher, and community organizer, Chente works at the Bienvenidos Community Center, a place designed to provide support for gang members and impoverished Los Angeles residents alike. Luis is immediately impressed with Chente's intelligence, passion, and effortless "cool." As he explains, Chente is an important mentor for him because Chente can inspire him without condescendingly telling him what to do. And this is the key to Chente's influence: he shows Luis the kind of life that Luis *could* have, and then leaves it up to Luis to choose this kind of life for himself. With Chente's encouragement and advice, Luis becomes more involved in grassroots politics. Chente is also instrumental in introducing Luis to Marxist ways of thinking about the world and understanding his life—and in particular, the quintessentially Marxist idea that exploited people of all kinds have something in common that transcends culture or race. Many coming-of-age stories have a mentor figure at its heart, and in *Always Running*, Chente is undoubtedly that figure for Luis.

Alfonso Rodriguez – Although Alfonso is Luis's father, he's a surprisingly minimal presence in Luis's early life, and in Luis's memoir. A talented, educated figure in Mexico, Alfonso makes the difficult decision to immigrate to Los Angeles, and relocates his entire family along with him. In Los Angeles, he's on the verge of breaking up with his wife and Luis's mother, María Rodriguez. However, the two choose to stay together, and

Alfonso supports his entire family with a job as a lab technician. Alfonso is described as being a man of few words. He doesn't discipline Luis for his bad behavior, and in general he does not have many lines of dialogue in the book. One notable exception comes when Alfonso begins taking Luis to the university lab where he works as a technician. There, Luis learns the truth: whereas he always thought his father held a highly-respected position at the lab, the reality is that Alfonso is little more than a janitor. Professors and scientists look down on him, and this infuriates Luis—who knows that his father is smart enough for a much more respectable job. In all, Alfonso's adult life confirms some of the harsh realities about immigration: in America, he's never given a fair chance to put his talents to full use.

María Rodriguez – María is Luis Rodriguez's fiery, intimidating mother. The descendant of Native Americans, María marries Alfonso Rodriguez while she's still very young, and then moves to Los Angeles along with him. As Luis notes several times, she's willing to sacrifice her own dreams and ambitions for the sake of her husband. Although she and Alfonso have marital difficulties throughout the memoir, they decide to remain married, in large part because they want to take care of their children. During Luis's teen years, María is an important presence in his life. She discourages him from participating in gang life, at one point forbidding him from living in her house (as a result of which he begins sleeping in the garage). Later, when Luis becomes more heavily involved in political activism, María supports him, even though she's generally suspicious of political activism. In all, María is portrayed as a passionate parent who takes childrearing very seriously, and hates to see her son get involved in trouble of any kind.

Rano Rodriguez / Joe – Rano is Luis Rodriguez's older brother, and an important influence on Luis's earlier life. When Luis's family moves to Los Angeles, Rano quickly becomes violent and unpredictable. He has trouble adjusting to his classes, in which he's mocked for knowing little English. But as Rano grows older, he undergoes a startling transformation. He begins to fit in at school, exceling at sports, music, and school. At this point, Rano begins to go by the name Joe. He becomes, as Luis puts it, "the Mexican exception," i.e., a Latino immigrant who fits in at an American public high school. However, Rano grows apart from his brother, and by the time Luis enters high school the two of them aren't particularly close. Nevertheless, Rano is an important figure for Luis: he introduces Luis to music and boxing and more generally he represents the young man Luis *could* be if he applied himself.

Ramiro – Ramiro is Luis Rodriguez's son (named, it would seem, after Chente Ramírez, Luis's beloved mentor). Ramiro appears in the memoir's first and final chapters. At first, he's portrayed as a teenaged delinquent who hates his father and feels a thirst for crime and violence. In the final chapter, however, Luis shows that Ramiro has made great strides toward getting his life under control, having come to terms with his abusive stepfathers and, much like Luis himself, turned to poetry and music as outlets for his frustrations. By his own admission, Luis wrote his memoir in order to convince Ramiro not to embrace the life of a gang member, as Luis himself did when he was Ramiro's age.

Camila Martínez – Luis Rodriguez meets Camila Martínez in the late 1970s, when he's a young, charismatic college student and she's a beautiful high school student. The two begin a relationship, and shortly afterwards, Camila gives birth to Luis's first son, Ramiro. However, the couple breaks up, and Camila proceeds to raise Ramiro on her own in Los Angeles.

Gloria (Cuca / Shorty) – Luis Rodriguez's younger sister Gloria grows up in Los Angeles with Luis. As she matures, she becomes involved in gangs. During this time, she faces grave danger from rival gangs, who are trying to get revenge on Luis by attacking his sister. During her time in local gangs, she goes by Cuca and Shorty.

Miguel Robles – A childhood friend of Luis Rodriguez, who first forms a small-time gang called Thee Impersonations, and later convinces Luis to join The Tribe, a larger gang that eventually merges with the Lomas. Miguel is a tragic figure because, more than a year after he pledges to give up the gang life, he's shot and killed by police officers. Miguel's death inspires Luis to become more politically active and speak out against police brutality.

Clavo – One of Luis Rodriguez's middle school friends, Clavo eventually joins the gang The Tribe along with Luis. He's shot in the eye during a fight with a rival gang, and soon after this he loses the eye and mysteriously disappears—nobody knows whether it's because he has moved away or because he's been arrested or killed.

Wilo – Wilo is another one of Luis Rodriguez's childhood friends. He joins The Tribe with Luis, and later the gang merges with the Lomas. Wilo is a close friend to Luis for long stretches of his teen years, and at one point it's strongly implied that Wilo saves Luis's life. On the night in question, Luis is getting high by inhaling clear plastic, and loses consciousness, almost dying in the process. It is Wilo who takes the clear plastic away from Luis when he regains consciousness, ensuring that Luis—who's almost suicidal at this point in his life—can recover.

Chicharrón – Chicharrón is another one of Luis Rodriguez's middle school friends. He's instrumental in convincing Luis to join the Lomas in high school, and he and Luis participate in various gang activities together—everything from getting high to getting in fights with rival gangs to burning down a rival gang member's house. Chicharrón is eventually arrested as an accessory to murder, after which he's never heard from again.

Claudio Ponce / Yuk Yuk – Yuk Yuk is one of Luis Rodriguez's friends from his teen years. Though Luis is never as close with him as Luis is with Chicharrón or Miguel Robles, Yuk Yuk and Luis participate in many gang activities together. They rob

houses, get high, and on several occasions fight with rival gangs. Luis is shown to be highly critical of some of Yuk Yuk's behavior—especially the belittling, aggressive way Yuk Yuk treats women. Ultimately, Yuk Yuk dies in a car accident when he steals a car and swerves off the road, killing himself and his friend.

Viviana – Viviana is a beautiful young woman with whom Luis Rodriguez has a passionate but confusing relationship. Luis first meets Viviana at a parade, where he's dismayed to learn that she's affiliated with a rival gang. Nevertheless, Luis and Viviana strike up a relatively secret romance. Though Viviana breaks off their relationship, Luis and Viviana get back together two years later, albeit briefly. Viviana is shown to be a calming influence on Luis's life, and the simple fact that Luis pursues a relationship with her shows that he's beginning to question the artificial barriers caused by gang warfare.

Chava – An important warrior in the Sangra gang, who's targeted by the Lomas one night when they burn down his house. Though Chava survives this murder attempt, he's later stabbed by rival gang members, leaving him alive but permanently debilitated. Chava appears toward the memoir's conclusion when, in an emotional encounter, Luis crosses paths with Chava twenty years after he leaves the gang world. Luis is shocked to see that Chava has become a weak, pathetic, middle-aged man, still consumed with self-hatred and hatred of others. In this way, Chava seems to represent the best-case scenario for La Vida Loca—a scenario which is still utterly miserable. In the end, *cholos* either die young, go to prison, or they grow into bitter old men.

Malcolm X – An influential political activist whose writing inspires Luis Rodriguez during his own political awakening as a teenager in the 1960s. Malcolm X's political beliefs are still hotly debated fifty years after his death. X was a Black Nationalist who believed that African Americans should celebrate their own culture and values instead of pursuing integration with white America. X was also notable for advocating violence as a form of self-defense against what he saw as the genocidal policies of the establishment of the United States.

Eldridge Cleaver – A black activist and early member of the Black Panther Party, Eldridge Cleaver is still celebrated for his influence on the "black is beautiful" movement and his emphasis on black empowerment and self-defense. However, Cleaver is still a highly controversial figure in black history, in part because he was known to have raped many women, and in part because after the 1970s he gravitated toward the Republican Party, displeasing many of his left-wing allies.

Mr. Madison – The principal of Luis Rodriguez's high school, with whom Luis has a number of head-to-heads. Madison is portrayed as a sheltered, "apolitical" figure who can't fathom why Chicano students would want to celebrate their culture or learn about their heritage. As a result, Luis at several points in the memoir organizes walk-outs to protest Mr. Madison's lack of concern for Chicano issues. These walkouts sometimes succeed in convincing Madison to reconsider his ways.

Mrs. Baez – Mrs. Baez is a teacher at Luis Rodriguez's high school, as well as the sponsor of the Chicano cultural society. As a result, Mrs. Baez is instrumental in advising Luis and his peers while they're planning grassroots political activism. There are many times when Mrs. Baez refuses to support Luis's activism, even when it's done in the name of Chicano rights. At other times, however, Baez is shown to be an important ally to Luis, standing up for him in front of Mr. Madison—and risking her own job in doing so.

Roger Nelson – A Los Angeles local and friend of Luis Rodriguez, who supplies Luis with a rifle that Luis later uses to shoot at some white bikers. As part of the fall-out from the incident, Roger is arrested for supplying Luis with the gun and is tried as an accessory to murder—however, Roger is released. Later, as if to show that there are no hard feelings, he asks Luis to be the best man at his wedding.

Licha – An attractive woman with whom Luis Rodriguez kindles a warm friendship and later a romance after they're both arrested by the police and sent to jail. Licha and Luis promise to get together after they're both released from jail, and they do—however, Licha turns out to be considerably older than Luis, and eventually she breaks up with him, saying that the age difference between them (about ten years) is simply too great.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Seni – The daughter of Alfonso Rodriguez from an early marriage. Alfonso and his family briefly live with Seni in Los Angeles.

Jaime – A one-armed boy whom Luis Rodriguez befriends in elementary school.

Earl – A boy whom Luis Rodriguez befriends in elementary school.

Ana (Pata) – Luis Rodriguez's sister, rarely mentioned in his memoir (even though they grow up together).

Tino – A childhood friend of Luis Rodriguez, who dies while fleeing from the police.

Socorro – A girl on whom Luis Rodriguez has a crush in middle school.

Marina – A girl whom Luis Rodriguez dates in middle school, who encourages Luis's gang activities.

Chucha – Luis Rodriguez's aunt, who tells him stories and sings to him while he's still a child.

Pancho – Luis Rodriguez's cousin, who inspires him to start lifting weights and listening to soul and jazz music.

Hermie – A young woman who spends time with the Lomas

gang.

Black Dog – A Lomas gang member who goes to prison.

Kiko – Luis Rodriguez's uncle.

Jandro Mares – Notorious Los Angeles robber who's connected with Yuk Yuk.

Shed Cowager – Notorious Los Angeles robber who's connected with Yuk Yuk.

Carlito – One of Luis Rodriguez's friends, who's attacked and nearly killed by racist police officers after a high school football game.

Payasa – The sister of Wilo, Payasa develops a big crush on Luis Rodriguez. However, their relationship deteriorates after Luis realizes that Payasa is too dependent on drugs.

John Fabela – President of The Tribe, who's murdered in his home by rival gang members.

Ragman – A powerful figure in the Lomas gang.

Pila – Puppet's girlfriend.

Paco – A friend of Luis Rodriguez, who's shown to be disrespectful and abusive to women.

Roberta – An attractive woman with whom Luis Rodriguez strikes up a brief romance, which comes to a sudden end when Luis realizes that she works as a prostitute.

Xochitl – An attractive woman with whom Chicharrón kindles a romance, even after he learns that she's a prostitute.

Frankie – Roberta's sister, with whom Luis Rodriguez has a quick "rebound" relationship after he ends things with Roberta.

Lisa – Luis Rodriguez's sister, who died as an infant. As a teenager, Luis has vivid nightmares about Lisa's death.

Mr. Rothro – The principal of Luis Rodriguez's elementary school, who tries to convince Luis to stay in school.

Amiri Baraka – An influential African American poet, jazz critic, and activist who inspires Luis to channel his feelings about poverty, racism, and gang warfare into music and poetry.

Arnie – A high school friend of Luis Rodriguez.

Charles Kearney – A restaurant owner who first arrests Luis Rodriguez for trying to "dine and dash," but then declines to press charges after Luis tells him about police brutality.

Cowboy – A local police officer with whom Luis Rodriguez has more than one nasty encounter over the years.

Maddog – Another local police officer in Luis Rodriguez's neighborhood.

Rubén Navarro – A flashy boxing champ who helps teach Luis how to box.

Daniel Fuentes – Ex-boxer who runs the gym where Luis Rodriguez trains.

Esmeralda Falcón – A classmate of Luis Rodriguez, with whom Luis tries out to be the school mascot. Like Luis, Esmeralda is an active member of the school's Chicano cultural club.

Fernando – A close friend of Luis Rodriguez's sister, Gloria.

Louie – Joe's son and Luis Rodriguez's nephew—named after Luis himself.

Terry – One of Luis Rodriguez's many girlfriends, who suddenly claims that she's pregnant, and then disappears.

Rodney King – African American resident of Los Angeles whose brutal beating at the hands of four LAPD officers—captured on film—sparked a city-wide uprising of black and Latino people, often called the "Los Angeles Riots" (though Luis avoids using the prejudicial word "riot" whenever possible).

Sal Basuto – The organizer of the La Casa Community Center, another Los Angeles space that supports impoverished city dwellers as well as ex-gang affiliates.

Puppet – One of the main leaders of the Lomas gang, Puppet is a brutal warrior who's shown never to shy away from physical violence. After Luis Rodriguez begins to distance himself from the gang, Puppet punches him, suggesting that Luis's Lomas days are now behind him.

Joaquín Lopez – President of The Animal Tribe.

Delfina Cortez – An attractive young woman whom Luis Rodriguez dates for a brief period in high school.

Sheila – A high school student who gets pregnant.

Santos – Luis Rodriguez's friend, who's later killed in a conflict with a rival gang.

Indio – Santos's friend, who's later killed in a conflict with a rival gang.

Mr. Humes – High school teacher who belittles his Latino students.

Mr. Pérez – Latino high school teacher whose sudden firing is protested by Luis Rodriguez and other Latino students.

Cokie – A powerful *chola* (i.e., female gang member) for the Sangra gang, who is later raped and murdered.

Dina – A powerful *chola* (i.e., female gang member) for the Sangra gang.

Night Owl – Sangra gang member who befriends Luis Rodriguez during his time in prison.

Deputy Coates – Police officer who kills Miguel Robles but is later acquitted of the killing.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have

a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

GANGS AND CRIME

Luis Rodriguez is a gang member for many years, beginning when he's in grade school and continuing, on and off, until he's in college. During this time, he becomes acquainted with the various aspects of Los Angeles *cholo* (i.e., gang member) culture: drug use, dismissive treatment of women, and, above all, violent clashes with rival gangs. Luis personally commits some reprehensible crimes as a gang member. Though he never seems to ask for his readers' forgiveness, he uses his memoir to pose the question of why Los Angeles gangs were formed in the first place—and why, furthermore, so many people turn to violent crime.

In answering these questions, Luis speaks from personal experience, but also outlines a more general theory about gangs and crime. Luis joins a gang because he sees himself as—and, in fact, *is*—a victim of a corrupt and racist society. Even as a child, Luis witnesses LAPD officers stopping Latinos without clear cause and using excessive force on Latino women and children. The racial epithets "Spic" and "beaner," frequently used by police officers, become painfully familiar to him. Surrounded by reminders of the LAPD's unwarranted aggression and his own helplessness to protect himself, Luis resorts to joining a gang—or, as he initially thinks of it, a club. The stated purpose of Luis's first club, formed with handful of grade school friends, is to protect its members from the dangers of the city—first and foremost, the dangers represented by the police force. Of course, half a dozen sixth graders can't do much to protect themselves, or each other, from cops. Nevertheless, Luis's gang gives him some much-needed psychological support. His gang helps him feel empowered and capable of standing up to the dangers he encounters in Los Angeles every day. The first half of Luis's memoir, then, establishes a clear cause-and-effect relationship between gangs, crime, and social corruption in general. Luis turns to gangs and crime—"La Vida Loca," or "The Crazy Life"—as a reaction against the injustices he witnesses and the fear he feels as a result of his oppression. In short, Luis is not born a criminal. Rather, he turns to gangs and crime as a source of strength in a world where he feels powerless.

As Luis grows older, however, he begins to think about La Vida Loca in broader and more explicitly political terms. Crime is partly a reaction to the racism of the LAPD, but it's also a rational response to economic inequality. As Luis writes, the vast majority of the criminals in Los Angeles would turn away from crime if they could just find a decent nine-to-five job. But in the 1960s and 1970s, these kinds of opportunities often aren't available to people living in the neighborhoods of outer Los Angeles, where there aren't always even paved roads or working sewage systems. In the absence of job opportunities, stealing or selling drugs becomes one of few seemingly viable alternatives. Luis also comes to understand crime as a psychological response to the feeling of despair that economic inequality often engenders. Luis goes through many periods of deep depression in response to the difficulty of his life. Convinced that he has nothing to work towards and nothing to aspire to, he takes out his frustration on himself by cutting himself and doing hard drugs, and on other people by bullying them and beating them up without cause. However, as Luis begins to educate himself and think about his time in Los Angeles more critically, he realizes the truth. At the most basic level, he has turned to crime because his poverty fosters a feeling of hopelessness and a desperate need for money that more privileged people never have to struggle with. The same goes for hundreds of thousands of other people in his city. Once Luis realizes that he and other gang members are suffering from the same "diseases"—poverty, racism, fear, and despair—he finds it easier to feel compassion for them. He sees beyond the petty gang rivalries that fuel La Vida Loca and instead tries to help the poor and end the cycle of violent crime in Los Angeles.

Too often, Luis writes, politicians suggest that criminals are born violent and depraved. Instead, Luis suggests that there is no such thing as a born criminal. The gang members in Los Angeles, as cruelly as they sometimes behave, are themselves victims responding to racism, responding to depression, or responding to economic need. Luis doesn't suggest that criminals should be forgiven without question, or that they shouldn't be judged and punished for their crimes. Rather, Luis believes that criminals *should* be held morally accountable for their actions—not because he believes in punishment for the sake of punishment, but because he wants to help criminals learn to be better. Luis is living proof that criminals and gang members aren't inherently dangerous or "beyond help"—on the contrary, they're capable of great things when they're treated with respect and compassion.

MACHISMO

One can't understand Los Angeles gangs without also understanding the culture (and the cult) of machismo. Machismo—the rigid code of male behavior which male gang members follow to the letter—is the glue that holds gangs together. It builds unity, keeping Luis Rodriguez and other *cholos* loyal to one another by giving them a common set of beliefs. Machismo influences almost every aspect of the *cholos*' behavior. Because machismo prizes the appearance of independence and toughness, it encourages *cholos* to bottle up their emotions and distance themselves from their families. Machismo also attaches importance to aggressive physical behavior for its own sake, which helps explain why *cholos* so often get into fights, and why these fights often ignite into full-scale riots. Because machismo is about

male power and aggression, it also has a strong misogynistic streak, such that the culture of machismo in Los Angeles gangs encourages *cholos* to think of women as objects rather than human beings. *Always Running* is filled with chilling descriptions of women who are raped or in some cases murdered by *cholos* who seem to think of women as their own property. Rodriguez portrays the culture of machismo as one ugly expression of the culture of violence that racial and economic injustice have spawned.

At the most basic level, it could be argued that machismo as Luis defines it is first and foremost the ability to withstand pain. Oftentimes, this pain is literal: for example, the "initiation ritual" for joining the Lomas—the large, powerful gang to which Luis belongs in high school—involves being viciously beaten for by the senior gang members for three minutes. While it might seem strange that Luis and hundreds of other gang initiates would allow themselves to be punched and kicked—and subsequently *join* the people who've just beaten them up—such ability to endure pain is the core of "La Vida Loca" and the cult of machismo. The implication is that "real men" can take a beating, while lesser men can't. However, machismo is equally defined by the willingness to inflict pain on other people, which requires the toleration of another kind of pain: the pain that human beings feel instinctively when they witness other people's suffering. As a Loma, Luis is constantly being ordered to attack other people. Sometimes, he is told that these people are members of a rival gang, the Sangra. But on other occasions, he isn't offered even that justification—he's just ordered to set fire to a house with innocent people sleeping inside, no questions asked. Luis is trained to suppress his natural capacity for empathy and compassion, and to tolerate and even welcome physical pain. In this way, insensitivity to violence is central to the cult of machismo.

Luis makes clear that, in the long run, the machismo of Los Angeles gangs is destructive to the point of being suicidal. Every day, gang members are killed in the streets by rival gang members, while innocent bystanders, including young children, are hurt or killed in the crossfire. Luis loses one close friend after another to gang warfare. Meanwhile, many of his friends who *don't* die in gang fights overdose on drugs or even commit suicide. In short, Luis and the other gang members are surrounded by pain and misery. And yet, instead of working together to improve their quality of life, the Los Angeles gangs accept pain as a necessary part of life. In no small part, they do so because the cult of machismo encourages them to embrace and fetishize pain. Indeed, it could be argued that machismo emerges as a reaction to—and way of dealing with—misery, poverty, and injustice. It's as if the *cholos*, faced with a hard, grim life, use machismo as a defense mechanism, training themselves to celebrate their pain because they see no way of diminishing it. The ultimate tragedy of *Always Running* (alluded to in the title) is that machismo is not only caused by pain and suffering, but also *causes* more pain and suffering, perpetuating a vicious cycle. Instead of cooperating with each other to fight poverty and discrimination, the Los Angeles gangs fight with each other. In this way, they are both the victims and the victimizers—a paradox that would be impossible without the culture of machismo holding gang life together.

RACE, RACISM, AND CLASS

The history of crime in Los Angeles is not a matter of class alone, nor of race alone—but of the intersections of these two issues. This holds true in Luis Rodriguez's account of "La Vida Loca." Los Angeles is one of the most racially diverse places in America, with large black, Asian, and Latino populations—yet the history of Los Angeles has been tarnished by frequent episodes of violent racism.

Even a cursory look at the recent history of Los Angeles reveals the city to be a place in which certain minority groups are under attack. From the Watts uprising of 1965 to the Rodney King uprising of 1992 (Luis makes a point of not referring to either incident as a "riot," a word he finds insulting and oversimplifying), minorities in Los Angeles have reacted to what they perceive as systemic racism in their city. In the latter case, for example, black and Latino residents of Los Angeles staged protests and, in some cases, violent uprisings after four police officers were acquitted of the charge of excessive force, despite the fact that there was video footage of them savagely beating a black man, Rodney King. Luis makes it clear that the Rodney King beatings were no aberration. Rather, virtually every case of police brutality for decades has ended in an acquittal for the police officers.

In his own life, Luis experiences racism from white authority figures countless times. When he's still a teenager, he's arrested for no apparent reason, and a white officer brags that the LAPD likes to arrest black and Latino youths so that they'll have a permanent criminal record (making it easier to convict them later on). On another occasion, Luis is arrested for drinking on the beach, a misdemeanor which, he strongly implies, would have earned a white teenager nothing more than a warning. Furthermore, the white police officers who arrest him call him a "beaner" and other racial slurs, suggesting that the arrest is partly motivated by the racist dislike or distrust of Latinos. Luis's experiences with racism don't end with the police, either. In elementary school, his teachers get annoyed with him because he's an immigrant from Mexico and doesn't yet speak fluent English. He's told to play with blocks while the white, English-speaking children learn. Many of Luis's Latino friends are punished for daring to speak Spanish in the classroom. In all, the memoir shows that there has been a long pattern of systemic racism in Los Angeles, ranging from disrespect for minority cultures to brutal violence against minorities themselves.

Luis depicts himself and the other characters in his memoir as

responding to their city's racism in a variety of ways. To begin, it could be argued that the growth of gang culture in the 1970s was itself a response to police racism. The *cholo* gangs that Luis describes are composed of Latinos. These gangs organize violent crime and drug trafficking, but they are also seen by their members as protecting the lives, communities of Latino people, and even Latino culture. For all their faults, *cholos* are shown to be protectors of Latino dance, music, food, and language. However, these gangs also perpetuate their own forms of bigotry against other groups. Luis's own gang, the Lomas, encourages violence toward people of other races, even if these people have done nothing wrong. At one point, Luis and his fellow gang members attack a group of innocent Asian students for no other reason than that they're angry and feel like hurting people who aren't like them. Even at the time, Luis is uncomfortable with attacking the Asian students, since he knows that Asians, like Latinos, are quite often victims of racism. At many other points in the memoir, Luis recalls starting fights with white students who haven't harmed him in any way. While this certainly doesn't mean that Luis and the Lomas' actions are comparable with those of the LAPD, it's undeniable that the Lomas practice racially prejudiced behavior, echoing the violent, outrageously unfair bigotry that Latinos experience at the hands of the cops.

After he has distanced himself from the Lomas, Luis finds ways of combatting racism without resorting to violence or hatred. In high school, he stages protests and walk-outs with the goal of pressuring his principal to introduce Chicano classes. He auditions for the part of the school's Aztec mascot to ensure that the mascot becomes a figure of respect instead of cheap humor. Luis shows that it's possible to celebrate one's own racial and cultural heritage without attacking other people's identities. Because of this conclusion, Luis eventually takes an even broader view of race and racism. Inspired by his mentor, Chente Ramírez, as well as the writings of important political activists of the era, Luis comes to believe that oppressed people must begin to see that issues of race and class are inextricably linked, as are the experiences of persecution of people of different races. Luis is proud of his Latino heritage, but he recognizes that he also shares a "heritage" with African Americans, homeless people, and anyone else who is a victim of institutionalized cruelty. He argues that Latinos need to work with people from different backgrounds in order to fight the many different kinds of injustice. Understood in this way, racial injustice against Latinos is just one manifestation of the injustice that all persecuted people experience. With this in mind, he continues to speak out against racism in his city, but also speaks out about issues such as the housing crisis, corruption, and rape. For Luis, the Rodney King uprising of 1992 was a great example of how blacks, Latinos, the homeless, and other exploited groups came together to fight for a common cause, sending the message that they were united and strong.

POLITICS, RESISTANCE, AND ACTIVISM

In addition to being a touching coming-of-age story and a fascinating insider's look at gang culture, *Always Running* examines the many different forms that political action can take. In Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s, there are a great number of worthy political causes, both domestically and abroad. At various points, Luis describes participating in the resistance to the war in Vietnam, police brutality, racism, and other injustices. In doing so, he poses one of the book's central questions: what is the best, most effective way to fight injustice?

One form of political activism that Luis discusses at great length is violent resistance. Throughout his memoir, he describes instances in which the most powerful people in the city—police officers, politicians, etc.—behave unjustly. In the face of this injustice, the best response is sometimes physical force to match that of the aggressor. For example, Luis witnesses two police officers using excessive force to arrest a woman, at one point punching the woman in the face. Almost without thinking, Luis chooses to intervene, attacking the two officers and ultimately going to jail as a result. Speaking more generally, Luis suggests that large-scale violent uprisings—such as the Watts Rebellion in 1965 and the Los Angeles riots in 1992 over Rodney King—were at least partly justified. In the case of the Watts Rebellion, Luis praises the "spirit of resistance" that emerged from Watts, a neighborhood that saw some of the worst racism and police brutality in the country, seeming to imply that violent resistance is a justified response to the violence of the LAPD.

Luis does not, however, claim that the Watts and Rodney King uprisings were unqualified successes. Although violence may have been justified in both cases, it's also true that the uprisings resulted in innocent people getting hurt and millions of dollars in property damage. Plenty of violence was done, but not always to the guilty parties—and this, Luis argues throughout his memoir, is one of the problems with violent political resistance. Luis demonstrates this by describing a riot that flares up after a high school football game when police officers harass Luis's friends and start choking one of them. In retaliation, Luis and his friends attack the officers, then some white bystanders, and then a group of Asian students watching the game. With every minute that passes, their violence becomes more indiscriminate and less justifiable as a result, until finally they're hitting people just because they feel like it.

It is because violent behavior can easily become unbridled that Luis advocates a second, more personal kind of political resistance: one rooted in education. It's a well-known adage that the political is personal and the personal is political. While these words have been interpreted in many different ways, to Luis they suggest that he has an obligation to educate himself and understand his racial and cultural heritage. With this in mind, Luis studies the writings of political luminaries like

Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver, who argued for many different forms of resistance to racially unjust American society. Luis comes to see himself as part of a vast, exploited proletariat, meaning that he has a shared heritage with working-class people of many different races. Furthermore, because he sees his own education as having been integral to his political awakening, Luis also becomes more invested in education reform. At his high school, he leads protests and walk-outs designed to pressure the principal to introduce Chicano classes and dismiss teachers who disrespect Chicano culture. In short, Luis's studies lead him to adopt a more personal, individualistic style of political resistance rather than a violent one. Put differently, Luis realizes it's not enough to agitate or rebel in order to get what you want—you must also concentrate on understanding injustice—and this means reading, learning, and passing on your learning to other people.

COMING OF AGE AND MENTORSHIP

Like many memoirs, *Always Running* is a coming-of-age story—in other words, it's a story about how a young, immature person grows into a confident adult. In this case, the immature young person is Luis, the protagonist and narrator of the memoir. Over the course of his early life in the outer neighborhoods of Los Angeles, Luis develops the courage and self-reliance to thrive where other young people struggle to survive.

Many coming-of-age stories feature a mentor—a wise, older character who guides the protagonist from immaturity to maturity—and *Always Running* is no different. Mentors are important in coming-of-age stories because they provide the main characters with the lessons they need to succeed. A mentor also gives the protagonist the emotional support he or she needs, often acting as a kind of parent figure.

At first, Luis lacks a strong mentor. His own parents, Alfonso and María, are honest, dedicated people, but they're shown as lacking the experience to help their son navigate the complexities of "La Vida Loca" in Los Angeles. Alfonso is a "hands off" parent who's never around, and María, though she's decidedly "hands on," doesn't seem to have much positive influence over Luis's behavior. Put another way, she knows how to punish Luis for doing the wrong thing, but she doesn't know how to inspire him to do the right thing. Because he lacks a good mentor, Luis feels himself being pulled in many different directions. As a middle school student, he gravitates toward gang life because he's confused and uncertain of his path in life. But gang life doesn't give Luis the tools to build a good or happy life for himself—rather, it threatens to destroy his life. It's no surprise that Luis describes himself as a ball bouncing back and forth: during this period of his life, he has no idea what—if anything—the future holds. Confronted with the possibility that his life has no real meaning whatsoever, he becomes depressed and even suicidal.

Luis's fortunes change, however, when he encounters Chente Ramírez, a charismatic, intelligent political organizer who runs a community center near Luis's home. Luis is immediately drawn to Chente, partly because Chente is "cool" and confident, but also because Chente is wise and speaks about the importance of standing up for political causes. And this, ultimately, is what Luis finds so compelling about his mentor. Unlike Luis's mother, Chente doesn't exactly tell Luis what to do. Instead, Chente leads by example, showing Luis the kind of person Luis *could* become if he gets his act together and leaves gang life behind. Inspired by Chente, Luis becomes more involved in grassroots politics, organizing walk-outs and demonstrations in support of Chicano rights. He borrows many of his political convictions from Chente—and in particular the belief that all exploited peoples share a common heritage. In short, Chente shows Luis not only how to be a mature, confident adult, but how to engage in productive political action.

Luis's coming-of-age story isn't just about his relationship with Chente, of course. Throughout the memoir, Luis makes his own mistakes as he tries to find his path in life. Moreover, he commits some horrific—and arguably unforgivable—crimes, hurting and even killing people. In no small part, Luis ends up finding success simply because of luck. For instance, he's lucky that, when he's arrested for accessory to murder, his case is thrown out. He's lucky that he has Chente to stick up for him, writing letters to judges and lawyers to ensure that Luis doesn't spend the rest of his life in jail. And of course, Luis is lucky that he's not killed in a war with another gang, as dozens of his friends and peers are. By contrast, the other *cholos* in Luis's memoir don't experience their own coming-of-age because they're stuck in a state of immaturity. They don't have their own mentors and they don't catch as many lucky breaks in life.

Luis's focus on the ways in which others may not have been *able* to succeed as he did is ultimately the main difference between Luis's life story and the typical fictional coming-of-age story. As in many other coming-of-age narratives, Luis benefits from a wise mentor and role model who guides him through life. However, Luis's story isn't just about one successful individual—it's also a story about the life of a *cholo* in Los Angeles. Luis is smart and talented, but he doesn't have any illusions about why he succeeded where so many others failed. He succeeded because of luck, not just talent or mentorship. Luis could just as easily have ended up in prison for life, or dead at the age of seventeen. Ultimately, Luis writes *Always Running* not just because he wants to document his own coming-of-age, but because he wants to shed light on why so many good, talented young people in Los Angeles *don't* realize their full potential: exposed to danger and violence, they're never given the chance.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TATTOOS

There aren't many conspicuous symbols in *Always Running*, but one exception is the tattoo that Luis Rodriguez gets in junior high school. The tattoo, which says, "Mi Vida Loca" (literally, "my crazy life"), is meant to be a symbol of Luis's loyalty to the gang world. La Vida Loca is Los Angeles slang for the life of a gang member, or *cholo*. By tattooing the words on his body permanently, Luis sends a clear message that he's willing to live this kind of life indefinitely and without looking back.

LUIS'S DREAM

When Luis Rodriguez is a teenager, he has a vivid dream about his half-sister, Lisa, who died as an infant years ago. In the dream, Luis sees that Lisa is crying, and he rushes her to the doctor. The doctors treat Lisa for appendicitis and save her life, informing Luis that, had they operated even a few minutes later, Lisa would be dead. The dream is a poignant symbol for Luis's desire to help other Chicanos by empowering them and, in doing so, to find a sense of purpose in his own life. Luis is surrounded by death and danger every day in Los Angeles. He wants to protect his friends and loved ones, and he wants to protect himself, too. So it makes sense that, in this dream, he finds meaning in the act of saving his little sister's life, undoing a tragedy that he's already experienced.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Always Running* published in 2005.

Preface Quotes

❝ Following me, Ramiro was a second-generation gang member. My involvement was in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Los Angeles, the so-called gang capital of the country. My teen years were ones of drugs, shootings and beatings, and arrests. I was around when South Central Los Angeles gave birth to the Crips and Bloods. By the time I turned 18 years old, 25 of my friends had been killed by rival gangs, police, drugs, car crashes and suicides.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker), Ramiro

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In the Preface, Luis discusses his relationship with his son Ramiro. Ramiro is a bright teenager, but he's gravitating toward the world of gangs, just like Luis before him. Luis is all-too familiar with "La Vida Loca," as Latino gang members call their own lifestyle. He understands that this kind of life is self-destructive, and he desperately wants to keep his son from making the same mistakes he made years ago in Los Angeles (his family now lives in Chicago).

Luis's memoir is meant to be person and universal at the same time. He's writing about his own experiences with gang culture in the 1970s, but he wants his experiences to inspire his own son to avoid gang culture. Finally, Luis pens this memoir in order to shed light on the systemic injustices of law enforcement in the city of Los Angeles.

❝ With little productive to do, drug selling becomes a lucrative means of survival. A 10-year-old in Humboldt Park can make $80-$100 a day as a lookout for local dealers. The drug trade is business. It's capitalism: Cutthroat, profit-motivated and expedient.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Luis closes his Preface by noting a few harsh facts about the drug trade in the United States. Too often, he argues, politicians and police officers characterize the people who sell and use drugs as monsters. The reality is much more terrifying, however. The people who buy and sell drugs are often ordinary people who, for various systemic reasons, can't find stable employment. In this sense, the drug trade isn't so different from any other American business. People enter the drug business to make a living, not because they're "depraved" or any of the other words that politicians like to throw at drug pushers.

A further implication of Luis's argument is that criminals in general aren't depraved; they're responding rationally to their own economic needs. Luis will extend and refine this point throughout his memoir, showing how criminals and

gang members, for all their faults, are also the victims of poverty.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ I just stayed in the back of the class, building blocks. It got so every morning I would put my lunch and coat away, and walk to my corner where I stayed the whole day long. It forced me to be more withdrawn. It got so bad, I didn't even tell anybody when I had to go the bathroom. I did it in my pants.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Luis's earliest memories of Los Angeles are confused. His parents move to Los Angeles when he's a toddler, and he grows up in an impoverished, predominately Latino neighborhood. As a result, Luis doesn't learn much English. By the time he enrolls in public school, he's far behind his white classmates when it comes to speaking English. His teachers, outrageously, don't take any time to remedy his ignorance; instead, they just tell him to sit in the back of the room and play with blocks until somebody figures out what to do with him.

The passage isn't just a heartbreaking episode from Luis's early life; it's also a compelling explanation of why so many Latinos in Los Angeles turn to La Vida Loca early on. In school—supposedly be the place where young children learn how to obey rules and empower themselves through knowledge—Latinos are often treated like second-class students. It's inevitable that Luis and many of his peers become rowdy, disruptive, and distrustful of authority. Their teachers don't like them, and so they respond in kind.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Tino looked below. A deputy spied the boy and called out, "Get down here...you *greaser*!"
Tino straightened up and disappeared. I heard a flood of footsteps on the roof -then a crash. Soon an awful calm covered us.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker), Tino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the young Luis Rodriguez and his friend Tino are running away from a pair of police officers. Luis and Tino are little kids, and they've committed a trivial misdemeanor, trespassing on school property. But because the police officers who catch them are aggressive and hostile (even calling the children "greasers," a racial slur), they choose to run away. The officers catch Luis, but Tino isn't so lucky. He tries to climb up a building, and winds up falling to his death.

The passage is a chilling example of the hostility that LAPD officers have shown for black and Latino residents of the city. Throughout his memoir, Luis will explore the racism of the Los Angeles police force, but for now he makes it clear that this racism is real. Furthermore, Luis shows how, from an early age, he is trained to think of the cops as his enemies—because they usually are.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ In the barrio, the police are just another gang. [...] Sometimes they come up to us while we linger on a street comer and tell us Sangra called us *chavalas*, a loose term for girls. Other times, they approach dudes from Sangra and say Lomas is a tougher gang and Sangra is nothing. Shootings, assaults and skirmishes between the barrios are direct results of police activity. Even drug dealing. I know this. Everybody knows this.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Luis offers a brutally harsh characterization of the LAPD. In his neighborhood of San Gabriel (located in outer Los Angeles), the police are seen as just another gang. They're not paid any particular respect; in fact, from the perspective of the neighborhood's Latino residents, the police are just as brutal and untrustworthy as the Lomas, the Sangra, or any other *cholo* gang.

Given what Luis says next, it's not hard to see why this is the case. LAPD officers try to provoke violence between gangs, and it's easy enough to guess why. As Luis explains later in his book, LAPD officers have an incentive to turn the Latino population of Los Angeles against itself. They want to ensure that Latinos remain divided and weak. While Luis's

observations may seem paranoid or hyperbolic, he's utterly matter-of-fact in the way he presents them: "everybody knows" that LAPD officers use this divide-and-conquer strategy to weaken Latinos.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Already a thug. It was harder to defy this expectation than just accept it and fall into the trappings. It was a jacket I could try to take off, but they kept putting it back on. The first hint of trouble and the preconceptions proved true. So why not be proud? Why not be an outlaw? Why not make it our own?

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Four, Luis continues to discuss his contentious relationship with the Los Angeles school system. At school, he's treated like an outsider. Because he's Latino, his white teachers immediately consider him a threat and a danger. Even other white students think of him as dangerous without even getting to know him. As a result of this constant, oppressive atmosphere, Luis *does* turn to violence. He does exactly what his classmates expect him to do.

It may seem counterintuitive that Luis becomes a *cholo* (i.e., gang member) because his classmates expect him to do so. But there's a lot of psychological research suggesting that social expectations, whether positive or negative, quite often *do* mold a person's behavior. In this way, the passage echoes Luis's earlier point about how criminals in Los Angeles are inherently bad people; on some occasions, they're gradually pressured and bullied into *becoming* criminals.

❝ I felt torn. There I was, a *vato* from Lomas staring into the eyes of a Sangra girl. This made me a traitor. But at the same time, all I could think about was her touch, her scent — those eyes.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker), Viviana

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

In his early teen years, Luis meets a beautiful young woman named Viviana. Viviana is charming and alluring, but Luis is horrified when he learns the truth: she's affiliated with a rival gang. For Luis to spend time with Viviana makes him a traitor to his own gang; he's sworn to be loyal to The Tribe, and now he's breaking his promise.

When Viviana tells Luis that she doesn't care for gang culture, however, Luis chooses to spend more time with her. Eventually, they kiss, and Luis like he's a traitor, even though he's having the time of his life. Luis's memoir is filled with descriptions of his relationships with women, but this passage is particularly important because it shows that Luis is gradually distancing himself from La Vida Loca.

❝ Maybe the whites didn't care for them either, but at least they had their money' status and grades. But one Asian guy got into our face. It wasn't so much he thought he was white. It was more in defense of what was "right." It was wrong to jump on innocent people. It was wrong to focus on the color of skin. It was wrong to throw rocks at cars, police and homes. "You can't do this," the Asian guy clamored. "We didn't do anything to you!
Five guys jumped on him.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately after a football game between the teams from Luis's predominately Latino high school and the team from a neighboring, predominately white high school, a fight breaks out. The fight starts when LAPD officers harass some of Luis's friends who haven't done anything wrong, and even start choking one boy. Luis and his friends are so furious with the LAPD officers' actions that they start a fight, attacking any white students who happen to be nearby. Furthermore, Luis and his friends begin attacking Asian students, simply because one of the students tries to convince them that it's wrong to attack innocent people.

The passage subtly conveys that, even at the time, Luis recognizes that he's doing something wrong. He knows that it *is* wrong to hurt innocent people, as the Asian student has just said. But he doesn't care. He's so angry that he just feels like lashing out, and isn't picky about who his victims are. He

targets Asian students because he feels like a victim, and because he resents their "money and grades," even though he knows that, by his own logic, Asians are victims of white oppression, too.

Suddenly everything around me exploded. An immense blackness enveloped me. A deep stillness. Nothing. Absolute. No thinking. No feeling. A hole.
Then an electrified hum sank its teeth into my brain. Hands surrounded me, pulled at me, back to the dust of our makeshift hideaway.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Luis describes the night that he almost died. He and his friends are sniffing clear plastic in order to get high. For Luis, this is nothing out of the ordinary; he turns to drugs, including meth and heroin, to ease his depression and self-hatred. Clear plastic, then, represents an escape from his daily woes. But as the passage shows, Luis's high takes him to strange places. The drugs don't make him feel better—instead, they make him feel even emptier and more isolated. Drugs don't ease his depression; they exacerbate it.

Though Luis doesn't know it at the time, he's on the verge of dying. When he regains consciousness, his friends inform him that he was passed out for a couple minutes. When Luis hears this news, his first reaction is to try to inhale more clear plastic. He's so consumed with self-hatred that he doesn't want to go on living.

Chapter 5 Quotes

I was in my mid-teens and Chente was about twelve years older. I looked up to him, but not as a big brother. He was someone who could influence me without judging me morally or telling me what to do. He was just there. He listened, and when he knew you were wrong, before he would say anything, he would get you to think.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker), Chente Ramírez

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Luis introduces readers to Chente, one of the most important people in his life. Chente is a young, charismatic man who works as the director of a community center. Chente is also a former gang member, meaning that he knows first-hand what Luis's life has been like. When Luis meets Chente for the first time, he's impressed. Chente is cool and charismatic, and he's also very wise.

Chente is, in other words, the mentor figure on whom Luis's coming-of-age depends. Like many another mentor figure, Chente knows how to train Luis without ordering him around. He inspires Luis by showing Luis the kind of adult that Luis *could* be. Up until this point, Luis has lacked any strong role models. He feels pulled in a hundred different directions, and lacks any sense of purpose in life. Chente's gift is to give Luis that sense of purpose, introducing him to politics and inspiring him to devote his life to political activism.

A naked girl, passed out, lay in the back seat. A black patch of pubic hair stood out on a shock of white skin which looked as if she had been immersed in flour'
"*Chale*, homes," I responded. "I ain't with it." Chicharrón nodded the same sentiment.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker), Chicharrón

Related Themes:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

One of the recurring themes of La Vida Loca is the *cholos*' abusive treatment of women. For many *cholos*, women are little more than trophies. They're seen as inferior to men in almost every way: men are said to be tough, strong, and independent, while women are seen as needy and weak.

The horrific consequence of this form of machismo is that, among *cholos*, women are regularly attacked and abused. Here, for example, Luis is offered a chance to rape a naked, passed-out woman, with the implication that she may have been assaulted already. Luis refuses to engage in this disgusting behavior, as does his close friend Chicharrón. While Luis made lots of mistakes as a young man, assaulting women wasn't one of them. The passage is chilling because

it shows how dangerous life can be for women affiliated with *cholos*, but it also suggests that Luis is beginning to distance himself from La Vida Loca.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ There's nothing wrong with being a janitor—and one as prestigious as my dad! But for years, I had this running fantasy of my scientist father in a laboratory carrying out vital experiments—the imagination of a paltry kid who wanted so much to break away from the constraints of a society which expected my father to be a janitor or a laborer—when I wanted a father who transformed the world. I had watched too much TV.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker), Alfonso Rodriguez

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135-136

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Luis looks back on his relationship with his father, Alfonso. Alfonso is a marginal presence in Luis's memoir. He's always around, but he doesn't seem to talk to Luis very much, let alone give him guidance or encouragement. Luis's relationship with his father changes forever when Alfonso begins taking Luis to his place of work, a scientific laboratory. There, Luis works as a janitor, a job for which he's highly overqualified. He doesn't stand up for himself when professors and scientists yell at him. For Luis—who, as a *cholo*, has been trained to fight at the slightest provocation rather than sacrifice his honor—this is particularly hard to see. And Luis doesn't like to think about the fact that his father is a janitor, period. He's always thought of his father as a smart, talented man—and the knowledge that, at the end of the day, Alfonso is a janitor is crushing for him.

In retrospect, Luis recognizes how childish he was to look down on his father for being a janitor. There's dignity in any profession, he decides—and for that reason alone, he owes his father respect.

❝ The librarian looked at me through the side of her eye, as if she kept tabs on whoever perused those books.

They were primarily about the black experience, works coming out of the flames which engulfed many American cities in the 1960s.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

In high school, Luis learns a lot—but not because he listens to his teachers. He begins checking out books from the library, including works by radical authors like Amiri Baraka, Malcolm X, and Eldridge Cleaver. Here, Luis describes these authors as having emerged from the fires that engulfed America in the previous decade. One way to interpret this poetic phrase is to say that X, Cleaver, and other important black leaders of the decade were reacting to the "fire" of racism and discrimination. Or maybe Luis is saying that the "fire" represents the *reaction* to racism and discrimination, with X, Cleaver, and the rest leading the charge. Furthermore, there were literal fires in some cases—like the tragic Montgomery church bombing of 1963. In any case, sixties radicals exert a huge influence on Luis's thinking. Luis doesn't agree with everything he reads in these books, but they open him to new ways of thinking about his role in society. He begins to think beyond his individual life experiences and consider his neighborhood, his race, and his city in explicitly political terms. Thanks to his auto-didacticism, Luis becomes intensely political, leading walk-outs and other exercises in civil disobedience in order to celebrate Chicano rights. (Additionally, the fact that Luis is inspired by the writings of black activists reconfirms his belief that political activism transcends racial boundaries.)

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ I had a cell next to Charles Manson. They threw me in with a dude who had killed a teacher and another who had shot somebody in the Aliso Village housing projects. One of the dudes pressed a stashed blade to my neck. But I knew, no matter what, never show fear. I stood up to him, staring without blinking. Then he backed off. Soon we played cards, told jokes and stories. That night, we heard the "East L.A. riot! - this is what the media was calling it! - had escalated throughout much of Whittier Boulevard.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Luis has just been arrested by the police for exercising his right to peaceful protest. The police handcuff, insult him with racial slurs, and send him to prison, where he ends up in the cell next to Charles Manson. Charles Manson was one of the most notorious murderers in American history; in the late 1960s, he led a group of followers in killing at lest half a dozen people, including the famous actress Sharon Tate. Luis's point here is clear: in the eyes of the LAPD, Luis, a Latino activist, is comparable with a mass-murderer like Charles Manson. From the perspective of the LAPD, the populist uprising in Los Angeles is nothing short of a "riot"; a challenge to the city establishment's authority.

> In prisons, where a disproportionate number of Chicano males ended up, pinto organizations and publications flowered into existence.
> East L.A. also birthed artists, musicians and writers out of the wombs of conflict. [...] Over the years, bands like El Chicano, Tierra, Los Lobos, Con Safo, Los Illegals and Califas carried forth the people's message through Latinized jazz-rock compositions, and later in punk and traditional corrido forms. Publications arose such as *La Raza* which chronicled through photos and prose the ongoing developments in the movement.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

In this important transitional passage, Luis pauses to discuss the history of the Chicano (i.e., Mexican-American) movement in California. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Chicanos in Los Angeles began working together on a number of political causes. (This shouldn't suggest that there was no Chicano activism before the '60s; Luis's point is simply that Chicano activism underwent a renaissance during his teen years, due to a variety of cultural and historical factors, most importantly the influx of actual Chicano people). There was a flourishing of interest in Chicano culture, and many of the greatest Chicano artists started making art, music, and literature around this time.

It's crucial to recognize that the flowering of Chicano culture in Los Angeles was closely connected to the flowering of Chicano activism around the same time and place. For Luis, not to mention many other Chicano activists, art was a way of glorifying the Chicano people—an inherently political act. On the other hand, Chicano political activism was, at its heart, a celebration of Chicano people and the Chicano culture. Activism and cultural production were two sides of the same coin.

> We have somebody willing to teach you," Mrs. Baez said. "He's an instructor for a *folklórico* dance troupe at one of the colleges. You look Indian enough with your long hair. And I think it would help involve some of the hard-core Lomas students in what we're doing if you tried out."
> What do you say, Louie?" Esme asked.
> They knew they had me. I accepted as a formality.

Related Characters: Esmeralda Falcón, Mrs. Baez, Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

Encouraged by Mrs. Baez, Luis decides to audition for the role of the Aztec school mascot. Luis and the other Chicano students are used to the school mascot being treated offensively: white students laugh at the goofy, clownish Aztec, implicitly belittling Latino culture, too. ToHMAS's solution is to have two Latino students, Luis and his classmate Esmeralda Falcón, audition for the part of the Aztec. Rather than getting the Aztec mascot banned or just ignoring it, they'll attempt to change it from the inside, giving it new dignity.

The passage is a perfect example of how Luis's forays into Latino culture are of a piece with his forays into political activism. By learning dance moves, Luis immerses himself in his own culture while also making a strong political statement on behalf of Chicano students at his high school: Chicanos will not be laughed at.

> The collective explained how workers of all colors and nationalities, linked by hunger and the same system of exploitation, have no country; their interests as a class respect no borders. To me, this was an unconquerable idea.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

The chapter ends with Luis discussing some of his new political convictions, influenced by his discussions with Chente. Like Chente, Luis believes in the unity of all exploited, working-class people. It doesn't matter, ultimately, whether people are black, Latino, white, or any other race: as long as they're part of the downtrodden proletariat, they're part of the same team, and should be working together. This is the "unconquerable idea" upon which Luis bases his activism. Although he celebrates his Chicano heritage, he also encourages his friends to transcend racial boundaries and unite against universal forms of corruption and cruelty.

It's worth mentioning that Luis's ideas, as he expresses them here, are recognizably Marxist in their influences (like a lot of radical political ideas to emerge from the 1960s). Echoing Karl Marx's ideas about the exploited proletariat, Luis argues that class, more than race or culture, is the primary determinant of people's behavior. Marx had a strong influence on the activism of Eldridge Cleaver as well as such radical sixties figures as Freddie Hampton and Noam Chomsky, and Luis is certainly part of the Marxist tradition of trans-cultural, economically realistic activism.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ I could see my mom and dad with a couple of Bienvenidos staff members in the front desk area. I looked over where Night Owl was still holed up.
"Hey dude, here's for Sangra," and I stuck out my hand.
Night Owl looked at me for a second, then smirked, and shook my hand through the bars.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker), María Rodriguez, Alfonso Rodriguez , Night Owl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Luis has just been released from prison for his role in an attempted attack on some white, racist bikers. During his time in jail, he befriends a man named Night Owl, who turns out to be affiliated with the rival Sangra gang. Despite their differences, Luis and Night Owl become friendly, and when Luis is released, he makes a point of shaking hands with Night Owl.

The passage is a concise example of the point Luis made at the end of the previous chapter: instead of focusing on their differences, exploited people should join hands and work together for the common good. To put it more concisely, Luis and Night Owl may be from different gangs, but at the end of the day, they're both in jail.

❝ Babies are easy too. Many homegirls become mothers, although they are unfinished children. Whatever comfort and warmth they lack at home is also withheld from their babies. Girls drop out of school. Homeboys become fathers even in their early teens. But there's nothing at stake for them; at the most, having a baby is a source of power, for rep, like trophies on a mantle.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198-199

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Luis discusses one of the most controversial aspects of life in impoverished outer Los Angeles: the number of couples who choose to have children at an early age.

The passage represents one of Luis's harshest critiques of his own neighborhood's culture. As he sees it, young men and women agree to have children much too easily, without really thinking through their decision ("babies are easy"). Then, quite often, the male partner realizes that he has no interest in raising a child and chooses to run off, leaving the female to care for her kid, often without much "warmth." And, tragically, another reason for the abundance of single mothers in impoverished Los Angeles is the prevalence of gang violence: sometimes, the father is killed in a fight.

The passage represents one of the most sensible versions of an argument that is sometimes distorted by conservative politicians to show that impoverished people are responsible for their own poverty (because they irresponsibly choose to have children that they can't afford to take care of, and because, due to "declining moral values," they don't really care about their own offspring). Luis of course argues nothing of the kind. He's harshly realistic about external factors, such as systemic racism, that bring about poverty in his city. Nor does he believe that declining family values are ultimately the cause of the poverty crisis in Los Angeles. Rather, he wants to suggest that impoverished couples—*because* of their poverty, as well as some of their

own bad bad choices—often end up with more children than they can support. He's critical both of the *cholo* culture and the economic stimuli that exacerbate this culture's worst traits.

"You all know I'll take on anybody," I countered as I stood up. "They were my homeboys too. But think about it: They were killed by a speeding car, both of them shot right through the heart. Nobody yelled out nothing. Who's trained to do this? Not Sangra. I say the cops did this. I say they want us to go after Sangra when we were so close to coming together."
"We have to use our brains," I continued, talking to every, one. "We have to think about who's our real enemy. The dudes in Sangra are just like us, man."
Treacherous talk.
Then Puppet stood up.
"Only *pinche putos* would tell us to back off on Sangra, talking bullshit about uniting barrios."

Related Characters: Puppet, Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter Eight, Luis finally takes a stand against the Lomas, the gang to which he's belonged for many years. Up until this point, Luis has made private criticisms of the Lomas, especially their misogyny, aggressiveness, and cruelty. But here, for the first time, he summons the courage to speak directly to Puppet, one of the Lomas' leaders. The Lomas are preparing to attack some members of the rival Sangra gang, in retaliation for a supposed Sangra attack on some of their own men. Luis is the only one to state the obvious—it's entirely possible that the Sangra didn't instigate the original attack. Therefore, there's little point in attacking the Sangra, since doing so could start a full-scale gang war, at a time when both gangs need to work together against their common enemies.

Luis's opinion angers Puppet, however, because Luis is implying that the gang should exercise caution and restraint instead of resorting to violence. Luis's statement contradicts the machismo that lies at the core of the Lomas' existence. So it's no surprise that Puppet is so aggressive in his response.

Chapter 9 Quotes

"Leave her alone - can't you see you're hurting her?" At this, a couple of deputies pounced on me. I fell to the ground. Officers pulled on my arms, picked me up and threw me against a squad car. I felt the blows of a blackjack against my side and back. I tried to pull them off me, when suddenly eight other deputies showed up. As they pounded on me, my foot inadvertently came up and brushed one of them in the chest.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 226-227

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Luis attacks a group of cops who are arresting a woman. The cops are being extremely aggressive with this woman, at one point punching her in the face. So Luis, without any hesitation, rushes forward and tries to protect the woman. In the process, he gets into a fight with the officers. Luis is careful to note that the officers attack him before he attacks them, though they later cite the fact that he brushed them with his foot as a "provocation."

Notice that, this time around, Luis resorts to violence, but only to protect other people. During his time in the *cholo* world, Luis has resorted to violence for the most trivial reasons, sometimes attacking innocent people in the process. Now, Luis uses violence to protect his political principles: in this case, he stands up for a woman who's unable to defend herself from aggressive, bigoted cops.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Nobody wanted the Super Kool after me! As soon as somebody took a stand and turned it down, the others did the same. I arrived at a point which alarmed even me, where I had no desire for the internal night, the buoyancy of letting go, the bliss of the void. I required more, a discipline as bulwark within which to hold all I valued, a shield against the onslaught.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Luis has just been released from jail. He's spending time with some of his old friends, many of whom

are still affiliated with the Lomas gang. Luis has noticed that PCP has become the new drug of choice for his friends. However, Luis has no interest in getting high anymore, perhaps suggesting that he's become more confident and self-reliant, and worked through some of his feelings of self-hatred.

When Luis refuses to do PCP, he's initially mocked for being weak. But then, his friends follow suit, refusing the PCP as well. It turns out that nobody particularly wants to do PCP; they're just going along with what they assume the group wants. In this way, the passage is a great example of the contradictions of machismo culture. *Cholos* are encouraged to do hard, dangerous drugs in order to prove their manhood and toughness. But they only fall in line and do as they're told because they think everyone else is going to do the same. Gang machismo is supposedly about confidence and independence, but really, it's often about going along with the rest of the gang.

❝ Money talked here. Big money. Similarly a good part of the Hills found itself swept away with the massive land deals and influx of investments during the 1970s and 1980s. Between the police, Pacific Rim money and developers, the Hills didn't have much of a chance.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Luis touches upon one of the key themes of recent Los Angeles history: gentrification. In the 1960s and 1970s, Luis's neighborhood is impoverished. Some of his neighbors lack electricity or reliable plumbing, and the roads are old and sometimes unpaved. But over time, this changes very quickly. Business invest in San Gabriel and other impoverished areas, buying large buildings and therefore raising the costs of nearby homes and apartments. Los Angeles also experiences an influx of affluent Asian immigrants ("Pacific Rim money"), many of them ready to invest in local businesses. Meanwhile, the LAPD continues its hostility toward the Latino community. The end result is that Latinos are gradually forced out of San Gabriel and other similar neighborhoods. They can no longer afford to pay rent, and they can't feel comfortable in a place where the police are such a conspicuous, hostile presence. Some Latino families are forced to return to Mexico, while others end up homeless. Similar changes have occurred throughout the country's biggest cities in the last thirty years.

❝ "There's some things to fight for, some things to die for - but not this. Chava, you're alive. I feel for you' man' but you're alive. Don't waste the rest of your days with this hate. What's revenge? What can you get by getting to me? I'm the least of your enemies. It's time to let it go, it's time to go on with your life."

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker), Chava

Related Themes:

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

In this climactic scene, set years after the events of the rest of the memoir, Luis reunites with an old enemy, Chava. Chava used to be a feared warrior for the Sangra gang. But now, he's just a bitter, broken, prematurely aged man. Chava spends almost every day in pain, since he's still suffering from wounds he sustained during his fights with the Lomas. Furthermore, Chava is consumed with hatred—for Luis, for all the Lomas, and perhaps for himself. When Luis sees Chava, he's filled with disgust as well as pity. Chava is pathetic, but Luis feels sorry for him: here, standing in front of him, is the culmination of La Vida Loca.

Another way to interpret this scene is to see Chava as the embodiment of the life Luis could have had if he hadn't made some good choices (and been lucky). Luis was attracted to La Vida Loca, and could have become a warrior for the Lomas. Instead, he turns to politics, art, and literature as a way of making sense of his confused feelings. As a result of his decisions, Luis escapes the misery and pain that Chava represents, and finds a happier way of life.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ The heart of the L.A. uprising was in the African American community. But it soon involved large numbers of Latinos (who make up almost half of South Central's population) and whites - Latinos were the largest group among the 18,000 arrests; at least 700 of those detained were white. Some called it the country first "multi-ethnic" revolt; the common link was the class composition of the combatants.

Related Characters: Luis Rodriguez (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

In the Epilogue to his memoir, Luis discusses the Los Angeles uprising of 1992, inspired in part by the acquittal of the four police officers who brutally beat Rodney King, an unarmed black man. While the Los Angeles uprising is often remembered as a "riot," in which black residents of the city expressed their frustration with the *status quo*, Luis takes a different point of view. He sees the uprising as a far more ambitious and utopian undertaking. During the uprising, blacks, whites, and Latinos all worked together to protest what they saw as the injustices in their city. They didn't limit themselves to Rodney King, either: they protested systemic racism, income inequality, and many other worthy causes. In short, the uprising fulfilled Luis's hopes that people from different backgrounds work together for a common justice.

Luis is arguably too utopian in his interpretation of the uprising. While it's true that blacks and Latinos worked together for a common good, they also targeted working-class Asians, suggesting that, in some cases, their goals were simply to commit acts of violence and hurt other people, not to fight inequality itself. It's also worth considering that dozens of innocent people were killed in the uprising, many of them black or Latino. Finally, the uprising did millions of dollars in property damage to impoverished, working-class neighborhoods, once again undermining Luis's bold claim that the uprising was a "revolt" against the upper classes.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE

In the winter of 1991, Luis Rodriguez, the narrator and author, resides in Chicago. His eldest son, Ramiro, is involved in gang life. Luis is reminded of his own gang involvement in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s. Although dozens of his closest friends were killed or imprisoned as a result of their gang affiliations, Luis managed to become a successful writer. He's worried that his son might not be able to do the same. "La Vida Loca" (i.e., "the crazy life") is slang for belonging to a Latino gang. Luis wants to save his son from this kind of life.

The Preface explains Luis's rationale for writing his memoir: he wants to discourage his son from joining a gang, as Luis himself did in the 1960s. Of course, this isn't the only reason he's writing his book. His project is at once personal and universal: he's coming to terms with his own early life in order to educate other people, not just his son, who might be struggling through some of the same problems he went through.

That winter, Luis gives his son "an ultimatum." Furious, Ramiro leaves the house, and Luis chases after him, begging him to come home. Ramiro ignores his father and disappears into the night.

Luis tries many ways of discouraging his son from joining a gang—for example, telling him that he has to choose between living at home and joining a gang. But nothing works, and Ramiro grows apart from his father, establishing an early opposition between gang life and family life.

Luis remembers when Ramiro was born in the late 1970s, just before Luis turned twenty-one. Two years later, Luis broke up with Ramiro's mother, Camila, and moved to Chicago, leaving Ramiro in Los Angeles. At the time, Los Angeles had over a hundred thousand active gang members. The East Los Angeles school system was infamously poor. Without a good education, many East Los Angeles residents turn to a life of crime and drug use because it provided an alternative to a traditional career, which was out of reach for many.

The setting for this memoir is Los Angeles, one of the biggest and most culturally diverse cities in the United States. One important aspect of the history of Los Angeles is its history of gang violence. Right away, Luis makes it clear that this isn't going to be a simplistic critique of gangs and gang life. He is harsh in his assessment of gangs, but also sympathetic: unlike many writers, he recognizes the forces that drive people to a life of crime.

In 1991, Ramiro runs away for two weeks. Luis is so furious that he replaces the locks on the doors to keep Ramiro out. Eventually, he finds Ramiro living in a hovel and talks him into coming home. Ramiro admits that he's been dealing with psychological problems, some of them stemming from abusive stepfathers. He agrees to see a psychiatrist, and lately he's been making what seems like steady progress, recognizing that La Vida Loca is dangerous.

Ramiro is attracted to the gang lifestyle not simply because gangs are seen as cool but also because he is struggling with psychological problems that have left him unstable and frightened. For many people, including Luis himself, gang membership offers a way of keeping fear and anxiety at bay.

Also in 1991, Luis begins seriously considering writing a memoir. He is inspired by the Rodney King beatings, as well as other stories of police brutality. Luis believes that "criminality in this country is a class issue." Criminals are victims of poverty who turn to crime because they lack basic life necessities. Luis wants to explore this idea by discussing his personal experiences with poverty and crime. He feels a deep responsibility, in writing his memoir, to save "the Ramiros of this world" from the allure of La Vida Loca.

In part, Luis was inspired to pen a memoir after the Rodney King beatings, in which Los Angeles police officers' brutal attack on a black man was recorded on video. The passage also establishes Luis's firm belief that all exploited, working-class people (not just Latinos, blacks, and other minorities) have something in common, and need to work together to fight injustice. By depicting gang members as victims of poverty and fear and not simply as vile criminals, Luis offers a nuanced look at crime.

CHAPTER 1

Luis remembers fighting with his older brother Rano. Once, when Luis was nine years old, he was sitting in the backseat fighting with Rano. His sisters, Ana and Gloria were sitting beside him. At the same time, his parents were arguing: his mother, María, wanted to move back to Mexico, but his father, Alfonso, was reluctant.

Luis's childhood is marked by abrupt change: his parents move him from Mexico to Los Angeles, and they fight a lot about whether they should stay or go.

Luis's family is from Ciudad Juarez in Mexico, but his parents make sure that he and his siblings are born in Texas so that they'll be American citizens. His father, Alfonso, is an educated man who later marries María, his secretary. Alfonso is a high school principal, a powerful position in Mexico. Because he's an outspoken critic of the local government, his enemies conspire to defeat him. He's arrested on trumped-up charges of embezzlement and sent to jail. He's eventually released, at which point he decides to move his family to America. María agrees to move to America with Alfonso, but she's reluctant to do so. María is descended from the Tarahumara Indians of Chihuahua. Her mother married a railroad worker during the Mexican Revolution. Later, when her husband was killed in an explosion, María's mother married Luis's grandfather, a trumpeter notorious for his affairs with women.

Luis's parents are surprisingly minor characters in his memoir. Here, however, Luis writes at length about them. Alfonso moves to the United States not simply because he thinks of the U.S. as a land of opportunity, but because he's fleeing from the corruption and danger of his native Juarez. María complies with her husband's plan, even though she has some strong reservations. Although she's more emotional and energetic by nature, she's a more passive partner in her marriage to Alfonso.

María is thirteen years younger than Alfonso. She's never been in a relationship with another man, but Alfonso already has multiple children from earlier relationships. María is fiery and intense, while Alfonso is a "stoic intellectual." María has three of Alfonso's children (and later, after the family relocates to Los Angeles, a fourth).

Alfonso and María seem mismatched in almost every way. That's partly why their early years in Los Angeles are marked by conflict and bickering, with Luis sometimes getting caught in the crossfire.

The family moves to *La Colonia*, a Mexican neighborhood in Watts, a predominately black area of Los Angeles. Watts is impoverished, and many cheap laborers live there. Seni, Alfonso's daughter from a previous marriage, suggests that Alfonso move to Watts, since she lives there, too. Luis has many half-brothers and half-sisters, including Lisa, who died while she was still an infant.

Luis's earliest memories are of Watts, a neighborhood of Los Angeles later made famous by the 1965 Watts Riots (or the Watts "uprising," as Luis calls it). It's odd that, even though Luis grows up surrounded by family, his family members aren't major characters in this memoir. In part this is because Luis is a fiercely independent person who tries to carve his own path in life.

Luis's earliest memories of Los Angeles are unpleasant. Life is hard, and Alfonso is almost always out of work. Luis sees billboards depicting happy white families and famous Hollywood actors—but these images contain "none of our names, none of our faces."

Luis quickly comes to understand that he's an outsider in Los Angeles, given that the city's most powerful people are white.


Growing up in Los Angeles, Luis plays with Rano, his brother. Rano plays the part of Tarzan while Luis plays a monkey—meaning that Luis usually loses the game, and Rano sometimes hits Luis. When this happens, María whips Rano. Other kids in the neighborhood attack Rano, and sometimes he comes home bleeding. In school, Rano attends a remedial class because he speaks little English, and he's held back another year. Rano takes out his anger on Luis.

Luis's fights with Rano go beyond the usual sibling rivalry. Rano has to deal with much more pain and frustration than the typical child: in particular, he has to face the humiliation of being held back a year because the English-speaking school system isn't designed to help immigrants assimilate.

Luis remembers Christmas in Los Angeles when he was a child. One year, he receives toys, which he breaks immediately, for reasons he can't explain. He writes, "In my mind it didn't seem right to have things that were in working order."

Luis suggests that there's a psychological link between pain and destructive behavior. He is so used to a life where nothing works that he begins destroying things of his own volition. In this way, the passage foreshadows his gang activities in later life.

María works as a maid, meaning that she gets to see "nice, American, white-people homes." She's often sick, since she suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure. Sometimes, her leg veins become so swollen that she's forced to cut them to relieve the pain.

The contrast between the grisly details of María's life and the pristine "white-people homes" where María works couldn't be clearer. This further suggests that the happiness and contentment of white families in Los Angeles is dependent upon the exploitation of Latino immigrants.

One day, Rano and Luis go to the grocery store to buy food for their mother. While they're there, two older boys call them "Spics" and beat up Rano. Weeping and covered in his own blood, Rano makes Luis swear never to tell anybody that he cried. Luis swears.

Rano (and later Luis himself) learns how to swallow sadness and tolerate pain. Both brothers are trained from an early age to see their community as a hostile, racist place in which Latinos aren't welcome.

Luis begins school at the age of six. One of the first things he remembers about school is his teacher's complaint that many of the students speak no English (at the time, Luis can understand English but can't speak it well). Another teacher sends Luis to a remedial class and tells him, "Play with some blocks until we figure out how to get you more involved." For most of the rest of the year, Luis sits in the back of the class and plays with blocks.

The school system in Los Angeles is so bad that no effort is made to assimilate Luis into English-speaking society. Instead, he's treated as a permanent outsider. Public school reform was a cornerstone of the movement for Chicano rights, as activists recognized the importance of education for Latino immigrants.

School is challenging for Luis because he doesn't speak English well. At the time, most schools in Los Angeles offer no extra help for Spanish-speakers, and often Latino students are punished for speaking Spanish in school. However, Luis makes some friends at school, including Jaime, a boy who lost his arm in a nasty accident as a toddler. Another of his friends is Earl. Luis befriends Earl after Luis is punished for Earl's misbehavior in the classroom. Earl comes by Luis's house and thanks him for "taking the rap" by offering him his prized marble collection. Jaime, Earl, and Luis explore their neighborhood together.

As a direct consequence of the school's policies toward Spanish-speaking students, Luis begins goofing off in class and getting into trouble with other students. The implication is that Latino immigrants fall behind in class and eventually turn to crime because they're treated like outsiders from the moment they set foot in the classroom.

Luis and his family change houses many times because they're evicted. Alfonso has trained as a teacher in Mexico, but he's unable to find work in America. Eventually he gets a job as a substitute teacher, teaching Spanish to "rich white kids." With the money, Alfonso moves his family to Reseda, a slightly wealthier part of the city.

Because of the appalling lack of job opportunities for even educated Latinos in Los Angeles, Alfonso is forced to take a job for which he's humiliatingly overqualified (he was the principal of a high school in Mexico).

In Reseda, Rano becomes the toughest kid in school, meaning that bullies no longer pick on him or Luis. But María is unsatisfied with her new neighborhood, partly because the other women tend to be healthier and better looking than she. Still, she knows that she'll have to follow Alfonso wherever he goes.

As Luis has suggested already, Rano learns to be tough in order to mask the fact that he's very lonely. Luis's mother copes with similar feelings of loneliness, but instead of resorting to violence she swallows her sadness and remains loyal to her husband.

Alfonso is dismissed from his job after students complain that they can't understand his accent, and after he writes letters to the school board proposing new methods of teaching Spanish. Next, Alfonso and his family move in with Seni, who lives with her husband and two daughters. Because the house is crowded, Rano and Luis spend most of their time outside.

Alfonso is punished for going above and beyond his job and suggesting a better way to teach students Spanish—in other words, he's fired for doing the school board's job. This suggests a deeply conservative and prejudiced environment in Los Angeles.

One night, Luis and Rano come home to find the house surrounded by police. It turns out that Seni had an argument with her husband, during which she stabbed him in the arm with a nail file. Soon afterwards, the landlord evicts Luis's family. At this point, María and Alfonso decide to separate.

Luis doesn't delve into why Alfonso and María decide to separate, but their decision seems to be due to a few factors: the unpleasantness of life in Los Angeles, the lack of a friendly community for María, and María and Alfonso's personality differences. One thing is clear: the life of an immigrant in Los Angeles is not easy, and puts a strain on relationships of all kind.

Luis returns to the scene from the beginning of the chapter: that day, while he and his brother were fighting in the car, his parents had separated, and Alfonso was driving María and the children to the station so that they could return to Mexico. At the station, Alfonso says a quiet goodbye to his children and then turns away, without even looking Luis in the face. Suddenly, María embraces Alfonso and cries out that she doesn't want to take the children to Mexico, since she won't be able to find any work. Alfonso and María announce that they're not leaving after all—they're going to stay together, here in Los Angeles. Luis feels like a ball bouncing from one place to another.

The course of Luis's life hinges on this decision: instead of splitting up, María and Alfonso decide to remain in Los Angeles. Like it or not, Luis is in Los Angeles for good, and that means that he'll have to find some way of adjusting to life in this strange, intimidating place.

CHAPTER 2

One evening while Luis is ten, he is walking through his South San Gabriel neighborhood with his friend Tino. They come the chain-link fence surrounding their school. Ignoring the "No Trespassing" sign, Tino climbs over the fence and then encourages Luis to follow, and Luis does so.

The chapter begins with a simple, childish misdemeanor—ignoring a no trespassing sign—that turns out to have major ramifications.

The two boys horse around for a while. Then, suddenly, they hear voices—police officers are standing by the fence, waving batons. Tino yells for Luis to run—if they're caught, the officers will beat them up. The boys run toward the school and try to climb onto the roof. The officers tackle Luis, but Tino runs past them. Over the officers' cries of "greaser," Tino climbs up the side of the building. But then he slips and, a moment later, Luis hears a crash.

Even though the two boys' crime is very minor, the LAPD officers intimidate them with racist slurs and aggressive behavior. Luis and Tino can hardly be blamed for running away. This, unfortunately, is representative of the relationship between Latinos and the LAPD more generally: the menacing, armed, racist LAPD using excessive force to punish the most trivial crimes.


Luis steps back to explain what happened in the year between the end of Chapter One and the beginning of Chapter Two. He and his family remain in Los Angeles and survive with the help of a poverty agency. Their new community, San Gabriel, is on the edge of Los Angeles (technically it's part of the city of Rosemead in the 1960s), and until recently it consisted mostly of cornfields and factories. Many of the poorest parts of Los Angeles are counties like San Gabriel. These areas often lack paved roads or sewage systems, but they have lots of police officers.

Walking around San Gabriel, it couldn't be clearer that Luis and his family are seen as second-class citizens in their new city: their neighborhood is run-down and doesn't even have a good sewage system, suggesting that the municipal authority ignores Latino immigrants. In fact, the only municipal authority with any visibility in the neighborhood is the LAPD, suggesting that the city thinks of Latinos as criminals first and foremost.


Luis's neighborhood has many interesting characters, including an old woman who's rumored to be a witch. One day, the police arrest the woman—she'd been babysitting three small children who later turned up "in a playpen next to the morning garbage."

Almost every kid grows up hearing scary stories about a nearby house. But in Luis's case, the scary stories have a basis in fact.

San Gabriel is largely Mexican, and many of the men who live there are field workers. Most of the neighborhoods in the area have Spanish names. Over time, some parts of San Gabriel become middle-class suburbs, populated by white families fleeing the inner city. But one neighborhood, called Las Lomas (literally, "the hills"), takes a different direction. It becomes an "incubator of rebellion," or, as the media dub it, a "haven of crime." In other words, Las Lomas sees a huge increase in gang activity.

Luis describes the process of gentrification by which impoverished, largely minority-populated areas of the city are taken over by affluent, mostly white families. Notice, also, that Luis doesn't describe gang violence in purely negative terms. Instead, he characterizes it as a form of rebellion. While Luis is critical of gang violence, he's also realistic enough to see it for what it is: a rational response to racism, poverty, police brutality, and cultural genocide in Los Angeles.

Luis joins a gang at a young age, but he doesn't think of it as a gang so much as a club. Five years after the death of Tino, Luis and his friends create a group called "Thee Impersonations" ("the" is spelled the old English way). Miguel Robles, the president, tells the members to pledge to protect one another.

Luis describes his friend's death using just one short phrase at the beginning of a sentence. And yet Luis still shows that he joins a gang in large part because of Tino's death, highlighting the fact that he sees gangs as a form of protection from violence and the LAPD.

The boys form their club "out of necessity." One day, an up-and-coming club called Thee Mystics comes to Luis's school, waving guns. The members fire at the school's windows, and others attack some of the students. Luis is horrified but also drawn to Thee Mystics—he remembers, "I wanted the power to hurt somebody." He, Miguel, and the others found Thee Impersonations because they need protection. Around the same time, many other new "clubs" pop up.

Luis is very honest about his motivations for joining a gang. He's appalled by the brutality of gang life, but because he has already experienced brutality in his own life, he wants an opportunity to dole out pain instead of receiving. As Luis sees it, he's trapped in a "kill or be killed" situation, and he chooses the former.

Alfonso gets a job as a lab technician, and Luis begins junior high school. His school is ranked one of the worst in the state—the dropout rate is about fifty percent. Luis enjoys school if for no other reason than that it lets him look at some of the girls, who suddenly seem very attractive. Luis begins dressing like a *cholo*, or gang member. He still has vivid memories of gang graffiti on the walls and gang fights breaking out in the halls.

Luis matures early, and it's not hard to see why: every day at school, he's surrounded by violence, danger, and sex, seemingly without real adult supervision.

Luis develops a crush on a girl named Socorro. Socorro likes Luis, too, but she insists that Luis has to give up the *cholo* lifestyle, or else she'll leave him. Luis refuses, and Socorro breaks up with him. Luis's next girlfriend, Marina, encourages his *cholo* activities and even suggests he get a **tattoo**. The tattoo, on Luis's arm, shows a cross with the words "Mi Vida Loca."

As the passage makes clear, Luis's early romantic experiences are closely tied to his experiences with the gang world. His most successful relationships reinforce his connections to gangs. Furthermore, Luis's tattoo suggests that at this point in his life, he's willing to embrace the gang lifestyle permanently and without any question.

In junior high, Luis feuds with his teachers. Some of the teachers are very dedicated, but many others seem like "misfits" themselves. One day, Luis and his classmates are tormenting their shop teacher. Because he's distracted, the teacher accidentally cuts of his own finger with a rotating saw. Someone steals the finger, and in secret the students pass it around.

Luis and his fellow students don't seem to get along with their teachers at all. At this point, more generally, Luis seems to lack a mentor or role model who can steer him in the right direction. The students' fascination with their teacher's amputated finger suggests a comfort with violence and the macabre that likely extends from the violence of everyday life in their community.

Alfonso learns that Luis is getting into trouble at school. He doesn't discipline his son, leaving this up to María. Luis's mother is an intense woman who punishes Luis whenever he misbehaves. She knows that Luis is attracted to the *cholo* life, and she wants to ensure that he stays away from gangs. Once, the vice-principal of the school meets with María to tell her that Luis is too smart for gang life. Luis's parents decide to ground him every day after school to ensure that he doesn't spend more time with gangs. But by this time Luis is thirteen and already "**tattooed**," "sexually involved," and "into drugs."

María does much more than her husband to ensure that Luis avoids the gang member lifestyle, but even she can't do enough. As Luis shows here, gang members are recruited early on. Because young Latinos in Los Angeles are often surrounded by danger, they quickly decide that they should stick together and embrace a violent lifestyle—and so, by the time their parents get around to steering them away from gangs, it's already too late.

Around this time, Luis and Rano drift farther apart. One day, two bullies who are upset that Rano has beaten them in a track race confront Luis. Luis claims that Rano is better than either one of the bullies, and they attack him. Later, Rano asks Luis why he stood up for him. Luis replies, "I did it because I love you." It's the last time he ever says these words. Rano—who starts going by Joe—skips grades in school, plays in bands, does well in sports, acts in plays, and generally becomes a "Mexican Exception." He doesn't interact with Luis very much.

Rano undergoes a surprising transformation when he begins to assimilate at his new school. His decision to go by "Joe" suggests that perhaps he wants to hide his Latino identity. In many ways, Rano represents "the road not taken" by Luis. Where Rano turns to school and athletics to give himself a sense a purpose, Luis embraces La Vida Loca instead.


Around the age of thirteen, Luis starts spending all his time with some friends named Clavo, Wilo and Chicharrón—together, "The Animal Tribe." The Animal Tribe (or just "The Tribe") is a powerful gang, and Luis is proud to be in it. Teenagers from across San Gabriel join The Tribe, consolidating their small gangs into one big organization.

By the time he's in middle school, Luis has become a dangerous gang member. Latinos throughout the neighborhood understand that they have to work together to be strong—the alternative is to be divided, weak, and easy targets for the police.




It is Miguel Robles who first introduces Luis to The Tribe. At a school dance, Miguel greets Luis and invites him to dance with Tribe members and their girlfriends. Miguel tells Luis and his friends that they need to join a big gang that can protect them. He warns Luis that he'll need to choose between the Tribe and the large Sangra gang.

The bitter irony of gangs in Los Angeles is that, even though gangs are formed to protect members from the violence of the LAPD, gangs create a new, arguably even worse form of violence: gang warfare. Thus, there's a deadly war going on between the Tribe and the Sangra—a war in which Luis is now caught.


Luis tells Miguel that he wants to join The Tribe. Miguel talks with Joaquín Lopez, an important Tribe leader. Later that night, Luis witnesses a *cholo* having sex with a young woman, and someone tells him, "She's being initiated into The Tribe."

One of the most shameful parts of gang life is the gangs' treatment of women. Women play an important role in the gangs' machismo culture. There are cholas *(i.e., female gang members), just as there are* cholos *(male gang members), but as this passage suggests, women in gangs are often forced into a passive role and valued purely for their bodies. The hostility of gangs toward women becomes more overt as the book goes on.*

CHAPTER 3

Luis, Wilo, Clavo, and Chicharrón spend more time together after they join The Tribe. They spray-paint their names on walls. One afternoon, they sit together, drinking and cooking in a roasting pit. All around them are the ruins of houses that burned down in fires. Suddenly, the gang notices a car driving by. Clavo shouts out that he and his friends are affiliated with The Tribe. In response, somebody rolls down the window of the car and fires a gun at the gang, yelling, "Sangra Diablos!" As the car drives away, Luis sees that Clavo's face is "shot full of pellets." The gang takes Clavo to the hospital. Later, they talk about starting a war with the Sangra.

Luis begins to adjust to the gang life—which means living with the constant threat of violence. Notice the matter-of-fact way that Luis describes his friend's injuries, and the way he and his friends move immediately from caring for Clavo to planning a massive retaliation against the Sangra gang. It's also significant that the violent encounter takes place in the ruins of outer Los Angeles, perhaps suggesting that gang violence is both a cause and effect of the deteriorating neighborhood.

As the years go by, more and more of Luis's family ends up in Los Angeles. Many of his cousins stay with him, and he becomes fascinated by his aunt Chucha. Luis respects Chucha for singing and telling good stories. Other family members hate her, but Luis respects her free-spiritedness. Another important influence on Luis is his cousin, Pancho. When Luis is ten, Pancho moves in. In his late teens, Pancho is very cool. He introduces Luis and Rano to soul music and weightlifting.

Luis's family members are relatively minor characters in the memoir, but that doesn't mean Luis isn't inspired and influenced by his family. The qualities that Luis finds so compelling in Chucha and Pancho—good storytelling, machismo, and good taste in music—suggest the different aspects of his personality.

One day, after weightlifting, Luis feels a pain in his abdomen. It turns out that Luis has ruptured his intestine while exercising, and must go to the hospital. While he's there, Luis's parents decide to have him circumcised. But the doctors make a clumsy mistake, and Luis has to get painful stitches on his penis.

This short section confirms the squalid conditions of outer Los Angeles: its medical institutions are so incompetent that the doctors can't even perform a routine medical procedure without complications.

Luis returns to the incident he described at the beginning of the chapter. Clavo survives his shooting, but loses an eye. To celebrate Clavo's survival, the gang decides to make a trip out to the "white people's beaches," where Latinos traditionally aren't welcome. At the beach, they play football, get high, and flirt with the young women with whom they arrived. At one point, a few gang members grope a pretty young woman named Hermie, throw her in the water, and laugh.

Luis portrays Los Angeles as a very segregated city: there are neighborhoods where, every knows, certain races go and other races don't. Therefore, it's an act of rebellion for Luis and his friends to go to a "white beach," even though there's no law against it. Notice, also, that the male gang members disrespect Hermie, suggesting their disrespectful attitude toward women in general.

In the afternoon, a group of white surfers arrives and starts harassing Luis's friends, saying, "Fuck you, beaners!" Luis's friends prepare for a fight, smashing bottles. Just then, the surfers pull out guns and badges—they're cops. They arrest everyone, continuing to call them "beaners."

It's impossible for Luis to tell the difference between some racist white guys on the beach and the LAPD—because, as it turns out, those two things are one and the same. This just confirms what Luis has already written about the LAPD's racism.

The cops take Luis and his friends to the police station, since they've committed a felony by drinking on the beach. After a couple hours, Luis and his friends are freed. However, one gang member, Black Dog, is sent to prison, since he has a few prior arrests.

Luis and his friends have committed a felony, but it's arguably indicative of the officers' racism that they choose to prosecute this felony to the fullest extent instead of letting it slide (as, one might imagine, the officers would do if the perpetrators had been white).

At the age of nine, Luis's parents tell him that he needs to start earning money. Rano is working as a newspaper boy, and when Luis turns twelve, he begins doing the same. To his own surprise, Luis becomes a great paperboy. He's so quick that his name is published in the local paper. Luis is less successful at selling newspaper subscriptions, however—at least in the rich neighborhoods, where people are unmoved by the free gifts that come with signing up. One day Luis tries selling subscriptions in a very poor neighborhood, though, and lots of people sign up. He knows they're just signing up for the free gifts, and won't pay when the time comes, but Luis is still praised for selling a record number of subscriptions.

Luis dips his toe into earning an honest living and finds that he can be a responsible, hard-working employee who's praised for his accomplishments. However, he also learns how to bend the rules. This shows that Luis is a smart, quick-thinking kid—he's figuring out how to use the system to his advantage.

At the age of the thirteen, Luis starts working at a carwash. This job gives Luis a foot fungus, because he often has to work in wet sneakers. Luis's sores become so bad that his mother and his uncle Kiko slice open the sores and treat them with herbs. It's the most pain Luis has ever experienced up to this point in his life.

This passage is another reminder of the awful conditions in Luis's neighborhood—even a simple foot fungus is an ordeal to treat (and, understandably, Luis doesn't seem too eager to return to the hospital after his circumcision).

The chapter skips ahead: Luis is standing in a jail cell. A guard brags to him that the cops detain every Latino teenager in the neighborhood in order to keep track of their names. In his neighborhood, Luis thinks, the police are "just another gang." He and his friends give different cops their own nicknames—Cowboy, Maddog, etc.

It's never explained how this section fits in with the rest of the chapter. The incident is never mentioned again, and Luis never offers any context for it, either. But this is quite possibly the whole point. Luis feels that he could be arrested at any time for even the most trivial offense. The reason is simple: the LAPD (personified by the guard) wants to fingerprint him and establish his criminal record to make it easier to prosecute him harshly later on.

Shortly after Clavo's accident, Clavo disappears. Nobody is sure if he's gone home or to jail. A new boy, Yuk Yuk (real name Claudio Ponce), joins the gang. Yuk Yuk has spent years in a juvenile detention center, and he encourages his friends to steal. At the age of thirteen, Luis steals records, food, and liquor from various stores. At times he gets away with it, but at other times a guard catches him and calls his mother.

Almost as soon as one gang member disappears, another one shows up to replace him. Yuk Yuk seems "harder" and more experienced than Clavo, perhaps suggesting the escalating violence and danger of La Vida Loca at the time.

Yuk Yuk also introduces Luis to two big-time robbers, Jandro Mares and Shed Cowager. Both men are in their thirties and specialize in buying up stolen cars. Luis and his gang scope out nice houses and then break in, stealing everything valuable they find.

Yuk Yuk is instrumental in introducing Luis to a more serious kind of crime. Jandro and Shed are the first older criminals that Luis meets, showing that gang life doesn't end as you grow older.

Yuk Yuk plans armed robberies, too. One night, Yuk Yuk asks Luis and his friends to join him in a robbery. The gang holds up a concession stand near a drive-in movie theater, and Luis carries a gun. Yuk Yuk yells at the concession stand worker and orders him to open the safe, but the man pleads that he doesn't have the combination. While they're arguing, a gunshot rings out. With his friends' encouragement, Luis fires back in the direction of the shot. The gang runs away from the stand and into the night, away from the sound of the gunshots.

The guy who works at the concession stand gets the short end of the stick: even though he's just a low-level employee, he assumes all the risk when criminals rob his company. The shot fired by a n unknown shooter (possibly a rival gang member) suggests that outer Los Angeles is becoming increasingly dangerous at the time.

CHAPTER 4

One morning, while Luis is a teenager, he wakes up in the garage to the sound of his sister's yells. He gets up from the pile of blankets where he sleeps and bickers with her. The previous night, unbeknownst to anyone, Luis had tried to commit suicide. That night, Luis comes home drunk and high. Depressed, he tries to cut his wrist with a razor blade. But as he holds the blade in his hand he realizes, "I couldn't do it."

Depression is rampant among gang members, and it's not hard to understand why. Luis is surrounded by danger, and because of the strict machismo culture of La Vida Loca, he's not allowed to show any weakness. Frightened and lonely, he first tries to suppress his feelings with drugs, and then tries to take out his feelings on his own body. And yet, for now, Luis refuses to end his life.

For months, Luis has been "exiled to the garage." María has grown exasperated with pulling him out of jail cells and hearing about his gang exploits. For a time, Luis stays with Yuk Yuk's family and later with other friends. Eventually, he starts sleeping by the railroad tracks or in abandoned cars. Frustrated, he comes home and works out a deal with his mother, whereby he's allowed to stay in the garage but forbidden to enter the house without her permission.

Luis's mother clearly doesn't approve of her son's gang life, but she isn't sure how to "steer him straight." She doesn't want to kick him out of the house altogether, because this will only encourage him to spend more time with his gang. But she clearly wants to punish Luis in some way, to let him know that she doesn't condone La Vida Loca. The garage is the compromise she comes to.

Luis attends high school, but he's "loco" all the time. He notices that white students tend to take the hardest classes, play on sports teams, and join clubs. Latino students take the "stupid classes" and are often on the verge of dropping out. By this time, Luis has become a quiet, sullen kid. He knows everybody assumes he's a "thug," and so he dresses like one, reasoning that he might as well be proud of his thug identity.

Luis conveys the extent to which social expectations can influence a person's behavior. He can sense that the people around him expect him to behave like a thug, so he gives in to their expectations.

Luis spends much of his time in the garage, listening to jazz and Motown records. He learns how to play the saxophone, and sometimes plays gigs. After gigs, he drinks heavily, gradually becoming an alcoholic. Many other gang members are musical—for instance, Joaquín Lopez plays the harmonica in shows.

Like many gang members, Luis turns to music as an outlet for his emotions. It also makes sense that Luis is drawn to jazz and Motown, two musical genres in which many of the artists sang about racism and social oppression.

One afternoon, when Luis is fourteen, Joe accuses him of stealing his records. Luis tells Joe, "Fuck you," and Joe attacks Luis and then destroys Luis's saxophone. Still furious, Joe leaves the house and doesn't return for three days. All Luis can think about is the "lost melodies."

Luis is genuinely interested in playing the saxophone—it's more than just a hobby. When his brother destroys his musical instrument, Luis feels that he's lost one of the only outlets he has for expressing his sadness and loneliness.

It's Fiesta Day in San Gabriel—the day when Latino residents celebrate their heritage. That night, Luis and his friends wander past the neighborhood parade. While Luis is hanging out with his friends, he crosses paths with a beautiful young woman named Viviana. The two flirt and agree to ride a Ferris wheel together.

San Gabriel is mostly Latino, and the residents come together every year to celebrate their ethnic identity. Luis is clearly attracted to Viviana, and she seems to be attracted to him, too.

As the night goes on, families start to leaving the carnival area—the only people left are cops and rival gang members. Viviana confesses to Luis that she hates Los Angeles gang culture. Noticing that some of the rival gang members are glaring at him, Luis realizes that Viviana is from the Sangra part of the county, and she's here with two of the lead Sangra *cholas* (female gang members), Cokie and Dina. He suggests that they go somewhere else. Luis wants to be "with Viviana, away from the war cries, the bloodshed."

Luis has stumbled into a Romeo and Juliet-type situation: he likes Viviana, even though she's from a rival gang. Viviana clearly has some misgivings about the gang culture of Los Angeles, and yet she's also closely tied to this culture, as evidenced by the fact that she's at the Fiesta with Cokie and Dina.

Viviana and Luis walk toward a school building and climb onto the roof together. Suddenly, Luis notices a group of gang members, some of them Sangra, some of them Tribe, fighting. Luis tells Viviana he has to join the fight, but Viviana begs him to stay. Luis hesitates, then decides to stay. He kisses Viviana, feeling like a traitor to his gang.

Luis starts to distance himself from La Vida Loca. He's depressed, even suicidal, and gang life is arguably the source of his depression. So perhaps it's no surprise that he "betrays" his gang by kissing Viviana—the romance represents a "way out" for him.

Every year, there's a football game between Luis's largely Latino high school and the mostly white neighboring school. At the game, Luis and his friends delight in yelling at rival students. Luis notices that when white students are in the neighborhood, there are always lots of police officers stopping the Latino students, often without reason.

Football games are often a playful way for two communities to compete with one another. But at this particular football game, the playful competition between two high schools becomes a serious fight, with the LAPD harassing and bullying Latinos.

During Luis's sophomore year of high school, cops stop Luis's friend Carlito after the football game and, when Carlito asks an officer, "Why are we being harassed?" they beat him with a baton and choke him. Carlito passes out, and the others are afraid the cops have killed him. Paramedics arrive and take Carlos away (after being delayed by the police), and soon a fight breaks out, with Luis and his fellow gang members leading the attack on the police. They also attack white bystanders. Luis's friends attack a group of Asians who attend the rival high school simply because one of them accuses Luis's friends of hurting innocent people. Luis knows what he's doing is unjust—whites harass Asians almost as much as they harass Latinos—but he doesn't care: he just wants to fight.

The police targeted Luis and his friends because of their race. Luis and his friends seem to respond in kind, attacking students who are white, even if these students have done nothing wrong. Luis even attacks Asian students, showing how his thirst for violence makes him irrational and pointlessly destructive. In passages like this, Luis reminds readers that he's not a "good guy"— he's done some horrible things in his life. It's also clear that the LAPD have trained Luis and his friends to think in racial supremacist terms: the LAPD attacks non-whites, so Luis and his friends retaliate by attacking non-Latinos.

Luis attacks more white bystanders outside the football game. As the night goes on, the fight spreads, and gangs burn cars and break windows. Though Luis eventually goes home, the fights continue next Monday at school. Latino students attack white students at their high school. White students fight, too, bringing baseball bats to school with them. Toward the end of the day, a white student attacks Luis's friend Santos with a bat, and Chicharrón hits him with a tire iron. The police come to break up the fight, arresting only Latinos, including Luis and his friends. Luis is brought down to the station and later expelled. He doesn't care.

The incident between Luis and the police incites a full-scale riot, releasing all the racial tensions that had barely remained under the surface during the football game. White and Latino students are equally to blame during this riot, and yet, because the LAPD is compromised primarily of white officers, Latino students end up paying more for their behavior. Luis's behavior in this passage is out of control: he just wants to hurt someone, and he doesn't care what happens to him.

At the age of fifteen, Luis buses tables in a restaurant in San Gabriel. Many of the clientele are middle-class whites who treat him offensively. Luis retaliates by spitting in customers' food and "accidentally" spilling water on them. The Latina waitresses at the restaurant are harassed, both by the staff and the customers. Every so often, cops come to the restaurant and arrest undocumented employees. Luis gets used to carrying his birth certificate with him wherever he goes.

Luis finds little ways of retaliating without getting sent to jail, and he learns how to defend himself from the threat of deportation. Notice, also, that Latina women are harassed by white and Latino men alike. This mirrors some of Luis's earlier discussion of the way women are harassed and objectified in his community.

Luis and his friends get high every day, often by inhaling gasoline, clear plastic, or paint. One evening, Luis gets so high on clear plastic that he begins to feel like "water." He tries to move toward a bright light in the distance. Even as he loses consciousness, he keeps on inhaling more clear plastic. Then, suddenly, he feels his friends shaking him awake. As he regains consciousness, Luis tries to get even higher, but his friend Wilo sternly tells him, "Give me the bag." Luis learns that he stopped breathing for a moment—and, in a way, he died. Luis thinks, "I wished I did die."

Luis's suicidal behavior is reflected in his drug use. He inhales clear plastic, even though it's very dangerous to do so, because he doesn't care if he dies. And indeed, Luis tries to inhale more plastic even after he has almost died—confirming that he really doesn't care what happens to him. One thing is clear: in this passage, Wilo saves Luis's life.

Wilo's sister, Payasa, has a crush on Luis, and they begin dating. Luis notices that Payasa gets high all the time, and becomes reckless whenever she does. He breaks up with her when he starts to realize that she can only be intimate with him when she's high. She later goes to a rehabilitation clinic.

Even though Luis himself struggles with drug abuse, he's smart enough to recognize the same destructive behavior in other people and distance himself from those people.

Luis returns to the scene he described at the beginning of the chapter. He holds a razor blade in his hand, trying to muster the courage to cut himself. But as he does so, he begins to remember "a sense of being, of worth," and decides that he's alive for a good reason, even if he doesn't know what this reason is. He throws the blade away and goes to sleep.

Luis sometimes feels overcome by sadness and despair, but for reasons he can't entirely put into words he chooses not to give in to despair. However, it's worth remembering that many other gang members do *give in, choosing to end their own lives rather than endure the harshness of La Vida Loca.*

The next morning, Luis enters the house, breaking his agreement with María. María ignores him. But when he asks if he can eat breakfast in the house that morning, she turns around, smiles, and replies, 'Of course … When you're ready to visit, with respect to our house, you can come to eat." Luis kisses his mother and then goes to the table to eat.

In this surprising conclusion to the chapter, Luis finds that his mother will let him back in the house without a fight. Perhaps this is because she senses that Luis is ready to respect his family and is beginning to distance himself from La Vida Loca. Or perhaps María just misses her son.

CHAPTER 5

The Tribe essentially dies along with its president John Fabela, who's shot in his home by rival gang members. At the time, Joaquín Lopez is already in jail for selling heroin, and the Tribe is losing its influence in the neighborhood. Tribe members relocate to new gangs.

In this chapter, Luis has to decide whether he wants to give up the gang life altogether or switch to a bigger gang.

Chicharrón tells Luis that he should join the Lomas, now the most powerful gang in the county. He explains to Luis that the Lomas will "beat on you for about three minutes," after which time he'll be accepted into the gang. Luis reluctantly goes to a Lomas party. As the party draws to a close, only aspiring members stick around. A gang leader named Puppet asks "Who's in?" and Luis stands up. Just as Chicharrón warned him, Luis endures an assault of fists and boots. After three minutes, the gang welcomes him to the Lomas.

On the surface, it seems bizarre that the initiation ritual for the Lomas would be a savage beating. But this just underscores the machismo of La Vida Loca: gang members are expected to be tough and able to take a beating. Being able to accept and later dole out pain is one of the defining features of the cholo *brand of machismo.*

Later that night, the Lomas take Luis and the other new recruits out for the second part of their initiation. They stop a passing truck, which appears to be full of decent, hard-working people. One Lomas leader, Ragman, attacks the drivers. Puppet presses a screwdriver into Luis's hands, points him toward one of the drivers, and orders him, "do it." Luis does as he's told, plunging the screwdriver into the driver's "flesh and bone." Luis concludes, "the sky screamed."

In this passage, it's implied that Luis commits a horrible crime (possibly murder) because his Lomas bosses order him to do so. Luis commits this arguably unforgiveable crime because he's frightened, uncertain of his direction in life, and full of self-hatred—but this certainly doesn't excuse what he does.

By the end of that year, the papers are full of headlines about grotesque acts of gang violence. Luis's neighborhood is becoming more violent by the day. The local community center is now overflowing with injured gang members who need help. Furthermore, police officers are becoming more brutal.

Police brutality is both a cause and an effect of increased gang violence: gangs are reacting to increased police brutality, but they're also being brutalized because of their own extraordinary brutality (as Luis showed in the previous section).

The year is 1970, and Luis feels "out of balance." He's a curious young man, and he wants to learn. Around this time the Bienvenidos Community Center hires a man named Chente Ramírez. Chente used to be a gang member, but he later became a grassroots political organizer. Luis is immediately impressed with Chente. Chente is in his late twenties, and seems calm and wise. He's also a karate expert, which Luis finds cool. Chente, Luis recalls, "was someone who could influence me without judging me morally or telling me what to do."

In this passage, Luis is at a crossroads. He turns to Chente, who ends up becoming something of a father figure to him. Chente never once tells Luis what to do. Instead, he leads by example. Put another way, he's an important person in Luis's life because he shows Luis what kind of adult Luis could become.

One night, Luis is out playing pool with Puppet and other Lomas. Puppet, Luis has found, rules by fear. Puppet shoots pool while Pila, his girlfriend, gets in an argument with another Loma member's girlfriend. Puppet is quiet as the argument goes on, and Luis notes that he doesn't seem to care about anybody.

As Luis grows older, he becomes more attuned to the psychology of other gang members. Luis realizes that Puppet is just as detached and nihilistic as he is.

For a couple weeks, Luis takes karate lessons at the La Casa Community Center. There, he meets Sal Basuto, the center's organizer (Chente's counterpart). Sal is frustrated by his interactions with the Sangra. They're a small gang, meaning that they often sustain horrible losses in their fights with rival gangs. But this only makes Sangra more vicious.

Sal's observations about the Sangra gang are very telling. The Sangra's mission is suicidal: because they're such a small gang, they endure heavier losses. But because of the culture of machismo—which teaches men to embrace danger—the Sangra don't give up, sending dozens of their own members to death or injury every month.

One night, Luis hears a knock on the garage and finds Lomas, including his friend Santos, waiting for him. Tonight, he learns, they'll be getting revenge on a group of Sangras. In the car, Luis finds rags and bottles, suggesting that they're about to firebomb a house. The car drives to a quiet neighborhood where an important Sangra member, Chava, lives. Luis and his friends soak rags in gasoline and surround the house. Luis notices that the house looks a lot like his own. But he helps burn down the house, throwing Molotov cocktails into the backyard. The next day, Luis learns that the house burned down, but everyone inside was able to escape in time.

For the time being, Luis is a passive servant of the Lomas. He does as he's told, even if he's being told to do something truly horrific, like burning down a house full of innocent people (Luis never says if there were children inside the house, but he implies that there may have been). Luis has some misgivings about the life of a gang member, but he's not yet at the point where he's willing to go against orders.

Around this time, Gloria, Luis's younger sister, has joined her own Lomas crew and begun going by the nickname Shorty. One night, Gloria is at a school dance. There, some Sangra girls notice Shorty and remember that she and Luis are siblings. The Sangras decide to attack Shorty when they get a chance, as revenge for Luis's involvement in the firebombing. Later that night, Joe gets a call from Gloria, begging him to pick her up immediately. Joe drives to the dance, only to see Gloria running out of the building, chased by armed Sangras. Joe manages to pick up Gloria and drive away, chased by bullets.

Just as Chava's family is punished for Chava's actions as a gang member, Luis's family (i.e., Gloria) is targeted because of Luis's actions. It's an endless cycle of violence and revenge.

As time goes on, life gets worse in Luis's neighborhood. Rape becomes common, to the point where it's "a way of life" for some *cholos*. One night, some Lomas offer Luis and Chicharrón a chance to "get in on this"—in other words, rape a naked, unconscious young woman. Luis says, "I ain't with it," and Chicharrón agrees.

One of the most disturbing aspects of gang culture is its treatment of women. For many cholos, *women are objects, and as a result, women are harassed, intimidated, and raped. However, Luis makes it clear that he doesn't participate in this contemptible behavior, nor do his close friends.*

One evening, Yuk Yuk, Luis, and some other friends are leaving a *quinceñera* (i.e., fifteenth birthday party). In their car, they find another friend, Paco, with two girls, both of whom have been doing heroin. As they drive off, Luis sees Paco groping one of the girls, who's almost passed out. The girl looks no older than fourteen. Meanwhile, Yuk Yuk begins kissing the other girl. Luis is disgusted. When the Lomas park the car, Luis wanders off to throw up.

Luis is surrounded by men who take advantage of women in despicable ways—and some of them, like Yuk Yuk, are people with whom he's friendly and does business. Luis doesn't take advantage of women in this passage, and he's disgusted by the people who do, but he's still unwilling to speak out against what he sees.

Wilo and Payasa move to a new neighborhood, partly to escape the violence. Just before they leave, Luis reunites with Payasa, who's been in rehab. She seems more energetic than she was when Luis last saw her. She greets Luis and says that she'll always remember their time together. Luis says goodbye to Wilo, too, adding that he owes Wilo for saving his life. They hug, and Wilo says, "You don't owe me nothing. Just pay yourself back." Ten days later, Wilo is killed in a gang attack. Later on, Payasa gets pregnant and ends up "in a prison of matrimony."

There's something devastating about the way Luis (as the narrator) follows this emotional moment between himself and Wilo with a sudden, matter-of-fact description of Wilo's death. And this, Luis suggests, is the true horror of La Vida Loca: anyone he knows could die at any time. The passage is also interesting because it describes marriage as a "prison." This echoes some of Luis's earlier assessments of his mother's life: he describes María as being tethered to her husband and children, unable to return to Mexico as a result.

Luis and his friends' lives revolve around death. They flirt with death by pursuing fights with cops and rival gangs, and by doing heroin and other dangerous drugs. They feel as if they had a "fever … weakening and enslaving us."

The life of a gang member is often nasty, brutish, and short—so dangerous, in fact, that it's only made possible by a culture of machismo that glorifies death and danger, and encourages its members to do copious amounts of drugs to mask their pain.

Luis stops inhaling sprays but starts experimenting with meth, PCP, heroin, mescaline, and pills. Luis, Yuk, and Chicharrón work together to steal heroin. Sometimes, he and Chicharrón go to new neighborhoods and pretend to be high school students. There, they meet girls and get into fights.

Luis continues using excessive amounts of dangerous drugs—in part, it's implied, because they provide him a momentary escape from his depression. He becomes more adventurous in his daily life, as if he's obsessed with "living on the edge."

One night, Luis and Chicharrón go driving around the neighborhood. They pick up two girls named Roberta and Xochitl, promising to take them to a party. They end up driving out to the neighborhood housing protects and making out with the two girls. From then on, Luis spends time with Roberta and Chicharrón starts seeing a lot of Xochitl. Luis has sex with Roberta, and sometimes sleeps over at her place.

Luis and his friends are never lacking for romantic partners. In part, Luis suggests, this is because cholos *are respected, but they're also feared, and many women may be too intimidated to turn them down.*

Luis eventually finds out from Roberta's sister Frankie that Roberta "turns tricks." When he learns this, Luis is furious. He's even more shocked when he discovers that Xochitl is a prostitute, and Chicharrón has become her pimp. That same night, Frankie kisses Luis, and the two of them sleep together. In the following days, Luis avoids Roberta. He's fallen in love with a prostitute, but he never wants to see her again. He begins doing more heroin.

It's interesting to contrast Luis's behavior with Chicharrón's: Luis seems interested in developing a close personal relationship with his girlfriend, whereas Chicharrón seems more interested in exerting power over his girlfriend (hence his willingness to become her pimp). As before, Luis drowns his depression in drugs.

CHAPTER 6

Luis describes a **dream** he's had. In the dream, he sees his "long-dead sister Lisa … in a deathbed of bliss." Lisa is a baby, and she's wearing her baptism dress. Suddenly, Lisa opens her eyes and screams. Luis runs around, trying to find help. Eventually, he finds his mother, father, and siblings. His parents take Lisa to a hospital, where she's cured of appendicitis. Luis is told, in the dream, that if she'd been brought in "minutes later, she'd be dead."

Luis is haunted by the memory of his dead sister (actually half-sister). And yet the dream he describes here isn't really about death, since it ends with Lisa's miraculous survival. One could argue that this dream is a form of "wish fulfillment"—in other words, it reflects Luis's desire to survive and help others survive, too. It's also interesting that in Luis's dream Lisa is on the verge of death—perhaps this is Luis's unconscious way of telling himself that he himself is dangerously close to death.

Luis spends most of his time in the garage. Sometimes, María tries to encourage him to go back to high school. She summons Mr. Rothro, the principal of his elementary school, to convince Luis to return to school. Rothro meets Luis in the garage, and Luis shows Rothro a book he's been writing about "what I feel about the people around me." Rothro praises Luis's writing and adds that he should return to school.

Luis is clearly a bright kid, but he has no interest in school—and based on what Luis has described so far, there's no reason he should be. Luis has always thought of school as a hostile, prejudiced place, where, as a Latino, he's treated as a second-class student. No wonder he prefers sitting in the garage writing stories.

Prior to his meeting with Mr. Rothro, Luis has attended Continuation High School, a school designed for students who "couldn't make it anywhere else." Luis lasts one day at Continuation and then gets expelled for fighting. At this point, Alfonso proposes that Luis come with him to his job at the local Junior College. Alfonso will enroll Luis at the nearby Taft High School, where Luis could get a good education.

This is one of the few times in the book when Luis mentions Alfonso. Even though they live together, Alfonso is a distant presence in his sons' lives. Luis is getting a second chance at life outside of the gang when Mr. Rothro takes him to enroll at Taft.

Luis accompanies Alfonso to work every morning. Alfonso works as a lab technician, but Luis thinks of his father as an "overblown janitor." After years of thinking of his father as a brilliant scientist, it's hard for Luis to see the truth. Professors yell at Alfonso for misplacing equipment, and instead of yelling back, Alfonso apologizes, which enrages Luis.

Even though Luis hasn't talked much about his father so far, he clearly thinks of his father as a smart man with a good job. But now he sees behind the veil: Alfonso has a menial job, for which he's overqualified, and he's too subservient to protest when people boss him around. For Luis, who's hungry for a strong role model, this discovery is very discouraging.

At Taft High School, Luis enrolls in art, photography, and literature classes, but his counselor tells him that these classes are full. Instead, he's placed in auto shop, print shop, basic English, and weight training. He tells himself that he doesn't even care about art or photography. He's the only Mexican student at his school. One day, he gets in a fight with some "hefty dudes in letter jackets." He's punished, but not expelled.

Once again, Luis is treated as a second-class student, not because he's unintelligent but because people seem not to expect much from him. Luis has a lot of interest in art and literature, but he's never given a chance to explore these interests.


After school, Luis spends time in the library, waiting for Alfonso to finish work. There, he reads some good books, including the poetry of Amiri Baraka and the memoirs of Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver. He's inspired by these authors, who've emerged "out of the flames which engulfed many American cities in the 1960s." One day, Luis shows up to English class with a copy of *American Me* by Beatrice Griffith (a famous book about Mexican-American immigration). The teacher irritably tells Luis that he was supposed to read *Preludes* by William Wordsworth, and yells at Luis when Luis suggests that he read Griffith's book instead. Luis storms out of class and never comes back.

Luis immerses himself in the works of radical writers like Baraka (a black poet and critic who advocated for a distinctly black aesthetic in literature). Luis also dips his toe into politics by reading Malcolm X and Cleaver, both of whom supported the empowerment and eventual independence of African Americans. Because Luis isn't allowed to read the books that he likes (and which have actual relevance to his own life), he's branded a bad and disobedient student even though he's clearly smart.



In 1970, there's a months-long teachers' strike in Los Angeles. Luis stops going to school, even after the strike. He continues going to libraries, reading William Wordsworth along with Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson. He also learns not to be angry with Alfonso. Even if he's disillusioned with his father in some ways, he respects his father for giving him "the world of books."

Luis's self-education seems to give him a new perspective on life. He's no longer consumed by anger and self-hatred. Literature serves the same function that music did: it gives him an outlet for his frustration and confusion, and allows him to live life more peacefully.

One day, Luis sits in his garage, listening to jazz. Chicharrón knocks, calling him outside. Chicharrón introduces Luis to his friend Arnie and tells Luis they're going out to dinner. At the restaurant, the three order expensive food, then realize that nobody has brought any money. They decide to run out of the restaurant. Luis tries to run, but two employees tackle him and wrestle him to the back of the building.

Even though Luis is educating himself, he still gets involved in trouble just like he always has—and here, he suffers the consequences for trying to steal from a restaurant.

In the back of the restaurant, Luis finds himself face-to-face with the owner, a man named Charles Kearney. Kearney tells Luis he's called the police, and asks why Luis stole. Luis explains that he's unable to afford food for himself. Luis goes on to describe how the police have beaten him up and how, in general, they take advantage of Mexicans. By the time a police officer—Cowboy, a cop Luis knows—shows up, Kearney has decided not to press charges. He tells Luis to leave and never return.

This passage represents one of the first times in the book when Luis makes a political statement: he criticizes the systemic racism of the LAPD. It's also one of the first times in the book when Luis uses words to get out of a jam. Finally, it's one of the first scenes in the book to show cooperation between a Latino character and a white character. In all, this passage is something of a game-changer: it foreshadows the way that Luis will become more politically active and use communication to empower himself.

Luis attends a youth center to see Chente speak. Afterwards, Chente summons Luis to his office for a talk. There, he offers Luis a job working for the Neighborhood Youth Corps. However, Chente also wants Luis to go to school. He believes that Luis could be a great leader.

Chente is an important influence in Luis's life because he believes that Luis could be a successful man if he applies himself while he's still young. Chente believes that a summer job could instill a sense of responsibility in Luis and perhaps keep him away from the influence of gangs.

That summer, Luis works for the Neighborhood Youth Corps, thanks to Chente. He becomes deeply involved in the Youth Corps, often waking up at the crack of dawn to work on charity projects. That summer, he takes up boxing at a gym owned by an ex-boxer named Daniel Fuentes. He practices almost every day. His coach is a man named Rubén Navarro, a contender for the world featherweight title. Navarro works with Luis and other aspiring boxers. Boxing is fierce, and Luis and his peers are competitive.

Luis's summer job turns out to have exactly the effect that Chente wanted: it makes Luis more interested in politics and charity. However, Luis's interest in boxing seems to pull him in another direction. Boxing encourages Luis to be aggressive and competitive—but it also gives him a sense of purpose and an outlet for his energy.

Luis is nothing special when it comes to boxing, but he has "heart." As a result, Daniel Fuentes invites him to fight in a big match. Luis is so excited that he invites his entire family to watch him. The fight begins with Luis throwing wild punches at his opponent, who barely fights back. But after a few minutes, Luis gets tired, and his opponent surges ahead to victory, viciously beating Luis. Luis's family isn't sure whether to congratulate Luis, and María simply cries.

Luis's brief boxing career comes to an end with this painful experience, as his mother is forced to watch her son endure a brutal beating.

Soon afterwards, Luis learns that Yuk Yuk and his friend have stolen a car and gotten into a horrible accident. Fleeing from the police, their stolen car swerved off the road at 120 miles per hour and rolled over multiple times. Yuk Yuk and his friend's bodies were "practically disintegrated."

Luis is still surrounded by death and danger. Almost every month, it seems, a close friend of his dies under horrible circumstances.

Luis attends a group called The Collective, organized by Chente. The group studies politics, philosophy, and economics, which Chente sees as the three pillars of revolution. One day, soon after Yuk Yuk's death, Luis shows up to The Collective, very high. Chente confronts him, and Luis admits that he's been distracted since Yuk Yuk's death. Chente angrily says that drugs are making "mincemeat out of your brains." He encourages Luis to keep studying with him, adding, "There are a lot of people involved in your life now. When you win, we win; but when you go down, you go down alone."

Although Luis is surrounded by danger, he finds a sanctuary in his time with Chente. Chente is an important influence on Luis because he encourages Luis to strengthen his mind through education instead of weakening it with drug use. Even more importantly, however, Chente celebrates the importance of unity, in politics and in life. His belief that people should help one another is the exact opposite of the code of machismo, which glorifies rugged independence above all else.

CHAPTER 7

In August 1970, tens of thousands gather in East Los Angeles to protest the Vietnam War. It's the largest anti-war protest ever held in a minority community. Luis participates in the protest, with Chente's encouragement.

Luis becomes increasingly politically active. At this time, the whole country is becoming more politically active, too: millions of people are working together to protest what they see as their country's unjust military involvement in Vietnam (among many other issues).

Luis and his peers march through the streets, chanting anti-war slogans. The area is riddled with cops, who threaten Luis and the other protesters. The officers shoot tear gas at protesters, some of whom are children. Another officer attacks Luis and wrestles him into a "black, caged bus," along with hundreds of other people. That night, he's imprisoned in "murderers row" alongside rapists and serial killers—in fact, Luis has a cell next to Charles Manson. All night long, Luis hears word of an "East L.A. riot" from the prison guards.

Even though Luis is exercising his right to peaceful protest, he's treated like a dangerous criminal and given the same treatment as a mass-murderer like Charles Manson (notorious for killing the actress Sharon Tate, among other people). What the police call a "riot," Luis further implies, is really the uprising of the impoverished and exploited peoples of Los Angeles.

The next day, Luis witnessed Charles Manson ranting about "niggers and spics." For the next couple days, Luis is held in his cell—on the several occasions when a hearing is scheduled, the courts cancel it, and Luis's parents are kept in the dark about the whereabouts of their son. Finally, Luis is released in the middle of the night. He returns home and embraces his mother, telling her, "I ain't no criminal." She replies, "I know."

Whether Luis is dealing with cops or criminals, the racist vitriol he hears is pretty much the same. María seems to understand that Luis has been unjustly imprisoned for his political beliefs, not for committing an actual crime.

Los Angeles undergoes some major changes during Luis's childhood and teen years. In 1965, fires from the Watts Rebellion destroy many buildings in Los Angeles. In 1968, thousands of Latino students protest to demand equal education opportunities. This event is a milestone in the Chicano (i.e., Mexican-American) civil rights movement. Chicano activists organize protests against injustices in the prison system and publish radical newspapers and magazines. The late '60s are also a time of great artistic achievement for Latinos living in Los Angeles. Throughout this period, and leading into the early 1970s, L.A. gang violence decreases as gangs work together to fight bigger injustices in their city.

Luis celebrates Los Angeles's history of political activism. Although the Watts uprising of 1965 is often characterized as a "riot," Luis describes it in more positive language as an "explosion" of the city's exploited, suffering people. While Watts is often remembered as a black movement, the reality is that it hastened and strengthened the developing Chicano renaissance in Los Angeles. This renaissance wasn't only characterized by political protest, either—Chicanos celebrated their cultural achievements and understood culture to be an important part of politics (an idea that resonates with Luis's own political activity).

Shortly after his stint in prison, Luis attends a dance at the local church. At the dance, Luis runs into Viviana, the woman he met two years ago at the carnival. They haven't seen each other since that day, but they dance together, eventually kissing. Luis notes, "I would fall for this woman." Shortly afterwards, Luis takes a big risk by going into Sangra territory to visit Viviana. As he bikes into the Sangra neighborhood, people give him dirty looks. At Viviana's home, her brothers ask Luis where he's from and try to intimidate him—however, Luis has become a big, tough-looking boxer by this point, so they don't try to hurt him.

Viviana continues to fascinate Luis. As before, Luis is willing to betray his gang ties because of his feelings for this woman, which suggests that he doesn't take his gang affiliation as seriously as certain other members. Luis is even ready to risk his safety (and, one would have to think, Viviana's safety, too) in order to spend time with her.

In the following weeks, Luis and Viviana spend lots of time together. Luis feels that Viviana teaches him "poetry" just through her words and the "soul-touch" she gives him. One night on her porch they are kissing, and Luis ends up touching her until she orgasms. Immediately afterward, however, Viviana tells Luis that he needs to go immediately. She refuses to say why, but Luis leaves.

Like many of the romances in this memoir, Luis's relationship with Viviana comes to an abrupt ending.

Afterwards, Viviana stops returning Luis's calls. He tries to see her, but she won't even answer her door. A month later, they reunite at another dance. Viviana tells Luis that she has to tell him something, but then disappears. An hour later, Luis sees her kissing another man. He's so angry that he tells his sisters, who are also at the dance, about what happened, and they offer to "jump" her after the dance. At first, Luis entertains this idea, but then he thinks better of it and goes home.

Even though Luis's relationship with Viviana comes to a disappointing end, it clearly left a mark on Luis. Luis doesn't want to hurt Viviana, even though she's betrayed him for another man (perhaps suggesting that he still has feelings for her, or even that he's beginning to move past the "eye for an eye" mentality common in his gang).

In the fall, Luis returns to high school. The principal there, Mr. Madison, is new, and wants to encourage Lomas to enroll in school. He says that he'll do his best to be fair to Lomas, but only if they behave.

Mr. Madison doesn't go out of his way to be an ally to gang members, but he rightly believes that they have a right to get an education.

That fall, Chicano students start a club called ToHMAS, or To Help Mexican American Students. The club's sponsor is a Chicano teacher named Mrs. Baez. Luis becomes more and more active in this club, which is intended to promote Chicano culture in the classroom and at school events. He doesn't say much at the meetings, but he attends almost all of them. Sometimes, meetings end early because there's a fight in the halls.

The purpose of ToHMAS isn't just to celebrate Chicano culture—it's to make sure that Chicano students are respected. To repeat a famous adage from the '60s, the personal is political, and this can be taken to mean that the students' personal relationship with their culture can take on political significance at school (as Luis will show).

ToHMAS is mostly run by women. The club deals with two main aspects of the student experience: first, repairing the school's physical deterioration; second, respecting the dignity of Chicano students. At Luis's high school, the mascots are a pair of Aztecs, one male, one female, who are nearly always played by white students. Some of the ToHMAS officers suggest that Luis and another ToHMAS member, Esmeralda Falcón, try out for the Aztec parts. Luis reluctantly agrees to try out and learn authentic Aztec dance techniques.

Luis and his friends have long felt uncomfortable with the use of an Aztec figure as a mascot for a high school, since the mascot trivializes Aztec and Latino culture. The ToHMAS members decide to try to give the mascot some dignity instead, and they enlist Luis for this task.

Luis and Esmeralda study Aztec dance for weeks, and María, along with mothers of other ToHMAS members, designs the Aztec costumes. Weeks later, Luis and Esmeralda are ready.

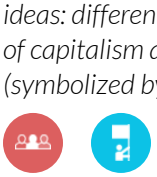
Luis takes his preparation very seriously, suggesting that, despite his reluctance to dance, he's committed to honoring Chicano culture.

During their audition, Luis and Esmeralda act very serious, unlike the clownish white duos who audition for the part. Their costumes are beautiful, and their dance is precise and impressive. As they come to a finish, the judges and audience members burst into applause—Luis and Esmeralda are the new school mascots.

Luis and Esmeralda succeed in bringing new dignity to the Aztec mascots and, by extension, to Chicano culture at their school. This isn't just a symbolic victory for Chicano students—it's a literal victory, since it shows the school that Chicano students will not be disrespected.

Luis and Esmeralda's success inspires other Chicano students to join ToHMAS. The group puts on dances and plays, three of which Luis writes himself. Luis's most controversial play is about the wars between the Lomas and the Sangra. In the play, gang members fight for turf, only to learn that their land will be the site of a new mall. When the play is performed for the school, some Loma members watch. The play ends with Esmeralda speaking about how to end the violence between neighborhoods.

Luis uses writing to discuss important themes, including some that he wouldn't be allowed to discuss with his fellow gang members. In other words, he uses art to interrogate big ideas and make daring claims about the way society should be—one definition of political theater. Notice, also, that Luis's play touches on one of Chente's key ideas: different gangs should be working together against the forces of capitalism and gentrification, and when they don't, big business (symbolized by the new mall) wins.



Luis enjoys his work for ToHMAS, but becomes frustrated that things aren't changing for Chicano students quickly enough. He suggests that the school sponsor a Chicano class, with a Chicano teacher—Chente. He tries to convince the ToHMAS teacher sponsor, Mrs. Baez, to support his idea, but she refuses. Luis has an idea to stage another walkout, protesting the lack of Chicano classes at his school.

Luis has been inspired by his friendship with Chente, who has used walkout techniques in the past. Luis believes, quite reasonably, that his high school has an obligation to teach its students about Chicano culture (since many of the students are Chicano).

Soon after, Luis and many Chicano classmates—at least 300—walk out of their classes. Mrs. Baez has an angry meeting with Mr. Madison, in which Madison accuses her of helping organize the walkout. He complains that he can't let some "disgruntled students" control what he does. But Mrs. Baez is able to convince him to listen to his students and organize an assembly where they can present demands.

By practicing civil disobedience—the refusal to comply with unjust laws and regulations—Luis and his peers show disapproval for Madison's policies without resorting to destructive violence. Clearly, Luis's actions attract Mr. Madison's attention—and this was Luis's original goal.

At the school assembly, Luis speaks on behalf of the Chicano movement. He emphasizes that he and his classmates are not protesting white *students*, but rather the prejudiced school system. The student body president, a white student, accuses Luis and his Chicano peers of being lazy and refusing to get involved with the school. But in the end, Mr. Madison approves a new course on Chicano history and culture, and promises that a Chicano will teach the course. Luis is triumphant, but he knows, "We had only just begun."

Luis makes a crucial distinction between targeting white students (i.e., the kind of reactionary bigotry that Lomas have practiced against white and Asian bystanders) and protesting the school system itself. One implication of this is that white students can be allies in Chicano issues. Luis's activism pays off, showing that civil disobedience, if backed up with a compelling message, can accomplish important political goals.

Around the same time, Shorty learns that one of her close friends, Fernando, has killed himself. Fernando, who's only fourteen, had a crush on Shorty, and the night before his death, he called her to talk as they often did. That night Shorty was tired, though, and asked if they could talk tomorrow. The next morning, Fernando's parents found his body hanging from a pole in his closet.

Even while Luis achieves success, he gets constant reminders that his life is still hard and miserable. His friends, and friends of friends, die suddenly and tragically. Some of them struggle with depression, like Luis—but unlike Luis, they may not all have politics, art, music, and literature to help them come to terms with their feelings.

At The Collective, Luis learns about the importance of social science. Chente emphasizes that it's not enough to rely on personal experience: one must dig deeper and grasp the systemic problems underlying one's experiences. Chente also teaches Luis valuable lessons about dignity and respect: for instance, that there's nothing shameful about being a janitor. Above all, Luis embraces the "unconquerable idea" that exploited people of all colors and nationalities have a common interest, rooted in their "interests as a class."

Here, Chente makes a distinction similar to the one Luis made in his speech to Mr. Madison: a distinction between personal experience and systemic problems. This distinction is important in the Marxist tradition, and so it comes as no surprise when Luis raises the quintessential Marxist point that exploited people have a "common interest" as a result of their having a shared class. Where many in Luis's life emphasize racial divisions, Luis and Chente emphasize the importance of trans-racial unity, encouraging people of different races to work together.

One night, at a party, a man rushes in and shouts that some "white bikers" tried to attack him. Luis joins his friends in driving to find the attackers. Eventually, they do—only to find that the attackers are armed with shotguns. They fire at Luis and his friends, who are forced to run. Luis's friends tell him to get a gun immediately and come back as soon as possible.

One of the most perplexing things about Luis's life is the way he goes from studying with Chente to joining the other Lomas in acts of brutal violence. Luis is beginning to believe Chente, but in the meantime he's still a gang member. One could argue that his violence is becoming more defensive and politically motivated, but he's still ignoring the "big picture" as Chente described it.

Luis runs to his friend Roger Nelson's house and asks to borrow a rifle. Roger lends Luis a weapon, and Luis returns to where the white bikers were staying, bringing other friends with him. At the site of the fight, Luis fires on a biker and shoots him in the butt. Before long, however, the police appear and order Luis and his friends to surrender. They do so, and the police drive them to the San Gabriel jailhouse. They're booked for "Assault with intent to commit murder."

Just like that, Luis is arrested for a serious crime. In many ways, his situation reflects the point Chente was making earlier: on a personal level, Luis has become embroiled in a conflict with some white bikers. But in a broader sense, Luis is just one small part of a racist system—the same system that now intends to send him to jail for a long time.

CHAPTER 8

Following the events of the last chapter, Luis is in prison. He's seventeen, meaning that he can be prosecuted as an adult. As he sits in his cell, he examines the graffiti and poetry that prisoners have written on the walls. A man in the cell next to Luis is a Sangra named Night Owl, and at first they argue with each other, but eventually they open up and start talking about music and women. Luis learns that Night Owl knows Viviana, who he claims messed around with a guy on her porch while her brothers watched. Luis realizes that *he* is the guy, and laughs. He then learns that Viviana is pregnant and living with another man, and he feels hurt.

Luis turns to poetry and music in his time of crisis, just as he's done before. Notice that Luis is able to bond with Night Owl, even though they're from rival gangs. This suggests that Luis is beginning to embrace Chente's idealistic denial of boundaries. Just as Chente has said, different gangs should be working together for a common good, and here Luis seems to grasp this idea. Notably, here Luis also learns why Viviana broke things off with him so suddenly—her brothers had seen them together on the porch.

Luis's parents don't visit him in jail. But he gets another visitor: Chente. Chente tells him, "You messed up," and Luis admits that Chente is right. Luis learns that Chente is trying to work with the community center to get Luis released soon. A few days later, Chente comes back and tells Luis that he's getting out. Before Luis leaves, he shakes hands with Night Owl, who wishes him good luck.

Chente doesn't forgive Luis for his behavior—as always, he's straightforward (and that's part of what Luis has always admired about Chente). However, Chente goes out of his way to give Luis another chance, since he recognizes that Luis is a talented young man who doesn't deserve to go to jail for years.

In the following weeks, Luis returns to school. Esmeralda and the other ToHMAS members just say they're glad Luis is okay. However, Mrs. Baez is furious with Luis for setting a bad example for other Chicano students. Luis doesn't reply, but he gives her some poems and stories he's written in jail.

Even though Luis has described himself as defending Latinos from the white bikers, he also seems to recognize that he's done something wrong by resorting to retaliatory violence. He also knows that he's setting a bad example for other Chicano students.

The white bikers refuse to cooperate with the cops by identifying Luis and his friends. However, the police are able to trace the gun back to Roger Nelson, who they arrest and charge with attacking the bikers. At Roger's trial, Luis sees the biker who he shot in the butt—luckily, the bullet didn't do any damage. Luis testifies for Roger's defense that he obtained the gun from Roger, and in the end Roger is acquitted. Soon after, Roger gets married and Luis attends the wedding as Roger's best man.

The biker incident comes to an end when the bikers refuse to cooperate with the cops—an action that, very oddly, mirrors Chente's earlier claim that Los Angeles people should be working with each other against the LAPD and other corrupt authorities.

Chente hosts a community center meeting to discuss problems of gang violence. The problem has gotten too serious to avoid, he argues: children are dying because of gang feuds. Some people propose holding a meeting for representatives of the various gangs. But other people argue that this would only legitimize the gangs in the eyes of the community. Chente emphasizes the need to provide young people with an "economic foundation" that will give them incentive to stay away from gangs. Luis agrees, "It wouldn't hurt if we had jobs."

As before, Chente takes an economic view of the gang problem. He refuses to believe that gangs are forming because of the deterioration of values or the inherent wickedness of immigrants. The reality is that people join gangs because gangs represent a viable way of surviving in Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, Cokie is found dead in the street—somebody had "pumped [her] full of pills" and then brutally raped her. It's whispered that Lomas killed Cokie, but many other Lomas, including Luis, are frightened by the crime, and conclude that nobody, Sangra or Loma, deserves that kind of pain.

Luis is beginning to grasp the horrors of the gang lifestyle, not just for himself but for women. He's becoming more compassionate, and seems to take seriously the idea that he has an obligation to protect other people from the kind of pain that Cokie experiences.

At school, ToHMAS membership skyrockets. Luis and his peers organize Chicano dances. He continues to serve as the school mascot, encouraging Chicano athletes to join the football team. Luis catches the eye of a pretty young woman named Delfina Cortez, and convinces her to join ToHMAS.

Luis continues flirting with women, just as he's done before. But where his earlier relationships with women caused him to gravitate toward gang culture, Luis now uses flirtation as a way to recruit women to his *cause, ToHMAS.*

Luis and the other ToHMAS members organize a dance, and Delfina attends. Afterwards, Luis asks her to hang out, and she says, "I'd love to." This seems to upset Esmeralda. Alone, Luis and Delfina kiss, and Delfina tries to have sex with Luis. However, Luis notices that Delfina is on her period, and tells her that he's reluctant to have sex. This upsets Delfina, who begins to cry. Then, unexpectedly, she says, "I think I love you."

Delfina is clearly attracted to Luis, even though she doesn't seem to know him very well. Luis's popularity seems to stem at least in part from his leadership position as the head of ToHMAS.

Love, Luis argues, is a word that "easily skims across our lips." As a result, some people in San Gabriel make bad, rash decisions. Young women have children and drop out of school, and their boyfriends don't always stick around to raise their children, since there's "nothing at stake for them." Some women raise their children without much "comfort and warmth," because they didn't receive much of either when they were children themselves. In other cases, *cholos* are killed in turf disputes, leaving their girlfriends or wives to care for the children by themselves.

Luis argues that young people in his neighborhood rashly commit to each other too soon. The result is that the men run off and the women end up raising children by themselves. Constant gang violence in the neighborhood (rather than the negligence of individual cholos*) is another important cause of this single mother trend. However, this is one of the only points in the book in which Luis seems to argue that his neighborhood is deteriorating because of poor "moral values," i.e., young men and women making irresponsible choices. Although Luis presents these choices as understandable and in some ways universal, his argument seems curiously out of step with his overall view that crime is caused by poverty.*

One day, Luis learns that his friend Sheila is pregnant. She's afraid that if she tells her parents, they'll be furious. Luis encourages Sheila to tell her parents—but when she does, her father is so angry that he breaks her fingers.

Sheila's father clearly didn't want her to get pregnant, but he's overly harsh and cruel to her, explaining why Sheila was afraid to tell him.

One day, Chente inspects the drawings Luis has made over the years and says that Luis has been invited to work on a mural project that summer. Luis will design a mural for his neighborhood, supervising a team of gang members, many of them female. That summer, Luis learns about mural design—and with that, "another world opened up to me."

Luis learns more and more about artistic expression, thanks to Chente. And as he says here, his artistic education opens up another world, because it allows him to express his feelings and come to terms with some personal demons.

One night, police officers arrest Miguel Robles, Luis's old friend. This is strange, because Miguel has been "going straight" for a year. He's even talked about becoming a cop. But that night, the police search Miguel and his friends for guns. When one of Miguel's friends runs, the officers chase him, and Miguel runs to help his friend. The cops shoot him in the abdomen. He's rushed to the hospital in critical condition. Luis and his peers have a new cause: Justice for Miguel Robles.

Luis presents the shooting of Miguel Robles as an outrage and a scandal: once again, the LAPD has used excessive force on a defenseless Chicano (who, as it turns out, wasn't even interested in the cholo *lifestyle anymore). Justice for Miguel Robles, then, is a worthy cause for Luis and his peers.*

The next day, the community holds a meeting to discuss how to respond to the news of Miguel. Sal Basuto, the head of La Casa Community Center, produces a peace treaty between the Loma and Sangra gangs, and the gangs' leaders accept. Soon after, word gets out that Miguel has died in the hospital. Luis thinks, "Miguel, you were the best of us!"

The murder of Miguel Robles gives the gangs of Los Angeles a wakeup call: they realize that they need to work together to fight police brutality instead of fighting with each other (and making it easier for the police to persecute Chicanos).

Deputy Coates, the officer who shot Miguel Robles, is charged with murder. This would be the first time an officer is sent to jail for killing an unarmed citizen in Los Angeles. Chicano groups, including gangs, work together to protest against Coates.

Luis and his friends join together to ensure that Coates is jailed for his killing, sending a message to the city that injustice toward Chicanos will not go unpunished.

One day that summer, Santos goes to visit a friend named Indio. A car drives by, and someone inside fires on Indio and Santos, killing both of them. Rumor has it that Sangra gang members shot Santos and Indio, but nothing can be proved. Chente tries to keep the peace, but there are too many gang members on both sides who still want to fight.

Almost as soon as it begins, the peace between the Lomas and the Sangra ends. Old habits die hard: the gang members on both sides are so eager to fight that their hearts were never really in the truce to begin with.

Puppet calls a meeting of Lomas. At the meeting, he hands out guns and organizes a retaliation against the death of Santos. Luis hesitates and then points out that Sangra is probably plotting a "hit," too. He argues that a war with the Sangra will mean that innocent people will die. Furthermore, he argues, the LAPD might have organized the killing in order to provoke a war between the Sangra and the Lomas. Furious, Puppet calls Luis weak and punches him in the face. Luis doesn't fall, however. Puppet announces, "We move on Sangra tonight." Luis is silent.

Here, it becomes clear how far from the Lomas Luis has drifted. Following Chente's advice, he considers the shooting from a general, systemic perspective, and comes to the conclusion that Chicanos need to stick together rather than fighting with each other and giving the LAPD what it wants. Puppet's reaction makes it clear that Luis is no longer welcome among the Lomas, something which Luis probably knew even before he opened his mouth.

CHAPTER 9

That night, Chava—a Sangra warrior—attends a party in San Gabriel. As he's walking inside, eight Lomas, including Puppet, step out of the darkness and chase after Chava. They beat and stab him, and then run into the night.

The peace treaty between the Sangra and the Lomas dissolves almost immediately, replaced by the same horrific violence that both sides have grown accustomed to.

That fall, Luis starts his senior year of school—he's ToHMAS president. He attends the new Chicano Studies class, and writes a column on Chicano issues for the student paper. After learning that a history teacher, Mr. Humes, called a student a "chola whore," he bursts into Mr. Humes's classroom and shouts, "We refuse to take any more abuse." Mr. Humes goes to Mr. Madison, who calls Luis into his office. Luis tells Mr. Madison that he and other Chicanos are taking things "into our own hands."

Luis continues to be active in high school and ToHMAS, showing that he has replaced his identity as a cholo *with the identity of a mature, politically engaged young man. Luis recognizes that his high school can be unfair and even bigoted—and with this in mind, he and his Chicano friends try to use civil disobedience to remove racist teachers from the school.*

In the following days, Chicano students find out about Mr. Humes's words. Someone slashes Mr. Humes's tires, and other Chicano students attack white students. Luis witnesses a fight between white and Chicano students, and tries to pull them apart. In the struggle, someone hits him hard, sending him to the hospital. Back at school, his face covered in stitches, Luis speaks before the school, saying, "We can't stop fighting until the battle's won."

Notice that, while Luis seems to think that the Chicano students' violence is understandable, if not acceptable, Luis himself doesn't participate in any fights. Instead, he tries to end them. This suggests that Luis is moving away from the brand of reactionary violence he learned as a cholo. *Instead, he wants to use reason, grassroots organizing, and civil disobedience to achieve his goals.*

Soon afterwards, Mr. Pérez, a popular Chicano teacher, is fired, supposedly because he's inattentive to students' needs (though the opposite is true, Luis claims). Luis talks about organizing a walkout to protest Pérez's firing. Mrs. Baez encourages him to wait for Mr. Madison to "work this out," but Luis ignores her.

Luis becomes bolder in his attempts at civil disobedience, even ignoring his own adviser. Luis knows that he's right to demand his teacher's return, and he won't listen to anyone who tries to discourage him.

On the day of the walkout, scheduled for 1 pm, Mr. Madison announces a surprise assembly at the stadium. Luis knows Mr. Madison is doing this to interfere with the walkout. At the assembly, Madison argues that some students are trying to "undermine" the school. Luis is angry, but also proud—he thinks, "all of this was because of me!"

Luis's goal is to catch Mr. Madison's attention and to be a thorn in the administration's side. Clearly, Luis has accomplished this goal—Mr. Madison has been forced to call a school-wide assembly just to respond to Luis's demands.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Baez returns Luis's stories and poems, telling him that they're wonderful and suggesting that he submit them for publication. Around the same time, Luis gets an offer from a university professor to paint a mural for the school. He is also offered an Economic Opportunity Grant at California State College.

Luis's political activism seems of a piece with his literary and artistic projects: all three represent ways for him to express his feelings and convictions. Luis's mural contract reflects the overall flourishing of Chicano culture (and interest in Chicano culture) in California in the 1970s.

Luis pauses to discuss the Chicano experience with language. As with many Chicanos, Luis is discouraged from speaking Spanish in school, but he doesn't learn English very well, either. And yet Luis, like so many other Chicanos, is poetic and expressive. Luis wishes that schools could nurture the literary instinct in their Chicano students instead of training Chicanos to think of themselves as stupid or inarticulate.

In no small part, Chicano immigrants are conditioned to think of themselves as stupid and thuggish because of the way they're treated in school. One of the best ways to nurture Chicanos (and, Luis implies, keep them from joining gangs) is to celebrate their culture and their language in school.

Luis wins a prize in a statewide literary contest. He's given a publishing contract and flown out to Berkeley. Luis is very proud of himself, and so is his mother. Shortly afterwards, he graduates from high school. He doesn't attend the official graduation, but he celebrates with ToHMAS friends. Shortly after Luis graduates, Mr. Pérez gets his job back and Mr. Humes receives "an early retirement." In 1972, Luis attends college at Cal State-L.A., where he majors in Chicano Studies and Broadcast Journalism. He signs a contract with a press called Quinto Sol, and works on a book about his early life. Luis also visits high schools to speak about Chicano issues.

The future looks bright for Luis: he's succeeding as a writer, an artist, and a political organizer, and his family is rightly proud. As befits someone who's benefited from so many great mentors, Luis makes it his mission to travel around Los Angeles, trying to get Chicano students interested in their own culture and political rights—in a way, trying to perform the same service that Chente once performed for him.

During one of his high school visits, Luis meets a high school student named Camila Martínez. Luis invites Camila to come to some of the study sessions he's been organizing in Los Angeles schools. Shortly afterwards, he asks her to come to a dance at Cal State, and she accepts. At this time, Luis is dating multiple women (meanwhile, his brother Joe has married and had a child, Louie, named after Luis).

Remember from the Preface that Camila later becomes the mother of Luis's first child. Notice, also, that Joe has named his child after Luis—suggesting that, despite their differences, the two brothers have remained close after all these years.

One night, Luis learns that one of his girlfriends, Terry, is pregnant with his child. Luis is stunned. He doesn't want to raise a child, as he's too busy with his studies and political organizing. He tells Terry that she should have an abortion, and Terry is appalled. Soon after, Luis learns from Terry's sister that Terry has gone missing. Terry's sister also raises the possibility that Terry was lying about being pregnant. Luis concludes, "I never did find out where Terry went."

Luis gives reader so little information about Terry that's it's hard to know what to think. It's unclear, for example, how serious Luis and Terry were as a couple, or whether Terry had certain psychological issues that might have led her to lie about being pregnant. And since Luis doesn't say which month and year this is, it's not even clear if abortion was legal at the time (it was legalized in 1973 as a result of the Supreme Court case Roe v. Wade).

The gang warfare between the neighborhoods continues, despite Luis's attempts to preserve the peace. One night, a gunfight breaks out between Sangra and Loma gang members. The next morning police officers arrest Chicharrón for the murder of a teenaged gang member who died in the gunfight. Chicharrón, seventeen at the time, is jailed for accessory to murder.

Even while Luis gravitates toward art, culture, and politics, his childhood friends continue to end up dead or in jail—a constant reminder of what could have happened to Luis had he been unluckier.

Meanwhile, Luis starts spending more time with Camila. Life is going well for him, especially now that he has "a beautiful woman at [his] side."

Luis seems to be succeeding in pulling his life together. He has a promising and meaningful career and a beautiful girlfriend.

Luis witnesses a fight between a woman and some police officers who are trying to arrest her. The woman resists arrest, and when the officers punch the woman in the face, Luis feels he has to intervene. He attacks the officers, and the officers overpower him and arrest him. He now faces serious prison time for assaulting an officer.

Things change for Luis after he tries to break up the fight. Notice that, as before, Luis uses violence defensively, to protect the weak. Luis clearly thinks his actions are morally justifiable—and he's probably right, especially given what he has said already about the LAPD's behavior.

For his preliminary hearing, Luis is assigned a public defender and grouped with another defendant named Licha, aged twenty-seven. Licha is charged with disorderly conduct. Luis befriends Licha, and they make a pact: whoever gets out first has to visit the other one in jail.

Luis generally makes friends easily, and now is no exception. He and Licha experience the camaraderie that often comes with suffering side-by-side.

Luis now has to figure out how to post bail. After trying to get money from his brother and parents, he's forced to go to a bail bondsman, who lends him the money he needs to get out of jail. Following his pact, Luis visits Licha in jail. During his visit, Luis learns that Licha has been classified as suicidal, since she tried to cut her wrists the previous night. Luis encourages Licha to be strong, and Licha thanks him for visiting her. The two find it surprisingly easy to talk to each other, and Luis notes that he found her very attractive.

While Luis doesn't explicitly say so, it's suggested that he's sympathetic to Licha because he, too, has struggled with depression and suicidal impulses. Notice, also, that Luis is becoming attracted to Licha even though he's still involved with Camila, the future mother of his child.

In the coming weeks, Luis focuses on his upcoming hearing. He speaks to a judge in San Gabriel who helped him when he was a juvenile offender. Amazingly, the judge agrees to write a letter to the court on his behalf. Luis also obtains letters from some of his professors at college, testifying to his good character. Luis calls Licha almost every day. They'll be grouped together on the day of their hearing.

At every stage of his life, but now more than ever, Luis is dependent upon the kindness of other people—here, his professors, and even a San Gabriel judge, vouch for him. It's a mark of Luis's modesty that he's so upfront about the role luck has played in his life, since the willingness of people to advocate for him is a clear mark of his good character.

Licha invites Luis to visit her in her neighborhood. Luis obliges, but when, after hours of travel and searching, he finally gets to Licha's house, nobody answers the door. It's late, and Luis is so tired that he's forced to sleep in a nearby church.

For reasons not fully explained, Licha isn't anywhere to be found, meaning that Luis is stranded in an unfamiliar neighborhood far from his home in San Gabriel.

While Luis prepares for his hearing, his work and other projects suffer. Quinto Sol is starting to collapse due to disagreements between its editors, and Luis loses his mural contract, too. Luis speaks to his public defender, who tells Luis that he should plead guilty, a suggestion that Luis immediately disagrees with, even after Licha encourages him to do so.

Luis's bright future starts to dim: at the same time that he's losing his professional relationships with publishers, he's beginning to realize that he'll probably have to go to jail. The court system is so cop-friendly that it won't show any sympathy to Luis, even though he only attacked a cop because he was trying to protect another woman.

On the day of his hearing, Luis swallows hard and tells his judge that he'll accept a guilty plea in exchange for a lesser charge of disorderly conduct. The judge accepts, sentencing Luis to a couple months in jail and a small fine. Licha is sentenced to jail time at a different location. They hug and promise to get together when they're both free again.

Since the 1960s, plea-bargaining has become a major part of the American legal system: without plea bargains, there wouldn't be enough time and space for all defendants to appear in court. The downside for defendants, as the passage shows, is that they have to plead guilty, and often end up paying a fine or serving time in prison.

On the day Luis is released from jail, Licha comes to see him. She invites him to stay with her in her neighborhood for a few days, and Luis agrees, even though he remembers what happened the last time he tried to visit. That night, Luis and Licha kiss for the first time. But just one month later, their relationship comes to a sudden end. Licha tells Lus that he's too young for her.

Luis's relationship with Licha, like many of his relationships in this book, comes to an abrupt (and somewhat comical) end.

CHAPTER 10

After his release from jail, Luis stops attending college. He works in a paper factory but continues to organize grassroots political events. Meanwhile, gang warfare continues. Luis visits Chente, who argues that "the rulers of this country" want gangs to fight each other. The turf that the Lomas are fighting for, he points out, is "tiny" in the grand scheme of things. It's time for Los Angeles gangs to start thinking bigger, Chente claims—and that means working together.

In this chapter, Luis's political beliefs crystallize: he sees more clearly than ever that the American establishment wants *gangs to fight each other, because infighting weakens the minority population. The only solution is for gangs to work with each other against their common enemies—racism, prejudice, sexual violence, poverty, etc.*

One night soon afterwards, Luis and some of his old friends are hanging out. A gang member offers Luis a cigarette laced with "angel dust" (i.e., PCP), and Luis declines. To Luis's great surprise, every single gang member after him refuses the cigarette, too—nobody else wanted it, either. Luis starts to realize that he's lost all interest in getting high. He wants to help his friends "become warriors of a war worth fighting."

Luis no longer seems to be wrestling with depression (or if he is, not to the same degree he's described previously). As a result, he's not interested in drugs. But the fact that other gang members turn down PCP after Luis declines suggests that nobody else is genuinely interested in drugs, either! Instead, perhaps cholos *do PCP because they want to prove their machismo and fit in, not because they actually want to.*

The same night, Luis is walking home when a car full of Loma members passes by. To Luis's amazement, one of the members fires a gun at him. Luis drops to the ground, but then realizes that the members intentionally aimed to miss him—they were firing warning shots, implying, "Next time you're dead." Luis is stunned: he's been with the Lomas for years, and at one point he "would have died for them." Now they're firing guns at him.

The message is clear: Luis and the Lomas have parted ways. Luis has become too invested in social justice and cooperation between gangs to buy in to Puppet's war with the Sangra gang, and vice versa.

Soon after this incident, Luis visits Chente and tells him that he's ready to leave his neighborhood for good. With Chente's help, he spends two months in a housing project in nearby San Pedro. Before he leaves, however, he says goodbye to his mother and father. María tells Luis that she admires him for sticking to what he believes, even though she never really liked his "revolutionary talk." Alfonso doesn't say much, but he shakes Luis's hand and tells him that he can call or ask for money any time. Luis isn't close with his father—he's trained himself not to expect much from his father.

While Luis clearly has a lot of respect for his parents, he doesn't seem especially close with either of them. At present, he's become more invested in political activism, and seems to think of Chente as more of a father figure than his own biological father. However, both his parents seem to have a great deal of respect for their son despite his missteps and shortcomings.

A lot happens after Luis leaves San Pedro. The police officers who killed Miguel Robles are acquitted—just like "virtually every deputy ever accused of maiming or killing an unarmed person of color." PCP becomes the new drug of choice, making 'blabbering idiots of once-vigorous boys and girls." There are more episodes of police brutality, including one that takes place outside Luis's high school. Gangs take over the community center, and so the community center decides to disband rather than empower the gangs—a strategy Luis compares to "scorched earth" policy.

At the same time that Luis is becoming more involved in political activism in Los Angeles, the city is deteriorating, thanks to drugs and gang violence. Police brutality is both a cause and an effect of drugs and gang violence; it's a vicious cycle that only results in further damage to the city and the Latino population. Even the organizations designed to repair the community disband, suggesting that gang warfare is so toxic that nobody can help.

In the years following Luis's relocation, his old neighborhood changes. There's an influx of Chinese and Japanese immigrants, and American real estate companies begin investing heavily in outer Los Angeles. By the 1980s, Luis's old neighborhood has become much more affluent, to the point where almost none of his old friends can afford to stay there.

Luis jumps ahead more than a decade, showing how Los Angeles changes between the 1970s and the 1980s. In the process, he brings up a new antagonist for the Chicano population: gentrification. As a result of gentrification, immigrants and working-class people are forced out of their homes, and sometimes end up on the streets.

Luis travels to political conferences with Chente. He later moves to Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, and later Watts, among many other neighborhoods. Over the years, he continues writing and practicing journalism. He also works with community leaders to address police brutality, labor and immigration issues, and other political causes. In short, he begins "a new season of life," based on his belief that he has a duty to contribute to society and help other people.

Despite the constant attacks on the Chicano population of Los Angeles, Luis remains cautiously optimistic. Using his education and training as a political activist, he battles injustice in all its forms and wherever he is able.

The chapter ends in the late '80s, with Luis attending his cousin's *quinceñera* in San Gabriel. By this time, he's married and has a child. Outside, Luis notices a strange, middle-aged man with a limp who asks him, point-blank, if he was in the Lomas years ago. Luis admits he was. The man shouts, "You're going to die." He explains that Luis stabbed him, and then pulls up his shirt to reveal the horrific scars on his chest. Luis tries to convince the man that he didn't stab him. Luis realizes that this man is Chava, once a powerful Sangra warrior.

Chava appears before Luis like a ghost from the past, a reminder of the life that Luis could have lived had he not chosen to devote himself to politics. The sight of Chava as a pathetic middle-aged man is at once terrifying and poignant. It reminds Luis that La Vida Loca is ultimately suicidal: either cholos *die in gang warfare or, perhaps even worse, they survive and grow into shadows of their former selves.*

Chava cries out, "Somebody has to pay!" and pulls out a knife. Luis can see how disturbed Chava is—it's as if he wants to hurt someone "just to salve his pain." Luis gently tells Chava, "Don't waste the rest of your days with this hate." Chava begins to moan and wail. Luis is disgusted by this sight, but also sympathetic. He finds that he no longer hates Chava, or any other *cholo*. Chava turns and hobbles away into the night.

Chava is still obsessed with the code of "an eye for an eye"—i.e., the idea that he's entitled to revenge for rival gangs' attacks. Unlike Chava, Luis has seen that this mentality can be dangerous. Chava is living proof that the life of a gang member is full of pain, to the point where gang members can only wail, moan, and scream out for revenge. In all, Luis's encounter with Chava is a powerful reminder of the life Luis could have had, but which he narrowly avoided. Chava is also a reminder of why Luis needs to use his education to fight for justice.

EPILOGUE

Luis dedicates his memoir to his children, especially his son Ramiro. Ramiro is still young, but he's already endured a lot. Luis writes, "He has a right to be angry. And he's not the only one."

Luis has already alluded to the abuse Ramiro suffered at the hands of his stepfather. Here, he echoes the point he made in the Preface: his memoir isn't just about his own life, or even his child's life. Rather, Luis wants to use his memoir to educate any and all young Chicanos who are at a crossroads in life, as he himself had once been.

In 1992, tens of thousands of people participate in the Los Angeles Uprising, a citywide response to the acquittal of the four police officers who viciously beat Rodney King. Luis has seen plenty of uprisings in his life—he was eleven years old during the 1965 Watts Rebellion. Later, as a journalist, he saw uprisings all over the world, including in Mexico and Miami.

Notice that Luis refers to these sudden populist movements as "uprisings," rather than riots (the term that's often applied to the movements in Watts in 1965 and Los Angeles more broadly in 1992). By using the more positive word, Luis suggests that the uprisings were justifiable responses to the corruption of Los Angeles.

The Los Angeles Uprising is often seen as an African American movement. But the reality is that Latinos were at the heart of the uprising. In fact, one could argue that the uprising was one of the country's first "multi-ethnic" revolts. The people involved in the uprising were crossing racial lines in order to protest the economic changes in their city—for example, the closure of big factories and the growing unemployment rate. In the nineties, Los Angeles has one of the largest homeless populations in America, and this, not just the Rodney King verdict, was the cause of the uprising.

Luis celebrates the Los Angeles uprising as a response to police brutality with regard to Rodney King, and to corruption in the city of Los Angeles in general. The uprising is a confirmation of Luis's theory that exploited people need to work together, rather than working within racial boundaries. It's worth mentioning that the Los Angeles uprising resulted in dozens of deaths, many of them impoverished black, Asian, or Latino people, and millions of dollars in property damage done to the working classes. This calls into question Luis's optimistic interpretation of the uprising, and it also calls into question the use of violence as a political tool.

In the early nineties, there was a major decline in gang violence in Los Angeles. Gangs proposed truces and peace treaties. However, police officers broke up many of the gangs' truce meetings and rallies. Following the increase in truces and treaties, the FBI has allocated far greater resources to monitoring gangs. And the federal government has "terrorized" Latino immigrants, breaking up families and sending people back to Central and South America. This is not the first time that the government has "derailed" the unity between Latinos under the guise of "breaking up the gangs."

Luis reiterates his earlier theory: the city authorities of Los Angeles have an incentive to keep gangs fighting one another, because they see gangs as being most dangerous when they work together for the rights of marginalized people. While the government sanctimoniously talks about fighting addiction and keeping people safe, the reality, as Luis sees it, is that the government's true priority is weakening the minority populations of the United States.

When powerful people in the U.S. can't accommodate Latinos, they turn them into criminals, "declare them the enemy," and "wage war." But these strategies never work in the end. Gangs are a dangerous problem, but not because gang members are inherently dangerous, and definitely not because of declining "family values," as many American politicians claim. Quite simply, many people join gangs because they can't find "a productive, livable-wage job."

Luis reiterates his economic theory of crime and gangs—in other words, that people join gangs and turn to crime because they're impoverished and need help, not because they're inherently wicked (as more than one conservative politician has suggested). By framing gang violence as a class issue, he makes it a problem for which everybody *shares responsibility—instead of seeing it as a problem to be handled by the police.*

Recently, Ramiro—now aged seventeen—read a poem about the abuse he endured from his stepfather. Since that time, he has read his poetry to audiences of thousands. Luis sees a fire in Ramiro; he encourages him to "draw on your expressive powers" and "stop running."

Like his father, Ramiro turns to artistic expression as a way of coming to terms with the pain and injustice he's experienced. Luis hopes that many more Chicanos will take after his and Ramiro's example: instead of running from their problems, they'll use art, education, and politics to confront these problems, and become mature, confident adults in the process.

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