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The City as a Place of Dialogue, Negotiation and Struggle in Terri de la Peña and Mona Ruiz

As Richard Lehan notices talking about modern metropolis, “we have seen that the history of the city contains within it the history of Western civilization. Originally the city provided a way of organizing a community in relation to the land (...) [as] the early cities took their being from the agrarian communities that preceded them” (Lehan 1998:285). Alongside the changing functions of the city its structure has undergone subsequent modifications. Terri de la Peña and Mona Ruiz discuss contemporary metropolis and city respectively. The city in their works functions both on literal and metaphorical planes and they try to analyze whether megalopolis as an imported concept of Western civilization can become a place of interaction between the two cultures.

In spite of dare predictions made by such urban commentators as Paul Hawken, John Naisbitt, or Alvin Toffler, that with technological developments, such as telecommunications, or the Internet the city will be weakened, it still exists and, as Lehan maintains, “the modern city is the world’s dominant social structure” (Lehan 1998:287). He also distinguishes two city forms in the Western world – European

one “with remnants of the medieval city still at the center and industry at the margins” and American model of a *doughnut* with “energy moving to the sprawling margins and suburbs” due to the fact that the center of the city used to be a location of industry (Lehan 1998:287).

Timothy J. Gilfoyle conducts a through analysis of American urban history together with the disputes concerning the city and the models of its development. He emphasizes the diversity of approaches that urban historians adopt while analyzing the American metropolis. According to him the choice of theory adopted for the examination of the city shifts the focus of a definition and highlights different concepts¹ and therefore, it verges on the impossible to provide one general definition describing an urban form of different cities. Urban growth “defies easy generalization” (Gilfoyle 2001:16) due to “significant reinterpretations of the American metropolis during the past two decades” (Gilfoyle 2001:26) and, therefore, in order to describe American metropolises “the plurality of models grounded in distinctive urban conditions” is necessary.

However, Susan Clarke endeavors to enumerate the “trends shaping the landscape of American cities at the end of the twentieth century” (Clarke 2001:240). Putting forward six major trends² she highlights the evolving multi-ethnic mosaic in American cities. According to her, “multi-ethnic politics have long been distinctive aspects of US political and social history, [but] in recent years many cities have had to deal with levels of ethnic and racial diversity comparable to those experienced at the turn of the century” (Clarke 2001:241). This “irreversible demographic change” (Davis 1999:341) is going to play a significant role in the direction of the changes happening in American cities.

¹ e.g. the historians studying social history of city centers and relying on gender theory “have found male working-class identities defined by neighborhood networks, street gangs, and saloons” (Gilfoyle 2001:16)

² such as “the declining significance of race, the evolving multi-cultural fabric of American society, the shifting grounds for multi-ethnic political coalitions, the rise of the new segregation, the spread of culture wars, and the resurgence of millennial prophecies about our urban future” (Clarke 2001:239)

The transformations American cities have been undergoing are not only reflected in statistics and in social studies but they have also been chronicled in literary works and “as the physical city evolved, so did the way it was re-presented in literary terms, specially in the novel” (Lehan 1998:289). As Jane Augustine maintains,

the city in pre-twentieth-century novels written in English is almost wholly *topos*, a place, a locale which is the backdrop for realistic dramas of individual consciences making choices in order to solve personal dilemmas of love, marriage, work, war, parental origins, psychic identity (Augustine 1993:73).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the city undergoes reinterpretation and

becomes less a *topos* and more anthropoid – *man-like, resembling the human being*, more organic and seemingly capable of choice. It becomes quasi-human. (...) [T]he city becomes a larger and more active agent standing in a new literary relationship to the individual human beings who are actors in the plot (Augustine 1993:74).

This new relationship develops in various circumstances, and as Augustine notes, these include the situation when the human characters are “in transit, rootless, not fixed in a domestic environment (...) that is, they are in physical and cultural flux” (Augustine 1993:74). The city as character is also “present, when the human characters in the novel discover the erotic – the power of sexuality” (Augustine 1993:74) or when protagonists are “confused, unformed or weak, out of touch with the prescribed set of values, thus shaky and uncertain in personal identity and consciousness – that is, they are in mental flux” (Augustine 1993:74). Finally, as Augustine maintains, big cities, or cities “perceived by a human character as a will or force or pressure bearing upon him” (Augustine 1993:74) can turn into a character as well.

Towards the end of the 20th century, it is a multi-ethnic city that turns into an active agent that reflects the struggles of its inhabitants and becomes a place of dialogue, negotiation, and struggle against conformity. Such depiction of the city is especially interesting in the two works by two Chicana authors mentioned above, namely *The Faults* by Terri de la Peña and *Two Badges: The Lives of Mona Ruiz*

by Mona Ruiz. Both authors choose as a setting for their books Southern California – Terri de la Peña sets the story of Dorado family in Los Angeles whereas Mona Ruiz talks about her home city, Santa Ana, California.

The setting of the two stories is especially thought-provoking in the light of dichotomous nature of Californian cities highlighted in extensive criticism, fiction and films depicting this region. As Mike Davis notices various presentations of Southern California hesitate between *The Land of Endless Summer* and *Armageddon* “imagined as a war of extermination between the white and colored worlds” (Davis 1999:355). This division is first introduced in “postcatastrophe fiction” of the 1970s that offers two alternative results of a catastrophe, namely “magical dystopian” – all non-white people do not survive the catastrophe – and “armageddonist” – when nobody survives the catastrophe (Davis 1999:331). Disaster fiction and films of the 1980s take it one step further and begin to draw an analogy between “alien invaders and illegal immigrants” (Davis 1999:341). Thus, “immigration and invasion, in a paranoid register, become synonyms” (Davis 1999:340). Later on, the fear of *the Other* and racial anxiety represented in fiction and films talking about Southern California change its imagery of a utopian *land of plenty* into a dystopian one. Both Ruiz’s and de la Peña’s stories reflect this dichotomy.

In Terri de la Peña’s *Faults* Toni Dorado realizes this transformation of an apparent utopia into a dystopia when she returns to Los Angeles after a 2-year absence. Recollecting her childhood spent in a neighborhood in Santa Monica she juxtaposes her memories with what she sees now. She remembers her happy family that attended community meetings, Christmas parties and picnics together with other families living in the neighborhood. She compares the coexistence of this diverse neighborhood of that time to various trees that used to grow on her street that not only “characterize[d] the surprising scenery of Southern California” but “the infusion of nonnative plants a living metaphor of the multicultural human population of the region” (de la Peña 1999:49).

However, as she notices, “a lot has changed” when she was away and since she was a child (de la Peña 1999:32). The City of Angels is a place where “concrete, smog and amplified noise await” (de la Peña 1999:40). To Toni her “hometown appears schizoid, a dizzying combination of prosperity and homelessness, property development and failed dreams” (de la Peña 1999:50). The neighborhood is torn apart between the homeless sleeping in dirty sleeping bags under cardboard shacks and yuppies and artists who are buying out houses and apartments in the area, as it has become fashionable. As the prices of real estate soar, the indigenous inhabitants can no longer afford to live in this area and they are forced to move out. Toni realizes aggravating ambivalence towards multi-ethnic make-up of the neighborhood and her growing sense of otherness is reflected in the analogy she makes comparing the community to the eucalyptus – a nonnative tree, that is “transplanted from Australia” and “is plentiful in Southern California. It thrives there, tall and aromatic, yet dangerously flammable during dry seasons. Like other aliens in the Golden State, it is both welcomed and reviled” (de la Peña 1999:32).

Realizing this contradiction and the need to adopt an attitude towards it are like a *déjà vu* for her as she had a similar experience before – during the L.A. riots when she worked in the library. Then she did not conform to her colleagues’ opinions that supported “low-key approach of dealing with racial-ethnic issues” (de la Peña 1999:33), or what Davis calls NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) attitude (Davis 1992:226). This was the first time when she spoke out and “began to lobby in earnest for community outreach” (de la Peña 1999:32). Her “sudden transformation resulted in supervisors’ and coworkers’ distrust and outright disagreement with [her] views” and she was laid off after 14 years of work in the library (de la Peña 1999:33). Non-conforming turned out to have graver results that she had expected. “Nothing felt right anymore,” she recollects, and she had to “run away from it all” moving out to the Northwest and leaving her partner and family behind (de la Peña 1999:99).

However, as she realized when living in Fir View, she could not run away from herself (de la Peña 1999:2). The urge to return to what

she left behind was reinforced by her experience of a paradox of simultaneous standing out and disappearing (de la Peña 1999:7). Even though her looks made her prominent, she was invisible. Therefore, Toni decided that she had to come back to California and fight again – for inclusion and recognition of diversity and against being invisible; against racism, sexism and homophobia stereotyping Chicanas.

The fight with homophobia turns out to be the first of serious challenges that she faces when back in L.A. It is also the most painstaking confrontation, as it requires from her reconciliation of two spheres – private one and public one. First things first, she has been brought up in a Catholic family where a heterosexual relationship functions as an unalterable model. Non-conforming to this model may have significant consequences with community ostracism as the mildest one. Therefore, her coming out is an act of bravery. Unlike many of her friends who hide the truth about their sexuality before their families, she decides to reveal it and this way determine her identity both at home and in public. (An analogical situation with gay men is described in *Latin Satins*; there, however, Daniel León decides not to disclose the truth and as a result his wife and the daughter become HIV positive; the case of down low).

Toni's confession was a difficult experience for her parents – they “cried together when she told [them] she was *una de las otras*, one of the others” (de la Peña 1999:36). Even though they have finally reconciled with her choice and appreciated her honesty, her mother still ponders over it asking herself where the fault is, who is to blame for the situation and what they, as parents, did wrong that she turned out to be a lesbian. When Toni comes back to L.A. she still has to negotiate her sexuality and help her mother overcome the feeling of guilt (de la Peña 1999:96).

Apart from that she also has to undertake a dialogue about her non-conforming with her sister's, Sylvia's attitude. Sylvia who is younger than Toni feels that her older sister patronizes her and disapproves of her life choices: first Sylvia was married to a white boy who spent days surfing and who did not care too much about providing for his family (we can observe Jeff's transformation in the story as well, as

right now he is a responsible father who takes care of their daughter, Gabi); right now, she is married to a stereotypical violent macho, Gonzalo (later in the story distorted by Gabi into *Godzilla*) (de la Peña 1999:184). “A living stereotype,” as Pat, Toni’s partner describes him, is a violent, abusive cheat who gives vent to his homophobia in violence directed both at Sylvia and at Toni with Pat (de la Peña 1999:151). (The first time he beats Sylvia is when he learns that Toni is a lesbian (de la Peña 1999:262)). As Toni realizes, Zalo’s violence, colorism – Martin Luther King Holiday is for him *Nigger Holiday* (de la Peña 1999:182) and homophobia mask his deep insecurities and complexes.

However, Sylvia lives in denial and does not want to admit openly that violence, mistreatment and abuse contribute to malfunctioning of her family. What is more, she blames Toni for all her fiascos and failures. Adopting Zalo’s attitudes Sylvia distances herself from her *dyke* sister, her ex-husband and her family in general holding them responsible for her twisted life. In the course of the story the sisters begin a dialogue and they try to reach a compromise. The dialogue is tenuous, as Sylvia has to accept the fact that Toni has decided to come out in public and work officially *for the cause*, openly criticizing racism, discrimination, and terrible inner city conditions (which become especially apparent after the earthquake, when there are no reports from neighborhoods inhabited by ethnic minorities, and people wait for help much longer than in any other parts of L.A.) (de la Peña 1999:219, 268, 272). Paradoxically, the earthquake is also a catalyst for the beginning of a real dialogue within the Dorado family.

The family finally negotiates a compromise after the earthquake. Zalo’s death, serious damage the neighborhood suffers and the need to come together in the aftermath of a disaster facilitate the reunion of a family. Yet the reunion takes place under specific circumstances – the Dorado sisters redefine the apparently homogenous model of *la familia* and rework the concept of *carnalismo* or *brotherhood* into the kinship of women – sisterhood. “La familia de hermanas” – with a newly born Sylvia’s daughter who, significantly, gets the last name after her mother, *Dorado* – does not conform to the popular and

monolithic model of Chicano family (Fregoso 2003:86). Another act of non-conformity creates alternative space for Dorado women. Through their dialogue, negotiation, and struggle they start to change the place that is most important for them, because, as Toni notices “everything is here,” in Los Angeles and if one does not like the situation the best thing to do is to try to change it (de la Peña 1999:70).

The need for change is also present in Mona Ruiz’s account of her life that oscillates between conforming and non-conforming. In her narrative she also records a transformation of a utopia into a dystopia, talking about her growing up in Santa Ana, but she depicts this metamorphosis against the background of the interplay between the barrio and the city.

Similarly to de la Peña, Ruiz’s life as a young girl revolved around her family – “both our household and the extended family that seemed to reach throughout the city,” as she recollects (Ruiz 1997:24). The family provided her with security, love, and models to follow. In addition to that, the parents set up some strict rules concerning their children’s upbringing in order to protect them from the increased activity of gangs. Mona’s parents hated gangs and regarded both homeboys and homegirls as “lazy and disrespectful” (Ruiz 1997:27). They wanted to safeguard their children against this world and open up some other opportunities for Mona and her siblings.

However, it was hardly possible to deny the existence of gang-related incidents in the neighborhood. Mona’s trouble-free existence was first undermined when she witnessed gang-related shooting in the barrio (Ruiz 1997:35). Then when she went to high school it was more and more difficult to negotiate her space in the place occupied by gangs where various gang skirmishes happened on a daily basis (as homeboys and homegirls from different gangs fought for territory and influence) (Ruiz 1997:39). The fact that her cousins belonged to F-Troop(ers) did not make it easier for her as she was often associated with them and regarded as a member of their gang (Ruiz 1997:33). When she was challenged by *cholas* from one of the *clicas*, she was left with two choices – either to be a victim or to fight back (Ruiz

1997:41). As she recollects, her life turned into a fight for survival in the hostile environment (Ruiz 1997:40), but at some point violence became inseparable part of her school life. What is more, Mona's victories in various battles with *cholas* gained her reputation which she started to relish. Looking back at her adolescence Ruiz admits that to a young girl's eyes this world became more and more mesmerizing and her cousins "seemed more and more like cool and exciting figures" (Ruiz 1997:29).

Her parents' response to her gradual involvement in the gang verged on violence. They were appalled by her and her sister's allegiance to the lifestyle they despised so much. Their warnings that "gangs promise only shame and danger for a young girl" (Ruiz 1997:27) were not very convincing, as she already believed that it was in the gang where she could get acceptance (Ruiz 1997:48). This feeling was reinforced when she saw her parents' reaction to her sister's early pregnancy (Ruiz 1997:47). It was then that the dialogue with her parents began to dwindle.

When Ruiz analyzes how she gradually stopped conforming to the values her parents cherished she cannot determine specific circumstances that induced such decision. As she recollects:

There was no specific day, no single moment, when I made a decision to run with a gang and turn my back on everything I had been taught by my father. It was more like a series of surrenders and lapses that combined to deliver me into the very lifestyle I had been raised to most despise. (...) And there was no great fall for me, merely a steady slide (Ruiz 1997:48).

Various scholars who started to examine girl gangs in the 1990s tried to account for the allure gangs held for adolescent girls. Their studies prove that the gangs not only enable the girls to stand out and be seen, but they also subvert dominant norms. In Keta Miranda's ethnography of girl gangs in Oakland, California she analyzes the importance of *pachucas* (as female zootsuiters) and *homegirls* (girls' gangs) for challenging "cultural nationalist concepts of community by re-creating forms of feminine Chicana solidarity through bonds of friendship, solidarity and mutual trust" (Miranda 2000). Catherine Ramirez, in turn "analyzes the role of *pachuca style* and *Chicana style*

politics in the formation of alternative national identities” (Ramirez 2000). As Fregoso summarizes their research, “this unprecedented scholarship has unearthed the ways in which pachuca and homegirl identities deliberately challenge sexual and gender norms, transgress gender roles, thwart behaviors and expectations, and defy dominant (Chicano/a and mainstream) boundaries of domesticity and femininity” (Fregoso 2003:96). Due to such subversion and non-conforming to various forms of subordination girls’ gangs have been receiving harsh reactions from both the outside and within their own community.

Ruiz developed her non-conforming even one step further. As a gang member she was an outcast to a certain extent, because she did not smoke pot or take drugs. Very often she was accused by *vatos* that her attitude to them bordered on disrespect and contempt (Ruiz 1997:58). The fact that she wanted to get education past high school was also perceived as an act of defiance by her friends and her husband (who was a *vato* as well). Her loyalty was questioned totally when she took up a job as a police clerk (Ruiz 1997:65). This was the first time she was openly called a “sell-out (...), a pig who will keep people down” (Ruiz 1997:214). And, as she admits, this is how she felt to some extent, because “to grow up in the barrio is to grow up seeing the police as an occupying army” (Ruiz 1997:93).

She was well aware of corruption and abuse that plagued Santa Ana Police Department. Working there she was also a target of various snide remarks concerning her looks or her friends and relatives and the barrio in general (Ruiz 1997:119). Her abusive marriage with a gang member became a proverbial *last straw*, and she gave up on her career in SAPD for some time, because she did not know how to negotiate between the loyalty to her family and her job at the police station (Ruiz 1997:92). When Mona finally ended her destructive marriage (which was another act of defiance because a divorce was still a taboo in the Chicano community) she decided to face the challenge again and she came back to the police station.

The treatment she received from her co-workers did not change from what she was used to – many times she experienced humiliation

and discrimination. She was treated like a spy for gangs and very often people were telling her that she belonged to the street, not to the police station (Ruiz 1997:236). This lack of trust was aggravated by various additional tensions, as her cousins still remained in gangs and were involved in various gang-related skirmishes, which was very often taken against her, even though she had nothing to do with their activities (Ruiz 1997:136).

However, she had some mentors at the police station who supported her choice. She was also determined to succeed, realizing that “despite having a huge Latino population, the city of Santa Ana ha[d] a mostly white police force” (Ruiz 1997:257). Therefore, she thought of it as her obligation to become a policewoman who would treat people with respect and “offer them solutions and options to their problems” (Ruiz 1997:252). Never forgetting about her background and her past she saw herself as a person who could start to build bridges in the community and develop a dialogue with people living there, which, as she admits, is still very difficult in the contestable space of Western metropolis (Ruiz 1997:252).

This need for the dialogue and non-conforming to ubiquitous stereotypes that both de la Peña and Ruiz advocate is especially critical in the light of recent events taking place in L.A. and in California. Looking through the articles in L.A. Times’ local section and listening to the news one can hardly resist a feeling that a problematic space of modern megalopolis remains unsettled and a “global crossroads city” (Davis 1999:419) is still at the crossroads. Davis’ statement arguing that “as the walls have come down in Eastern Europe, they are being erected all over L.A. (Davis 1992:228) seems especially salient nowadays. These are both virtual and metaphorical walls that victimize people who are already discriminated against. However, with no progressing agenda on such issues as skid row and homelessness, gang injunctions, and immigration reform – to mention just a few unresolved issues that divided L.A. community – it will be extremely difficult to negotiate any kind of cooperation and integrity and “the proliferation of new repressions in space and movement” combined with personal

insulation may continue to be a sad but plausible scenario for L.A. and other American cities (Davis 1992:224).

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