

Cultural Daily

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Always Running, La Vida Loca: Gang Days in LA

Monica Santiago · Wednesday, January 27th, 2016

Born and raised in Inglewood, the City of Champions, Monica Santiago is a young Hispanic writer. She enjoys exploring and learning new things on a daily basis. As a 16 year-old, Monica plans on accomplishing great things that will help inspire others and change the world.

She is this week's feature on "[Tomorrow's Voices Today](#)," the new series curated by poet and educator Mike Sonksen.

Always Running, La Vida Loca: Gang Days in LA

Raised in Los Angeles, Luis J. Rodriguez came from Mexican immigrant parents. As strangers to a new country, Rodriguez and his family encountered many hardships, such as money. It was difficult to settle in one place because many well-paid jobs did not want to hire Spanish-speaking natives or discriminated against Mexicans. Living in Watts and East Los Angeles, Rodriguez was surrounded by gang culture in his teenage years. Being part of one of the biggest gangs, Las Lomas, he experienced and witnessed numerous beatings, shootings, arrests, murders, and drug use. After years of being drawn into the 'hood's lifestyle, Luis found a way out through literature, leadership and education. As a result of his past, Luis continues to write and change and create peace in the lives of others in the 'hood. In Luis J. Rodriguez's remarkable memoir, *Always Running*, audiences understand the deprivation of discrimination and gang culture.



He begins his autobiographical tale by revealing his parents' reason for coming to the United States. In Mexico, especially Ciudad Juarez, opportunities and security were very little compared to the States. Though Mexico wasn't safe for the Rodriguez family, life in the U.S wasn't so safe either. As "Aliens," many Hispanic people were looked at as scums of the earth because they were seen as uneducated, dirty, and poor, especially in American schools, where Hispanics were placed in the back of the class because they only spoke Spanish. However, Spanish was Luis's first language as a child and he had no other way to communicate. He explains further when he writes, "I knew I wasn't wanted. She put me in an old creaky chair near the door" (Rodriguez, 26). Through his experience in Kindergarten, Rodriguez demonstrates that Hispanic children enter in a world of discrimination, as they are treated as useless and unimportant. Since they are treated like that at an early age, children begin to develop a belief that school is insignificant. In addition, children are told not to take pride in their ethnicity or be whom they are. One of the biggest rules in American schools was, "Don't speak Spanish, don't be Mexican – you don't belong" (Rodriguez, 20). Luis indicates through sharing his experiences that many white people treated Hispanic children like they did not belong here. For example, he had teachers that were unwilling to teach

him and some of his classmates because they spoke a different language. Living in a world where discouragement is in the atmosphere, leads an individual to join a gang.

Growing up in Watts and East LA was a challenge for Luis because he lived in between two of the largest gangs, which required him to choose a *clica*. As a male living in areas like Watts, Compton, South Central, among others, there was one expectation from the streets, which was joining a gang. If one does not enter a gang, he may even be beaten or shot to death. Not only is the individual initiated into the group, but the person also initiates their family along too. Adapting to the gangster lifestyle, Rodriguez gives the audience an insight into the dangers of the streets. “People ran in all directions. Screams pierced the night, Shouts of ‘Lomas Rifa’ and ‘Sangra Controla’ bellowed as *vatos* clashed in senseless fury” (Rodriguez, 93). He reveals the countless shootings, murders, suicides, homicides, beatings, and arrests one experiences growing up in the streets. He also describes other elements of gang culture such as how getting a tattoo as a preteen was considered cool or sagging your pants was displayed as toughness.

In addition, Rodriguez also includes the language gang members used to communicate with one another. For example, *yesca* (marijuana), *clica* (clique), *compa* (companion), and *la marqueta* (the market). As a former gang member, Rodriguez explains that “[Gangs] begin as a unstructured grouping, our children, who desire the same as any young person. Respect. A sense of belonging. Protection” (Rodriguez, 250). He demonstrates that gangs aren’t the corrupt ones—it’s society. It’s society’s fault that Hispanics are labeled as uneducated, dirty, and poor and excluded from the world. For these reasons, gangs came to rise so that anyone can join and find their sense of belonging.

Luis J. Rodriguez’s memoir illustrates the effects of discrimination and gang culture in his many remarkable stories. He is very detailed and includes many stories that will make one laugh, see a vivid image, cry, and acknowledge what goes on within gangs and communities like Watts, South San Gabriel, and East Los Angeles. Coming out of the ‘hood and receiving so much success through his words, Luis J. Rodriguez is now the Los Angeles Poet Laureate. Furthermore, he owns and operates a bookstore in the San Fernando Valley with his wife called Tia Chucha’s Centro Cultural. As a young writer, he inspires me to write poems about where I come from or stories about events that I witness on a daily basis too. His memoir is an inspiration to youth, in and out of the ‘hood. It’s a **MUST READ** book that will change the views of people and make the world a safer place.

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