

La banda* and their *choros*.** **A group of street children narrating tales about leadership, gender and age

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Original article

SUMMARY

This article recounts the story of the Bucareli boys (*chavos*), a group of street children in Mexico City, who were also known as “the Metro Juárez’s *banda*”. Documenting their everyday life over a period of three years allowed me to formulate three insights about the internal power differentiation, which are also valid for other 15 *bandas* (gangs) of street children in Mexico City. First, it is important to place the dynamics of leadership and gender relations in an age perspective; dynamics that occur within the *banda* and among the different *bandas*. Second, as structuring principles of street life, leadership, gender and age have an inherently evanescent character, due to an interplay of constraints that are both internal and external to the *banda*. Third, homelessness creates a world of paradoxes and contradictions. Power differentiation among relatively powerless people is a contradiction in terms; and the dynamics of leadership, gender and age disclose paradoxical social ties within the *banda*. These can be particularly harrowing in the relations between street kids and the young adults posing as surrogate fathers and mothers.

This ethnographic analysis of “crazy-making homelessness” is relevant for mental health. The kids (“*gamines*”)’ story-telling about leadership, gender and age hide their weakness, because in these stories street children assume a power which actually they lack of. More than mere symptoms of madness or a manipulative personality disorder, these stories testify to the creativity and resilience of these young people. The illusory power of their “*choros*” (stories) enables them to live in apparent harmony under the conditions in which they live.

Key words: Street children, Mexico City, storytelling, leadership, gender, age, ethnography.

RESUMEN

Este artículo narra la historia de los *chavos* de Bucareli, un grupo de niños de la calle de la Ciudad de México, quienes también eran conocidos como “la *banda* del metro Juárez”. Documentar su vida cotidiana por un periodo de tres años me ha permitido formular tres puntos de análisis relacionados con la diferenciación interna del poder, puntos también válidos para otras 15 *bandas* de niños de la calle de la Ciudad de México. Primero, es importante poner en una perspectiva de edad las dinámicas sociales de liderazgo y género que se dan al interior de la *banda* y entre las diferentes *bandas*. Segundo, los principios que estructuran la vida en las calles, como el liderazgo, el género y la edad, tienen un carácter inherentemente evanescente como consecuencia de la interacción de limitaciones internas y externas a la *banda*. Tercero, la falta de vivienda genera un mundo de paradojas y contradicciones. La diferenciación de poder entre personas que carecen relativamente de poder es una contradicción; y las dinámicas de liderazgo, género y edad demuestran las paradojas de las relaciones internas de la *banda*. Dichas paradojas pueden ser particularmente alienantes en las relaciones entre los niños de calle y los adultos que fungen como padres o madres sustitutos.

Este análisis etnográfico de la “enloquecedora falta de una vivienda” es relevante para la salud mental. Las historias narradas por los “*gamines*” en torno al liderazgo, el género y la edad esconden su fragilidad, porque en ellas los niños de la calle se atribuyen un poder del cual carecen en realidad. Más que meramente síntomas de locura o una personalidad manipuladora, estas historias testifican la creatividad y la resiliencia de estos jóvenes. El poder ilusorio de sus “*choros*” les facilita vivir con aparente armonía en las condiciones en que viven.

Palabras clave: Niños de la calle, Ciudad de México, narración de historias, liderazgo, género, edad, etnografía.

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"*Crazy-making homelessness creates a world of paradoxes and contradictions*".¹

INTRODUCTION

The Bucareli boys (*chavos*) were a *banda* or a group of street children, who –along with other children– lived in downtown Mexico City. Their ages ranged from eight to sixteen; sometimes adults were also sharing the same space. They took their name from Bucareli Street, where they lived in a building in ruins after the 1985 earthquake. During the field visits, there were typically between 10 and 15 children; sometimes they were only six and, at other times, the number could amount to forty. We conducted an account of their daily life between 1993 and 1996.

The dilapidated building located on Bucareli Street became the dwelling or the land (*terreno*) of the *banda**. In order to get to the place where the group met one had to pass through a narrow entrance leading to a dark and destroyed corridor. Then, one had to go up through several nearly-collapsed stairs and, on the fourth floor of the building, one had to jump a series of plumbing pipes. In the center of the place there was a bedroom where, according to one's rank in the *banda*, they *came* or *stayed* but never *lived*** . Here, gamines*** used to inhale solvents, sleep, play video games and watch TV. They also received there to street educators, anthropologists and other visits. This space became their main room: it was decorated with scrap and with a typical small altar to the Virgin of Guadalupe. But the *banda's* territory, which they called their *barrio* ("neighborhood") was only the house in ruins, as it included Juárez metro station where they used to sit and sleep in the station entrance. Therefore, the Bucareli boys also called themselves "the Metro Juárez's *banda*".

* Usually, in ethnographic papers, demotic concepts are written in italics. This is done especially when the slang term has no equivalent in the standard language and may confuse the reader, i.e. the words *activo* and *banda* (the gang). However, street people not only speak slang⁴ but also use standard words, and they can do this when naming aspects reflecting their lifestyle. When the standard vocabulary refers to categories of the *banda*, which are not made evident due to the context itself, they are written between quotation marks. For slang concepts that are subject to interpretation, they are also written in italics (such as *choro* or *cotorreo*).

** Expressions such as *staying* and *coming* are associated with places where street children live, even when *living* typically refers to the place where they have not lived for months or years.⁵ Land (*terreno*) is neither directly related to its ordinary usage, since it rather refers to the territory. *Terreno* usually refers to a building in ruins enabled to accommodate a group of street children and other poor persons. Someone *coming* to the *terreno* probably is visiting the *banda* in order to hang out and inhale solvents, while someone who *stays* probably also sleeps there.

*** Gamines is a common term to name street children in other Latin American countries, especially in Colombia.⁵ In Mexico, educators and researchers also use this term.

Documenting the daily life of this *banda*, in a period of three years, allowed the creation of three points of analysis related to the internal differentiation of power in terms of leadership, gender and age. I consider that such analysis points are also valid for the other 15 *bandas* of street children that I visited in Mexico City. First, it is important to place the dynamics of leadership and gender relations in an age perspective; dynamics that occur within the *banda* and among the different *bandas*. Second, as structuring principles of street life, leadership, gender and age have an inherently evanescent character, due to an interplay of constraints that are both internal and external to the *banda*. The kids ("gamines")' story-telling about leadership, gender and age hide their vulnerability, because in these stories street children assume a power which actually they lack of.

The third suggestion concurs with Liebow¹ in that homelessness creates a structurally chaotic situation. The differentiation of power among people who relatively lack of power is a contradiction; dynamics of leadership, gender and age show the paradoxes of the internal relations of the *banda*, which can be particularly alienating in the relationship between street children and young adults posing as surrogate mothers or fathers.

This ethnographic analysis of "crazy-making homelessness" is relevant for mental health. However, more than mere symptoms of madness or a manipulative personality disorder, the stories of these young people testify their creativity. The illusory power of their *choros* (stories) enables them to live in apparent harmony under the conditions in which they live.

THE BUCARELI BOYS

Juárez Metro station is located a short distance from Plaza Garibaldi and Marroquí street; therefore, the Bucareli boys knew well the *bandas* from both places. The lifestyle of these groups was similar to that of the Bucareli boys; for example, they also *stayed* at a *terreno*. In addition, the three *bandas* shared a preference for inhalation of *activo* (paint thinner), a solvent containing toluene. The Bucareli boys bought this inhalable solvent in Plaza Garibaldi's black market and usually used it in their own *barrio* or in the *terreno* of the Marroquí *banda* (later called "Casa de Todos" [Everyone's House]). The purchase and use of the *activo* at the same time constituted a common attribute and an important link among the three *bandas*.

Nevertheless, despite the proximity of the *bandas* there was a wide gap among them. The Marroquí and Garibaldi *bandas* were four times the number of the Metro Juárez's. Members of Marroquí and Garibaldi *bandas* included young and older adults, both men and women; several of those women had babies and toddlers. In

contrast, the Metro Juárez's *banda* was a group made up, almost exclusively, by adolescent boys. During the 1993-1994 period, no woman was seen at the *terreno* and there were only two boys of legal age. Thus, it was found that gender and age had major implications for street everyday life, ranging from how men organized their dwelling to the content of the stories they told, including all the survival practices and games and the establishment of relations with neighbors.

Age also modified the contact with intervention agencies. The Juárez's *banda* used to go to children's homes, particularly Casa Alianza and Ministerios de Amor. They often did it on their own initiative. For these children access to charity and assistance was much easier than for young adults of Garibaldi and Marroquí *bandas*. However, few activists, researchers and promoters of charity visited the Bucareli's *terreno*. For them, the wasteland of Marroquí street was more accessible, because there, the politically cunning street community –called "Casa de Todos" [Everyone's House]– proved to be a more attractive target for their respective projects and interests.⁶

The relatively homogeneous composition of gender and age of the Juárez's *banda* was reinforced by the representation of their own people as *machitos* or *pequeños machines* (little macho men). The qualities that these kids attributed themselves were a contradiction between strength and vulnerability. On the one hand, they were used to consider themselves "street kids", which was definitely a result of the intervention of others in their lives ("I think I'm a street kid, because everyone calls me so"). Also, the Bucareli boys considered themselves as *despapayosos* (naughty rogues) and particularly *desmadrosos* (wild guys) (and even *destroyers* or destructive). What distinguished this group from other *bandas* I met in Mexico City was that it had a formal leadership structure that excluded women from its ranks.

In the Marroquí and Garibaldi *bandas* there was practically no formal leadership structure, where the unwritten rule was that influential members of the *banda* should not flaunt their rank. In contrast, the Bucareli boys did not hesitate to talk about Lofar, the leader of the gang. As there were indications that Garibaldi and Marroquí *bandas* were not meant to be as equal as they aimed to be, also it was clear that the position of Lofar as leader was constantly undermined. As in other *bandas*, there were checks and balances that were important to prevent any member took too much power over others. Notwithstanding the foregoing, Lofar's formal leadership remained a unique feature of Juárez gamines (street kids), and this had to do with the fact that Lofar was considerably bigger than the others.

Furthermore, the Bucareli boys clarified that they did not want women among them. This gave the impression that it was their own choice not to live with women. Ga-

mines could say things like: "Girls can't be here because the boys will fight for them", or "women don't come here because they are cleaner and men like dirt!" Once, I asked whether women ethnographers or educators could visit the group; one of them, *Pecas* (Freckles), answered: "Well, women can visit us but they can't stay; there are no couples or mothers with children. We don't want that here". This explicitly misogynist discourse was correlated with the unilateral composition of age and gender of this group. In contrast, the Garibaldi and Marroquí *bandas* took for granted the presence of women, which also reflected age and gender characteristics of such communities.

During the process of meeting the Juárez boys several changes in terms of leadership structure and gender composition took place. For example, one of them, *el Mudo* (Dumb), went with the Marroquí gang, but came back when Lofar disappeared. *El Mudo*, who had lost the ability to speak in his childhood, took on more of the influential role in the *banda*. Several young women from the Marroquí street also began to visit the Bucareli's *terreno*. With these "*transbanda*" dynamics –the constant movement of actors and ideas across the boundaries of the street communities, but still within the limits of the street culture– much of the initial discourse on the internal structure of leadership resulted in stories invented for the occasion. In fact, also the content of such stories changed over time. At one point, the boys said that they did not have a leader and that they were fond of women. The above summarizes the Bucareli's *banda* story. Its relevance, regarding mental health science, lies in the flow of meanings that are beyond the commonplace of purely pragmatic stories or stories inconsistent with the reality that street children always refer to.

Chief Lofar

Lofar: "For the past year and a half we have lived in this *terreno*. We have drinking water but no electricity; we illuminate the place with a bonfire. This building is in this state since the earthquake of 1985 and, as far as I know, has always been taken by children. Sometimes they are taken out but always return. Once the building was closed, and a guard was hired but the kids took possession again. Now all is quiet; nobody bothers us and the police no longer come".

Alvis, *el Cisne* (the Swan): "We kick their ass!"

Lofar (paying no attention to the *Cisne's* interruption): "I know the police and the community [neighbors] very well. I negotiate everything with them; that's why we live in peace with our neighbors, without causing discomfort. If the police come here, I tell the kids that we have to resolve the dispute. Normally we are here from 12 to 15 kids, and sometimes more, because we come and go all the time. When there are kids who don't stick to our rules, the group kicks them out of here. I force the kids to go to church ev-

ery Friday, and supervise that they behave themselves on the street. I also make sure that they don't use monas in the street [*mona* is a piece of cloth or cotton impregnated with *activo* – paint thinner].”

The researcher looks incredulously at Alvis, *el Mudo*, *Pecas*, *el Chulo*. They all nod enthusiastically.

Lofar: “I send the *morritos* (small kids) to a children's home, los Ministerios de Amor. It's true, they're assholes because they force kids to pray, but I think that they are better there than in the street. I also organize that the kids play on a soccer team, so that they don't use the *mona* all the time. It's healthier”.

Lofar said he was 20 years old and it was true that he negotiated with neighbors and police for not being bothered. During the time I met Lofar it was common to see him bragging about being the boss – both “leader” and “father” of the street kids. Unlike other *bandas* that I visited, the Juárez's *banda* did never deride the boss. The stories that the *banda* told to educators and researchers refer to a collective history of the gang, a homogenous perspective of the group, as well as the importance of the boss for the well-being and permanence of the group. Lofar, the expert in the street life, spoke as if he were a savior of children.

According to Goffman,⁶ Lofar's leadership discourse was “something stronger than pure fantasy and something more ethereal than the facts”. What most legitimized Lofar's claim to leadership was his ability to convince others, and himself, that he was at that moment the leader of the gang. Street children have a special category to refer to this type of stories particularly, and, in general, to all stories told regarding street children: the *choro*. The *banda's choro* –including Lofar's *choro* regarding a formal leadership– aimed to convince its audience, and perhaps its speakers too, that in their lives there was hope and solidarity, although it was quite the opposite. The street children's apology contains sad and happy stories. Both types of stories reflect the special situation of these stigmatized children, a situation that also transforms the success stories of strong and robust street children into tragic stories.

In their *choro*, the Bucareli boys projected themselves as a relatively harmonious group that had chosen the most experienced person as their leader. Lofar's *choro* justified his leadership, which projected himself as an adult able to protect street children and contain self-destructive tendencies. Nevertheless, this *choro* contrasted with reality. Sometimes while Lofar was pleased to inhibit the use of inhalants, the children staying there had the *mona* impregnated with *activo* under their nose. Their boss told them not to inhale, but rather addressing me or himself, not to them. In addition, there was evidence that questioned the *choro* that the *banda* had chosen Lofar because he protected them and helped reducing the use of inhalants. For example, I had

information indicating that Lofar's influence was based, at least partially, on the sale and provision of such solvent, which inhalation he allegedly was fighting in his role as formal leader. I also knew that it was said that Lofar's friendship towards other kids was not for free. Therefore, some educators who knew the guys well said that Lofar sexually abused them.

Although perhaps Lofar's authority was not accepted uniformly, undoubtedly wielded a substantial power base. In other *bandas* there were few leaders, or maybe none, with such a formalized influence, and yet, this leader par excellence –so popular among the Bucareli boys– did not last long. Within days his position collapsed. His fragility was rooted in the contradiction of power differentiation among powerless persons. The decline of his leadership was not only due to his ambivalence toward street life or to his behavior with the kids, but also to his inability to control the *banda* and its destructive tendencies. What gamines were expecting from Lofar –a control in their inhalable use and adequate protection when they fought each other– was out of reach. In this sense, this young leader failed where psychologists, street educators and correctional staff had not had great achievements either.

Street kids were aware that Lofar's stories about the *banda's* benevolent leadership were mainly an illusion of a desire and also part of the “cotorreo”: playful and humorous banter of street kids. They laughed and joked about the public who took for granted Lofar's *choro* about protecting street kids. Their teasing behavior had a meaning, since they knew very well that they had not to take so seriously the illusions of Lofar.

The discourse and the illusion about leadership were useful to the Metro Juárez's *banda* to cope with its vulnerability and to pretend they lived a normal life in its *terreno*. Their stories allowed children to create themselves the impression that, through an adult figure in the group, they could have some kind of governance and self-control in their lives, and that their street lifestyle life was, at least partly, the result of their own actions. The idea of having a symbolical leader approached the *banda* to the family model. It was a way of clutching to a father figure who protects them against the evil from the world and from their own inhaling vice.

El señor mudo (Mr. Dumb)

When Lofar was gone *el Mudo* came back. It was evident that the latter was emerging as an increasingly influential figure in the *banda*. *El Mudo* was 15 years old, the same age as *Pecas*, *Alvis* and *el Chulo*. Unlike Lofar, *el Mudo* made no reference to formal leadership, and this was not only because of the fact that *el Mudo* was unable to speak. As I noted during soccer and card games, *el Mudo* avoided introducing himself as the leader of the *banda*, not even with

the youngest children, as Sidri and Broc brothers. Only at specific times I saw him take the initiative as a leader and this always happened when they were analyzing revenue and expenditure of the *banda*. There was only one graffiti about "the *Mudo's banda*", which was overlaid on a Lofar's slogan that could be interpreted as a reference to a more formal position.

El Mudo's influence was already noticed when Lofar was the leader. *El Mudo* hid *activo* bottles at night and distributed *monas* in the morning. The boys thought that thus they were not inhaling so much, while also the risks of fire or suffocation decreased when sleeping. They explained that they trusted *el Mudo* to manage the solvents, because he was not inhaling anymore. With his sign language, *el Mudo* explained that, years before, he was about to die for using *activo*. *El Chulo* (the Cute) narrated the rest of the story of the accident, in which the Red Cross refused to take the child to a hospital. *El Mudo* barely survived, and his face still expressed fear and disgust when he insisted that he had seen death face to face. Then I asked if, as a result of this incident, *el Mudo* had lost the ability to speak, and *el Chulo* explained that *el Mudo* was dumb since he was very young and because of this his parents abandoned him. "His mom is still looking for him", joked *el Chulo*, which emphatically denied the *Mudo's* squeaky sounds.

Due to his so sad childhood story, *el Mudo* resembled Lofar, as both had a life story marked by negligence on their way through the streets and institutions. *El Mudo* also knew other *bandas*, such as the Marroquí or even the Tacuba gang, where, like Lofar, he did not have the influence he had in Bucareli. Another similarity between *el Mudo* and Lofar was that, in both cases, their position derived from their particular relationship with inhalants, a relationship that was –at the same time– of excess and withdrawal. However, *el Mudo* had two additional resources that made him influential: twinkle in his eye and money. When the kids were watching TV at the appliance store opposite Juárez station, *el Mudo* was who controlled the "special watch" that was used as the TV remote control, by which the *banda* could change the TV channel without the store owners realizing it. *El Mudo* also taught street kids to open cars and steal car stereos. Probably this combination of wit, petty crime, perhaps also the petty sale of *activo* and their own drug withdrawal, made *Mudo* to have more money than others. *El Mudo* did not look dirty and was always well dressed with designer clothes and shoes. He also liked to own things such as the special watch and even more sophisticated devices.

Mudo's informal leadership flourished during the consumer economy of the *terreno*. He provided the group with a TV, rented movies and bought video games and cartoons with which others entertained themselves. When someone named *Pooka* stole the first TV, *el Mudo* organized that each *banda* member cooperated to pay the second TV.

Looking after the TV thus became a collective responsibility; a task performed taking turns. A couple of months later, the second TV was taken away by police, under the argument that "as they were street children", the TV had to be stolen by them. The *banda* (that is to say, *el Mudo*) bought a third TV and *el Mudo* posted on the wall a certified copy of the receipt to convince the police that this TV had been obtained legally (the copy, sacredly posted between the TV and the altar, was registered on behalf of "Mr. *Mudo*").

Mudo got along fine thanks to his contribution to the economy of the *banda*. This gave him not only a higher position, but also the best room in the *terreno*. This private space, called "el *cantón del Mudo*" (*Mudo's* house), measured about four square meters and *el Mudo* kept it very clean. This room had a window, with no glass but with a mosquito net, and also had a mattress and blankets, as well as a collection of videos and cartoons. His *cantón* was a source of pride for him. A day before showing me his *cantón*, and especially to my colleague Raquel, *el Mudo* rushed in for perfuming it with a hygiene spray, which further highlighted the contrast with the other rooms of the wasteland. During the *Mudo's* leading period the *banda* moved towards a more egalitarian image, but behind that public face the diversity of internal subtle distinctions remained.

A moverse los morritos y a mocharse las chamaconas (May young children apply themselves and may hot girls share everything)

I remember well when *el Mudo* and other Bucareli kids suddenly appeared before the Marroquí *banda*, also known as *Casa de Todos* (Everyone's House). Screaming as only they could do, they gave the impression that a new gamines group invaded the *terreno*. This soon turned out to be part of the "transbanda" dynamics. Five to ten years ago, the Marroquí kids were as young as the Bucareli kids. They knew that they had not to compete with those children, since both groups earned divergent survival niches. The Bucareli boys had access to children's homes, which was much more difficult for Marroquí kids because they had the reputation of being rebellious. Among Juárez's gamines crime was limited to petty theft to downtown cars; they were not yet ready for *cortinazos* (robberies to appliance stores) that some older guys committed with certain frequency.

In those places where survival activities concurred the two *bandas* did not compete for the space. The Bucareli boys begged outside of the *terreno* they lived in or at the Juárez's metro station, while Marroquí girls begged at their own street. In fact, the gamines could never compete in collecting alms with Marroquí young mothers, as they were used to beg holding a baby and sometimes another toddler. Meanwhile, Marroquí boys used to guard

cars and wash windshields at intersections nearby their street.⁷ The Bucareli boys had to work much less than Marroquí kids, as they could turn to children's homes, and if they worked they always did it in their own neighborhood.

The Marroquí *banda* took advantage of the presence of Juárez's gamines, since the latter bestowed the former the appearance of being a group of street children. Thus, the tender age of the gamines caused that Marroquí's *terreno* was an even more attractive target for charity promoters. It was also possible that, from time to time and in small doses, some Marroquí influential guys sold cocaine or marijuana to the little boys. Only once I noticed tensions between the two groups; this happened when the Bucareli boys stole the building materials that the Marroquí children had previously stolen.

Regardless the possible purchase of drugs, the Bucareli gamines had their own reasons for maintaining relationships with the Marroquí kids. For example, this relationship made it easier to have access to charitable organizations they had not yet known. Furthermore, due to the emphasis the media put in that period, "La Casa de Todos" had already become a national symbol of street children in resistance against police violence. The Marroquí *banda* was also seen by other street children as a wild group (*pinches desmadrosos*), so the Bucareli gamines in a way admired it. But what most attracted the interest of the gamines toward the Marroquí *banda* was precisely their qualities. On one occasion I witnessed how the kids took advantage of their good relationship with the Marroquí kids to impress another child that belonged to the Tacuba *banda*, praising the large size of the group of their allies, as well as the presence of strong men and especially that among them there were "lots and lots of girls".

"*Transbanda*" dynamics were not made from Juárez to Marroquí unilaterally, since a reverse process was observed at the end of 1994. Intervention played an important role and, in order to understand the changes that occurred in the Bucareli's *terreno*, it is important to consider what happened with the Marroquí *banda*. As a result of police violence and television viewing interest, that wasteland had become an icon of economic investment. Political and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) negotiated looking for an alternative venue, and soon there were rumors warning that the inhabitants of the Marroquí *terreno* could get, through this negotiation, new apartments. As a result, young couples with babies increased within the Marroquí population. Thus, the weakest members of the *banda* –mostly single adults and younger kids– became uncomfortable among these families and chose to go to Bucareli's *terreno*.

The stubborn resistance of the Marroquí *banda* and its ties to a basic policy bore fruit. Therefore, on December 24, 1994, a large building was opened as a shelter ("in order that

the homeless could celebrate Christmas"). This affected the Bucareli gamines in different ways. From that date, gamines could use this extra space where they could stay, meet other street children, watch TV and use *activo*. However, the Juárez boys were not the only ones who split their time between the new shelter and the Bucareli *terreno*. Several members of the Marroquí *banda* did the same. Generally, these members had the opportunity to stay in the new shelter, but preferred the freedom of self-destruction allowed by the Juárez's *terreno* instead of the straitjacket that meant the programs of detoxification, care and regulated inhalation of the new shelter.

At least 10 children and adolescents moved from Marroquí to Bucareli, as well as a single man about 26 years old called *el Mono* (the Monkey). Five women also moved out from the *Casa de Todos* and from its intervention programs to take refuge in the Bucareli inhalers area. Three girls –Hella, Lorelei and Megaira– were not comfortable within the Marroquí families. They lived alone, since they had no partner or because their potential partner was in jail. None of these three girls were interested in charitable programs: Hella had no children and the children of the other three were taken away. A fourth girl, Mephitis, had been thrown out from Marroquí allegedly for being too aggressive and uncontrollable during her intoxication with *activo*. The fifth girl, Gloria, aged 22, was the mother of four children and was different because she did have a substantial influence in the Marroquí *banda*. Gloria was a visitor: she did not *stay* at the *terreno* but came to gab, ie to talk and inhale *activo*.

Drastic fluctuations regarding the number of members are common in all *bandas* or street populations. But this time a fundamental alteration in the *banda* took place in the composition of gender and age. As a result of the presence of women, the Bucareli boys began organizing their *terreno* in a way that resembled the *Casa de Todos*, establishing differences between private and public places and making the space a little cleaner.

Except for Hella, the Marroquí girls were quite older than the Bucareli gamines. The girls could have been too weak to stay in the *Casa de Todos* but all, except Hella, got favorable positions in Bucareli. Physically, these girls were stronger, had more experience living in *banda* and knew how to lead street children. For example, Mephitis, the outcast, was able to fight with knives; Gloria, the influential mother, was known for her verbal skills ("so occasionally we called her *la Pelangocha* [the Obscene]"). This was how pseudofamily ties were developed between some of these young women and the youngest Bucareli boys. For example, a 7- or 8-year-old gamín walked behind Gloria always asking her if she accepted to be his mother and putting his head over her shoulder.

But obviously, the Marroquí girls were young too, and the Bucareli gamines never hide their sexual arousal for

them. Sindri, aged 10, once commented on the Marroquí *terreno*: "Oh yeah, I saw the *chamaconas* (hot girls) there! That was the first thing I saw when I got there". It is not surprising that romantic relationships arose between Marroquí girls and Bucareli gamines. Sindri, the little one, used to invent pet names to refer to his *chamacona*, Mephitis, who was easily twice his age. One day he jumped for joy, did a somersault and exclaimed: "I'm so happy! The *Papelerita* is coming!"

Sometimes, courtship involved an exchange of goods and solvents, as was probably the case with Lorelei. Unlike the others, Lorelei looked clean and wore underwear lingerie. In Marroquí, it was known that she invited visitors to the *terreno* to make love with them. There were rumors – never mentioning names – that Marroquí boys supposedly had to wait in line to have sex with a girl "who did not even charge them". However, it would be a mistake to see Lorelei and Mephitis just as pitiful girls who allowed being mistreated. Once, Lorelei allowed two little boys to get between her legs and touch her breasts but, when she noticed that I was watching them, she told them to leave and return at another time.

In slang terms, "*los morritos empezaron a moverse y las chamaconas a mocharse*" (young children started to apply themselves and hot girls to share everything). The gamines did everything they could to provide the girls with money, solvents and food in exchange for a mixture of maternal love and sex. For the girls, their sexuality represented a means to negotiate: instead of being victims of bad boys, Mephitis and Lorelei had the power to send gamines to the streets to beg in exchange for her favors. Sexual relations, by age categories, were characterized by barter, games and curiosity. Nevertheless, Mephitis ended in a more stable relationship with *el Chulo*, from whom, according to her, she was pregnant, but later had an abortion due to a knife fight.

El Mudo was a special case. Obviously, in the Marroquí *terreno* he could not have the position he enjoyed in Bucareli. (Once, in the *Casa de Todos*, I saw *Mudo* pretending he was inhaling and immediately he showed me that his *mona* was not impregnated with *activo*). The Marroquí boys considered *Mudo* as any other street child – as another young inhaler who was trying to get his share of whatever available; however, some Marroquí girls considered him differently. *El Mudo* had an affair with Hella, but later he abandoned her; he slept in hotels with Graciela, who had the reputation of being a bit more expensive than the other girls. Also, he used to help Gloria, the *pelangocha* mother, to pay the costs of her newborn (the baby could well have been *Mudo's* son but, at the same time, *el Mudo* could pass as Gloria's brother). So, in the end, *el Mudo* spent hundreds of pesos in his *chamaconas*, who seemed to compete for their favors and jealously compared how they got from him every day. Gloria even learned *Mudo's* sign language.

For a while, Mephitis and Lorelei had influence on the *banda* and each girl had a separate room in the *terreno*. Their popularity among the group was also highlighted in the graffiti of the ruined building where their names appeared with the *Mudo's* slogan. In the neighborhood the girls were identified as *jefas* (leaders) of the *banda*. The change in the *banda's* gender composition ended up with the last trace of the group's misogynist discourse: with the girls playing a role in the formal leadership stories of the Bucareli gamines. However, gender reversal can not be interpreted as a conversion of such boys into non-misogyny. Gamines accepted Mephitis and Lorelei not only because they had strong inclinations towards them, but also because these girls had the means and the position to be respected. This took a different pattern when the latter was not the case.

Hella's tragic case illustrates well the generation of indifference regarding certain street girls. Back then, Hella was 13 or 14 years old, as the gamines, and thus she established a string of affairs with many of them. After being abandoned again and again, Hella cried and tried desperately to return to the last lost love. Both girls and boys from the *banda* spoke negatively about Hella: "I think she has AIDS", "she's a fucking crybaby!" Hella's boyfriends even reproached her for a behavior that they themselves did daily: "That girl is a fucking *chema* (addict)!" Not only the *banda* rejected the weakest member, as there were also street educators acting in the same way: "Hella is a liar and a clown", "don't listen to her, she just seeks to attract attention".

As if this was not bad enough, it appears that the educators' warnings were not inappropriate. Hella's behavior matched her problems and also was part of them. One night of fieldwork, my colleague Raquel and I found Hella lying on the floor of the living room, in the middle of gamines who were inhaling and watching TV. The girl was pale and feverish, whispering the names of her deceased mother and of the Virgin of Guadalupe; she said that she was going to die. Except for Dromi, her current boyfriend, the other gamines showed more interest in the TV show (*Police Academy*) they were watching, than in what affected Hella. The girl accepted our proposal to go to a children's home. As she said she was too sick to walk, we carried her and went down by a narrow and dangerous stairs, in the middle of an impenetrable darkness. Once we were on the street, Hella was able to walk and, when we got to the children's home, she was given a dinner that made her feel better. However, even though she liked the children's home, Hella was determined not to stay there and we had to take her back to the *terreno*.

Then, some friction began to occur with another inhabitant of the *terreno*, Loki, aged 16, whose incessant pranks earned him the nickname *Asesino* (Murderer). Once he started throwing stones from the third floor of the Mar-

roquí *terreno* to children, street educators, neighbors and anyone else who happened to pass. Given the malicious pleasure of the gamines and their audience, Loki, being mischievous, injured Hella's head, who bled heavily. Loki also threw a bucket of mud to my head. Then, I told what happened to the Bucareli boys, and they immediately recognized the problem of controlling Loki:

Researcher: "Oh, yeah, I know Loki! This boy is extremely *desmadroso* (violent). How can we calm him down?"

Pecas: "With the *banda* for sure!"

Sindri: "We don't let him in anymore. Whenever he's here, he steals. The other day he stole 300 pesos from *Mudo* as well as two bottles of *activo*. He also stole me 20 pesos. Once he tried to steal my soup and Mephitis told him to refrain. Then, Loki hit her with a broom on her head (actually the broom broke), and Mephitis really pissed off and pulled out her knife. If Loki had not run fast, she would stab him. Recently we kicked him out again; now, when he comes, we throw stones at him so that he leaves. He's afraid of us".

This field note shows the irreversibility of the changes in the Juárez's *banda*. Mephitis knew how to control Loki only because she had learned to do it over the years that she had remained in Marroquí and Plaza Garibaldi. Children aged 10, as Sindri, obviously needed someone like her to be protected from violent people like Loki. Mephitis protection was even more needed as previous defenders, Lofar and Pooka, were not going to the *terreno* anymore.

In the above narration one can also appreciate the illusory qualities of the *banda*, because in reality it was never able to maintain a consistent policy towards Loki. Shortly after the conversation with *Pecas* and Sindri, I saw Loki and his comrade Duvalín in the bathroom located on the roof of the *terreno*. Along with all the other gamines, both were inhaling *activo* and watching TV, while masturbating quietly under their big pants. External forces also helped Loki to establish himself among the Bucareli boys. For instance, an Anglican minister, invited Loki to spend a weekend in the mountains with the *banda*.

With the arrival of more people to the neighborhood, conflicts between neighbors and street conflicts increased. Over and over again, gamines and their allies were thrown out from the *terreno*, only to occupy the place again shortly after. Stories of violence appeared in newspapers talking about street children in Bucareli. A rumor, which could not be corroborated, was also spread –allegedly there was a murder of a man committed by a child around metro Juárez. Gamines were increasingly involved in vandalism, such as parked cars burning. The first case of pyromania arose as a reaction of revenge after being thrown out from the *terreno*. According to newspaper photos, Lorelei had played an important role, since she was introduced as the "la capitana guapa" (the beautiful leader), who led a *banda* of destructive children.

Another pyrotechnic incident occurred during a popular protest against the repression to the Zapatista Movement in Chiapas. There were rumors that groups of porros (thugs) had ran riot to cause a violent reaction from the police towards protesters. But apparently, Bucareli and Marroquí kids were also involved. The next day photographs appeared in some newspapers in which they were dancing around two police cars on fire. This time, the girl identified as *capitana* (leader) of the gamines looked like Mephitis. Nevertheless, Jaibo, a guy of 15 who had recently arrived, could not remember anyone specifically who instigated the group. As Jaibo expressed it, with a hint of excitement in his eyes: "the truth is that we went there only to have fun; when cars were burning, people screamed: *Hurrah for the street children!*"

The polarization in the neighborhood was partly due to the separation of Lofar, the former formal leader, who had skills to mediate between the *banda* and the neighbors. The Lofar's disappearance also involved the evaporation of the stories about a formal leadership, which served to soften conflicts and present gamines as an organized group. Obviously, an informal and dismissed leader, such as *el Mudo*, could not fill the gap. Another aspect that contributed to the polarization of relationships with the community was the presence of members of the Marroquí *banda*. Girls like Lorelei and Mephitis had learned much of the discourse of the *Casa de Todos*. They had learned a vocabulary of human rights and knew how fruitful could be to cite words from activists to defend themselves on the street. For example, they used to say: "We are also human beings", thus claiming their right for not being harassed by police. But also it is important to add that the activist discourse and the vandalism corresponded to the self-image of gamines as being *bien desmadrosos* (very wild), ie, as creators of a real chaos. In the absence of a recognized peace-making person as Lofar, gamines now had the opportunity to celebrate this.

A year later, in 1996, things had changed again. Intervention programs were finished at Marroquí. The great NGOs project ended up as a government service, designed for this special case and called "El Programa de Casa de Todos" (Everyone's House Program). While this entity imitated the rhetoric and ideals in order to provide basic support to street people, institutional dynamics tended to go in the opposite direction. The new shelter was closed after 10 months, so that the entire groups of Marroquí and Juárez were relocated in hotel rooms for four weeks. Most adults were evicted and then warned that they had to take care of themselves.

El Mono, the eternal bachelor who fled from Marroquí to Bucareli, was assigned by the project manager as leader of the little kids. He, like gamines, would be accommodated in a children's home on the outskirts of the city. Since the building of the children's home still had to be built, the manager invited them to collaborate in the construction. So, they had to work three days a week and return

to the Bucareli *terreno* the remaining four days. One day the kids stopped coming, and soon the whole project was terminated. The cycle of recycling the street children from their *terreno* to an institute, a hotel, a nonexistent children's home and back to the children illustrates that also public officials, politicians and NGOs generate their own *choros* (stories), ie illusory discourse about street children; and programs intended to diminish poverty can also become a *desmadre* (chaos).

Both Marroquí women and men were re-accommodated in other *terrenos*. Some moved to the poorest *terreno* of Fensalir, a wasteland in bad condition across the Marroquí street. Hella lost a tooth in a fight with a lover and moved to another *terreno* when her boyfriend Hungur when he was released from prison. Sindri lost an eye when he was looking after a drunk's car; this drunk attacked him in the middle of the night. Loki was shot in a similar situation and survived to tell the story. Mephtis became pregnant again and returned to Plaza Garibaldi. According to *el Chulo*, she went to her mother's house to give birth, as she had done with her other two children.

El Mono had compassion on the gamines and, even when the government withdrew its support completely, he stayed in the Bucareli *terreno*: after all, he did not have another option. In the eyes of the gamines, a 28-year man was considered an aging veteran on the streets and in institutes. *El Mono* taught gamines to look after cars; he also collected and redistributed payments. Meanwhile, neighbors expressed that *el Mono* took well care of the gamines. The boys were quiet again, and continued climbing the reinforced door installed by police to sleep in the caves of their *terreno*. As happened with Lofar two years before, some problems started in the apparent paternity of *el Mono*. The gamines regarded him highly for his heart of gold and his fighting skills, but despised him for being an addict inhaler. The gamines detested his aged appearance and said he was finished or wasted by the vice; however, they kept provided him with *activo*. Once *el Mono* told me: "before, the older people perverted children, but now children lead older people to the vice".

The *choros* (stories): moments of creativity and resilience

In this analysis it can be seen that even a relatively homogeneous group in terms of age and gender –as the Juárez's *banda*– became a group of street children that included other poor people. At a higher level of self-organization, the Juárez gamines were intimately linked to *bandas* that on average had one or two generations above the "cycle of street life".* Relationships of Juárez gamines with the Marroquí

* The term "cycle of street life" is borrowed from Fleisher,⁸ whose study on "beggars and thieves" in Seattle distinguishes among children, adolescents, youngsters and veterans.

banda emphasize the differentiation and coexistence of different ages within street culture. Precisely because of the age difference, these two *bandas* could be mixed and their members could move from one to another.

This article highlights the limitations of a discourse on street children where "children" and "adults" are mystified or distorted as opposite persons, as if they were antagonistic categories – mutually exclusive and internally homogeneous. In Mexico City, the *bandas* or communities of street "children" are composed mostly of youngsters; however, adults, toddlers and even babies constantly appear within its borders.

Age also plays an important role in the stories of the street children. Representing themselves as *machitos* –small masculinized men who rule their own society of gamines– the Bucareli boys created the illusion of a successful self-government with its own order and surveillance of its borders. The stories told on the formal leadership of an adult male and on the exclusion of women in the group were, at the moment, significant and communal,** even when the moments of banter and uncertainty indicated that children were aware that such stories were only *choros* or invented stories. Often these stories were adapted to the re-accommodation of adults in the group. Thus, the formal leadership discourse disappeared after Lofar's departure. Without this alleged pederast, gamines' explicit misogyny disappeared and, with the arrival of women to the *terreno*, gamines also began to like them. With *el Mono* some elements of the formal leadership discourse reappeared.

Age was the outstanding feature that differentiated the boss from the *carnales* (young united children). Lofar's age meant not only a significant advantage in resources, but also a difference in perception. An influential figure older than the rest of the *banda* may be easily regarded as leader, since the outside world assumes that among street children order is maintained through a formal hierarchy based on age.***

In other words, Lofar could be the leader because he had power and was old enough. When Lofar left the group, age differences became irrelevant or too small for formal

** The fantasies and lies of street children have been documented in several publications, but have rarely been the subject of anthropological research beyond their methodological implications.⁹ While social workers, psychologists and educators commonly see these fantasies and lies as a symptom of the unhappy existence of street children, some ethnographers interpret the stories as part of a list of survival. Aptekar,¹⁰ for example, sees the practice of storytelling as an "ability of street children to manipulate the public", which fulfills with the "psychological function" that allows them "to belong to a society that devalues them". Both notions of psychopathology and information management may be valid for particular cases, but they overlook the collective meanings contained in the illusions that street children have of themselves.

*** It is noticed that the representations of young adult leadership abound in the literature on street children, although there is little empirical evidence to refer to formal leadership (for the Colombian context, see Ennew¹¹ and, for the Peruvian case, see Gigengack).⁷ What I have found in Mexico, however, cannot be extrapolated so easily to other contexts. Life on the street seems to be more violent in Colombia and Peru than in Mexico City, and the formal leadership in street gangs could be a mechanism to deal with the extreme violence.^{9,12}

leadership. Under these circumstances, the Bucareli boys were organized or disorganized as any other *banda*, until *el Mono* showed up, who was as influential and older enough to be the leader.

El Mudo was not old enough to be the leader and, therefore, his position was more informal than Lofar's and *el Mono*'s position. However, the basis of his power reflected important aspects of both adults and then probably had more influence due to his resources and capabilities. The division of power among the *carnales* (united children) was more or less implicit for reasons of ideology (*carnalismo* or friendship) and of pragmatism (eg, the presentation of some *Mudo*'s things as collective goods). Petty theft, control of others' inhalation and other activities that confirmed the *Mudo*'s position were illegal, which justify the need to keep them underground. Lofar's and *el Mono*'s influence was based on the survival and self-destruction, but in this case the differences between the children and these two adults could not be hidden. To disguise the most illicit base of their subsistence, Lofar and *el Mono* had to emphasize their age and pretend to be leaders or father figures. In summary, being a legal age person was a condition and a reason to transform informal influence into formal leadership.

The negotiation with the outside world and the cultivation of a more orderly and decent picture may explain why, on two occasions, the Juárez's gamines accepted an adult as a leader. Nonetheless, an instrumental explanation as this one does not consider the expressive dimension of collective self-representation of this group. Many of the leadership stories focused on the ability of the leader to protect his *carnales* and avoid their self-destructive tendencies. The space between illusion and reality points out that the meaning of the *choro* lies in beautification of street life. Lofar and *el Mono* were willing to accept the role of leader because this gave them a witty reason to be in the *terreno*: they were there to protect the *carnales* and not for abusing of street children or of their solvents. For gamines themselves, the figure of a surrogate father masked uncomfortable contradictions. In this sense, Lofar proved to be both benign and harmful to gamines, and *el Mono* played a positive and a negative role at the same time.*

In a similar bifurcation age changed gender relations. It has always been stated that street girls suffer from two types of vulnerability: their poverty and their female conditions. Although Hella was near this double victimization, she was not a passive victim. For the other girls and young mothers of the *banda*, the situation became even more complicated, since there were adult strengths and competitions. Their femininity, on the other hand, offered them opportunities

to negotiate with the Juárez's gamines. Actually, women did comply with their civilizing task, and managed to make the group and the *terreno* more presentable. The mixture of maternal and carnal love allowed Lorelei and Mephitis to occasionally act as if they were formal leaders of the *banda*.

Maternal love involved emotions and meanings. Maternal care could have been equally important for these young women, because it was possible that certain compensation was offered them for maternal deficiencies in their own homes. But the task of being a street children mother is structurally impossible, especially due to the constant re-accommodation of children and women. Thus, the meaning of the pseudomaternity within the *banda* probably goes beyond itself, and has to do with the ambivalence in economic exchanges between the *morros* (young children) who *se mueven* (apply themselves) and the *chamaconas* (hot girls) who *se mochán* (share everything). The pseudofamily tie that empowered both children and women to face the awareness that, despite everything, the existing reciprocity between them is based on forms of child labor and sexual transaction.

The symbolic significance of surrogate mothers and fathers can be detected in the terms that the Bucareli gamines used for describing themselves: *desmadrosos* and *despapayosos* (wild boys). In the popular vocabulary, these terms refer to the creators of *desmadre* and *despapaye*, respectively, chaos and minor disorder. In the jargon of street children, these terms also refer to the inhalation of glue and solvents. It is noteworthy that, literally, these words refer to those persons who have no mother (*des-madrosos*) and those who have no father (*des-papayosos*). The distinction is important because not having a mother is worse than not having a father. The absence of the mother represents pure chaos and, therefore, is taken as the most appropriate symbol for street children. "Motherless destroyers" is the motto of the forgotten.

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* Cohen¹³ wrote about the myth and rhetoric of community equality. The rhetoric of street children about formal leadership is rather a myth of community hierarchy.

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