

And Saúl comes back, rocking back and forth on his heels: "Not everything has to be so obvious like in your songs. There's an interior landscape, too, *cabrón*."

By the time Maldita stumbles onto the stage, the walls of the club are sweating. Everyone's hair is pasted onto their foreheads in the dripping wet air. I inch my way through the crowd, slipping on stray bottles on the unseen floor below. The balconies seem on the verge of collapse, dozens of kids hanging over the railing.

The sound coming from the stage convulses, lurches: Roco, Sax, Pato, Aldo and Lobo are floating away on tequila-inspired riffs (they've been partying since early afternoon), steamrolling crazily toward a

great abyss, drunk boys daring each other as they look down into the darkness and laugh. The anarchy doesn't perturb the crowd in the least. On the dance floor a thousand bodies match Maldita's wild energy leap for leap.

Roco loses his breath during the melodramatic, held note on "Morenaza." Sax stumbles through solos, barely keeping up with the rushed rhythms, flapping across the stage in his loose shirt, waving his arms, giggling. Lobito is oblivious to everything but his own private torpor, slamming away at bloodied congas (he ripped his hand open during the second song).

Punkish youths leap on stage and tumble back into the crowd. Now Roco himself takes a diving leap of faith into the mass of steaming bodies. Now Sax. Now Roco is pushing Pato, guitar and all, into the pit.

The band launches into "Querida," a hardcore cover of pop megastar Juan Gabriel's hit. Roco leaps skyward so high that he bangs his head on the red spotlight overhead. Saúl Hernández suddenly climbs onto the stage in all his tall, dark elegance, plays with a microphone-become-penis between his legs, hugs Roco like a long-lost brother, throws his head back, closes his eyes, and then without warning he too dives out onto the dance floor, where the slamming youths edge ever closer to absolute madness.

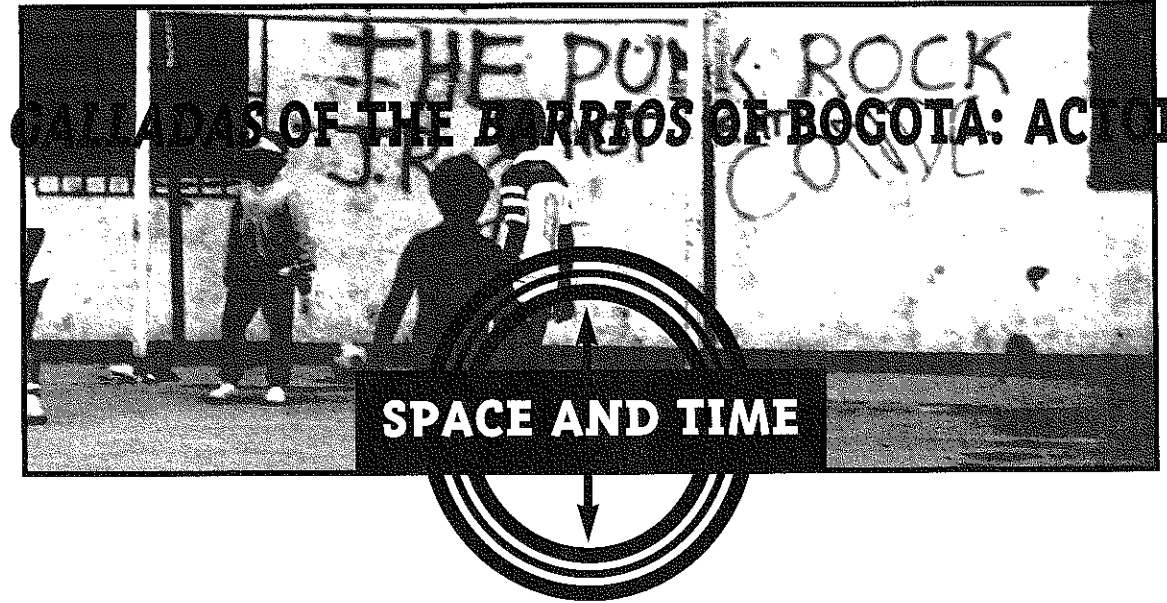
As the crowd filed out afterward—punks, ex-hippies, ex-Marxists, kids from the *barrios*—Lobo is nursing his hand, bleary-eyed in the arms of his girlfriend. Aldo is downing more beer at the bar. Pacho, the only one who played the gig straight, is talking with a small group of fans. Roco is nowhere to be found. Sax is back behind the percussion section, weeping into a friend's arms—in a few minutes he'll make a bizarre attempt at taking off his pants and pass out.

Tonight, Maldita have fallen apart. Tomorrow they'll wake up, hung-over as hell, in the city where *rocero* never quite dies.

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## Pilar Riaño

### THE CALLADAS OF THE BARRIOS OF BOGOTÁ: ACTORS IN

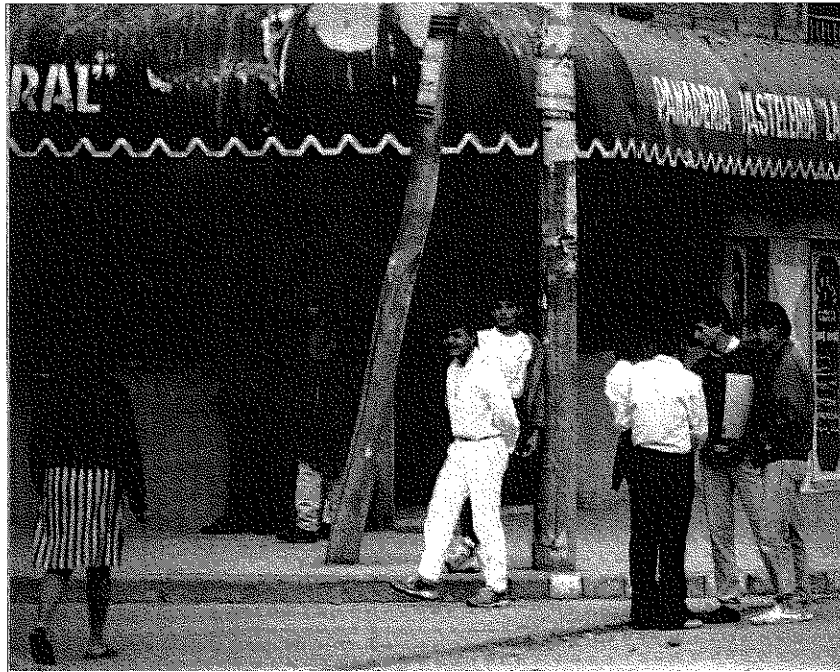


**P**opular Culture Studies in Latin America has criticized the reductionist approach of essentialist, romantic or exclusivist views of popular culture, insisting that "the popular" should be approached as a heterogeneous, dynamic and conflictive cultural matrix. In the case of Latin America, this cultural matrix is grounded in a history of colonization in which, despite the destruction of the political and social structures of indigenous populations, indigenous knowledge and cultural forms could not be completely exterminated. The peculiarities of colonial history of the region have accentuated ethnic and cultural fusions.

"*Mestizaje*" represents not only the defining element of this popular cultural expression, but also the key device for social, economic and symbolic interaction of Latin American societies. This fusion, however, has not dissolved indigenous and local cultures into a unified "*mestizo*" culture. "*Mestizaje*" in the Latin American context represents not just cultural blending, but the creation of a new identity, "the *mestizo* identity," that is continuously and sectorally re-created with new fusions: the rural and the urban, the massive and the popular, the "modern" and the "pre-modern," the ethnic and the new social actors. Plurality and "impurity" are probably the best descriptive elements in approaching the curious mixture of cultural backgrounds and the systems of values contained in, for example, the cultural practices of poor urban dwellers. The various cultural practices of street youth of the *barrios* of Bogotá that are described in this article illustrate the dynamics of such *mestizaje*.

"Yes brother everybody changes for good or for bad and they are distinct and I see the *barrio* and in despite of all the buildings and whatever I believe this is the same shit like when I grew up, like my best friend and my best brother, they never let me down. As the song says 'Time passes/ and we grow older' and I believe more fucked up than before. But, whatever, the best school I ever had is my *barrio*, the university of life, here in Kennedy..."

(Paco el Tenaz)



April 16, 1988. It was 8 p.m when we reached the bus parking lot of the *barrio* "María Eugenia." From there, an unlighted and unpaved space, we could hear the lively noises of a clear and warm Saturday night. The smell of dust was in the air: dust spread out everywhere, on walls, doors and windows, covering stalls, sidewalks and buses. However, below layers of dust, a colorful scenery could be perceived. Houses in bright colors, doors and windows in combinations of colors. As we started walking, a cloud of dust circled our feet.

Surrounded by three rows of houses, the parking lot is located at the south-west side of the *barrio*. On the south-east side of the parking lot two young couples enjoyed the privileged darkness of the corner. In a straight line to the bus stop, three young members of a *gallada* [young males group] stood by the outside stall of the *fritanguería* [fried food vendor] drinking beer. The fresh smell of their still-wet hair was filtered by the smell of the pork sausages, *morcillas* [blood puddings] and fried potatoes on display in the stall.

Miguel, a *barrio* resident and a member of one of its *galladas*, was walking with me. Looking at the three young men, he commented: "You see, they're getting ready for the night, they look very *pintosos* [sharp]. They're get-

ting together later to move on to their favourite *tienda*, [small corner store]. By this time, if they've not been invited to a party, they'll go find one." The three and some other guys from the same block have hung out together since their childhood. Their friendship is based on a *ñero* relation [fellowship relation] of common likes and mutual help.

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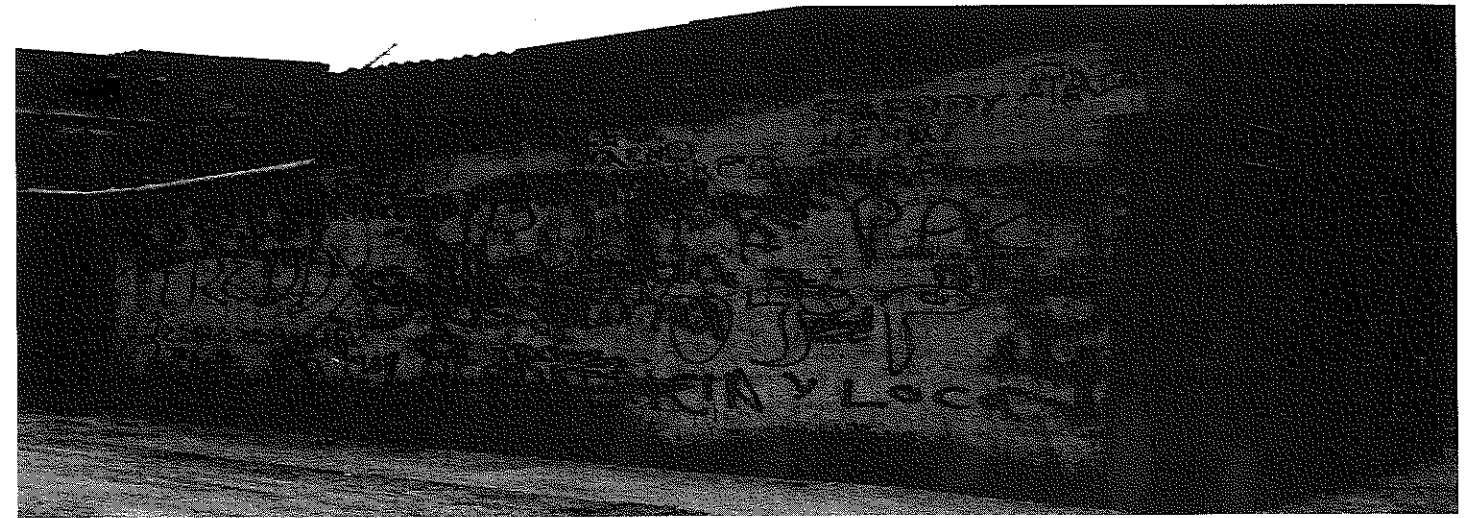
The *gallada*, an informal group, constitutes the basic cultural unit and most meaningful institution for young people of Bogotá's *barrios*. As the literature on youth cultures has emphasized, the informal group represents the space where youth find a collective response to their search of identity.

The group constitutes the culture's material base that is tied by friendship relations and by an implicit body of group norms. In the *galladas* studied, the group norms are basically defined in terms of: 1. loyalties to the group (when and how specific actions or attitudes are considered double-crossing); 2. a group's ways of 'mamar gallo' [kidding], or of relating with women; 3. a group's weekly routine (what to do, when and how). Group membership is highly recognized and valued. The sense of group is closely tied to the sense of belonging to the *barrio*.

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The three young men standing in the *fritanguería* belong to a *gallada* known as *plásticos* [plastic people]. Although this name is only used by other *galladas* when they refer to these young people, Miguel explained, " '*plásticos*' are guys [*manes*] who always want to have the latest fashion either in clothes or in hair style. They just want to know the latest dance movements and to listen to Disco music. They dress like *Menudos* [the current teen-idol group], tight t-shirts, slip-on shoes and close fitting pants. They are very *pintosos* [sharp], beautiful!" For young people, to be a *plástico* means to belong to a kind of *gallada* with a distinctive set of activities and likes (good clothes in light colours, disco music, rivalries with other *galladas*).

We walked towards the *barrio*'s main road. The *barrio* "María Eugenia" was the first settlement in this



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area 25 years ago, when it began as charity mission of a rich Colombian man who built 640 houses to be given to large, destitute Catholic families. He did not, however, provide public services. It was the community which did this through a system of self-help. The community built the access road to the *barrio*, opened the trenches to install the sewage system and demanded public electricity, water fountains, telephones, public school, public transportation and community centers. The *barrio* was marked as an illegal settlement until six years ago when it acquired legal status.

Each one of the twenty-five blocks of the *barrio* faces the main road. Taking this road we walked down to the *barrio*'s final blocks. In the very last *esquina* [corner] of the *barrio* there was a group of five youths. The dark clothes they had on seemed to me an echo of the mysterious darkness of the bushes next to this block. It is a place feared for its countless stories of hold-ups, murder and rape. Dark clothes, long jackets of imitation leather and boots signal a *gallada* of *malos* or, as they call themselves, *vivos* [sharks]. By their *esquina*, they stood making a circle, three of them leaning on the wall and the others facing it. The *esquina* is known and respected as belonging to the *gallada* of Runcho [nickname of its leader]. They kept a very small distance between themselves. Their hands were in the pockets of their jackets and their eyes were watchful.

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Popular identities -who we are, where we are - are inextricably rooted in a sense of place which popular groups build up throughout the appropriation of specific spaces as a stage for social relations and communicative exchange. In the *gallada*'s use of space one can observe evidence of this process. The *esquina* is probably the best representation of this. It has been marked as youth territory and the space has acquired a meaning related to the individuals, their group and their social practices.

In the corner, what probably was a very good story told by one of the members of the *gallada* produced a collective outburst of laughter followed by playful kicks and boxing punches. As Esteban, a very well-known leader of a *gallada* of *vivos* in this *barrio*, once told me,

When you're not working, you meet your friends to have a joint, to drink, to chat: 'we went out last night to jump someone and look brother what I got was a leg full of lead; it was a man that we were going to hold up'. Yes, it happens any time you see a *gallada*: 'so what, *compadre* [buddy, originally used for relations among parents and godparents], are we going to get high? and go and start to 'hablar mierda' [shit around].

As I walked to the west alongside the main road, the *barrio* appeared as if it were breathing. Hundreds of people flowed around corners, streets, houses, *tiendas* and restaurants to the main road and its corners. A communicative exchange expanded from the *barrio*'s beginning to its end. From sidewalk to sidewalk, the road had been occupied. There were kids playing, groups of people, men and women, either chatting in a circle or rocking back and forth. On the road, cars, motor bikes and bicycles snaked their way through the frenetic movement. Human voices and the noises of car motors, horns and several stereos blasting created a constant din.

Public electricity is scarce in the *barrio*. The main road has a few lamp-posts positioned far from each other. Somehow, this dimness was counterweighted from below. Each store - and there are at least four in each block facing the main road - had its bright bulbs on, its doors and windows open. To my left was the *panadería* (bakery) of Don Velasquez. In the corner, the *gallada* of Milton (its leader) was waiting for a *rumba* or something to do.

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It is this Friday's waiting-for-something-to-do which reveals a group sense of time regulated by a cyclical organization. The weekend is the cycle's point of departure and arrival. A cycle begins with the Friday-and-Saturday-rumba-night and continues through the day on Sundays (the sports day) and the evenings at the "esquina" during the week. The expectations for the return of the weekend's ritual pull out group dynamics and temporality. This sense of time presents a significant continuity with a popular temporality that evolves around the community's 'fiesta' and its return. This experience of time contradicts a linear organization of time intrinsic to production routines and hegemonic logic.

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The wall that members of Milton's gallada were leaning on displayed in big, messy letters the names and nicknames of some of the members of the group. Members of this gallada are between 22 and 25 years old. Those that are unemployed at the moment constitute the more active and permanent members of the group. Depending on the job situation, gallada members will continuously enter and re-enter the group. The gallada is for them a place to be when they do not have a full-time job. That night one of them was trying, on his tiptoes, a new Salsa dance movement to a song from the Colombian Salsa group "Niche." Meanwhile they waited. Miguel commented,

You always try to feel alright but when you feel bored, then you say 'well brother, what are we doing?' You're there in your corner speaking, mamando gallo [to tease, to poke fun at], goofing around, dancing but waiting for something, looking for what you are going to end up doing. You are always waiting for something.

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Free time is highly prized by the gallada's members. It is group time and therefore how to pass this time represents one of the group's biggest concerns.

The leisure time of Latin American popular youth exhibits differences from European or North American working class youth. The "Barrio Popular" is not just a unit of habitation. The barrio has a multifunctional character (leisure, reproduction, work, education) that influences the different social and cultural processes occurring there. The distinction between times for work and times for leisure is not clear in this place. Popular youth's leisure time, if seen as "free time," cannot be characterized plainly as "non-work." As with other popular social relations, it is characterized by its multifunctionality and, therefore, is not just associated with consumption and the attempts to resolve symbolically problems of work, family and future. The space of the group, in the case of Bogota's galladas, offers as well a space to resolve materially basic needs of social security and basic survival. Galladas

are part of a network of services and self-help that functions within the barrio. Group members and sometimes their families exchange favours and services as part of their group's taken-for-granted duties.

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In the tienda of Don Jose, the 'social club' of the barrio, the other members of Milton's gallada have started a second round of drinks. Going for a drink to their favorite tienda is part of a gallada's ritual activities during the weekend. It is, as well, the main occasion for social exchange with other youths and adults. The activity unites the group in long, intense sessions of drinking, chatting and listening to music. Gallada's drinking times are afterwards a favorite theme of discussion at the esquina. To remember drinking bouts provides an occasion for mockery, criticism and group reminiscences. For the drinkers, that night was a rumba night and this meant to be ready for anything, to drink heavily, to party until dawn, to hang out on the streets and to be alert because at any moment they might have to fight. These are the moments where the gallada's honour and *hombria* [manhood] are in play. But 'getting in trouble' is taken as part of the fun and excitement 'philosophy' that galladas' members share. As Miguel said,

you see it's not a big deal, in a gallada you just want to feel all right and this is the way you see life, like de paseo [a wild-weekend, to take 'life' easy], 'giving time to time' because solutions come later, to have fun in life even though you might be in trouble, you just 'take it easy, maaan'!

We saw all kinds of small businesses in the next two blocks: five-and-dime stores, a roast chicken stand, a beauty parlor and a meat market. In the corner of one of these blocks were seven young men. This is the corner known as the *esquina de los plásticos*. It is Saturday night, the time to wear their best clothes: white runners, tight t-shirts and light colored pants. Their gestures and clothes reminded me of the Latin American Disco music group *Menudo*, a quintet of youngsters with patent costuming and set up choreographies that have had large audiences among Latin American teenagers.

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This concern to be "in-fashion" appeared during the late seventies and mainly during the 80's. The incorporation of youth and women into the job market occurred at the same time as the implementation of a strategy to strengthen Colombia's domestic market. The strategy involved the incorporation of popular youth into the trend of consumerism through fashion and leisure activities. Up until then, popular youth cultures could not be seen as being shaped through a conspicuous consumerism; rather they were more concerned with the defense of their territory and the maintenance of group loyalties. The galladas of *plásticos* emerged in the middle of the 70's to be the first popular youth group to exhibit a

more explicit concern for mass consumption and fashion; specifically a concern for looking "well-dressed" as the symbol of their "distinction." They exhibited a patent style of clothing concentrating on detail and cleanliness; a style that has come to identify the "new-elegance" of the young-urban-male of the barrios populares.

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In this gallada of *plásticos*, they all talked at the same time, looked at who was passing by and played physical games. Three of them were huddled down while they shared a cigarette. One of them told us 'what-they-were-doing':

killing time, in the gallada nobody is quiet, you never get to talk about serious things, while you are on the corner looking at people passing back and forth you are kidding, bugging people, and telling stories. You get to comment on them, you are *rajando del pueblo*, [cutting everybody down] in very different ways. At times you can judge a *Concurso de Feas* [Miss Ugly contest] or imagine *Jardines de Sucias* ['filthy women's garden,' you are there in your corner so you try to get some excitement.

For the galladas, the corner is a very strategic space; it allows them to move and it is the 'best' view point: "to 'watch!' girls, the weird things happening, to know when the *rayas* [police] are coming, to gossip and to make fun of everything you can." Moreover it is their 'liberated' territory: 'nobody can make you move from there'. The daily, nocturnal and weekend routines take the *esquina* as reference space. Miguel commented, "A day of *vagancia* [day off] in these groups starts at 7 a.m. Each one goes to the same *esquina* without having a shower. To let the others know you are there, you use signals such as hissing, clapping or throwing small rocks onto your friend's roof. Little by little, everybody drifts in."

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Relations with women embody the basic structuring principles of gallada moral values. Women are perceived as

both objects of sexual pleasure, fantasies and humour, and as almost sacred symbols of high values of wisdom, intuition and care.

The ethnography reveals the sexist orientation of most gallada activities on the corners and the streets. The speaking of passing women in terms of "Miss Ugly contests, the imagining of gardens of *sucias* [literally filthy women], the nicknaming of women according to their physical features, the sexual fantasies and retelling of sexual stories, all operate under the same principles: a vision that dissects and objectifies women.

Represented in the figure of the mother, women are associated with tough-wisdom, intuitiveness and sensitive understanding. Mothers (as mothers not as women) are seen as wise and are sought after for advice.

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On the other side of this street, a woman had a stall to sell *arepas* [corn bread] with pork sausages. The strong smell of the pork fat surrounded us. At the same time we perceived the smell of a roasted chicken stand and the smoke of a *bazuco* [crack] cigarette recently lit at the corner. The street is well-known for its drug dealers, *ollas de bazuco* [crack houses] and marijuana. People come from all over the area to buy drugs here. Four *vivos* were leaning against the wall, cigarettes held in their mouths, while their heads were slightly bent. One of them wore a black *ranchero* hat, another a soccer cap. Their hands were in the pockets of their dark jackets. Standing at the corner that has been witness to their life-games, they watched people of the *barrio* pass back and forth.

Their postures reminded me of Carlos Gardel, an Argentinian tango singer who left to posterity the gestures and looks from the *lunfardo* world [low urban world] of Buenos Aires. They are a gallada of tough people, *malos* or *vivos*, young people engaged in illicit activities (drug dealers, thieves); those for whom life is a matter of sharpness.

The members of the gallada of *vivos* greeted us and asked Miguel the 'what's-happening-tonight' question. The loyalties they maintain with the neighbors are very strong. Miguel commented,

When the police come to the barrio for a *requisa* [to ask for I.D and a military service card] or when the *rayas* [secret agents] are around, the barrio's people have the doors open and call you: 'mano, mano.'





When the police get there, you just get into any house that has the door open; if not, anyway, somebody's going to open the door for you; because you are bien [all right], they're nice to you. Here, the vivos protect you even more, they'll go and defend you and then they'll walk you home. Once something happened to me - it was a New Year's day - "Runcho" put his revolver to my head and he said 'Put a [bitch] hand over all that you have' and I said, 'but man, what's wrong with you, don't you know me?' 'Oh! sorry man', he had a large 38, he hugged me, offering to walk me home but I told him I wasn't going there. That was on the dawn of the New Year! 'O.K, man Happy New Year!' then, he kissed me. Fifteen days later he got killed!

As much as the kind of clothes worn, vivo language differentiates them from other galladas. As Esteban, the leader of a gallada of vivos, said, 'This language is born from your own self, from us, it is born with the vivos, it is not written down or anything'. Creating new words and expressions almost every day, vivo language is full of metaphors and words of altered meaning. When the members of Esteban's gallada talk, they use a drawl, stretching the end of words, and always putting the accent on the final syllable.

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A group's way of talking constitutes an important distinctive element for popular youth. Popular youth language appropriated the expressiveness of a popular language that is built on the richness of description and on the concreteness of discourse. It is a language full of metaphors, ruptures, imprecisions and ambiguities. The language of galladas offers a way of isolation from the 'others.' Codes and signs define them as a group.

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One block further, we saw the side wall of Señor Castillo's house completely filled with graffiti. Pablo, his son, is 16. His gallada hangs around this esquina. The group was carefully listening to one of its members. His story was followed by noisy laughter. Miguel commented, "Usually there's somebody in the group who's a good storyteller. Everybody likes him because he can laugh at anything. You can stand out in a gallada for different things: for the way of gambling, for your toughness, for your street smarts, for the way you tease, but very importantly for the way you raja del pueblo [cut everybody down]."

From the unlit street, we came to the light of one of the most popular meeting places for young people, the billiard room of Rafa. Cream-coloured walls contrasted with the green billiard tables and the red wash of the floor. On one wall was a beer poster of "the sexy woman" and beside this, a poster of an unfamiliar landscape of purple-white

flowers, green-red trees and a river of very clean water. On Friday and Saturday nights, Rafa's billiard room receives more clients than usual. All the billiard tables were in use with groups of men drinking aguardiente and beer. The great number of cigarettes smoked and the absence of open windows created a curtain of smoke that filtered the flashes of light coming from the light bulbs on the ceiling.

Young people coming to Rafa's billiard-pool room belong to various galladas from the middle part of the barrio María Eugenia or from the other two neighbouring barrios. Two billiard players, while waiting their turn, followed the fast beat of the song "Marcela," a top hit with the Merengue rhythm, that was playing on the radio:

*I do not know if time has ended or maybe  
if it started  
about the future I dreamed that it was  
you who I loved  
Make my day, without you I can not  
live, Marcela.*

The dancers had their hands up while their bodies swung with the rhythm; they moved their feet at a very fast pace to Caribbean Merengue, the new king of rhythm. The swinging pace of this musical rhythm is vividly expressed in the excerpt from the novel *Reina Rumba*:

*I'm called negrita sandungera because I dance with  
a lot of swing, I do not know what it is that comes  
inside my body when I feel a merengue, my hips get  
anxious and my heart leaps."*

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A consciousness of body movement and of its endless rhythmic possibilities has been discovered by Colombian youth through dance. In their walking on the streets where risk and chances of dangerous surprises are always present, popular youth have reinforced this consciousness of the body. On the street their bodies need to be always alert. Their bodies express the rhythmic sensuality acquired with the dance but with the co-ordinated, measured and watchful movement learned on the streets. In the daily life on the street, in the gallada's most routinized activities, music is a means to define identity and to remember.

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Rafa, the billiard room owner, is 28 years old. He has been a member of the gallada of *Deportistas* since he was sixteen. As a member of this gallada he used to play on behalf of the barrio in mini-soccer tournaments. He started working when he was 13. When he was 16 he got a steady job in a factory. As many other people have done in these barrios, he asked for an advance of his retirement payment to fulfill a dream he had had in mind for a long time: that of a small business in the barrio that could provide an additional income for his family. During the week, the billiard

room is kept open by his parents, who own a tienda in the front block. During the nights and weekends Rafa is in charge with the help of his brothers.

As we were leaving we met Bolita. His black curly hair was very long, he dressed in tight ripped jeans, jean jacket, handcrafted leather bracelets and a bead necklace. Bolita belongs to a gallada of roqueros [rockers]. While he waited for his friends, Bolita wandered around the barrio. His friends were coming back from downtown Kennedy. On Saturday afternoons they meet with other roqueros in the minitecas of Kennedy. A "miniteca" is the afternoon opening of a discotheque where young people (13-25) can get in. To enter, there is a cover charge, and inside they can buy any kind of liquor at lower prices than at night. Galladas

of Roqueros maintain close relationships with the other galladas of Kennedy. More frequently than the other galladas, however, Roqueros hang out in downtown Kennedy and in Kennedy's disco bars. Roqueros from all over the region meet in downtown Kennedy.

Music is a part of almost any activity of roquero galladas. Rock is the background music for their street encounters as well as the music they look for in minitecas and at parties. Roqueros often rent a big stereo, speakers and music, decorating a house for a dance that goes without stopping for as long as two days at a time. Anybody can go if they pay the cost of admission. Bolita told us about the parties:

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*To have fun, to feel bacano [groovy], to pick up girls,  
and to listen to rock music. We took it easy at parties,  
you know, we didn't want problems, but other people,  
the plásticos, wanted to 'ponerse las fiestas de  
ruana' go crazy man and fuck everything up. They  
only wanted their music and to cause us trouble, they  
were so arrogant. We just wanted our music: rock,  
rock and roll and salsa.*



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A gallada's plurality of musical likes exhibits elements intrinsic to its cultural expression. It was with rhythms such as rock in the 60s, salsa in the 70s and disco and merengue in the 80s when a symbolic musical world, building up youth differences, was created. In the appropriation of those musical rhythms, popular youth have expressed their stylistic differences: a style created out of ways to hear these sounds, to walk with them in the streets, to dress according to them, and to dance with them. First of all, in the act of dancing, young people brought together the eroticism of body gestures inherited from Afro-Cuban music and the total experience of rhythmic movement. However, the new rhythms could not provide popular youth with the words needed to communicate their experiences and passions. This role was filled by musical genres such as Tango, Ranchera [Mexican music], Carrilera and bolero that constitute the old musical rhythms. Old music is liked by everybody: roqueros, plásticos, vivos, deportistas and parents.

In old musical rhythms, youth found a space and time to express their nostalgia. While their parents' city experience was limited to discovering the ways and means to survive in the city, popular youth experience grew out of hanging out in streets and of the construction of a sense of group tied to these spaces. And it was in old music lyrics where youth cultures recognized those stories (of violence, terror, mystery and intensity) and feelings (fear, enthusiasm, pity,



laughter) many times "lived" or seen in the streets of their barrio. Whether looking at new or at old rhythms the same central element can be seen, the musical sound is an empowering element. Music identifies their differences, and provides a way of classifying their spaces.

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Four different groups were at the tables. After having spent some time *gastando acera* [wearing down the sidewalk] they came there for a drink. At one table was Adonai, a black male leader of the *gallada* of *deportistas* with his friends. The passion for soccer held by Adonai's *gallada* is equalled by its passion for Salsa music. When Adonai and his friends stand in a corner with a tape recorder, the *rumba* starts right there.

Salsa rhythms are the best company for intense *rumba* nights and *esquina* evenings. Its dancing requires a masterful combination of fast paced feet (back and forward) with the slow waving of the hips. Shoulders mark the beat while arms go up and down, and the dancing partner is taken to swing around. Salsa is combined with clapping and singing and with non-stop dancing journeys through songs that all of them know: songs about love, friendship, the *barrio*, the street, mother, friends, and prisons.

One block ahead was the communal room and the mini-soccer and basketball court. The court is surrounded by the communal room, by a wall of the public school and by the main road. On the red-brick front walls of the communal room we could read graffiti written in English: "Punk Rock not Death." Beside that phrase was the word "Conde" -somebody's nickname- and below that the initials J.R. Over the side wall we could see more graffiti with large big red letters in English: Heavi Metal, Anarchy (the symbol), Alex and Rock.

Over the whitewash of the back wall, there was graffiti written in a very careful, large style: "Mi Timidez no me permite hablarte/ pero si escribirte/ Marta Yo te Amo, atentamente yo" [My shyness does not let me talk to you but I can write to you, Marta, I love you, sincerely, I]. The bleachers around the court were painted with all kinds of graffiti, especially political slogans:

*Por la vida hasta la vida misma, (of life and to life, itself), Por un Primero de Mayo combativo y unitario* [For a combative and unitary first of May], social statements: *Problemas son de Todos* [problems belong to everybody], names, short phrases: "Merry Christmas", "love", "peace" "kiss" and more sarcastic graffiti: *Tú piensas en mí, yo pienso en tí, quién piensa en los dos?* [You think of me, I think of you, who thinks of us both?].

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A few names, words and drawings on the walls cannot define a youth culture. However, what calls my attention is the exploratory and different character 80's graffiti shows from what was the graffiti pattern of a few years ago. During the 80's a depoliticization of graffiti occurred. New social actors have taken over. These are informal groups or just individuals painting a spontaneous and intimate world on the walls.



A popular youth language speaks through these walls. They have completed a circle of space appropriations: the street, the corner and now the walls. It is a language built upon a particular use of space and time. In the creation and marking of their own time and spaces lies the heart/core of youths' difference.

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The noises were left behind us. At night, the empty and noiseless court becomes a transient space either to have a joint, make a dangerous deal, or to find intimacy. It was 10:30, the streets were vacant, the crowd of people walking on the road had dispersed. Now they were in *tiendas*, billiard rooms, corners, or houses. The smell of liquor and smoke, the noise of music and voices had decreased. All have gone inside. The night was young and could still offer many things. The *rumba* was there, as was the excitement and uncertainty of the streets.

*And without permission the rumba took another course and we for ever moved away from the bar because like a song each place has a special site in your life, in my barrio's heart that loves so many things and in this surprising box that amazes us every day. (From "Celia, Celia Rumba")*

From the corner of the final block we looked towards a large dark area on our right: the swamp, better known as the *matadero* [slaughterhouse]. We could not see what was going on in the darkness; but out there around swamps, dark trails, corners, or empty land plots there exists a noiseless street world ruled by violence. Illicit affairs, fights, gun shots, revenge and drugs set up a code of violence that is known by every inhabitant of these *barrios*. It is the other half of the *barrio* night that for me, as an outsider, was veiled. In the words of Palomo, "out there you are fast, you are sharp or you die. There is not something like a quiet night." The street, as the salsa singer Willie Colon put it, is a "desert of surprises," a mysterious and dangerous world.

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# we haven't had time to be guilty: Youth Culture In Argentina

by Silvia Delfino

translated by  
Michael  
Hoechsmann

"WE HAVEN'T HAD  
TIME TO BE GUILTY."  
- SECUESTRO [KIDNAP]

Three years after the recuperation of democracy in Argentina, this graffiti slogan was painted on the walls of Buenos Aires by the rock group *Secuestro*. In synthetic and eloquent prose, graffiti condenses various key elements of 1980s youth culture in Argentina, which - despite its delimitation by age group - is lived as a site of languages, images and modes of participation which cut across all social practices. In the Latin American context, graffiti not only permits an analysis of youth culture in its use and appropriation of the media and of urban consumption practices, but also as a strategic site of survival and political action during the dictatorships. Thus, for example, the signature -SECUESTRO-

resignifies the denunciation of repression in the public space of a Buenos Aires street by superimposing upon it the rock concert, a recognized site of youth culture during the periods of greatest police vigilance.

## Latin American Youth: From Modernization to Revolt

Latin American youth were protagonists in two major historical 'moments': the attempted social modernization implicit in the development model of the 1950s, and the economic crisis of the 1970s and '80s which showed the deficiencies of this project.



Youth were important in both moments by virtue of their numbers - Argentinian youth constitute 16% of the population and, of those, 82% live in urban centers - and because they were the first ones to be raised on modern forms of socialization where education, demographic control and the passage from rural to industrial economies were to be the transformative strategies for economic development. Youth showed high levels of political participation when the recession rendered impossible the trickle-down theory of economic distribution, and unemployment - aggravated by the overpopulation of the urban peripheries - brought down expectations of social mobility.

At the same time, youth became a social sector particularly affected by repression. Through long years of political instability, civil governments alternated with dictatorships which legitimated themselves, on the one hand, by the call to order and authority by conservative and liberal sectors and, on the other, by the elimination

of democratic mechanisms of popular participation. Between 1976 and 1982, young Argentinians lived the systematic violence taking place in public spaces (streets, plazas, soccer stadiums, clubs, concert halls), while other sites of socialization were withdrawn. The violence directed towards youth was a constant feature of everyday life from the end of 1960s through to the 1980s (67% of the disappeared were between the ages of 18-30). For example, there were the armed interventions into schools and universities which resulted in violence towards students followed by kidnappings and disappearances (35% of the disappeared between 14-25 were students), and later there was the *Guerra de Malvinas*

