

Criminal Kinships and Coming of Age: The Portrayal of Lower-Class Youths in
Contemporary Brazilian and Colombian Works of Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Toby Weisslitz: Criminal Kinships and Coming of Age: The Portrayal of Lower-Class Youths in Contemporary Brazilian and Colombian Works of Fiction
(Under the direction of Professor Rosa Perelmuter)

This thesis addresses how gangs (both organized and informal) at times provide more for lower-class youths than the state and/or contemporary family unit in Brazil and Colombia. I focus primarily on two novels—Arturo Alape’s Sangre ajena and Patricia Melo’s Inferno—which deal with domestic violence, the absence of worthy biological fathers, and the perpetually reinforced stereotype that a life of crime will yield familial, economic, and social rewards. I also use two films—Victor Gaviria’s La Vendedora de rosas and Hector Babenco’s Pixote—in order to demonstrate how street kinships can provide previously absent family units as well as a means to daily survival. This thesis incorporates sociological studies of Brazilian and Colombian lower-class youths involved in crime; I use this research as a point with which to compare the depiction of gangs and street children in the said novels and films.

To my parents

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Chapter One:

Introduction and Background

This thesis aims to explore the struggles of lower-class youths as depicted in contemporary Brazilian and Colombian narratives. I will rely on two works of fiction from Brazil—Patricia Melo’s novel Inferno (2003) and Hector Babenco’s film Pixote (1981), and two from Colombia—Arturo Alape’s novel Sangre ajena (2000) and Victor Gaviria’s film La Vendedora de rosas (1998). In examining and comparing these works, I focus on a set of issues that are of special concern: (1) the negligence of state institutions, (2) domestic abuse within the modern-day lower-class family, and (3) the attempts by poor adolescents to actualize meaningful social identities.

Through my analysis of these narratives, I will show how the sadistic nature of juvenile reformatories and coincident domestic abuse force the poverty-stricken protagonists to the streets. There, the central characters proceed to join either informal or organized gangs that function as surrogate family units. The disadvantaged juvenile protagonists struggle to at once survive and reject their disposable societal position. It is through gang kinships that they are ultimately offered the opportunities and attention that the state and their biological families have failed to provide for them.

Given that the four works are fictional attempts to present societal ills, I will refer to sociological studies of underprivileged Colombian and Brazilian adolescents as a point of comparison. By threading my analysis with literary and sociological approaches, I am

attempting to apply what is termed “literary sociology” to the texts addressed in my thesis. Bart Keunen, in Literature and Society: Literary Sociology and Comparative Literature (2001), defines “literary sociology” as: “the question as to what is the relationship between the literary system and the texts it produces, on the one hand, and the social context of the system, on the other” (12). The purpose of foregrounding my chosen novels and films within a context of national social problems is to underscore their documentary-inflected nature. My own experience living in Brazil’s largest *favela* (July 2003-June 2004 and May 2005-August 2005) additionally compelled me to draw attention to the injustice committed against lower-class youths that is mirrored in these narratives.

The introduction of social problems in a narrative framework is a crucial device that is used to elicit an ethical response from the audience. Martha C. Nussbaum, in her essay “Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism,”¹ explains that the artist’s “conduct is ethical conduct because it strives to come to terms with reality in a world that shrinks from reality. When we follow him as attentive readers, we engage in ethical conduct, and our readings are assessable ethical acts” (59). Nussbaum asserts that through narratives, the reader is absorbed in a fictive world that demands attention to a reality and a morality that are often disregarded. Through an analysis of my chosen works of fiction, I will demonstrate that the authors and filmmakers similarly use narratives to engage their audience in a set of overlooked social problems that are perpetuated by domestic violence and unjust social institutions.

¹ Mapping the Ethical Turn. Ed. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2001. 59-79.

Each of my four selected works bitterly attacks the defects of government, the law, education, penal systems, and even family. Moreover, each similarly illustrates the protagonists' response of unity and compassion amidst perpetual despair. The unadorned depiction of abusive social institutions and the coincident emphasis on the characters' desire to be loved is a technique that compels the audience to sympathize with the victimized protagonists. Through compassionate portrayals of lower-class youths—often perceived as disposable members of society—these works exemplify the potential that literature and the visual arts have to tear down existing stereotypes.

In contrast, many contemporary Colombian and Brazilian narratives that deal with a similar subject tend to emphasize or even exaggerate the violent aspects of shantytowns—referred to as *comunas* in Colombia and *favelas* in Brazil. Such one-dimensional works consequently do harm to the external reality of the fictive framework by solidifying existent typecasts of shantytowns as dangerous, frenzied, and drug-filled spaces.

On the Colombian side, Fernando Vallejo's La Virgen de los sicarios and Jorge Franco's Rosario Tijeras are novels that, like Sangre ajena, deal with lower-class youths who choose a life of crime in order to achieve prosperity. While Sangre ajena is largely focused on family units (both biological and surrogate) in relation to the decision to enter into a life of crime, Vallejo and Franco's novels accentuate the high-risk lives of *sicarios* (hit men). La Virgen de los sicarios and Rosario Tijeras do not devote much attention to the space of *comunas* because both novels take place in the center of Medellín, not just the surrounding slums where the *sicarios* were born. There is minimal description of the biological families of the *sicarios*, and instead, Franco and Vallejo concentrate on the

relationship that the protagonists have with members of the upper class. In La Virgen de los sicarios, for example, the two central *sicarios* are lovers of a wealthy grammarian—a man three times their age who obstinately expresses his hatred for the lower class: “Millón y medio en las comunas de Medellín, encaramados en las laderas de las montañas como las cabras, reproduciéndose como las ratas” (51-2). While the grammarian’s views are challenged by his relations with the *sicarios*, the fleeting affairs do little to alter the elitist attitude that he has cultivated all his life. In Rosario Tijeras, the protagonist *sicaria* is similarly befriended by two young men from the upper class who sympathize with her and try to understand her way of life. In my reading of these similarly themed Colombian novels as well as others (Oscar Collazos’ Morir con papá, Mario Mendoza’s Satanás, and Efraim Medina Reyes’ Érase una vez el amor porque tuve que matarlo), I chose to focus on Alape’s Sangre ajena because his novel details the protagonist Ramón’s early life in a poverty-stricken, abusive home in the countryside while contrasting this misery with the education, paternal love, and opportunities afforded to him by a wealthy crime boss in Medellín. Through this multi-dimensional text, Alape sheds light on the decision of lower-class youths to become criminals.

In choosing a Colombian film for this study, I found Victor Gaviria’s La Vendedora de rosas—like Sangre ajena—to be a multi-faceted narrative that enabled the audience to sympathize with the poverty-stricken protagonist. Gaviria’s style of direction—with natural actors and filming within the *comunas*—culminates in a film that is highly documentary-inflected to the point that personally I found it difficult to watch. The numerous scenes of children sniffing glue, for example, were especially heartrending. These segments of the film have a heightened impact due to the fact that the actors

themselves are lower-class youths whose everyday life is not dissimilar to what Gaviria presents. Another Colombian film that treats the same subject is the cinematic version of La Virgen de los sicarios. This film contrasts with La Vendedora de rosas in that it is a very crisp, polished film that was shot outside of the *comunas* with professional actors. While Gaviria's neorealist style of filmmaking engages the audience in social problems, the cinematic version of La Virgen de los sicarios keeps the audience at a distance through a very artificial portrayal of the lower class.

Like La Vendedora de rosas, the Brazilian film Pixote is directed in a neorealist style by Hector Babenco. This latter film—which similarly employs non-professional actors—presents the horrors of detention center abuse and the difficulties of life on the street in a raw, unadorned fashion. Pixote subsequently has an amplified documentary-inflection that forces the spectator to acknowledge the social problems external to the film. Of utmost importance is the emphasis on the central characters' desperate desire to realize a meaningful social identity, and the kinship that is formed from this shared aspiration. Another Brazilian film that deals with the struggles of poor adolescents is the cinematic version of Paulo Lins' novel Cidade de Deus. While the immense popularity of this film yielded an international awareness about the existence of *favelas*, gratuitous violence dominates the film and ultimately generates a negative stereotype of *favelas*. The caste-system that forces *favela* residents to become gangsters is not addressed in the on-screen version of Cidade de Deus, and other elements of *favela* life are overlooked as well (i.e. the religious community, quality of education, and the positive contributions of the gangs).

From my own experience living in Rocinha—the largest *favela* in Brazil, I found Patricia Melo’s novel Inferno to be the most accurate and multi-dimensional portrayal of *favelas*. In my reading of other Brazilian novels that deal with the shantytowns (i.e. Julio Ludemir’s Sorria, você esta na Rocinha and Paulo Lins’ Cidade de Deus), Inferno stood out as an informative narrative that covered a wide range of daily issues such as: domestic abuse, the laws enforced by the gang (i.e. no lying, cheating, or stealing), the relations between the gang and the Evangelical community, the substandard public education, the relationship between *favela* residents and the upper class, and the impossibility of social ascension via an “honest” job (i.e. employment outside of the gang). The four works of fiction that I have selected, then, clearly stand out from other contemporary narratives in Colombia and Brazil due to their multi-faceted, documentary-inflected nature.

Three chapters follow this introduction. In Chapter Two, I examine Sangre ajena and Inferno in order to compare the incentives that motivate poor youths to pursue criminal paths. Specifically, I look at domestic abuse, the absence of worthy biological fathers, and the glorification of gang bosses as community leaders and paternal surrogates. The longing to be the object of someone’s pride, coupled with the aspiration to realize a significant societal role, motivate both protagonists to leave home in favor of the familial and economic opportunities offered by criminal groups.

Chapter Three examines Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas. My analysis of these neorealist films focuses on the cycle of repression that holds the central characters hostage in lower-class Brazil and Colombia. The protagonists of both films depart from abusive homes or negligent institutions; once on the street, they benefit from the affection

and sharing of survival tactics offered by supportive peer-composed street clans. The desire of the leading characters to actualize meaningful social identities, however, ultimately culminates in their return to state institutions or their biological families. Finally, in Chapter Four, I will compare the presentation of lower-class juveniles and criminal kinships in the novels of Chapter two and the films of Chapter three.

Through the four narratives examined in this thesis, I will illustrate that the protagonists—who must resort to immoral means to survive and to gain respect—are victims of deficient state institutions and negligent families. The leading characters succeed in trading microcosms of violence: from domestic or institutional spaces to street gangs that, while still violent, afford them mostly camaraderie and comfort. The space of the street, however, implies a dangerous freedom and the protagonists confront the ensuing hardships with varying degrees of success. Ultimately, the street gangs formed never fully succeed in substituting for the love of natural families. The perpetual desperation and the poignant desire to be “someone” stand out amidst the unadorned portrayals of injustice in the selected films and narratives.

While Inferno and Sangre ajena end on a positive note that seems to encourage gang initiation, Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas both culminate as pessimistically as they began. Two vital aspects which affect the varying fates of the protagonists in these four works are: 1) their biological families and 2) the level of organization of their criminal kinships. The protagonists of Melo and Alape’s novels are poor youths who live with abusive parents in shantytowns. Both characters have older siblings who encourage them to join the highly organized and respected criminal groups that provide them with employment opportunities and paternal surrogates. Conversely, in Pixote and La

Vendedora de rosas, the protagonists are either orphans or members of extremely abusive homes; when they are forced to the street, they form makeshift street clans that survive off petty thefts. The disorganized nature of these peer-composed kinships ultimately yields a break-up of each street clan and the inevitable return of the protagonists to abusive homes or institutions. Since the leading characters in the two films have less stable biological families and survive amongst themselves on the street, I will use the term “gamins” when referring to them, since the word is defined as “a homeless child who has been abandoned and roams the streets.”² I will refer to the protagonists of Inferno and Sangre ajena with the more general term “lower-class” due to the less abusive nature of their homes and the relative stability of their biological families. Their adoption by paternal gang leaders into organized gangs further differentiates them from the protagonists of the two films in that they are provided with economic prosperity and fatherly love.

² dictionary.com. 14 April 2006 < <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=gamin>>

Chapter Two:

Negligent Fathers and Guiding Gangsters: The Portrayal of Paternal Figures in Inferno and Sangre ajena

La imagen paterna de estos muchachos es débil y por ello fácilmente sustituible. Cuando aparece un alguien grande y representativo de orden masculino, el adolescente sentirá que puede identificarse con él. Es cuando el jefe de la pandilla, de pronto el traqueto del barrio, puede jugar un papel importante en estas personas, que se vuelven sencillamente manipulables. (Bedoya Marín and Jaramillo Martínez 78)

In present-day Colombia and Brazil, the reality of many poor youths is defined by a critical deficiency of admirable biological fathers and a perpetually reinforced stereotype that gang life will offer economic prosperity, a meaningful social identity, and the security of a loving—though ultimately exploitative—family. Taken together, these social factors lead many adolescents to perceive initiation into a life of crime as the obvious solution to the chronic problems of domestic abuse and poverty. Gangs in Colombia and Brazil come to serve as tight-knit and idyllic family units with the gang leader functioning as a strict but doting father for impressionable and affection-starved young boys. It is consequently through gang induction that poor youths can self-construct meaningful identities as beloved sons. Guided by gang leader father figures, the boys are then able to actualize powerful social roles that are ultimately mediated by crime.

The incentives for disadvantaged youths to pursue a life of crime are numerous. Specific motivations include: the possibility of employment and subsequent economic success, the growing desire of adolescents with regards to consumerism, the

normalization of gangs and the growing number of youths involved in them, and the increase in single parent families coupled with the loss of family values. While there exist various motivations for gang initiation, given the limitation of space I will address the familial factors. Within the debility of the modern-day lower-class family unit, I will specifically focus on the problematic role of paternal figures.

My analysis will center around two novels: Brazilian Patricia Melo's Inferno (2003) and Colombian Arturo Alape's Sangre ajena (2000). Through their emphasis on familial relations and life within shantytowns (Brazilian *favelas* and Colombian *comunas*), both novels distinguish themselves from other contemporary works of fiction that treat the same subject matter. (i.e. on the Colombian side: La Virgen de los sicarios, Satanás, Rosario Tijeras, and in Brazil: Cidade de Deus and Sorria, você esta na Rocinha).

The protagonists of both Inferno and Sangre ajena are young boys who substitute their apathetic biological fathers with paternal gang leader mentors. Both youths live in abusive, poverty-stricken households that epitomize everything the young boys resist actualizing in their adulthoods. A cycle of parental abuse and apathy yields the boys hungry for social existence and familial love. Due to the skepticism about what society can offer and the communal idolization of drug bosses, the protagonists come to perceive gang initiation as their single chance to become "someone." While Luiz Eduardo Soares, in Cabeça de porco (2005), argues that "já se foi o tempo da glamourização do banditismo, em que se se cultuavam os criminosos como se fossem heróis populares" (124), my analysis of the documentary-inflected novels and consideration of relevant sociological studies will challenge this assertion. Ultimately, it is the protagonists'

adoption by crime boss father figures that affords them an otherwise impossible chance for a meaningful social identity.

2.1. *Critical considerations*

As Raymond L. Williams observes in Postmodernidad y América Latina:

Uno de los factores hasta ahora poco tenidos en cuenta en la descripción, análisis y discusión de la postmodernidad, es el problema de la verdad, de cómo y en qué circunstancias se pueden afirmar verdades (*truth claims*) en nuestras sociedades supuestamente modernas o postmodernas. (19)

I argue that both Melo and Alape, through their unadorned presentation of social problems in a narrative framework, are able to confirm the truths of the realities external to their novels. This technique places both Inferno and Sangre ajena within the category of “documentary narrative,” a term put forth by David William Foster that refers to literature in which “all authors are important novelists, all display a high degree of novelistic interest, and all overtly involve the difficulties of narrating a segment of Latin American reality” (42).

Since Patricia Melo and Arturo Alape use fictive narratives to present existent societal ills, I will refer to sociological studies of underprivileged Colombian and Brazilian adolescents in order to highlight the veracity of the stories presented. To support my analysis of Alape’s novel, I will refer to two studies of Colombian lower-class youths: De la barra a la banda by Diego Alejandro Bedoya Marín and Julio Jaramillo Martínez and Gamines: testimonios by Cecilia Muñoz Vila. In reference to lower-class Brazilian youths in Inferno, I will rely on Gilberto Dimenstein’s Brazil: War on Children as well as Donna M. Goldstein’s analysis of *favela* life in Laughter out of Place. I will also consider Luke Dowdney’s research on juvenile gang members in Rio de Janeiro in Crianças do

tráfico. These sociological studies of poor adolescents will serve as a point of comparison with Alape and Melo's novels. They furthermore will lend credence to the problematic role of father figures and then demonstrate how this issue in the novels factors into the decision of the protagonists to enter into a life of crime.

2.2.1. *The biological family in Inferno*

In Patricia Melo's Inferno, the central character is Reizinho— an impressionable and affection-starved young boy who is entirely lacking in role models. Reizinho lives with his mother Alzira and older sister Carolaine in a poverty-stricken *favela* within Rio de Janeiro. Although Alzira preaches the virtues of education and hard work, she is never around to enforce such values. In the minimal time that Alzira is home and not working, she is physically abusive and she constantly disparages Francisco—the alcoholic, womanizing husband who abused and abandoned her. Left to run the household all alone, Alzira literally and figuratively pushes the resentment she has for Francisco onto their son.

In an exemplary instance, Reizinho gives his mother a portion of his first earnings as a gangster. As a result of his criminal involvement, Reizinho is punished with a violence that is by now second nature to her; “a mão ia sozinha, sabia o caminho, menino burro, e bateu...sentia uma vontade feroz de machucar o menino, espancar, e batia, idiota, batia, e ele não reclamava, não dói? Tem que apanhar para aprender” (31). The irony of Alzira's violence lies in the fact that Reizinho is already earning a far better wage than her. Alzira slaves away at a job that pays well below the minimum wage, but her “honest” (not gang-related) work has gotten her nowhere in life. As her bitterness intensifies and the beatings

become habitual, Alzira releases her profound rancor through increasingly powerful blows to Reizinho.

Alzira's characterization of her husband as the "enemy," coupled with the beatings she routinely inflicts upon her son, lays the foundation for Reizinho's alliance with his father, or more specifically, with the romanticized paternal image he has created. Reizinho envisions his father as "um homem alto, com peito de nadador profissional" (11); he furthermore conceives him to be a tall white man despite having seen a photo in which Francisco is undeniably an Afro-Brazilian who is short in stature. Reizinho's resistance to this reality is fueled by his mother's beatings. Ultimately, he forms a bond with Francisco that is born from their common opposition to Alzira; her slander of Francisco and the physical violence she inflicts upon her son leads to Reizinho's union with Alzira's other foe.

Reizinho concludes that Alzira must have driven Francisco away; surely it was not his father's decision to leave. During his fabricated encounters with Francisco, "o pai lhe explicava que era mentira o que diziam a seu respeito, as histórias de que saíra de casa para comprar cerveja, com um vasilhame nas mãos, e nunca mais voltara. Calúnias nojentas. Cirrose era calúnia, os porres, as surras, as amantes, calúnias e mais calúnias" (11). Because Reizinho consistently bears the brunt of Alzira's indignation, he consequently transfers all of his hope for a role model into the utopian image of his father that he cultivates. Reizinho, after all, has no one in his life to look up to, and he hence uses his absent father as a drawing board to invent a heroic paternal figure.

Upon seeing Francisco for the first time, Reizinho rationalizes that the pathetic, homeless drunkard before him must be in disguise; it is his father's blanket that impedes

Reizinho from seeing Francisco's undeniable might. He thus prolongs his fantasy, imagining his father as an ever-present vulture; "fora o cobertor que lhe dera uma idéia negativa do pai... A diferença era o cobertor. Quando o pai levantava os braços, com a coberta nos ombros, surgiam asas negras, um urubu enorme, um urubu cabeludo e desequilibrado" (89). Even after the face-to-face discovery that Francisco is indisputably a short and weak alcoholic, Reizinho continues his idealization of him because he is still wholly lacking in role models. There is comfort in the image of his father as a bird of prey who can watch over Reizinho from above and sweep down to protect him from any danger. Ultimately, however, it is Miltão—the favela gang leader—who takes Reizinho under his wing and watches over him like his very own son.

2.2.2. The biological family in Sangre ajena

An alcoholic father and domestic abuse similarly set the stage for running away and the pursuit of a better life in Sangre ajena. While these problems are also present in the middle and upper classes, children from more affluent homes are less prone to initiate into a life of crime due to the educational and recreational opportunities afforded to them. In Alape's novel, Ramón and his brother Nelson live in a cramped two-room apartment with their parents and numerous siblings. The father in Sangre ajena is akin to Reizinho's in Inferno with the sole exception that he has not abandoned the family. Still, he is an alcoholic who ignores his wife and children unless he has prioritized the time to physically or verbally abuse them. While Ramón is starved for paternal attention, he ironically only achieves such a spotlight during these frequent bouts of physical abuse.

In addition to the beatings they suffer, Ramón and Nelson are repeatedly forced to bear witness to the physical and emotional abuse that their alcoholic father inflicts upon their mother. Ramón relates, “Aquella escena se nos grababa en la mente como película de terror, la maldad y la guerra entre familia y sangre de uno” (102). It is this violence “entre familia y sangre de uno” that motivates Ramón and Nelson to leave home in order to pursue a better life. When they are taken in by a benevolent crime boss, it is ironically through *sangre ajena*—or specifically through the new bloodline formed with their paternal surrogate—that they achieve previously absent familial love and social opportunities.

In some lower-class Colombian families where the father is still present (such as depicted in *Sangre ajena*), Muñoz Vila observes that, “el contacto entre padres e hijos se reduce a órdenes, castigos y amenazas” (102). In Alape’s novel, Ramón similarly explains that his father: “Sólo intentaba hablar con nosotros o con mi mamá cuando le daba el puto hipo y, temblando, lo hacía sentirse el ser más indefenso de la tierra” (20). In his abusive father, Ramón perceives everything he does not want to be, but everything he will become if he does not leave the microcosm of violence that is his home.

Like *Sangre ajena*, Oscar Collazos’ *Morir con papá* is a contemporary Colombian novel that deals with poor youths involved in crime. In Collazos’ novel, however, the relationship between the protagonist and his father is radically different than that of Ramón and his father. The protagonist in *Morir con papá* is a teenage boy who enters into a life of crime guided by his father—a professional criminal. The tender—and at times sappy—relationship between the father and son criminal team is the main focus of the novel; through various difficulties, father and son care for one another with an

unconditional love. Collazos presents the reader with a sentimental narrative that merely uses the *comunas* and the life of a *sicario* as a referential background. The factors external to the father and son relationship are subordinated in the text, and Collazos thus fails to give an involved portrayal of either the lower class or *sicarios*. Morir con papá lacks the documentary-inflection that is illustrated in Sangre ajena through the contrasts of the poor countryside with Medellín, the opposition of Ramón's biological father with the paternal criminal boss who adopts him, and the difference in quality of education offered in the countryside and that which is provided at the *sicario* school.

2.2.3. *The role of siblings in Sangre ajena and Inferno*

In Sangre ajena, Ramón—guided by his older brother Nelson—embarks on an ambitious trip by foot to Medellín, a third world metropolis that offers hope for employment and social advancement. In the face of substandard schools and a violent home, Nelson's initiative to pursue a better life is the preliminary step in distancing both his brother and himself from poverty and thus moving closer to realizing elevated social roles. On the streets of Medellín, Nelson is able to use his past domestic abuse as a tool to prove his worth; he withstands brutal beatings from his new peers as a means of fabricating a sense of authority. Nelson has already initiated the process of a self-constitution rooted in violence. Under Don Luis's guidance and paternal love, both brothers will be able to actualize meaningful social roles defined by delinquency.

Like Nelson's steering of Ramón into a life of crime, in Inferno, Reizinho's sister Carolaine points out that gang induction would indeed offer more opportunities for him than any other path. She explains that ending up like their mother would be the worst

possible outcome; “Não vou me foder, como ela... Melhor o tráfico, melhor o Miltão. Muito melhor. Isso mesmo, volte para o Miltão. Seja alguém. Ganhe uma metralhadora e mostre para eles” (49). Carolaine’s lack of respect for her mother is elucidated when she proclaims, “Não vou me foder como ela.” In Of Woman Born, Adrienne Rich explains the frustrated emotions of daughters—like Carolaine—who feel that their mothers have settled for an inferior position in life. Rich observes that, “Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, ‘whatever comes.’ A mother’s victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman” (243).

In Inferno, Carolaine eventually transforms into her downtrodden mother because she has no other female role models to emulate. Furthermore, Carolaine falls victim to the same fantasy world that Reizinho creates to supplement his absent father. Carolaine puts all of her hope into her relations with men; she naively expects her lovers to conduct themselves like the leading men in her favorite telenovelas. Instead, Carolaine is repeatedly used, impregnated, and abandoned to raise her children alone. Like Alzira, she projects all of her resentment for past lovers onto her bastard children. Carolaine remains a victim of her fantasies because she never finds any female role models to imitate; she thus slowly transforms into her mother while Reizinho—thanks to Miltão’s guidance—is able to actualize Carolaine’s advice by tearing himself away from home and working as a gangster in order to become “alguém.”

2.3.1. *Paternal substitutes in Inferno*

Gang leaders in Brazil and Colombia alike are often thrust into a moral position of esteemed leadership which is reinforced by the admiration of the community at large. In Donna M. Goldstein's research on *favelas*, she observes that "in the absence of reliable state presence, the gangs fill a role beyond simple trafficking in illegal goods. They are called upon to right the wrongs of everyday life, and in this role they are tolerated and sometimes even venerated" (200). There exist, for example, very specific and idyllic codes of living for residents of Brazilian *favelas* and these laws are, in fact, set and strictly enforced by the gang. Luke Dowdney—in Crianças do tráfico—observes that in the *favelas* there is "nada de roubos na comunidade, nada de brigas (físicas) entre moradores, nada de estropos, nada de assédio sexual a crianças, não bater na mulher, não conversar com a polícia, não ser dono de uma arma sem os traficantes saberem" (67). If these rules are not complied with, then the gang leader will issue due punishments. Crime bosses then, as unconventional but widely accepted and respected leaders, consequently become the obvious role models for poor boys.

Dowdney's research into Rio de Janeiro crime factions and the augmentation of youth drug traffickers exemplifies the reality in which Melo's novel is grounded. Dowdney concludes that, "os traficantes demonstram um interesse mais prático pelo bem-estar da comunidade do que a polícia" (61). In Inferno, the relationship between the gang and Reizinho's *favela* community is similarly portrayed as benevolent; the gangsters are depicted as successfully endowing the community with the order and basic resources that the police and government have failed to provide. Most notably, the gang settles domestic abuses, builds sewers and day-care centers, buys school supplies, and pays for funerals. The integrity of the gang is solidified by the community members' oft-expressed

gratitude. Reizinho's grandmother, for example, unabashedly praises the gang leader while she is simultaneously blind to the effect that such adulation has on her grandson. "Negão esperto, esse Miltão. Cândia falava do traficante num tom de admiração, era exatamente isso que envenenava o sangue do menino..." (46). Throughout the *favela* Reizinho hears people praising the gang leader to no end. Furthermore, Reizinho sees daily how Miltão is leading the good life, complete with a beautiful girlfriend, brand-name clothes, and a fancy home. With no tangible role models, no incentive to stay in the overcrowded and undersupplied public school system, and no desire to remain a victim of Alzira's spiteful beatings, only one thing remains clear: gang initiation is Reizinho's single chance to become "someone."

Reizinho's first substitute for a father figure is thus Miltão. The gang leader's paternal role is most clearly actualized through the extreme manner in which he disciplines. Reizinho's carelessness during his first job in the gang, for instance, is punished by a bullet that Miltão fires through the young boy's hand; "Reizinho, pensei que neguinho conectava lé com cré. Ele sempre dizia isso, o Miltão... Vem cá, babaca. Reizinho se aproximou. Miltão tirou um revolver da cintura, encostou o cano da arma na alma de mão do garoto e detonou" (17). Despite this violent punishment, Reizinho still reveres Miltão and wants more than anything to continue working in the gang. The vicious cruelty of Miltão's chastisement is ultimately overshadowed by the fact that Miltão is disciplining Reizinho and offering him more attention and individual guidance than he has ever had. The key lesson of responsibility and diligence inherent in Miltão's act is understood by Reizinho as a result of the explanation that Miltão gives to the young boy. In contrast, while Alzira aims to violently push her son towards a more ethical path, the lesson is lost

due to her failure to communicate with her son and rationally explain his misconduct. Alzira's violence is additionally distinct due to the habitual and spiteful nature of her beatings and the fact that Reizinho has little respect for his overworked, underpaid mother. The abuse by Alzira and the indifference of Francisco are subsequently supplanted by Miltão's harsh but apparently sincere authority. Miltão thus proves himself to be a useful role model for Reizinho, a boy who has previously lacked any meaningful adult supervision whatsoever.

In the end, Reizinho is forced to betray the gang leader, but he is very hesitant to do so as a result of the gratitude he feels for Miltão. "Miltão o tirara da lama. Foi por Miltão que o recuperara, que o afastara das drogas. Tudo o que possuía devia ao Miltão" (167). Although Miltão's extreme punishments at times left Reizinho skeptical of his sincerity, the protagonist never loses sight of the fact that everything he has achieved is because of the gang leader. As a result of Miltão, Reizinho achieves a sense that his role in the community at large is a significant one. "Mais que tudo neste mundo, gostava de se imaginar como uma peça de uma engrenagem, uma esfera ponderosa, um sistema, uma força... Era bom saber que até os funcionários de postos de saúde precisavam do seu aval para subir o morro nas campanhas sanitárias" (105). Miltão has given him a chance to play a meaningful role in society and Reizinho delights in the knowledge that he is already achieving a certain ascendance in the hierarchy of (gang) life.

Miltão's ultimate abuse of both power and drugs forces Reizinho to kill his one sincere father figure and assume the position as gang leader. But Reizinho's reign as *Dono* is distinguished by the benevolence that Miltão instilled in him. Reizinho "era educado, respeitador, atencioso. 'Faz muito pelos pobres,' diziam" (250). Reizinho

forbids his men to use drugs and he builds a church for the community. Miltão's success as a paternal surrogate is verified by Reizinho's decision to continue his mentor's legacy and fulfill his standing as a just community leader.

2.3.2. *Paternal surrogates in Sangre ajena*

Miltão's adoption of Reizinho runs parallel to Ramón's rescue from the streets by a powerful crime boss in Sangre ajena. After a detailed account of sketchy characters and the daily perils of homelessness, Ramón and Nelson are taken in by Don Luis, the wealthy founder of an "escuela de robo y sicariato" (57). At the boarding school, Ramón and Nelson receive the finest clothes, a comfortable place to call home, and a rigid education that more than adequately prepares them for successful futures as *sicarios*.

The narrative of Sangre ajena is indeed a familiar one, most notably captured in Dickens' classic Oliver Twist. Like Sangre ajena, Dickens' novel contains a protagonist street child struggling to survive in a society that, much like lower-class Colombia, is portrayed as resistant to social mobility. After the death of Oliver's mother, the young boy goes to live in a private juvenile home where he is mistreated for nine years. The abuse he is subject to here runs parallel to the beatings inflicted upon Ramón in the home of his youth by his alcoholic and uncaring father. Like Ramón, Oliver runs away to the big city in pursuit of a better life. There he meets Fagin, the ringleader of an infamous gang of criminals and the headmaster of a school for pickpockets. Fagin differs from Don Luis in that the latter expresses a sincere affinity for his adopted boys. In contrast, Fagin overtly exploits the youths at his "school" and any traces of kindness that he shows are

mere aberrations. Fagin ultimately proves to be a self-interested swindler and thus stands out sharply against Ramón's paternal surrogate.

While Don Luis also exploits the boys by employing them as *sicarios* following their graduation, he goes a step further by caring for them as if they were his own flesh and blood, and not merely *sangre ajena*. “Ustedes, Nelson y Ramocito Chatarra, ya hacen parte de mis muchachos. Los considero como si fueran dos hijos más” (68). Don Luis thus becomes an important paternal figure for the brothers, and Ramón in particular is often overwhelmed by a warmth and appreciation for the man who rescued them from imminent death on the street. “No sabíamos como darle los agradecimientos. De verdad queríamos abrazarlo, explicarle que él se había vuelto sangre de nuestra sangre” (73). Like Miltão in Inferno, Don Luis exemplifies the role of a paternal gang leader and mentor who generously provides for impoverished youths—although he also takes advantage of them—in the absence of stable biological families and social opportunities.

Don Luis's unparalleled munificence pushes Ramón and his brother to go to great lengths to impress him. The crime boss stands in complete opposition to the brothers' biological father and they are extremely eager to prove themselves to their paternal replacement. This desire to please is detailed by Alonso Salazar in No nacimos pa' semilla—a study of Colombian *sicarios*. Salazar notes that young hit men—such as Ramón and Nelson—“are Rambo robots. When they're told they have to prove themselves by doing a job they'll do anything to show how good they are” (63). In Sangre ajena, Nelson and Ramón similarly aim to make Don Luis proud by excelling in their studies at the *sicario* school. “Como es la vida curiosa: ahora Nelson sí era un estudiante de verdad, muy aplicado, no le perdía detalles a las explicaciones de los profes

de la escuela” (66). A previously indolent learner, Nelson becomes a master of the art of gunmanship and killing in an effort to make his mentor proud and fulfill the social role that Don Luis has offered to both him and Ramón.

On the one hand, Don Luis’s rescue of numerous street children and their consequent entrance into his *sicario* school can be viewed as a selfish act that ultimately repays him via the boys’ profitable crimes. On the other, however, Don Luis conveys a distinct and genuine affection for these boys, as observed by Ramón: “Don Luis nos enfocó con su cámara y luego dijo que él conservaba un álbum muy especial con las fotos de los muchachos que habían sido alumnos graduados en su escuela” (72). Don Luis’s photo album and his open invitation for his students to return after their graduation is an unnecessary, selfless extension of his role; furthermore, these acts are the type of behavior that concretizes the elevated images of crime bosses.

Following completion of the *sicario* school, Don Luis proceeds to finalize Ramón’s manhood by giving him a gun and a woman. Although initially clueless, Ramón is well-educated by his female teacher: “mi pistola funciona y me disparé dentro de ella” (75). Don Luis thus sends his boys out into the world as men. By educating Ramón in the use of firearms, Don Luis ensures Ramón’s future as a skilled hit man. At the same time, Don Luis’s arrangement for Ramón’s first sexual experience (implied by his initial usage of his other “pistola”) is the final instruction that solidifies Ramón’s manhood. Ramón’s new social identity is thus defined by his careful training in the use of his two pistols.

As an adult, Ramón’s manhood remains defined by Don Luis. Upon his maturity, Ramón’s father figures are paralleled with his own tender role as a caretaker to an ailing Nelson. Because Nelson is more cynical and ambitious, he eventually “vivía obsesionado

por dirigir su propio grupo y realizar sus cruces” (158). Nelson’s uncontrolled ambition to become a crime boss himself ultimately proves fatal, even despite Ramón’s attempts to serve as his “perro guardián” (91).

Ramón similarly explains his attempts to protect his young daughter from any knowledge of his violent past. “No traje a mi niña porque no quiero que escuche desde pequeña mis historias. No quiero volver violentos sus oídos” (49). Ramón’s attempt to shelter his daughter mirrors his efforts to care for Nelson as well as those of Don Luis to regulate the contact between his scrawny but moral sons and the students of the *sicario* school. Ramón thus actualizes the examples set for him by Don Luis and he finally does so in a manner that parallels Reizinho’s continuity of Miltão’s principles in Inferno. But while Miltão loses power due to his drug addiction, Don Luis continues to run the *sicario* school in a responsible, caring fashion until his death. As a result, Ramón is never forced to replace his paternal surrogate in the way that Reizinho supplants Miltão.

A contrasting depiction of paternal surrogates is offered in La Virgen de los sicarios (see Chapter One). In Vallejo’s novel, the elderly grammarian functions at once as a father figure and lover for the two central *sicarios* of the narrative. The grammarian buys the adolescents expensive clothing, a stereo, anything else they want. Simultaneously, he educates them by exposing them to classical music, literature, and other elements of the upper-class world. While the grammarian dreams of running away with his lovers in order to provide a better life for them, he is primarily motivated by love—or at least by lust. There is a role reversal in La Virgen de los sicarios (when compared with Melo and Alape’s novels) in which the paternal surrogate is the needy, affection-starved character and his adopted sons / lovers are the criminal experts. The grammarian is ultimately only

able to offer material goods to the *sicarios*—a far cry from the opportunities that Don Luis and Miltão afford the protagonists of Sangre ajena and Inferno respectively.

2.4. *Conclusion*

As illustrated through Reizinho's relationship with Miltão, and Ramón's with Don Luis, gang leaders often become significant in an adolescent's search for paternal substitutes, and ultimately in attempts to redefine their place in the world. There exists so little hope for social mobility in mainstream culture that drug bosses often become folk heroes of sorts; in the long run, these community leaders frequently prove to be more realistic role models than the biological fathers of lower-class youths.

In an explanation of the choice of lower-class youths to initiate into gangs, Salazar notes, "If you haven't even got enough to live decently, if you have no job or earn a pittance, while every day you are being shown what you need to lead the good life, and if at the same time you have the connections so that you can get all that, then it's easy to fall into crime" (101). For a poor youth trapped in the caste-system of Colombian and Brazilian shantytowns, gang initiation offers more economic and social opportunities than could ever be hoped for otherwise; the sole alternative is to remain in an abusive and unsupervised home with the highest hope of attaining a job that pays well below the minimum wage, and then slowly transforming into an abusive and alcoholic father. There is often no incentive to stay in a poor, overcrowded classroom, a violent home, and later work an "honest" job in order to barely put enough food on the table.

Inferno and Sangre ajena accurately capture this reality through the struggles of their respective protagonists. The early skepticism concerning what society can offer lead

Reizinho and Ramón to self-invent meaningful identities mediated by violence. Amidst their hunger for social existence and paternal affection, gang life offers a sense of self-esteem as a “someone” and furthermore as a valued son. Gang leaders like Miltão and Don Luis are the only respected authority and thus the obvious role models for poor youths to emulate.

Through multi-faceted documentary narratives, Melo and Alape engage their readers in current social problems. The continued discussion of issues presented more than 150 years ago in Oliver Twist offers a bleak perspective on the hope for social change. Ultimately, if lower-class adolescents are not given any other chance to play a meaningful role in society, then some of them will inevitably continue to initiate into the world of crime.

Chapter Three:

Succumbing to Societal Stigmas: How State and Familial Maltreatment Perpetuate the Gamin Struggle

“El paso de la casa a la calle, de ésta a la institución, se vuelve para estos niños un proceso circular y repetido” (Muñoz Vila 11).

In present-day Brazil and Colombia, the mounting presence of street children is aggravated by abusive state rehabilitation centers and precarious lower-class households. Many neglected juveniles are imprisoned by a vicious cycle in which flight from either reformatories or abusive homes is the point of initial departure. Although a difficult life on the street ensues, gamins—“homeless children who have been abandoned and roam the streets”³—create makeshift families composed of their peers. Despite the comfort of longed-for familial support offered by these kin units, gamins prove unable to resist the lure of meaningful, though ultimately detrimental, social identities. In their attempts to actualize a significant societal role, these youths are inevitably led back to their abusive accommodations only to repeat the orbicular tragedy. Powerless to immobilize this recycling process, gamins inexorably fulfill the stigma of “o lixo da humanidade”⁴—a term used by Brazilian sociologist Luiz Eduardo Soares to illustrate the upper-class perception of street children.

³ [dictionary.com](http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=gamin). 14 April 2006 < <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=gamin>>

⁴ Soares, Luiz Eduardo, MV Bill and Celso Athayde. *Cabeça de porco*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Objetiva, 2005. 218.

The repression of Brazilian and Colombian lower-class youths is mercilessly portrayed in both Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas. In Hector Babenco's film Pixote: a lei do mais fraco (Brazil 1981), widespread abuse in a state detention center justifiably fosters the inmates' resentment towards society. Such manufactured rage is subsequently manifested through acts of crime which only solidify the societal perception of these delinquents as disposable. A similarly dismal and stereotypical existence is realized by the street girls in Victor Gaviria's La Vendedora de rosas (Colombia 1998). The inefficiency of the gamin hostel and the girls' irrepressible desire to be members of conventional loving families yields a break-up of their makeshift sisterhood. The girls' consequent return to their violent homes forecasts their impending anonymity and inferiority as future abusive maternal prototypes. Through a comparison of the failure of institutions to rehabilitate, I will elucidate the cycle of repression in which the protagonists of both films are held hostage.

In accordance with the documentary-inflected nature of these films, I will consider sociological studies of Colombian and Brazilian street children as points with which to compare the films' narratives. Specifically, I will rely on Cecilia Muñoz Vila's research on Colombian street children in Gamines: testimonios, Donna M. Goldstein's analysis of *favela* life in Laughter out of Place, and the study of gamin group formation in De la barra a la banda by Diego Alejandro Bedoya Marín and Julio Jaramillo Martínez. These studies will substantiate that societal and familial neglect of Brazilian and Colombian lower-class youths indeed perpetuates victimization of the gamin subculture.

3.1. *Critical Considerations*

The illumination of national social problems through cinema has been a decisive characteristic of the New Latin American Cinema. Speaking about the choice to present a problematic national reality by means of film—as both Babenco and Gaviria do—

Colombian filmmaker Marta Rodríguez explains:

When you combine the social sciences with a mass medium like film, you are challenging the uses to which both are put by the privileged class while simultaneously putting them at the service of the working class. In contrast to the kind of hermetic treatise that only five initiates can read, this is a way to use anthropology or sociology so that the working class can put it to use analyzing their particular situation. (Burton 31)

The neorealist, documentary-inflected style of both Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas, and in particular the use of natural (or non-professional) actors, enables the gap between the fiction of the film and the reality of national social problems to be bridged. As Gaviria, the director of La Vendedora de rosas, explains in an interview with Carlos Jáuregui: “Los actores naturales son testigos... El personaje se produce entre la narrativa de la propia vida y el proceso de la narración filmica” (224-25).

The external reality of the film represented by natural actors is heightened by their use of street slang. In the aforementioned interview with Jáuregui, Gaviria further explains that such slang “expresa y alevosamente alude a la historia y a las historias de muchos, a determinados espacios de la ciudad, a experiencias sociales profundas... lo que violenta al espectador no es la monstruosidad abstracta del lenguaje sino lo que ésta significa como diferencia” (229-30). The street language of the actors thus confronts the spectator with the uncomfortable reality of national social problems.

Through the use of natural actors and other neorealist elements, La Vendedora de rosas stands out against other Colombian films that deal with the same subject matter. As

was mentioned in Chapter One, the cinematic version of Fernando Vallejo's La Virgen de los sicarios, for example, is a highly polished film that directly contrasts with Gaviria's gritty montage, on-location filming in the *comunas*, and use of natural actors.

On the Brazilian side, Pixote similarly distinguishes itself from other national films that treat a similar subject. As was again discussed in Chapter One, the most frequently addressed stereotype of extreme violence within Brazilian *favelas* was concretized by the enormous success of the one-dimensional Cidade de Deus. In an interview with Julianne Burton, Brazilian director Glauber Rocha defends such use of violence in film:

the violent elements typical of Brazilian films are a means of provoking the public out of its alienation... If the audience leaves the theater discussing the violence of the last scene, that is a good sign because it indicates stimulated discussion and that other issues will also be raised. (Burton 109)

Rocha's final assumption here is a risky one, for if the "other issues" fail to be raised, audiences are then left with a solidified impression of violence. Cidade de Deus, for instance, is a high-concept⁵ film that glamorizes the violence of Brazilian shantytowns with an eye-catching cinematography and an immensely popular soundtrack. At the same time—and this may not have been the film's intention—it fails to portray crucial aspects of everyday *favela* life such as the powerful sense of community within the shantytowns, the divide between *nordestinos* (Northeastern Brazilians) and *cariocas* (natives of Rio de Janeiro), the religious community, and the difficulties of breaking out of the caste-system that imprisons *favela* residents.

In contrast, Pixote succeeds in candidly showing the horrific abuse of Brazilian juvenile detention centers in addition to the violent reality of life on the street. At the

⁵ "a film that includes and/or exploits certain elements (e.g. fast action, big-name stars) in order to attract a large audience" [imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com). 14 April 2006 <<http://www.imdb.com/Glossary/>>.

same time, however, touching moments of solidarity between the protagonist and his peer-composed street family are accentuated in Babenco's film. Pixote is additionally unique in that Babenco overtly foregrounds the narrative within the existent national social problems. At the opening of the film, he introduces the main actor within his poverty-stricken *favela* and gives an overview of the oppression of the Brazilian lower class. Babenco thus contextualizes the film while compelling the spectator to take the forthcoming fictional events as verisimilar.

While the critical articles published on Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas have thoroughly detailed the cinematic methods employed by Gaviria and Babenco, they do not address the domestic and institutional abuse depicted in both films. In "Profilaxis, traducción y ética: La humanidad "desechable" en *Rodrigo D.: No future*, *La Vendedora de rosas* y *La Virgen de los sicarios*," for example, Medellín is keenly observed as "una ciudad contaminada no por los ruidos y la polución industrial de la modernización periférica, ni por los residuos petroquímicos de los motores que la cruzan, sino por una 'polución humana'" (Jáuregui and Suárez 367-68). While this article proceeds to provide a context of relevant national cinema, there is no comparative criticism between the closely related themes and cinematography of Gaviria and Babenco films. Through a transnational comparison and focus on the portrayal of human rights violations, my study will thus distinguish itself from other published criticism on Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas.

3.2.1. *Juvenile Detention Center Abuse in Pixote*

The first social evil presented in Babenco's film is the demoralizing detention center to which Pixote is sent. Indeed, there exist various types of rehabilitation centers and reformatories in present-day Brazil. Because delinquent youths often come out of these abusive state institutions with an augmented rage towards society, they consequently lash out through further violent acts of crime. Denied a significant social role by a society that aims to obliterate its human garbage, many poor youths must, in fact, resort to criminal behavior as a means to both daily survival and an identity that demands respect. Such delinquency, however, inevitably forces them back into the penal complex. It is henceforth clear that the abuse of detainees within these institutions significantly fuels the gamin cycle of repression. These reformatories ultimately become factories which, by forcing inmates to turn to violence in order to survive, mass produce individuals who are angrier and further lacking in opportunities than they were prior to their "rehabilitation."

In an interview with Mirelli, a *favelada* who spent years in FUNABEM (one of the principal reformatories in Brazil), Goldstein illuminates the miserable conditions of such despotic state institutions; as Mirelli describes:

[The girls] were allowed to bathe and change their underwear only infrequently... the women in charge were punitive and authoritarian, and the girls were beaten, often for no reason, until they had large bruises on their bodies; some of the women used their position of power to abuse the girls sexually. (153)

The problematic role of detention centers is further complicated by the fact that Brazilians under the age of eighteen cannot be legally prosecuted. As a result, adults frequently employ gamins to commit crimes in exchange for a small percentage of the profit; such exploitation is appealing to poor juveniles because at the age of eighteen, regardless of the severity of the offense, they will be liberated from a reformatory. Even if sentenced to years within these institutions, the ease of access to escape additionally

diminishes the fear of any prison term. This sense of being untouchable only provides added incentive to commit criminal acts. Still, conditions within the filthy and overcrowded detention centers are so horrific that mere days confined in such places can prove fatal. While breakout from the institution may be facilitated, there is no escape from the ever-present vulnerability to sadistic abuses and sexual humiliations committed by both the authorities and the prisoners alike.

At the opening of Hector Babenco's film, the protagonist Pixote is sent to a state reformatory and subsequently assigned to a division appropriately titled "Pavilhão Euclides da Cunha." A well-known Brazilian author, da Cunha is best known for Os Sertões (*Rebellion in the backlands*), a non-fictional account of brutal military expeditions put forward by the Brazilian government against the rebellious village of Canudos. Within the detention center, a similarly cruel and unnecessary repression occurs by autocratic and abusive officials. Reformatory authorities not only exploit the inmates, but they furthermore torture the boys and condone fatalities with disturbing frequency.

In Pixote, the corruption of the detention center's overseers is in turn matched by their equally disreputable allies in the police force. The trail of blood left by their partnership is clearly illustrated through the use of detainees as scapegoats for unsolved crimes and the coincident conspiracy of silence surrounding the frequent abuse and murders of inmates. In a specific attempt to close a high-profile murder case, the police bring an arbitrary group of detainees to their headquarters; there, they proceed to bully an uncertain witness into making a positive identification. Pixote and his friends are then piled naked into a small isolation room while the cops drive off and riddle two of the boys with bullets. While Pixote returns safely to the institution, his determination to

escape has grown; until a breakout proves possible, he resorts to getting high on glue in order to alleviate his misery and fear.

Ultimately, Pixote abuses glue to such an extent that he puts his young life in danger. When he passes out in the latrine after getting high, the doctors in the infirmary chuckle and make light of Pixote's bleak diagnosis using the inmates' slang. While the doctors indeed make attempts to restore the detainees' health, their levity in the face of acknowledged inmate maltreatment casts a negative light on them. Furthermore, the doctors' complacency towards the brutality by reformatory officials is vital in maintaining the repression intrinsic to the institution.

Monica, the protagonist of La Vendedora de rosas, also indulges in glue sniffing. For her, this becomes the single vehicle for escape from the hardships and misery of everyday life as a gamin. As will be seen in section 3.2.4., in the face of the glue-induced unreliability of Monica's gamin unit and her coincident desire to reconnect with the loving family of her past, glue will ultimately serve as a permanent exit from the dejection of street life.

While Pixote is in the infirmary due to his glue-induced sickness, he inquires about Fumaça, his friend in the next bed over who had also been taken by the police. The nurse intuitively plays dumb and tells him: "Conheço Fumaça nenhum" (46:00-48:00). Soon after, however, Fumaça's disfigured body is found in a garbage heap. In keeping up with tradition and the general attitude of "se não há suspeito, trate de conseguir" (58:18), authorities pin the murder on AC—another detainee. While they assure AC that everything will be alright because he is only seventeen, the inmate is predictably killed by nightfall.

The recurring exploitation and murder by authorities is furthermore covered by lies to the visiting investigating agencies. Several attempts made by outside officials to help the detainees are additionally thwarted due to the boys' rightful mistrust of all authority figures. When a benevolent investigator comes to the institution following a riot generated by AC's murder, he pleads to the boys: "Vocês vieram pra cá pra se reintegraram na sociedade como cidadãos úteis. Estão desperdiçando a oportunidade das suas vidas" (59:00-59:35). In spite of the mutiny generated by the murder of their fellow inmate, the boys sadly remain taciturn when faced with authority because their mistrust of officials prevents them from revealing their constant abuse and thus putting an end to it.

The investigator's good intentions, then, are not only lost on the guarded detainees, but misconceptions that the institution is a legitimate rehabilitation center further impede his efforts to help. Up against a tight-knit, overpowering network of police, detention center officials, and even the institution's doctors, accordingly indignant detainees in fact stand no chance of emerging from the penal complex as "cidadãos úteis." As their resentment towards society is increasingly cultivated by sadistic authorities, the best that they can hope for is to leave the reformatory alive.

3.2.2. Education in the juvenile detention center

Like the naïve investigator, the institution's schoolteacher similarly extends herself in an attempt to connect with Pixote. Lost amidst daydreams, Pixote stares blankly at the teacher when she asks him to write down the following sentence: "A terra é redonda como uma laranja" (21:15). The teacher, in fact, has to put Pixote's hand on the piece of

paper in order to initiate his completion of the simple writing task. Both the classroom setting and the simile, however, are meaningless to Pixote. His “terra,” after all, is that of the street, and his only circularity is reflected in the cycle of repression that holds him hostage. Pixote’s interaction with the teacher does distinguish itself as one of the few selfless instances of positive adult attention in the film. In the close-up of Pixote sounding out each word of the sentence, Babenco draws attention to what would have been a normal child. Ultimately, however, the exchange is too isolated to make any meaningful difference and it is inevitably lost amidst the perpetual struggle to stay alive within the institution.

While Pixote receives a superior education in crime at the reformatory, in the end he is clueless with regards to the basic material taught in “normal” schools. At these latter educational centers, children are taught the fundamental knowledge to prepare them for their futures as productive citizens with a trade. In contrast, Pixote and his fellow detainees are educated in the basics of survival for their impending lives as criminals. Both schools, then, prime their students for the realities of adulthood: while “normal” schools train children how to live as mainstream professionals, detention centers teach inmates how to survive as criminals.

Mirelli’s educational experience in FUNABEM, described in Goldstein’s Laughter out of Place, stands in noteworthy contrast to that of Pixote in the reformatory. While Mirelli suffered extensive abuse at the institution (where she stayed until the age of twelve), at the same time she was able to benefit from a quality education: “Her reading and writing abilities far surpassed those of others who have had a similar level of public schooling on the outside, and she has held better-paying, higher-status jobs as a result. But Mirelli felt

that she was a prisoner during her childhood, and she hated her years in FUNABEM” (153). Although the victim of an abusive state institution, Mirelli was immune to the often-fatal violence depicted in both Gaviria’s and Padilha’s films as a result of her all-female context. Mirelli continued to express anger towards the reformatory even in her adulthood, but she never employed crime as an outlet for her resentment.

Of utmost importance is the improbability that, as a woman, Mirelli would pursue a criminal life upon release from the institution. While lower-class women may date criminals, they are unlikely to pursue a path of delinquency themselves. If females are to resort to an immoral means of survival, they are likely to fall back on prostitution rather than violence. This latter alternative is depicted by Judy in La Vendedora de rosas. A penniless street girl, Judy turns to prostitution in order to earn money for food and clothes. Conversely, in the real-life situation of Mirelli, there is no need for such a desperate alternative as a result of her quality education. The less abusive nature of her all-female state institution enabled Mirelli to benefit from her schooling without constant concern for her own survival.

3.2.3. *Familial relations and meaningful identities in Pixote*

In Babenco’s film, Pixote does not benefit from his schooling and his struggle to survive is further exacerbated by the constant disappointment that marks his relationship with his grandfather—Pixote’s only accountable relative. On visiting day, Pixote asks his grandfather to bring some marijuana to offer the other inmates in exchange for his protection. His grandfather’s insensitive refusal, however, only augments Pixote’s hunger for familial love. Fixated on Roberto, the inmate singer who is performing, his

grandfather asks Pixote: “Por que você não faz como ele?” (31:00-34:00). Despite Pixote’s knowledge that he cannot sing, he later tells a friend that he dreams of joining Roberto’s band. Pixote’s musical aspirations are on the one hand a clear attempt to ingratiate himself with his grandfather, and on the other, a larger effort to carve out a meaningful and respected social identity. Rejected by his only relative, Pixote yearns to be adored like Roberto and to furthermore attain a respected social position that will safeguard him from the abuse and neglect that have up to now defined his life.

In spite of his dream, Pixote is ultimately only able to actualize a significant societal role by means of delinquency. Luiz Eduardo Soares, in Cabeça de porco, explains how street children in Brazil use crime in order to erase their anonymity as part of the human pollution of the streets. “O importante, aqui, é a vontade de ser motivo de orgulho para quem o amou... Na esquina, apontando-nos a arma, o menino lança a nós um grito de socorro, um pedido de reconhecimento e valorização” (215). By the same token, in the detention center in Pixote, the boys repeatedly act out hold-ups, bank robberies, and torture methods in order to prepare for their future crimes and respected identities in the outside world. The detainees are, in fact, already very familiar with these modes of abuse thanks to the police and reformatory authorities. Brazil’s damaging detention centers then, as first-rate schools of crime, operate in complete opposition to their intended function as true reformatories; the result is that a life of law-breaking often turns into the single vehicle for social mobility.

Babenco’s portrayal of reformatories in Pixote parallels the sickening conditions of Brazilian juvenile detention centers depicted in José Padilha’s documentary Ônibus 174. In this latter film, Padilha details the life of Sandro, a former street boy who, by hijacking

a local bus in Rio de Janeiro in 2000, attacks the society that robbed him of what little he possessed: his mother, who was slain when he was six years old; members of his gamin family, who were murdered by police while they were sleeping; and, finally, his youth, which was annihilated in the juvenile detention center to which he was sent. Padilha's documentary clearly presents such state-sponsored subjugation as the justified stimulus for Sandro's nationally televised act of terror. Denied a significant social role by a society that aims to obliterate its human waste, poor youths like Sandro must, in fact, resort to criminal behavior as a means to both daily survival and an identity that demands respect.

Sandro's extensive criminal activity as a young adult exemplifies how state institutions function most successfully as educational centers of law-breaking. By facilitating increased contact between street children, juvenile detention centers permit the exchange and dissemination of methods of delinquency. Furthermore, the dog-eat-dog nature of such reformatories forces the prisoners to learn and employ innovative methods of survival for the dangers of their new environment.

3.2.4. *The rooming-house "El descanso" in La Vendedora de rosas*

In Victor Gaviria's La Vendedora de rosas, the gamin rooming house similarly fails to improve the lives of the street-girl protagonists. At the same time, the boarding house sharply distinguishes itself from Pixote's detention center because of the detrimental passivity of its authorities. In Pixote, the reformatory officials are indifferent to the well-being of the inmates, but they are involved with the detainees through perpetual physical abuse. In contrast, the inefficiency of El descanso in La Vendedora de rosas is illustrated by the visible lack of supervising adults and the widespread sniffing of glue that takes

place. The hostel's Doña, who is portrayed in a bit part as a background figure uninvolved in the girls' lives, is the antithesis of the detention center officials. While a more caring administrator is presented earlier in the film, her similar lack of knowledge about the girls confirms that street children are patrons of such hostels; they come and go as they please as if they were clients of the shelter.

The actions of the characters in the film are corroborated in sociological studies of Colombian gamins such as the one by Bedoya Marín and Jaramillo Martínez, who observe the following:

Aun cuando existan los espacios deportivos y culturales, la subutilización y la ausencia de personal que responda por la capacitación para los jóvenes y niños del barrio hace de este tipo de construcciones unos elefantes blancos, que terminan utilizándose para actividades opuestas a su función, como *tirar vicio* por ejemplo. (68)

Indeed, while Monica and her friends have their own rooms and beds at the hostel, they ultimately spend very little time there. Although the lack of adult supervision affords a strengthening of the gamin sisterhood created by the girls, in the end there is no real incentive for these self-sufficient street children to remain at the shelter.

Even though El descanso is undeniably more secure than the girls' previous abusive homes, it never succeeds in going past the substandard function as a transitory, welcoming space. Monica's friend Judy, for example, resists returning home throughout the film despite repeated pleas by a close family friend. When almost raped, however, she decides to go back to her mother's house. At that moment of complete vulnerability, Judy chooses her abusive mother over a shelter denied of concerned adults. Her decision to return home further solidifies the fact that the street girls in Gaviria's film are ultimately love-starved youths. Their cravings for the affection of their biological families are

provisionally replaced by their gamin sisterhood and, to a lesser extent, by the inconsequential hostel. The girls' irrepressible familial pining, however, eventually yields the completion of the gamin cycle via their return to their abusive families. When domestic abuse inevitably resurfaces, the girls will once again be forced to the streets to repeat the inescapable cycle.

3.2.5. *Biological families in La Vendedora de rosas*

While the rooming house is yet another example of inept institutions, the real tragedy in Gaviria's film is the failure of the modern-day family unit, which forces the girls to the street, and less frequently, to El descanso. For the protagonists of La Vendedora de rosas, the alternative to street life is to remain in the crowded shack that is their home. There, domestic life is defined by hunger, neglect, and both physical and sexual abuse. Accordingly, the girls in Monica's gamin family unit have all run away due to familial mistreatment. Monica's gamin sisterhood is thus composed of independent young girls who provide for one another, be it affection, a transfer of street survival tactics, or the sharing of glue to sniff as a means of escape.

The widespread domestic abuse among the Colombian lower-class is illustrated when another one of Monica's friends, Andrea, runs away from home in order to escape both her mother's habitual beatings and her sexually frustrated boyfriend. Monica offers to share her bed at the rooming house with Andrea and proceeds to guide her through a phone call in which she callously denigrates her mother. Through this act, Monica succeeds in freeing Andrea from her previous family. Her simultaneous doting and generosity preface Andrea's induction into the gamin sisterhood. Monica's adoption of

Andrea typifies how many street girls, in the absence of caring families, are perpetually in search of love to either give or receive. Such espousal is an attempt to give meaning to their uncertain lives by having someone dependent on them, or conversely, by becoming the dependent on a gamin sister.

An additional example of the dysfunctional modern-day family is illustrated through Monica's interactions with her remaining relatives. Upon returning to her aunt Bibiana's house after much time on the streets, Monica reviews photos of her family and specifically laments her deceased grandmother—the personification of maternal love for the orphaned girl. Monica has chosen not to live with Bibiana due in part to the sexual abuse that she suffers at the hands of various men around the house. With no other family, she is left to live on the streets where, with her gamin sisters, she sells roses and abuses drugs to both remove hunger and escape the misery of street life.

Bedoya Marín and Jaramillo Martínez find the same “*adición a la droga como una forma de escape a las vicisitudes cotidianas*” (83) in their study. Monica indeed achieves an escape from the reality of street life by getting high on glue. Her various attempts to reconnect with her grandmother are ultimately achieved only by means of the hallucinations that result from her addiction. After hours of sniffing glue, Monica envisions her grandmother in a statue of the Virgin Mary and proceeds to tell her: “*Usted vino por mí, cierto? No, yo no la voy a botar ... ¿Por qué se fue y no me llevó?*” (45:00-47:00). In her assurance that she's “not throwing it [the glue] away” (“no la voy a botar”), there is a distressing duplicity. Left alone in the world, Monica fights to give value to her life (and thus to not throw her existence away) via a relentless search for love; her friendships with other street girls and with her boyfriend, though, are never enough to

satisfy her longings. Although the girls have formed a cohesive gamin sisterhood in which all watch out for one another, their shared glue addiction produces unreliability and consequent holes in their network of safety. As Monica becomes increasingly addicted to glue as both an escape from her lonely existence and a means to connecting with her grandmother, it is the glue that she ultimately cannot throw away. In the end, her inability to dispose of it proves fatal.

Monica's highs from glue supplement her lack of love and a meaningful existence. Her desperation is exacerbated, though, by her failure to understand the workings of the world. As will be seen with Pixote in section 3.4.1., Monica's gamin status has left her ignorant of the basic facts of life. She asks her grandmother, "¿Por qué se fue y no me llevó?" as if not fully comprehending that her grandmother has died. While all of Monica's attempts at happiness are crushed, she simultaneously faces a non-functional rooming house and a society resistant to mobility.

Despite her efforts to foster a meaningful relationship with her boyfriend Anderson, his glue addiction yields him perpetually dim-witted and irresponsible even despite Monica's dotting. Anderson's gamin brotherhood again exemplifies the conclusions reached by Bedoya Marín and Jaramillo Martínez from their research on Colombian street children: "las actividades de la banda son vividas por el muchacho como si fueran parte de un mundo de aventura, muy propio de la edad que tiene en la época del ingreso al grupo" (115). Anderson and his friends habitually get high on glue, rob people, and proceed to crash their bicycles into trees; they have no sense of a future and their reckless behavior reflects the uncertainty of their lives as well as their immaturity. When Monica finds out that Anderson is cheating on her, she immediately goes in search of glue to

replace her loneliness and despondency. Trapped in the recycling process of abusive home to El descanso to the street, Monica eventually realizes what society seems to be expecting all along: through her excessive sniffing of glue, she is ultimately made invisible.

Monica and Pixote, then, are victims of failed institutions and unreliable broken families. Through the extreme abuse of inmates, the juvenile detention center in Pixote amplifies the already hopeless situation for lower-class adolescents by intensifying their resentment towards a society that consistently tries to expunge its disposable citizens. In La Vendedora de rosas, Monica and her gamin friends are similar victims of a defunct rooming house and households that are microcosms of violence. In spite of their neglect, both Pixote and Monica obtain interim security from temporary, peer-composed families formed amidst their perpetual maltreatment.

3.3. Gamin family units

The kinships that both Pixote and Monica form in the detention center and rooming house respectively enable both protagonists to survive for a while on the streets. Although these gamin units provide provisional comfort, both street clans ultimately unravel as a result of the temptation to pursue meaningful social identities. The success of these familial groups is further thwarted by the ill-planning of their activities. While the street children in both Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas exhibit impressive street smarts, in the end they are merely affection-starved youths whose desire for love and respect yields the destruction of their peer-composed kinships.

3.3.1. *The street family unit in Pixote*

Following AC's murder, Pixote breaks out of the detention center with a small group of inmates and is led to a life-endangering freedom on the streets. He commits crime after crime with the knowledge that, as a minor, he is untouchable. Guided by a newly formed family unit composed of reformatory escapees, Pixote—as the youngest member—fulfills “a lei do mais fraco” through street survival aided by the parental love offered by his gamin family. It is this familial unit that supervises the carrying out of petty assaults and drug deals. Along Pixote's path to a respected gun-toting identity, however, he encounters difficulties that lead to the destruction of his gamin kinship. Although soon empowered as an armed murderer, Pixote's inevitable continuity of a murderous lifestyle foreshadows his return to the detention center and a consequent repetition of the gamin cycle of repression.

Pixote's gamin unit, unlike Monica's sisterhood, fits comfortably into the prototype of a typical family as a result of the varying ages and genders of its members. Dito, as the young macho fawned over by dueling women, comes to serve as a crude father figure and gives himself the title of familial head of the street clan. Dito even buys Pixote a gun so that the young gamin can follow in Dito's paternal path of crime. While Pixote is already well on his way to a life of delinquency, he now has a mentor on the street. Dito's transvestite girlfriend Lilica proceeds to step perfectly into the role of mother and wife. While she nourishes the younger members—Pixote and Chico—with food and love,

Lilica's role as wife is further cemented by her jealousy of Sueli, the desirable prostitute who threatens to ruin their idyllic makeshift family through her seduction of Dito.

While there exist brief moments of compassion amidst the overwhelming difficulties of street life, the familial roles within this newly-formed unit are repeatedly confused by all of its members; ultimately, this disorder contributes to the devastation of the street clan. Although Dito attempts to serve as the head of the family, he is repeatedly emasculated as a result of his botched criminal plans and his refusal to do drugs when even little Pixote is getting high. The blurring of familial roles is further complicated in a seemingly ideal scene of family life where Sueli, Dito, Lilica, and Pixote all watch television together. A few minutes later, however, all are in bed as Sueli and Dito make no effort to hide the consummation of their relationship. This curiously communal act not only signals an initial unthreading of the gamin family, but it further confounds Pixote's superficial understanding of familial roles and protocol. As will be seen, in section 3.4.1, this confusion manifests itself in his final interaction with Sueli and the coincident undoing of their gamin kinship.

3.3.2. *Gamin formation in La Vendedora de rosas*

While failing to fulfill its potential status as a refuge of absolute safety, El descanso, like the detention center in Pixote, does succeed in fostering the formation of a new family unit necessitated in the absence of supervisory figures. With no incentive to stay at the shelter, the innovative gamin sisterhood in La Vendedora de rosas functions as a support network on the street. Like Pixote's ability to survive as a result of the collective crimes of his gamin family, the street girl kinship in Gaviria's film similarly ensures the

girls' survival through the cooperative selling of roses and the simultaneous affection that the girls provide for one another.

Muñoz Vila's research on Colombian street children demonstrates how accurately Gaviria depicts these familial units and how they aid in the survival of life on the streets: "Se conforman entonces grupos parcial o totalmente marginados de la familia, la escuela y el trabajo, con bajo nivel de acceso a los medios de supervivencia y que, para obtenerlos, tienen que utilizar formas de delincuencia o semidelincuencia" (10). Monica and her friends not only share in rose selling and petty theft, but also in the abuse of drugs, and specifically, in getting high on glue. The girls' make-shift sisterhood itself has an adhesive quality due to the girls' efforts to stick close to one another. But ironically, their addiction yields the opposite of glue's intended purpose to bond, for the gamin sisterhood consequently comes undone.

During Monica's first glue-induced hallucination in the film, her friend Judy listens attentively to Monica's description of her grandmother and she proceeds to comfort Monica in a sisterly fashion: "Venga, vamos a vender rosas, sí. No chupas la cola" (3:57). Monica agrees to stash the glue if Judy promises to stay with her all night. It is evident yet again that Monica is desperate for love and that glue replaces affection when her gamin sisters are not immediately there for her. Indeed, Monica's gamin sisterhood is never wholly reliable because of their addiction to glue. Judy, for instance, sabotages Monica's courtship with Anderson and subsequently rationalizes that she is merely protecting her friend from a cheating boyfriend. In truth, Judy is high on glue and her reckless matchmaking of Anderson with another girl is proof of the cracks that glue

yields in the gamin adhesion. Monica's inebriated gamin sister, then, ruins her perceived chance for love, and without delay she again seeks glue in order to replace the loss.

Don Héctor's gang is a noteworthy contrast to the street girls' kinship in La Vendedora de rosas. The group is composed of males of varying ages and it is paternally led by the crippled drug boss Don Héctor. Despite their daily drinking and use of cocaine, the gangsters never allow substance abuse to threaten the unity of the gang. While many of the gangsters are men already hardened by lives of crime, the key aspect that permits the success of their group is the benevolent leadership of Don Héctor, a crime boss who repeatedly offers fatherly advice to his followers throughout Gaviria's film. The gangsters pledge their unconditional loyalty to Don Héctor, ultimately choosing him over their biological families. Such allegiance contrasts with the street girls' irrepressible longing to be the object of pride amongst their biological families. Ultimately, the absence of supervisory adult figures at El descanso, coupled with glue-induced irresponsibility, irrevocably enervates the gamin sisterhood.

Both of the street families in Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas offer temporary love and mentoring, but the temptation of a meaningful social identity—defined by crime for Pixote and by a beloved position in biological families for the street girls—ultimately unravels both gamin kinships. The confusion of familial roles in Pixote's gamin unit, coupled with his desire to be a respected criminal, lead to the end of his makeshift family. Similarly, the street girls' desire to be loved by their real families and their coincident addiction to glue ultimately yield the disbanding of their sisterhood. Through the realization of significant social roles, the protagonists in both Gaviria's and Babenco's

films enter the final phase of the recycling process: a return to the abusive accommodations of the detention center and the violent home.

3.4.1. *Social identities and the destruction of the gamin family in Pixote*

Pixote's struggle to assert his citizenship throughout Babenco's film is reflective of the gamin reality the director aimed to portray. In an interview with Randall Johnson, Babenco explains:

There is no greater sadness, no greater disillusionment than a person not reaching the moment where he can say who he is. I feel that the need to express oneself, the gap between wanting and being able to do something, is one of the most painful things for people. In a certain way, both *Lucio Flavio* and *Pixote* are films that make violence flow precisely from the conflict between "I want" and "I will not give it to you, you do not deserve it." (Johnson 242)

Pixote's desire for a significant societal role is indeed fueled by the continual denial of his rights as a member of Brazilian society. The abuse by reformatory officials and the apathy of his single accountable relative further solidify the protagonist's disposability.

Liberated from the detention center, Pixote thus sets his aims high with a desire to be a wealthy and respected crime boss: "Quando eu tiver com minha grana na bolsa ninguem vai mexer. Quero ver aquele filho da puta que vai querer me bater. Eu não vou morrer como Big Boy, não" (1:20:00). Pixote's reference to Big Boy, one of the first powerful drug bosses of Rio de Janeiro who was killed at a young age by the corrupt police force, exemplifies how, with few opportunities in life, many lower-class youths inevitably idolize crime bosses as respected models.

Pixote's desire to actualize a meaningful social identity mediated by crime is possible due to his thorough criminal training within the penal complex and the support from his gamin family. Just as he practiced with makeshift weapons in the reformatory, Pixote

instinctively stabs a woman with a smooth, precise stroke in the wake of an ill-fated drug deal. As previously seen with the confusion of roles in his gamin family (section 3.3.1), Pixote is unable to decipher between the real stabbing and the make-believe one. He expresses no reaction to either incident. Pixote's desensitization and dehumanization is further illustrated by his only momentary concern for his gamin brother Chico, who lays unconscious on the ground. Pixote's dog-eat-dog survival skills guide him to leave Chico and the crime scene as soon as possible, but not before stopping to steal the victim's gun and money.

As a result of his peers being killed so frequently—from the detention center to the street—Pixote is immune to the emotional tolls of death. His life has been defined by violence as a means to survival and whatever sensitivity he had was shed long ago. Murder and brutality are, in fact, the components of the only reality he has ever known. Pixote's perception of the stabbing as inconsequential and his dismissal of Chico concretize his prioritization of a life of crime. It is this pursuit—as seen through the abandonment of Chico—that has already begun to destroy his gamin family unit.

While Pixote proves that he can kill, however, he is ultimately still a little boy who has been denied the luxury of conventional morality. One minute he murders, and the next he sings hymns with a street choir. Like Monica's hallucinations with the statue of the Virgin Mary, Pixote is similarly drawn to the church choir, and earlier in the film he becomes fixated on an effigy of the Virgin. Despite the comfort found in Christian symbols, such consolation—like that of the gamin kinship—is fleeting for Monica and Pixote. Religion can only offer momentary comfort for the two protagonists; as gamins,

Pixote and Monica know they are expendable and furthermore that they must survive by any means necessary.

Not only is Pixote devoid of morals, but he is additionally unaware of the fundamental details of life that “normal” children learn either from their families or in their schools. When he finds Sueli’s aborted fetus in the bathroom, he asks her if she’s hurt, only to be met by her biting riposte: “Tua mãe não contou como é que tu veio no mundo, não? É assim... Até parece contigo” (1:59:00-2:02:00). Although Pixote is able to employ his precocious street smarts in order to succeed as an urban survivor, his orphaned state ultimately yields him ignorant of the basic facts of life.

When Pixote accidentally kills Dito in a foiled robbery, he is again unmoved by death, even that of his paternal mentor. As Sueli mourns the loss of her recent lover, Pixote orders, “Não fale mais dele. O Dito já morreu” (1:59:00). Pixote appears unmoved by the killing, but, while watching television, he suddenly vomits. Sueli cradles the boy in her arms, lets him suck on her breast and assures him: “Já passou, já passou... Meu filho, Mamãe está aqui com você, viu?” (2:00:00). But when he refuses to remove his mouth from her, Sueli demands: “Me larga, Pixote. Não quero. Tira essa boca suja encima de mim. Eu não sou sua mãe. Ouviu? ... Vai viver a tua vida” (2:01:00). Babenco accentuates the Oedipal tone of Sueli and Pixote’s relationship by blurring the erotic male fantasy in this scene. In the end, Pixote’s confusion of familial roles and his bold attempt to pursue a life of crime have yielded the murder of his gamin father and the alienation of a maternal surrogate.

In the aforementioned interview with Randall Johnson, Babenco details the disintegration of the gamin kinship as representative of the societal disregard for street

children. “The film began with so many children, with so many personages emerging, and little by little one would leave, another died, another disappeared, another the film itself forgot, another the police killed” (244). As Pixote wanders about armed and alone in the film’s denouement,⁶ only one thing remains certain: in his inevitably violent struggle to survive and to be respected, Pixote will undoubtedly be forced back into the detention center where he will repeat the gamin cycle of repression and thus confirm for society that he is indeed disposable.

3.4.2. *Social identities realized and gamin unthreading in La Vendedora de rosas*

While the gamin sisterhood in Gaviria’s film is a source of comfort, it ultimately cannot replace the conventional love of biological (although negligent) families. Like Pixote’s attempts to be respected as a gangster, the street girls in Gaviria’s film choose stable roles in abusive families over their gamin sisterhood. Continual abuse, though, will again draw the girls to the street, where they will repeat the gamin cycle of repression and solidify the lowly stigma cast upon them by society.

The prioritization of biological families over the gamin kinship is illustrated when Cheeky’s abusive father comes looking for her at El descanso. Claudia, a gamin peer who has become Cheeky’s maternal surrogate, immediately interrogates Cheeky’s father, demanding to know what he can possibly offer her: “La levanté diez meses entonces por qué me la levantará?” (1:15:00). The heartache of Cheeky’s departure forces a tearful Claudia to threaten replacing Cheeky’s spot as her adopted gamin daughter: “si demora mucho yo le regalaré su puesto a otra niña” (1:19:00). Cheeky asks Claudia to wait one

⁶ “The concluding scenes of a movie where the story elements are finished and the characters' status after the climax is shown” [imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com). 14 April 2006 <<http://www.imdb.com/Glossary/>>

week before replacing her; if her father continues to be physically abusive, she will return.

Although the all-female peer-composed gamin unit in La Vendedora de rosas is undeniably more like a sisterhood than Pixote's street family, the need to love and be loved yields instances of mother-daughter relationships within the girls' kinship. As Adrienne Rich explains in Of Woman Born:

The woman who has felt 'unmothered' may seek mothers all her life... the 'motherless' woman may also react by denying her own vulnerability, denying she has felt any loss or absence of mothering. She may spend her life proving her strength in the 'mothering' of others... In a sense she is giving to others what she herself has lacked; but this will always mean that she needs the neediness of others in order to go on feeling her own strength. (242-3)

While Monica and Cheeky exemplify "unmothered" girls who continually seek mothers, Claudia clearly fits into the second category of "unmothered" females who become maternal surrogates. Although Claudia is the same age as the rest of the girls in the gamin sisterhood, her physical appearance suggests that she is much older; Claudia is heavy-set and wears baggy clothing in contrast to her friends' skimpy outfits. For Claudia, the security of having a dependent like Cheeky is priceless in the context of gamin misery. Although Claudia sniffs glue and is no more responsible than the other girls, she has taught Cheeky street survival tactics while offering her previously absent love.

As all of the girls watch Cheeky leave, they lament: "Yo quiero un papá así" (1:21:00). The longing for biological families, even in the face of unrelenting abuse, is hence irrepressible. In the end, however, violence and sexual misconduct will inevitably force the girls to the street yet again.

In another return to an abusive home, Andrea confronts her mother's lewd boyfriend and defends her mother, who works overtime to support him: "Lo que es con mi mamá es

conmigo” (1:30:08). Although Andrea leaves home due to her mother’s habitual beatings, the gamin sisterhood has not succeeded in replacing maternal, albeit violent, love. When Andrea comes home for Christmas, her mother promises not to hit her again. Andrea’s decision to accept her mother’s brutality forecasts her own development into a down-trodden and poverty-stricken mother herself.

Monica, too, desires the love of her biological family and goes to irrefragable lengths in hopes of attaining familial bliss. On Christmas she sniffs glue with Claudia and leaves as her friend—amidst hallucinations of blood—has obvious prognostications of Monica’s death. Monica proceeds to get high in the ruins of her grandmother’s house. She carelessly waves a firecracker about while having hallucinations of past Christmases. When the sinister gangster Zarco comes to steal her watch, she is unable to distinguish between her drug-induced visions and reality. Zarco forcefully strikes Monica but she is fixated by the apparition of her grandmother and she mistakenly hugs his leg and simultaneously embraces the maternal image. It is this final glue-induced connection with her grandmother that leads to her death and perhaps reunites Monica with her in heaven.

3.5. *Conclusion*

Both groups of street children in the Gaviria and Babenco films are able to find temporary comfort within innovative peer-composed families. These protective groups ultimately disband, however, due to the juveniles’ concession to the temptation of meaningful social identities. Pixote’s aim to be a respected gangster and the street girls’ desire for a beloved role within their biological families inevitably deconstruct the gamin

kinship and simultaneously lead to the realization of society's single promise of "no future," as in the title of another of Gaviria's films, for these underprivileged youths.

The unfortunate reality of many lower-class youths in both Brazil and Colombia is not only supported by the aforementioned sociological studies, but furthermore by the real life events surrounding these documentary-inflected films. Fernando Ramos da Silva, the actor who plays Pixote, had hoped that Babenco's film would lift him from the misery of favela life and initiate his acting career. His illiteracy and the violence that followed him everywhere prevented this dream from actualizing. At the age of nineteen, he was inexplicably shot and killed by police. Gaviria's earlier film, Rodrigo D.: No Future, is dedicated to its four main actors who, like Fernando Ramos da Silva, were killed in the absurd everyday violence of a society that continually aims to socially clean itself. In his interview with Carlos Jáuregui, Gaviria explains, "Es importante y éticamente necesario saber que algunos de mis actores han muerto en esas guerras amorfas que se libran en Colombia; muchos siguen en la calle y son presa de la miseria y la droga... hacemos parte de la sociedad que los margina y que todos los días los traicionamos" (227). Through a neorealist style of filmmaking, Gaviria confronts his audience with national social problems that are oft-ignored.

In contrast to Rodrigo D.—in which the leading characters are young men and the film is marked by a punk soundtrack—La Vendedora de rosas is a more sentimental narrative that is based off of Hans Christian Anderson's "The Little Match Girl" and that utilizes melodramatic music. By employing a softer soundtrack and overtly founding the narrative in a classic children's story, Gaviria further engages the audience in existent

social problems while simultaneously confronting them with the reality that they are “parte de la sociedad que los margina.”

While injustice is mercilessly explicated in La Vendedora de rosas and Pixote alike, neither of the narratives suggests the overthrow of the established order nor do they offer any concrete alternatives or solutions. They do, however, engage the audience through an unadorned portrayal of national social problems within a narrative framework. Both films show how deficient state institutions and negligent modern-day families in Brazil and Colombia sadly perpetuate an already hopeless situation for lower-class youths. By producing juveniles who must resort to crime and glue in order to survive, the upper-class perception of street children as human waste is solidified. Amidst perpetual brutality and lack of care, gamins staunchly strive to cultivate meaningful identities for themselves. With few options, however, such efforts inevitably add fuel to the imprisoning sphere of repression.

Chapter Four:

Conclusion

While coming of age is difficult for all, the four narratives discussed in this thesis demonstrate that, for many reasons, it is hardest for the poor. For many lower-class youths in Brazil and Colombia, there is often no childhood and adolescence, but rather an immediate shift from infancy to adulthood. Due to the abusive nature of state rehabilitation centers and the modern-day lower-class family unit, the juvenile protagonists of the four works of fiction are consequently forced into the streets. There, they must resort to criminal behavior in order to both survive and carve out a meaningful social identity. With varying degrees of success, the leading characters join street gangs that function as supportive kinships. In some cases, however, the impossibility of social mobility and the failure of institutions quell the efforts of these adolescents to transcend their disposable position in society.

4.1. *Poor youths vs. gamins*

While all four narratives depict poor youths who struggle with abuse and poverty, only the central characters of Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas stand out as gamins. As a result of the sadistic detention center in Pixote, the ineffective hostel in La Vendedora de rosas, and the severe instability and abuse of biological families in both films, the protagonists of the two films have no alternative to the street; these circumstances define

the central characters of Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas as gamins because they are consequently homeless children who must make their homes on the street.

In Babenco's film, Pixote is forced to the street because, as a destitute orphan, there is no other place for him to go. Since Pixote must resort to a life of crime in order to survive and be respected, his return to the juvenile detention center is inevitable. There, he will not merely face an alcoholic father or a bitter mother—as illustrated in Sangre ajena and Inferno respectively—but rather a highly organized group of corrupt officials who routinely use and abuse the inmates. In La Vendedora de rosas, Monica similarly has no other option but to live on the street. She cannot stay with her aunt and uncle—her only relatives—due to persistent sexual abuse and her alienating addiction to glue. Ultimately, Pixote and Monica are not only denied meaningful social identities, but they are additionally deprived of the luxury of alternatives.

In Sangre ajena and Inferno, the protagonists are never forced to spend a significant amount of time on the street due to several reasons: the less violent nature of their homes (when compared with the abuse depicted in both films), the presence of caring older siblings, and their adoption by paternal crime bosses. Both the detention center murders in Pixote and the persistent sexual abuse in Gaviria's film trivialize the domestic violence that is depicted in Melo and Alape's novels. Reizinho and Ramón, the central characters of Inferno and Sangre ajena respectively, live in abusive, poverty-stricken households that epitomize everything that the young boys want to avoid in adulthood. Motivated by the prospect of realizing a better life, Ramón and Reizinho choose to leave home and enter into a life of crime. The domestic violence that they suffered in their youth does not create a permanent estrangement with their biological families; both protagonists in fact

reconcile with their parents by the end of the novels. It is this ability to return home that is lacking for Monica and Pixote.

In José Padilha's documentary Ônibus 174, the distinction between motivated poor youths (like Ramón and Reizinho) and puerile glue-sniffing orphans (like Pixote and Monica) is further elucidated. The film's protagonist, Sandro—a former street child turned hijacker—has been banned from all of the gangs in Rio de Janeiro due to his known drug abuse and erratic behavior. Prone to petty thefts and sniffing glue, street children such as Sandro are scorned not only by the upper classes, but even by organized gangs. In order to initiate into highly structured criminal groups (such as those depicted in Inferno and Sangre ajena), youths must prove their responsibility and diligence. Such characteristics are often lacking in gamins. For example, as was seen with Pixote and Monica in Chapter Three, their minimal contact with schooling and family left them ignorant to the basic facts of life. This lack of knowledge, coupled with the sniffing of glue, prevents both Monica and Pixote from achieving a better life and a meaningful identity. Ultimately, Sandro's tragic life in Ônibus 174 exemplifies in documentary form what Babenco and Gaviria tried to portray in their films: the hopeless situation of street orphans.

Another tragic aspect of Padilha's documentary is Sandro's nickname—*Mancha* (a birthmark or stain)—which is sadly fitting. Perceived by the upper classes as human garbage, gamins like Sandro (as well as Pixote and Monica) are stains on the social landscape. Ultimately, Sandro is only able to claim a meaningful and distinct identity by means of a terrorist act that is televised live throughout Brazil. By hijacking a bus, Sandro succeeds in leaving his mark—actually more like a *mancha*—on the collective

national memory. Ultimately, though, Sandro's legacy as a violent thug is a stain that merely reinforces the stereotype of gamins as valueless. Similarly, in Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas, the audience is permanently marked by the numerous scenes of glue sniffing; the natural actors seem to be genuinely high. These haunting scenes amidst the protagonists' desperate desire to be loved are intense confrontations with the reality of street children.

4.2. *Organized gangs vs. informal street clans*

As in Ônibus 174, the protagonists of La Vendedora de rosas and Pixote are never able to actualize a positive societal role on the street. In contrast, the central characters of Inferno and Sangre ajena thrive following their departure from abusive households. Ramón and Reizinho ultimately succeed outside of their biological families as a result of their informal adoption by responsible crime bosses. Both of their gang units are highly organized and demanding; weak or irresponsible youths are consequently weeded out in the process of criminal training. The opportunities afforded to Ramón and Reizinho by paternal gang leaders fosters a more genuine familial devotion within the organized crime units. Both boys view their paternal surrogates as saviors who have offered them a single, previously absent chance for social mobility, a respected identity, and the first chance to be a source of fatherly pride. Moreover, the criminal groups in both novels demonstrate a concrete code of ethics that is sustained by the protagonists in adulthood.

In contrast, the protagonists of Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas lack the training, guidance, and paternal warmth given to Ramón and Reizinho by the crime bosses. In Pixote, while survival tactics are exchanged among inmates in the penitentiary, this

education in delinquency is minimal when compared with the demanding instruction at the *sicario* school in Sangre ajena. Although Pixote's gamin unit attempts to succeed as a serious criminal group, they lack the necessary leadership and loyalty of an organized gang. While Pixote and the other inmates learn to survive as street delinquents, in Sangre ajena, Ramón is taught to succeed as a professional criminal.

The gang bosses in Sangre ajena and Inferno thus function as strict but doting father figures for the impressionable and affection-starved protagonists. In La Vendedora de rosas, Don Héctor is a similarly paternal gang leader who is idolized by his subordinates. One gangster, for instance, comes running to Don Héctor when Zarco—a malicious and strung out member of the posse—slashes his hand. Like a bullied child crying to his father, the wounded gangster expects Don Héctor to remedy the situation. While the gang leader brings about justice by killing Zarco, Don Héctor's criminal group is completely disorganized in comparison to that of Miltão in Inferno or Don Luis in Sangre ajena. Furthermore, Don Héctor's paternal mentoring is unconvincing because, unlike Don Luis and Miltão, he is constantly drunk or high on drugs. When he offers guidelines for a long life to the youngest gang member, Don Héctor wraps up the advice by sharing his cocaine with the eight year-old boy. Like the gamin groups of both films, Don Héctor is inhibited by drug use; as a result, he never succeeds in achieving the extravagant lifestyle and successful criminal group illustrated by the gang bosses in Inferno and Sangre ajena.

In contrast to Don Héctor's debilitating abuse of drugs, Miltão (in Inferno) has a zero tolerance policy of drug use for the members of his gang. In fact, he only allows Reizinho to join the gang once the boy has promised to stop getting high. Even when Reizinho spends time on the street prior to gang initiation, he distinguishes himself from the

disorganized gamin criminals (such as those in Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas).

“Reizinho trabalhava sozinho, embora sempre aparecessem pivetes propondo parcerias. Nunca ajudavam, os garotos, e traziam riscos para as vítimas, já que, diferentemente do Reizinho, so assaltavam depois de se drogarem” (61). When Reizinho becomes *Dono*, he continues Miltão’s prohibition of drugs among the gangsters. Conversely, the heavy drug usage among both groups of street criminals in Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas further exacerbates their struggle and dim prospects.

4.3. *Families of origin vs. families of choice*

An additional distinction between the protagonists of the novels and those of the films is the presence of siblings who encourage initiation into gang life. In Inferno, Carolaine advises her younger brother Reizinho to get a gun, join Miltão’s gang, and “seja alguém” (49). She contrasts such a meaningful identity as a gangster with the lowly position of their mother, who slaves away at an “honest” job for a paltry wage. Similarly, in Sangre ajena, Nelson rescues his younger brother by taking Ramón to Medellín in order to escape the misery of their abusive, crowded household. He furthermore offers nightly tutoring sessions in order to help Ramón with the sophisticated criminal tactics taught at the *sicario* school. While the girls in La Vendedora form a sisterhood on the street, their shared drug addiction and coincident longing for the love of their biological families impedes the development of the sincere concern that is characteristic of biological siblings in Inferno and Sangre ajena.

The portrayal of maternal figures is another point of contraposition between the novels and films. While the biological mothers in Inferno and Sangre ajena slave away to make

ends meet, Pixote's mother is a prostitute that he has not seen for years, and Monica is an orphan. In Pixote, the maternal figures are all portrayed in a negative light: the prostitute Sueli has given herself an abortion and she banishes the affection-starved Pixote when he tries to push a maternal and erotic role onto her; Dito's mother has an affair with the overseer of the detention center and she consequently alienates her son. The maternal figures in Babenco's film are thus selfish women for whom motherhood is simply a burden. Even the reformatory psychologist, the nurse, and the schoolteacher are disappointments. In the absence of any family members, Pixote and Monica both find comfort in makeshift gamin kinships that ultimately fail to replace their desire for a significant identity.

The lack of worthy maternal figures is also illustrated in the examples of "unmothered" daughters—Carolaine in Inferno and Claudia in La Vendedora de rosas. The resentment that Carolaine expresses for her mother Alzira pushes her to achieve a better life for herself. Carolaine tries to realize a more significant identity through her relationships with men, and she subsequently ends up pregnant, alone, and destined to transform into her bitter, downtrodden mother. In contrast, Claudia gives meaning to her life by mothering her gamin peers and thus providing them with the maternal love that she never had. By having these adopted daughters dependent on her, Claudia actualizes a meaningful social role for herself.

4.4. *Public schools vs. Educations in crime*

Apart from family, another fundamental issue presented in the narratives is that of the failed education system. In Laughter out of Place, Donna M. Goldstein describes the ineffective schooling offered to poor youths in Brazil: “Although public education is paid for through government funding, it rarely functions as the great equalizer that many liberals desire it to be... The children of the poor, if they go to school at all, enter a second-class educational system perfectly suited to reproducing second-class citizens” (95). The problematic issue of ineffective schools is well-illustrated in Inferno. When Reizinho realizes that he has a better chance to succeed in life via gang initiation, he abruptly drops out of school. Reizinho perceives from an early age that honest jobs for the lower class are underpaid and employees are overworked. By observing the success of Miltão and other gangsters, Reizinho concludes that the sole means to economic mobility is through induction into criminal life. This way of thinking also attends to Nelson in Sangre ajena. Although a previously inattentive student, Nelson thrives at the *sicario* school in light of the unique opportunity that it presents for economic prosperity. At Don Luis’s school, Nelson is instructed in criminal tactics by professional *sicarios*. Conversely, his former school in the countryside was overcrowded and poorly supplied. There is no hope for a better life through the education offered at such meager schools.

Nelson’s situation is corroborated by the published testimonies of Colombian *sicarios* in Alonso Salazar’s No nacimos pa’ semilla. Salazar’s description of failed Colombian schooling is illustrated by Mono—the leader of a successful gang. “He studied engineering at the university for a while, but since it was money he was really after, he took up crime instead. Antioquia University was shut for months at a time in those days anyway, so he had to find some way of surviving” (58). In light of a valueless system of

education and the substandard conditions in which to study, there are simply no motivations for some of the poor youths in Colombia and Brazil alike to continue with their schooling.

4.5. *Hopeful vs. hopeless endings*

As Sangre ajena and Inferno end, the two protagonists reflect on their respective paths to criminal success. Although it is uncertain whether Ramón and Reizinho will continue with their lives of crime, one thing remains clear: both protagonists have surpassed the poverty of their biological families as a result of their induction into organized gangs. Furthermore, they never once forget the paternal crime bosses who enabled this ascension. In light of the opportunities that organized gangs offer Ramón and Reizinho, both novels end on a hopeful note that seems to promote organized gang initiation. After all, if Ramón and Reizinho had not been rescued by Don Luis and Miltão respectively, they would have undoubtedly transformed into either gamins or abusive fathers themselves.

In contrast to the positive endings of both novels, Pixote and La Vendedora de rosas conclude on unequivocally bleak notes. Monica fatally overdoses from her glue addiction, and Pixote—the lone survivor of his gamin kinship—wanders the street by himself. Through a uniquely multi-faceted and unadorned portrayal of gamins, Gaviria and Babenco foster a dialogue about the failure of state institutions and the weakness of some lower-class families. Although they do not offer any direct solutions, their realistic presentation of street children promotes awareness and removes the collective anonymity previously attached to this mass of abused youths.

Like the abusive parents depicted in the four narratives, the state itself is portrayed as a negligent paternal figure who has abandoned its most needy residents. By employing a narrative framework to address societal ills, these four works of fiction are able to engage their audiences in the existent social problems which persist in Colombia and Brazil.

4.6. *Postscript*

As previously mentioned, my experience living in a Brazilian favela for a year and a half compelled me to work on a subject that would draw attention to the reality of shantytowns that I saw mirrored in the four texts. Of utmost importance was the need to counter the negative stereotype of gangsters that was conveyed to me in my conversations with members of the upper class. In the favela, I came to understand that the temptations to join a gang were overpowering in light of the benefits that such criminal groups offer. For example, gangs provide: health care (i.e. if a gangster is shot he will be treated by a doctor employed by the gang), an extremely high salary, days off, funeral expenses for members of the gangs who are killed, and various services for the community such as youth soccer programs and the construction of day-care centers. In light of these factors as well as the extremely poor quality of the public schools, my experience in the favela confirmed that gang initiation is ironically the best chance for a favela resident to rise above poverty. Gangs are a necessary evil in the context of extreme class inequality in Brazil. Furthermore, I saw that gangs provide the community with the services that the government and police fail to offer favela residents.

Another aspect of the favela is the incredible sense of community. Since the gangs have a code of ethics that is abided by all community members (in short—no lying,

stealing, cheating, or killing), I felt safer in the favela than I did in any other part of Rio de Janeiro. While in the main city I was vulnerable to pick pocketing and sexual harassment, in the favela I could come home by myself very late at night and feel entirely protected. This security even extended to the ability to sleep with the door of my apartment open.

In the time that I lived in Rocinha, I was a full-time volunteer teacher of English and art at two elementary schools. There, I witnessed both the poor quality of education as well as the admiration that my young students expressed for the gang members. While I befriended several gangsters and never had any negative encounters with the gang, I conversely was the victim of numerous instances of police harassment. Because of my appearance, I stood out to the police and they believed me to be a tourist who had come to the favela to buy drugs. Another difference between the police and the gangs was their individual policies of when to open fire. In my favela, the gang had a rule that if they saw the police, they should run in order to avoid cross-fire that might injure an innocent favelado. If a gang member accidentally kills an innocent person, then he is punished by death. In contrast, the police often invaded the favela and killed numerous innocent residents in the process. It is the gang, in fact, that must protect the favela residents from the police.

In the end, I wanted this thesis to reflect my experience, which was portrayed in the four texts I analyzed, that it is extremely difficult to rise above the caste-system that oppresses members of shantytowns. Although there are non-profit programs that teach trades to favela residents, these initiatives exist on a very small scale. If lower-class youths join organized gangs, they cannot be judged for having to resort to crime in order

to make a better life for themselves. Only through the improvement of government programs, education, and an end to police corruption will gangs cease being a necessary and attractive evil.

Appendix A

For additional resources on contemporary Colombian novels and film, see:

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