"All Chicanos need a sense of belonging, respect, and opportunity. Due to the exclusion from the surrounding region, however, the only space where these opportunities could possibly exist is in the barrio."

BARRIOS, GANGS, AND ENCLAVES

A Socioeconomic Reading of Luis Rodriguez's Always Running

CHRISTOPHER BRUNNER

THIS PAPER WILL ENGAGE IN A SOCIOECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF LUIS RODRIGUEZ'S ALWAYS RUNNING. THE PAPER WILL IDENTIFY THE LOMAS BARRIO AS AN IMMIGRANT ENCLAVE ISOLATED FROM THE GREATER LOS ANGELES COMMUNITY. WHILE AN IMMIGRANT ENCLAVE TYPICALLY SERVES AS A TRANSITIONAL COMMUNITY FOR ETHNIC IMMIGRANTS, THE GEOGRAPHIC, POLITICAL, AND SOCIAL ISOLATION OF THE ECONOMICALLY-DEPRIVED BARRIO LEAD TO EXCLUSION OF THE RESIDENT CHICANO POPULATION FROM THE SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES. AS A RESULT, RODRIGUEZ AND THE OTHER YOUTH ARE THROWN INTO THE NIHILISTIC GANG LIFESTYLE OF LAVIDA LOCA, A REBELLIOUS AND MILITANT RESPONSE TO THE MARGINALIZATION OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD. THE PAPER CONCLUDES THAT WHILE GANG LIFESTYLE IS NOT THE BEST OPTION FOR THE YOUTH OF THE BARRIO, IT IS THE ONLY CHANCE TO EARN THE RESPECT, IDENTITY, AND SENSE OF BELONGING THAT THE BARRIO CANNOT PROVIDE.

In Luis Rodriguez's memoir *Always Running*, Rodriguez describes a youth lifestyle of gangs, violence, and discrimination. The setting of this lifestyle is a Los Angeles "barrio"—an inner-city ethnic neighborhood typical of a Spanish-speaking population. While every city has ethnic neighborhoods and the divisions accompanying these neighborhoods, the barrios of Los Angeles have an identity and strength to which few neighborhoods can compare. Using the prevalence of gang culture and violence in the barrio, Rodriguez looks to paint the barrio as a neighbor-

hood detrimental to the individual and to social psychology.

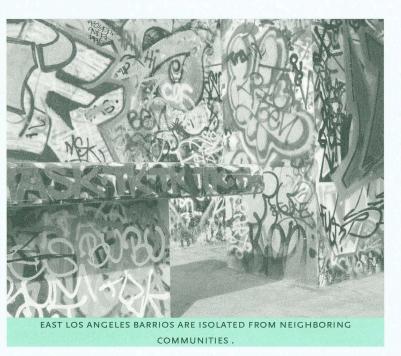
Nonetheless,

Rodriguez continually returns to the barrio throughout the story. Due to the isolation of the barrio from the Los greater Angeles community and the inability of the barrio to respond to this isolation, Rodriguez defines the gang culture as an emulation of the barrio identity as well as

the only possible source of social structure not provided by the barrio.

A neighborhood's isolation begins when the group residing within the neighborhood is either excluded or chooses to be isolated—the latter being a desired rarity. The first and most prominent form of isolation Rodriguez describes is geographic. When Rodriguez first introduces the reader to *Las Lomas*, or "the Hills," he calls "The Hills... unseen. Unvisited. Cars flew past north of here on the San

Bernardino Freeway...a place you could have found in the Ozarks or the hills of Tijuana."¹ The readers' initial introduction to the barrio paints it as cold and secluded. Originally, he does not describe specific geographic features, yet he compares Lomas to the Ozarks and the hills of Tijuana. In this account, Rodriguez transforms the freeway into artificial hills to isolate Lomas from the East Los Angeles area. This serves as a precursor to the development of many social issues within the barrio, including the development of gangs. In her book *Going Down to the*



Barrio: Homeboys and Homegirls in Change, Moore chronicles the beginnings of select East Los Angeles gangs by first highlighting the neighborhood's history. According Moore, in the 1950s, the city made a series of land grabs for freeway construction in the region, and "two of the freeways (the San Bernardino and Santa Ana) cut

through the heart of the East Los Angeles barrios."ii The removal of large tracts of land combined with the increasing population density served to effectively isolate East Los Angeles, and it is doubtless Lomas would have been included as well. Having only grazed the driving narrative, Rodriguez uses spatial and geographic isolation to close Lomas off from the surrounding community.

Besides the geographic isolation of the barrio, political and social isolation were equally as prominent and historically

"With such social, political, and geographic powers opposing the development of the neighborhood, the barrio lifestyle became one of alienation from the greater Los Angeles community."

more powerful. The barrios served as homes to a migrant and impoverished population, an outcast group forced to live in strictly defined areas. In the beginning days of urban sprawl in Los Angeles, what often defined a neighborhood was its annexation by the neighboring city. The remaining "unincorporated county territory was generally where the poorest people lived, the old barrios, which for the most part didn't belong to any city because nobody wanted them."iii Essentially, an unincorporated city is politically isolated; government and other institutions are not established in these areas, and access to many basic elements and utilities of a city, such as sewage systems and paved roads is lacking. These measures of isolation for

the barrios which were [not] incorporated, including Las Lomas, became self-contained and forbidden, incubators of rebellion . . . For years, nobody ventured into Las Lomas unless they had to be there. Buses refused to provide residents there any service. Sheriff's deputies entered it with full firepower and ample backup, hardly ever alone.iv

This passage from Rodriguez describes the psychological and social isolation of the neighborhood. The barrios are excluded by the greater Los Angeles community due to their image as havens of crime and poverty. The media also rode on this wave of intolerance, expounding upon tales of criminal youth and gang dominance in these areas. With escalating notoriety seizing the neighborhood, Lomas becomes socially isolated. No one wants to enter the neighborhood without firepower and basic civil services—such as the bus lines that refuse to enter the area. With such social, political, and geographic powers opposing the development of the neighborhood, the barrio lifestyle became one of alienation from the greater Los Angeles community. This isolation, in turn, plays a pivotal role in the development of many families, including the Rodriguez family.

With these issues, Rodriguez paints a bleak picture of the community. Yet the Lomas community is further isolated by its Mexican culture. Las Lomas is an ethnic community intrinsically different from the white, middle-class neighborhoods that enclose it. In John Logan, Richard Alba, and Wenquan Zhang's article Immigrant Enclaves and Ethnic Communities in New York and Los Angeles, the authors analyze post-Vietnam development of the ethnic enclave in social and psychological contexts. Curiously, the authors make a distinction between what they term as "immigrant enclaves" and "ethnic communities." Immigrant enclaves are driven by "people's limited market resources and ethnically bound cultural and social capital," and these neighborhoods are intended to be "transitional neighborhoodsthey represent a practical and temporary phase in the incorporation of new groups." Additional identifications are "physical characteristics (by the usual standards of mainstream society, they are less desirable as places to live) and by the characteristics of the people who live in them (they concentrate immigrants who are recently arrived and have few socioeconomic resources.)"vi An ethnic community, on the other hand is a term used "to refer to ethnic neighborhoods that are selected as living environments by those who have wider options based on their market resources."vii This distinction the authors make is interesting as sociologists do not often separate ethnic communities into transitional and permanent neighborhoods. Their study is a sociological analysis of immigrant neighborhoods, yet they choose economic resources as the determitant for a homeowner's choice between these two areas. While it is often economic resources that determine a family's ability to move out of a poor area, the "transitional period" that accompanies the immigrant enclave may be an extended or permanent period of time. Many families in the barrio, such as the Rodriguez family, may have had intentions of leaving the barrio, yet the economic, political, geographic, and cultural isolation may have prevented them.

The Rodriguez family's transitional period is an active one as they move to new homes and work places. The majority of the first chapters are dedicated to Rodriguez's descriptions of each new neighborhood to which he moves. Nonetheless, the relocations are constrained by their economic resources; they "often changed houses because of evictions. [His] dad constantly tried to get better work."viii Logan, Alba, and Zhang postulated the transitional period of the immigrant ended when "people with more financial resources and mainstream jobs avoid ethnic zones . . . in search of the 'Promised Land.'"ix When Rodriguez's father secures a new job and believes he has the economic resources to move out of the Lomas neighborhood and into Reseda, a middle class suburb, Rodriguez views his father's new job as "a miracle." Rodriguez's father "went nuts in Reseda," purchasing a new home, car, and several new appliances, all with the "attitude [of] 'who cares?' We were Americans now. We were on our way to having a little bit of that dream."xi This American ideal of homeownership comes with its share of changes. Reseda is a starkly different neighborhood from Lomas, with a completely different identity. Although Rodriguez does note that Taft High School was for "well-off white children," he never explicitly says that their neighborhood is a white neighborhood.xii In fact, Reseda lacks any ethnic identity, but of the ethnic enclaves of Los Angeles, the Rodriguez family is free to roam without any confinement.

Ultimately, though, this suburban, "ethnic-less" identity is not ideal for the Rodriguez family. The Rodriguez family

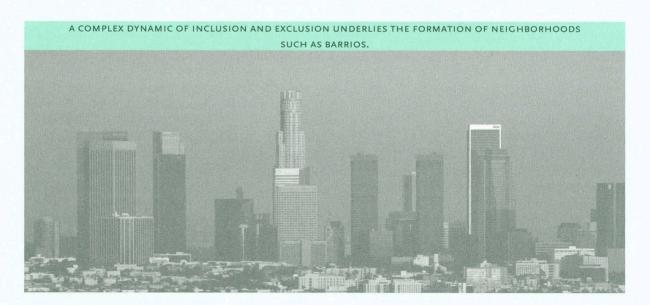
leaves within a few months of entering Reseda after Rodriguez's father loses his job. As the Rodriguez family pulls away from their former home, Rodriguez sees the "sad faces on our neighbors were our farewell. I supposed they realized we [were not] so bad for being Mexican. We were going back to an old friend—pobreza."xiii Rodriguez's description allows the reader to see that for Rodriguez, the Mexican family does not fit in this suburban lifestyle. When they moved to Reseda, the Rodriguez family was "the only Mexican family around."xiv Rodriguez is harassed by the children at his elementary school, his mother is insecure about her body image in the face of the other suburban mothers, and the high school students could not understand his father's accent. Although the neighbors do not directly discriminate against their family, the strong Mexican culture and ethnic identity the Rodriguez family possessed was "bad" and not welcomed in the suburban environment. Rodriguez uses the Spanish word pobreza to describe poverty instead of an English term. The irony of returning to the barrio, however, is that in order to gain acceptance in their surrounding neighborhood, they must return to the "friend" of poverty.

The Rodriguez family's desire for identity and acceptance is not an isolated incident. These desires are key themes throughout much of Chicano literature, including Always Running. Rodriguez's personal search led to a changing identity throughout his story. In Paula M.L. Moya's article "This is Not Your Country!": Nation and Belonging in Chicano Literature, Moya contends that when Rodriguez "began to educate himself through the Chicano Movement about the economic and social institutions that put him and others like him at a structural disadvantage relative to other 'Americans' . . . Rodriguez was able to break free of gang life and begin the long, arduous process toward achieving full, substantive U.S. citizenship."xv Moya is certainly correct that Rodriguez's education does change his identity, his view of the barrio, and the marginalization of the Hispanic population in Los Angeles. After Rodriguez is introduced to the library at Taft High School, "it [was not] the same as before. A power pulsed in those books I learned to savor, in the magical hours I spent in the library."xvi It is far-fetched, however, to say that Rodriguez's ultimate identity is shaped by his obtaining U.S. citizenship. Rodriguez never mentions citizenship in his novel, except for a fleeting moment in his description of applying for college. Learning excites him, but his academic interest is never an antecedent for desires of citizenship or American nationalistic identity. Moya herself even mentions this impossibility in her closing analysis of Rodriguez: Always Running "contests the idea that Latina/os must forever be outsiders to the US national imaginary."xvii Moya aims to classify the Chicano identity as a separate nationalistic movement within American borders, despite the fact that an author identifying this movement is something she herself deplores. Nonetheless, whether Moya's United States is defined by citizenship or the suburban Reseda lifestyle, Moya is correct in noting that the Chicano identity exists separate from the American identity, and Rodriguez seemingly has set out to isolate the barrio as the only space were his Chicano identity is welcome and identifiable.

The question remains, however, as to why the barrio is not only necessary space for the Chicano family but the *only* space. According to Logan, Alba, and Zhang, any forms of

acculturation are inversely associated with residence in ethnic neighborhoods for almost all groups. In some cases, the ethnic neighborhood tends to be chosen by those for whom it serves their practical needs (as indicated by their socioeconomic position) for an inexpensive and congenial setting. And for several groups, the neighborhood may also link members to ethnic employment. These are the functions of immigrant enclaves. xviii

Rodriguez furnishes his book with examples of his family's lack of acculturation; from the language barriers his father faces to the neighbors of the Reseda suburb, the Rodriguez family has an inherently Chicano cultural identity that is incompatible with the area surrounding them. Logan, Alba, and Zhang are certainly correct to say that families of immigrant enclaves such as the barrio choose an immigrant enclave out of a need for inexpensive residence. The choice, however, may not be as free as implied. Their definition of the immigrant enclave as a transitional period may be marred by the economic and social conditions that surround a neighborhood, such as the economic, geographic, social, and cultural isolation of Lomas that Rodriguez highlights. For a family living in a barrio, the transition period is not temporary; their isolation leads to a



permanent transitional state.

The barrio, then, must lack the means of assistance or aid that helps families find future success. Logan, Alba, and Zhang identify two needs for a functioning immigrant enclave: an economic practicality, and a congenial association brought on by connection with others of similar cultural backgrounds. Undoubtedly, cheap housing is an economic practicality of the immigrant enclave, but for the barrio, the practicality ends with the fulfillment of low-priced land. The employment market of the barrio is far from sufficient to sustain the economic needs. Rodriguez's "mother worked on and off, primarily as a costurera or . . . cleaning homes or taking care of other people's children."xix Her odd jobs were mostly in "nice, American, white-people homes" outside of the barrio neighborhood.xx Rodriguez's father settled for a job at Pierce College, a community high school in Los Angeles, which required him to get "up every day at 4:30 a.m. and [go] . . . almost forty miles away to the other side of Los Angeles," simply to be employed as "an overblown janitor."xxi The menial, minimum wage (or less) jobs could never provide for Rodriguez's family of five.

LACKING A SENSE OF BELONGING, MANY YOUNG MEN TURN
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Moreover, these jobs require travel to outside neighborhoods. For a teenager like Rodriguez, the challenge to find work is even greater. His mother tells Rodriguez that "'you have to work, to help us out here. . . You're a big man now. There's got to be something you can do.' . . . I was nine years old—a good working age, as far as my mother was concerned."xxii Rodriguez's mother expected him to mature at an alarming rate and enter the working world to support the family; however, with the scarcity of jobs for adults in the barrio, it would be difficult at best for Rodriguez to find a job as a child.

Besides economic necessities, Logan, Alba, and Zhang seem to identify cultural necessities. The "congenial setting" they picture seemingly describes a unified, pleasant, cultural community within the borders of the immigrant enclave. Yet, Lomas is far from any of these descriptions. The barrio lacks any sense of cultural unification. Within the barrio, Rodriguez never mentions a successful community movement to unify the area. The La Casa Community Center in Sangra that "offered dropout programs, welfare assistance, federal job placements, a teen mother day care, and places for young people to hang out" eventually succumbs to "the scourge of PCP."xxiii Rodriguez remembers "the San Gabriel Mission held an annual 'Fiesta Days' celebration to honor the Spanish-Mexican heritage of the area," and at night, after the "Anglos" left, "the fiesta belonged to the Mexicans."xxiv Yet, "by the midnight hour . . . Lomas and Sangra soldiers began to congregate in different sections of the enclosed area."xxv Nothing within the barrio is free from the hands of gangs and conflict. The festival, in a sense, mirrors the surrounding neighborhood: what could potentially be a haven for families in a safe, culturally saturated environment turns into a battleground for the gang soldiers whose presence permeates the area.

Gangs are a critical element in *Always Running* which infiltrate the barrios to satisfy a need within the neighborhood. Lomas lacks the strong, proud cultural identity and economic prowess necessary to function as an ethnic community; the gangs, however, are highly organized, hierarchal,

and efficient groups. Rodriguez describes the beginnings of these gangs as groups of youth, calling "ourselves clubs or *clicas*. It was something to belong to—something that was ours. We weren't in boy scouts, in sports teams, or camping groups."xxvi It is interesting that Rodriguez notes the importance of club affiliation. Although he was a resident in the barrio, he does not seem to be able to connect to it. The borders of the barrio are formed by social conditions, and Rodriguez seems against joining organized social groups, such as the Boy Scouts. If Rodriguez is alienated by the world outside the barrio and unable to deduce a connection to the barrio, then the only remaining option is to find identity amongst the gangs.

The gangs did not just provide an individual identity; they were more structured and encompassing than a simple group of friends. Rodriguez noted that some groups "became more organized. They obtained . . . their own colors, and identification cards. Later a few of the cliques became car clubs . . . Then also some of the clubs metamorphosed into something more unpredictable, more encompassing. Something more deadly."xxvii This level of exclusion and identification could be alarming for any group of people, especially a group of adolescent teenagers. The gangs had immense power; the Animal Tribe gang in Lomas "pulled in dudes from all over South San Gabriel, even from areas east of the Hills . . . which had long-running feuds with Las Lomas."xxviii Essentially, the gangs begin to define these communities. When the crime rate in Lomas begins to rise, "gang members were interviewed and news photographers worked the Hills to depict the poverty."xxix The community borders do not exist in the eyes of Rodriguez's youth or the eyes of the surrounding Los Angeles region. These reports paint an image of universal poverty and crime, even though gangs may not entirely make up the population of the neighborhood. The gang members themselves also follow this idea; when young Luis, Wilo, and Chicharrón ask Miguel why they were harassed by Sangra members at a quinciñera, despite the fact that they were not "in their barrio," Miguel's explanation is, "You ain't in Lomas either . . . That's the problem. You guys live in between the two "Logan, Alba, and Zhang identify two needs for a functioning immigrant enclave: an economic practicality, and a congenial association brought on by connection with others of similar cultural backgrounds."

largest 'hoods. You got to figure out which one to claim or you're going to get fucked by both of them . . . I'm telling you there's no choice. . . . You wanta live, you wanta breath air, you got to be in the Tribe man."XXX Miguel's explanation and subsequent suggestion demonstrate the power of these barrio gangs. There was no escaping them, especially if one was young; eventually, all must, for the sake of self-preservation, declare allegiance to a gang. For Miguel and many other characters, the gangs were the neighborhood. One identifies himself not by his barrio, but by his gang. Eventually these terms become synonymous, as "there were dudes who didn't even claim the Tribe anymore. Just Lomas."XXXI Just as Rodriguez must join a gang to find personal identity, his family had to return to their barrio to find cultural identity.

Joining a gang to find identity, however, comes at a price. Rodriguez describes the gangs as deadly, a term that can barely begin to encompass the violence and brutality surrounding gang life. From the moment he joins the gang, Rodriguez becomes involved in drugs, murder, and de struction on an unimaginable scale. This violence is in-

hospitalizations to the emotional strain resulting from his allegiance to a gang. Claudia Durst Johnson, in her book Youth Gangs in Literature, comments on the emotional aspects of many literary works depicting youth gang life. According to Johnson, Rodriguez "emphasizes the self-destructiveness of the Mexican American community as members of rival Chicano gangs kill one another . . . gang members not only kill Mexican Americans in rival gangs, but they kill members of their own gangs, a truth that is brought home to Luis when he is shot at by his friends."xxxxii Johnson stresses the very prevalent self-destructive aspect of Rodriguez's work is very prevalent in the novel; few of Rodriguez's anecdotes about gang life do not include some form of violence. Puppet, in trying to organize a hit against Sangra, tells his fellow Lomas members "This means we got to take care of each other. And we have

to be trucha for dedos ['watch out for snitches']."xxxiii While

this ideal of group defense seems noble, any protest to his

plans—such as Luis's questioning as to the purpose of con-

credibly harmfuf to Rodriguez, himself, from injuries and

Vincent Perez analyzes nihilism as a psychological phenomenon. This phenomenon occurs when "the expression of undaunted yearning, desperate (violent so, perhaps even to the extreme of self-destruction), but not hopeless, meaningful in its furious revolt against a world of bewildering violence and meaningless death."xxxv Rodriguez describes "locura, the spirit of existence which meant the difference between living life to the fullest or wandering aimlessly upon the earth, taking up space, or getting in the way. The vatos hated those without daring, those who failed to meet the challenge, the fear and exhilaration of this presence."xxxvi For a gang member, there seems to be no moderation in living their lives; they either choose to live their life to the fullest expression of emotional prowess, or they will waste aimlessly on the earth. This attitude is extremely nihilistic: the gang members have an undaunted yearning to revolt. Yet their yearning is not against violence but is expressed through violence. Perez explains this expression of violence is a thematic expression of nihilistic antagonism:

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stant and consistent revenge—yield only "a fist slammed against [his] mouth." Rodriguez can certainly seek protection and defense from his fellow gang members, but any deviation from the violent plans of the gang is simply unacceptable.

This violent drive does not consist of only violent gang plans. It is a deeper consciousness that permeates the gang identity. In his article "Running" and Resistance: Nihilism and Cultural Memory in Chicano Urban Narratives, author

Rodriguez thematizes nihilism as a strident oppositional voice irreconcilable with the practices of racist institutions such as the legal system which not only fail to address the needs of the minority community, but also actively criminalizes its youth. Though nihilism can be self-destructive, violent, antisocial, anti-intellectual, and apolitical, Rodriguez suggests that it can also be constructively channeled. Yet, even if the sentiments which define it (despair, rage, fear, and anger) are not directed into more traditional conduits, nihilism for Rodriguez constitutes a militant po-

Rodriguez chooses constructive channels for his personal nihilism. He explores art and murals through his paintings, he becomes heavily involved with ToHMAS (a Chicano support program), and he gives some effort towards his education. Still, the image persists of Rodriguez as an usher of violence, a perpetrator of destruction, and a harbinger of menacing ferocity. Nonetheless, one must consider that Rodriguez also attempts to make social commentary through his work. His novel is not simply autobiographical musing. As a commentator on the psychological identity of the gangs as a whole, Rodriguez feels their violence is justified. In the final scene of the novel, Chava confronts Rodriguez, and Rodriguez "can see him pulling out a knife and stabbing [him] just to salve his pain."xxxviii This pain is that of the barrio gangs. Rodriguez never condemns his own personal actions, but the marginalization of the community has created an economic, social, and, most importantly, an emotional pain that is only alleviated through violence.

In the epilogue to his novel, Rodriguez explicitly completes his social commentary. He realizes the necessity of gangs in the face of marginalization:

Gangs are not alien powers. They begin as unstructured groupings, our children, who desire the same as any young person. Respect. A sense of belonging. Protection. The same thing that the MCA, Little League, or Boy Scouts want . . . Gangs flourish when there's a lack of social recreation, decent education, or employment. . . . If there was a viable alternative, they would stop. If we all had a choice, I'm convinced nobody would choose la vida loca, the "insane notion"—to "gang bang." But it's going to take collective action and plan. XXXIX

In this passage, Rodriguez has described exactly what Logan, Alba, and Zhang called for in an immigrant neighborhood. All Chicanos need a sense of belonging, respect,

and opportunity. Due to the exclusion from the surrounding region, however, the only space where these opportunities could possibly exist is in the barrio. Rodriguez's family returns to the barrio and their "friend" pobreza. Yet the barrio lacks these critical opportunities for the neighborhood to truly be a transitional period, and often families fall prey to a state of permanence in impoverished communities. This is where the gangs step in. Lomas gave Rodriguez everything his family had been searching for-respect, identity, and a sense of belonging. This comes with the price of the nihilistic expressions of the spirit of locura, or, as Perez notes, a militant, political, and conscious response to the marginalization of the neighborhood. The barrio gangs are not the best solution to make up for what the barrio cannot provide; however, in the face of discrimination, marginalization, and identity formation, it is the only option.

ENDNOTES

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i. Rodriguez (39)
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ii. Moore (15)

iii. Rodriguez (38) iv. Rodriguez (41)

v. Logan et al. (299-300)

vi. Logan et al. (300)

vii. Ibid.

viii. Rodriguez (30)

ix. Logan et al. (300)

x. Rodriguez (30) xi. Rodriguez (31)

xii. Rodriguez (30)

xiii. Rodriguez (31-2)

xiv. Rodriguez (30)

xv. Moya (183-4) xvi. Rodriguez (139)

xvii. Moya (184)

xviii. Logan et al. (320) (italics original)

xix. Rodriguez (23)

xx. Ibid.

xxi. Rodriguez (135)

xxii. Rodriguez (67-8) xxiii. Rodriguez (112, 240)

xxiv. Rodriguez (87-8)

xxv. Rodriguez (89)

xxvi. Rodriguez (41)

xxvii. Rodriguez (43)

xxviii. Rodriguez (52)

xxix. Rodriguez (112)

xxx. Rodriguez (54)
xxxi. Rodriguez (73)
xxxii. Johnson (180-1)
xxxiii. Rodriguez (208)
xxxiv. Rodriguez (209)
xxxv. Perez (113)
xxxvi. Rodriguez (206)
xxxviii. Perez (139)
xxxviii. Rodriguez (244)
xxxix. Rodriguez (251)

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