

Structure and Agency in Life Stories: How to Become a Gang Member

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Abstract

The text is an attempt to rethink the *structure / agency* dilemma from life stories, putting into practice Franco Ferrarotti's (1981) proposal to 'read a society through a biography'. To do so, we focus on a singular account of the member of a transnational gang. The protagonist was born twice: the first, as César Andrade, in a coastal village in Ecuador in 1976; the second, as King Manaba, in an inland city of the same country in 1996, when he was crowned Latin King. After his 'coronation', his life went through three stages: that of the Primitive King, including his emigration to Spain in 2003; that of Conservative King, including his time in prison after 2009; and that of New King, after his liberation and rebirth as a citizen. His life stories are analyzed from three points of view: as a *subaltern story*; as a *chronotope*; as a *vertical synthesis of a social history* and as an *horizontal synthesis of a social structure*. This last interpretation allows us to read the *structure*, through the vertical axis of the Latin American exodus to Europe and of the post 2008 crisis, as well as the horizontal axis of the penal and media instances that criminalize the youth of the gangs. But it also allows us to read *agency*, the protagonist's ability to overcome and be reborn as a phoenix, transforming resistance into resilience.

Introduction

Every human life is revealed, even in its less generalizable aspects, as the vertical synthesis of a social history. Each behaviour or individual act appears in its most singular forms as a horizontal synthesis of a social structure [...] our social system is entirely present in each of our actions, in each of our dreams, delusions, works, behaviours, and the history of this system is found whole in the history of our individual lives.¹

(Ferrarotti, 1981, p. 41).

The aim of this text is to apply Franco Ferrarotti's proposal to '*read a society through a biography*' (1981, p. 43), from the point of view of the *structure / agency* perspective. According to this author, every single life history could be read from two perspectives. From one side, it is the 'vertical synthesis of a social history', that is, the diachronic dimension of the collective history in which a single life story is placed. From another side, it is the 'horizontal synthesis of a social structure', that is, the synchronous dimension of the individual story determined by the institutions and networks with whom this person interacts. Vertical and horizontal axes are structural forces independent of personal will. Nevertheless, individuals are not passive actors but active agents who can accept, negotiate, resist, react and be resilient in this scenario.

In the field of youth studies, the debate structure / agency has been superposed to the debate youth transitions / youth cultures. The study of youth transitions emerged, both from structural-functionalist positions and from Marxist approaches, emphasizing their macrosocial causes and the irrelevance of individual decisions; then it evolved towards the recognition of the process of individualization, starting from notions like 'choice biographies' (Beck, 1992) and 'misleading trajectories' (Egris, 2001; see Rudd, 1998). The study of youth cultures, on the other hand, seems to have followed a trajectory in the opposite direction: it emerged, both from symbolic interactionism and from countercultural positions, emphasizing the free will of 'resistant' people and minorities, emphasizing the cross-class -generational-dimension of the 'subcultural choice', then evolving towards more precise class analysis, which take into account structural aspects such as the cultural market and the processes of 'distinction' (see Bourdieu, 1978/1993; Pais, 2020). This led to a bifurcation of youth studies: 'a structuralist strand of school-to-work transitions research that has been historically criticized for overemphasizing structure is contrasted to a cultural strand of youth research that is seen to have overemphasized agency' (Woodman, 2009, p. 247).

In recent years, there have been attempts at convergence from considering both the cultural aspects of youth transitions and the structural aspects of youth cultures. Subcultures can no longer be considered only as a temporary or 'transitional' phenomenon, which affects individuals in the 'youth' stage of their biographies, but they extend into other stages of life and involve other age groups. They are also affected by the processes of individualization and subjectivation, since 'lifestyle' is not so much a collective uniform but the result of a personal 'DIY' choice (Bennet and Guerra, 2018). On the other hand, the transnational dimension of subcultures, the impact of the network society, and even the 'anthropocene' debate (Kelly, 2018), force us to consider supra-individual and even supra-human global processes, which

were previously only secondary. The challenge is the dialogical interaction between the Self and the Other, the first including 'pain, hurt, hunger, despair, anxiety, decisiveness, uncertainty, ambiguity, irony, humour, longing, desire, loneliness, companionship, love', and the second including 'cultures and subcultures, education and health systems, labour market, a vast array of administrative, even governmental, programs, and diverse technologies (old and new, algorithmic, media based, war oriented, bio-genetic' (Kelly, 2018).

In this text I will focus on a single biography: the life story of the member of a particular youth subculture (considered to be a gang by the police and the mass media): the Latin Kings & Queens Nation.² Following Becker's (1963) classic sociological challenge, the goal is to understand how one becomes a deviant -or a gang member-, through the interaction between structural forces and personal agency. First, I will expose the social history of this transnational organization. Second, I will present the individual story of the protagonist. Third, I will try to interpret the horizontal and vertical axes of this story through the concept of 'subaltern biography'. Fourth, I will try to interpret the spatio-temporal dimensions of this story through the concept of 'chronotope'. Fifth and last, the coincidence of the "happy ending" of this story will be used to rethink the structure / agency dilemma as a result of the autobiographical imagination.

Structure and Agency in the Latin Kings and Queens Nation

The usual policy of boy's work agencies has been to redirect the activities of existing gangs into wholesome channels by some sort of supervision. While this method is difficult and not always successful, its usefulness has been conclusively demonstrated by many Chicago agencies...

(Thrasher, 1927/2013, p. 508).

There are several legends going around about the origin of the Latin Kings. All agree that they emerged in Chicago, the same place where the first serious study about gangs was published: *The Gang*, by Frederic M. Thrasher (1927/2013). But they disagree about the time and circumstances: Some versions maintain that the Latin Kings emerged in the 1940s as a defence of the second generation of Latino immigrants against the dominance of Afro-American gangs. Other versions claim they appeared in the 1960s, within civil rights and minority defence movements (which also gave rise to groups like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords). Wikipedia gives the official founding date as 1954 and the official constitution of the group, the *KMC (King's Manifesto Constitution)*, known as the Latin King Bible, says that the group was born in 1962.

It seems that the Latin Kings first emerged as a street gang in the Latin quarter of Chicago (around Humboldt Park, a place I visited a few years ago accompanied by an '*hermanito*')³ and was then officially formed in a jail, where some of the leaders who drafted the aforementioned KMC were serving sentences. In the 1970s, the Latin Kings expanded among the Latino community in other cities in the United States, mainly on the eastern coast, where Puerto Rican and Caribbean emigration was predominant. In the 1990s the New York tribe underwent a process of politicization and commitment thanks to new leadership and

the support of intellectuals and religious people. This resulted in a fragmentation among followers of the Chicago doctrine (more traditionalist and hermetic) and those of New York (more reformist and open to contact with external agents). As part of this process, hip-hop was introduced, coming together in the concept of *nation* (drawing inspiration from the Zulu nation founded in 1973 by Kevin Donovan, *aka* Africa Bambaataa, a pioneer of rap), around a '*mestiza*' nation – the '*coffee nation*' in the heart of the '*wasp nation*'.⁴ A female branch (the Queens) was also incorporated. The result was the official creation of the Almighty Latin Kings and Queens Nation (ALKQN). The process ended abruptly in 1996, when Rudolph Giuliani, the then mayor of New York and today a lawyer for Donald Trump and involved in his impeachment, promoted Operation 'Corona', which took the most combative leaders of ALKQN to jail (see Alkqn, 2020; Brotherton and Barrios, 2003; Conquergood, 1994; Kontos, 2003).

A few years before, in 1994, an Ecuadorian member of the New York tribe, King Boy Gean, was deported to his home country, where he re-founded the Nation, under the name of Sacred Tribe Atahualpa Ecuador (STAE). It grew rapidly in the neighbourhoods of Guayaquil and Quito, and began the transnationalization of the Latin Kings. In the year 2000 another Ecuadorian Latin King, King Wolverine, emigrated to Spain and 'planted the flag' in the new nation, founding the Sacred Tribe America Spain (STAS), which was independent of the previous group. In 2004, after appearing on a TV show, he was arrested and convicted of rape. During the same years, which coincided with a profound economic and political crisis in Ecuador and the economic boom in Spain, other Ecuadorian Latin Kings emigrated to Madrid and then to Barcelona and Murcia, and re-founded the other branch of the Latin Kings (STAE). In 2006 the Catalan branch was officially constituted as the Cultural Organization of Latin Kings and Queens of Catalonia, with the support of the Barcelona City Council, the Catalan government and the regional police. This process had replicas in other areas, such as Alicante, Mallorca and Navarra, although it failed in Madrid due to the opposition of the conservative community president, Esperanza Aguirre (today accused of corruption), who stopped Pedro Núñez Morgades, Child Advocate, who had opted for dialogue.

In 2007 a trial for unlawful association was held against the Madrid faction of the Latin Kings (STAS). The Spanish military police (*Guardia Civil*) had promoted *Operation 'Pañuelo'* (Handkerchief) against this group. As behind the trial there were no serious crimes and the evidence was very weak, the Supreme Court overturned the sentence and forced a retrial. In 2012 they reached a definitive conviction, although the arguments and evidence were almost identical; however, the defendants chose not to challenge, since they had been waiting for years and most had assigned attorneys. The social climate had changed and the punitive discourse had become dominant: in 2010 the penal code was reformed, adding new criminal types (criminal group, criminal organization) and simplifying the probative criteria. The State Attorney General's Office, during the term of the right-wing Government (*Partido Popular*), promoted the idea that gangs (identified *de facto* with *Latin gangs*) should be followed and monitored, which meant that the majority of groups were subject to raids and criminal proceedings (while other gangs, such as extreme right groups or those of other ethnic backgrounds, were treated very differently). In 2011 the Catalan police replaced their main leaders with new managers who believed in the criminal route. This coincided with the negative impact of the crisis on Latin American emigrants, some of whom

chose to the return to their country, some lost their jobs and some started criminal careers (see Feixa *et al.* 2006, 2008; Queirolo Palmas, 2016).

In 2007, the Rafael Correa Ecuadorian government, following the path opened up in Barcelona, legalized the Latin Kings and Queens Corporation of Ecuador, initiating a mediation process, which significantly reduced crime (Brotherton and Gude, 2018). Today, Latin Kings are present in most Latin American countries and in many European and even Asian countries. At the international level there is no single leadership due to the persistent rivalries between Chicago and New York. In Ecuador they are still legal (they even have a deputy in the parliament); in Catalonia they have still not been declared illegal, although they are not very active; Madrid STAS is an illegal association, but there are other groups that although they are not legal act openly with the support of NGOs, who work with Ecuadorian immigrants in Spain.

Structure and Agency in King Manaba's Lives

The *bandana* for me is an amulet: I usually wear several colours, but in many cases, when I have to talk about my personal life as a Latin King, I wear the yellow and black bandana, it gives me inner strength to express myself in front of people, sometimes I keep it inside my pocket. Its meaning: gold represents the fabulous bright sun in its highest gaze, the radiance of hope in the oppressed people, the brilliance of the mind and the unity in strength, love and sacrifice; the black represents the dominant colour of the universe, the brave and courageous, the darkness of the immense night, it represents people of an idea, a body and mind and soul, the alpha and the omega. They are our primary colours in our organization. The gold and black unite to form the colour of coffee, which is the strength of our skin, of the Latinos and for which we must fight, 'coffee strength' we call ourselves.

(King Manaba, October 24, 2019)

César Andrade was born twice (metaphorically, of course). The first time was in Manabí, in the coast of Ecuador, in 1976, within a working class poor family. The second time was in Santo Domingo, in the interior of Ecuador, at age 20, in 1996, when he was crowned a Latin King, adding to his name King Manaba. After a few years of commitment to the Ecuadorian branch of the Nation, known as STAE [Sacred Tribe Atahualpa Ecuador], the conflict with other gangs – especially with the Ñetas – motivated him to emigrate. He arrived in Madrid in 2003, where two years earlier the first European branch of the Latin Kings, known as STAS [Sacred Tribe Atahualpa Spain], had been founded. In early 2005 he arrived in Barcelona with the aim of expanding the Nation, and in June of that year we met and began our collaboration. This led to the establishment of the Cultural Organization of Latin Kings and Queens of Catalonia in August 2006. After three intense years in which he became involved in countless cultural projects, in 2009 he was imprisoned and was sentenced to five years for a crime against public health (drugs traffic). After serving his sentence he was released back into civil life and into multiple jobs in the underground economy (during his prison stay he was unable to renew his papers and is currently completing his second regularization process). In 2015 he was arrested again in a macro-raid that had the explicit aim of dismantling the legal sector of the Latin Kings. Although there were no serious crimes behind the accusations, the objective of the new Catalan police leaders and the Prosecutor's Office was to

set a precedent, and condemn them as a criminal organization. What they wanted was to prove that Manaba was a leader, although there was no material evidence of who was involved in crimes and the evidence was based on contradictory statements by former members (some allegedly threatened with deportation if they did not cooperate with the police). The trial took place in December 2018 and I acted as an expert.⁵

King Manaba himself divide his life story into three stages, each of which corresponds to a colour and a state through which a Latin King passes, as defined in the KMC, the ideological basis of *kingism* (the religion of the Kings and Queens). The first stage is the Colour Gold, allusion to royalty and corresponding to the status of *Primitive King*, the first phase in which the Latin King seeks the light of knowledge. It contains seven conversations that took place in the initial stage of the study, between 2005 and 2008, focused on his childhood and youth in Equador, his initiation into the Latin Kings & Queens Nation, the decision of emigrating to Spain and his active participation in the process of constitution of the association. The second stage is the Colour Black, allusion to the pain and sacrifice of the Kings and corresponding to the state of *Conservative King*, the second phase in which the Latin King matures and regresses. It contains two deep and emotional interviews about Manaba's prison experience. The third stage is Colour Coffee Brown, the brown fruit of the union of gold and black, allusion to the hybridization of the Latin 'Race' and corresponds to the State of *New King* or *King Reborn*, who is able to overcome death in life. It contains three interviews conducted in recent years, from the last arrest to his Phoenix-like resurrection, and focuses on his and the Nation's present and future. In the concluding interview the protagonist summarized the three lives of a Latin King in this way:

Now I'm here as César Andrade, but I want to see King Manaba the way I knew him in Ecuador. In all this time he has matured, he no longer feels involved one hundred percent in the organization, he directly or indirectly helps many young people who follow and continue in the organization but in a way that in my time they did not help me. Because in my times maybe I didn't have a person who was older than me who could tell me this is good and this is bad. When you are a teenager you do things because you think they are good, but later it turns out that they are bad. So I see that the evolution has been good, time makes you evolve, it makes you more mature. I see that César Andrade sees King Manaba as a Latin King within the three stages of the king, as the New King, as the one who has evolved, as the one who now wants to see different things because he no longer wants problems in the streets. He doesn't want problems of any kind, he is just focused on his family environment and closest friends, his work on his studies, which is what all young people really should have and do. But of course, young people are also crazy, it's part of the process of this life, of each of us as a person. This has to be the mentality of every Latin King and Queen, to help all young people to prepare, educate them together with the values of the Nation and the values of our parents. This will reinforce the idea much more that every young person who wants to be part of the Nation has to be a King or a Queen of good for their community and society. (King Manaba, October 24, 2019)

Structure, Agency and Subaltern Voices

It is true that autobiography has great historical value, since it shows life in action and not only as it should be according to written laws or dominant moral principles (...) However, history, in general, is made on the written law: when new facts that reverse the situation come to light afterwards, vain questions arise, or there is a need to document how the mutation has been prepared 'molecularly' before exploding. (Gramsci, 1975, pp. 1718-24).

King Manaba's life story represents giving a voice to subaltern cultures, as Antonio Gramsci observed in his *Quaderni del carcere* [Prison Notebooks] (1949/1975), and Gayatri Spivak expressed later in his essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988/2010). In one of the notebooks written during his imprisonment by Mussolini, between 1932 and 1935, the Italian politician and thinker reflects on the value of autobiographies. Jail is one of the autobiographical territories par excellence because from this imprisonment space reflection on the personal past and identity arise spontaneously and communicate to the outside by different forms of writing (letter, memory, graffiti, tattoo). Gramsci was one of the first Marxist authors who promoted the biographical genre as a fundamental instrument in social research, compensating for the difficulties of the subaltern culture to make itself heard and become hegemonic. Only through biographies is it possible to see the 'mechanism' in action, embodied in real individuals: autobiography can be conceived 'politically', because although one life is similar to many other lives, it always contains original entries. History and life are complementary poles in the construction of a type of humanistic *materialism* that allows us to understand not only how structures work, but also how specific people react to historical changes, or in the author's words, how these changes are prepared in an invisible way 'molecularly' before exploding. Gramsci himself, in the letters he wrote from prison to his wife and children, shows the fruitfulness of biographical writing and the dialogic nature of all vital reflection. In another jail notebook, the author refers to folklore in these terms:

It could be said that until today folklore has been studied primarily as a 'picturesque' element [...] It should be studied, instead, as the 'conception of life and the world', largely implicit, of certain strata (determined in time and space) of society, in contrast (also in general implicit, mechanical, objective) with the 'official' conceptions of the world (or, in a broader sense, of the cultured parts of historically determined societies) that have happened in historical development [...] Folklore can only be understood as a reflection of the conditions of people's cultural life, although some conceptions of folklore can be prolonged after the conditions are (or seem) modified or give rise to strange combinations. (Gramsci, 1975, vol. III, pp. 2,311-2,317).

From this perspective, the Latin King subculture, and all the cosmovision contained in the *KMC* and *kingism*, fit with the characteristics of the popular culture of the subaltern classes (generating a 'strange combination' that could be called *ganglore* or *kinglore*). On the one hand, it reflects a social structure based on unequal access to resources and power, reproduces traditional values, alludes to the past as something sacred and immutable (as *survival*), and reproduces ethnocentrism and sometimes sexism. However, on the other hand, it also has a great progressive force as an experience of community and resistance, as a channel to express the voice of the oppressed. The Latin Kings can be considered as a variant of those 'contemporary subalterns' that Gramsci identified in Italy before World War II as seeds of social change. This implies not giving up a class analysis or a political reading of autobiographies.

In all this time many things have changed. Before, maybe, we had the wrong idea of what the organization was, we were younger, crazier. But when you grow up, as you get older, well you also start to see life differently and the way of behaving with society, with people, you start to experience it differently. Change is always for the good, never think it's bad, even though during all this time all you see are obstacles, whether you're young or old you'll always stumble and make mistakes, because life is made of stumbling and mistakes, and that is what will make you stronger and smarter. In my personal life, I'm a responsible person, in the sense that now with my work, with my personal life, with people, I suppose before I had other worries, I was not thinking much, I'm a bit more intelligent now. The street makes you smart too, the experiences that you live in the

streets of Ecuador, and here in Barcelona and the journey that I've made over almost all of Spain visiting the different groups of brothers, of friends that I have, are things that in the end make you mature and make you be a little more cautious and a little smarter in this life. Because as you get older you get smarter. You have to show that the years have not passed in vain and that they have served to change and so that your values and sacred five points come first before everything else. (King Manaba, October 24, 2019)

Structure, Agency and the Autobiographical Imagination

The lived statement, having taken meaning and form at a particular historical moment in a specific social environment, cannot avoid undoing hundreds of vivid dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciences around the very object of the declaration; they cannot avoid actively participating in social dialogue.

(Bakhtin, 1994, p. 276).

Although the autobiographical narrative can be read as an 'open work' that is subject to different readings, so the reader becomes (co)author and the interpretation is polysemic and polyphonic (Eco, 1962/1984), the reading key of King Manaba's story is inspired by the 'dialogic imagination' proposed by Mijail Bakhtin (1981), more specifically by the concept of *chronotope*, which I have tried elsewhere to apply in the study of youth cultures (Feixa, Leccardi and Nilan, 2016). In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin showed that the understanding of the space and time of a novel (which can also be applied to autobiography) depends on the *heteroglossic* ability (that is, on the ability to make other voices echo, to interpret not only depending on the text but also on the context). This capacity arises from a double dialogue: the 'internal dialogue', fruit of the interaction of the subject with their own memory; and the 'external dialogue', fruit of the interaction with the social environment represented by the audience (or by the researcher who asks, transcribes and interprets what is spoken).

From this perspective, the spaces and times of King Manaba's life can be summarized in seven central chronotopes: the Nation, the nation, the border, the corner, the gold, the black and the coffee brown force. The first, the *Nation* (in capital letters), is the space-time of the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, with their myths of origin, their rites of passage, their three states (Primitive King, Conservative King, New King), their four phases (Observation, Five alive, Probatory and Coronation), their five points (Love, Honour, Obedience, Sacrifice, Rectitude), their formal organization in chapters, sectors and tribes, and their informal organization in factions, clans and generations, their annual calendar of local and universal meetings, and their culmination in the 360 (the hermeneutic and social circle of the imagined community, which some interpret as the circle of pain where neophytes must bear the blows of the initiated).

[A Nation is] a group of people governed by a single government, race, constitution, laws. We live here a Nation in which we have a president, vice president, a secretary, a treasurer, a counselor, a war chief, teachers who teach, our policies, regulations, we have a supreme court, judges ... Within our organization, we live a Nation within the other Nation, which is Spain. (King Manaba, July 30, 2005)

The second, the *nation* (in lowercase), is the transnational space-time that connects the identity of origin (Ecuador) and the identity of destination, also binational (Spain-Catalonia), which is expressed in the concept of 'Nation of nations', and is a constant in the story.

When we say: 'My king's love forever and ever on both continents', it means the American continent and the European continent, that the cry of the king reaches those always dark corners, which we say. I was born in Ecuador, but we always respect our motherland, our mother earth that is Chicago, where the Latin Kings were born in the 1960s. So we hierarchically come from Chicago and from there it extends to New York, to all the states of the USA, Latin America, Central America. From Ecuador kings are born to come here for Europe. Right now I am Catalan, I am a king from here. (King Manaba, January 8, 2019)

The third, the *border*, refers to the physical, legal and symbolic barriers that separate continents, countries, neighbourhoods and rival gangs, as well as the instances (political, police, media) that build walls and justify exclusion.

We are a little afraid of being bullied by the police. On Friday we went to a meeting [at the parish] to pray for our deceased brothers. That day new kings are born, new queens, a work plan for the year is given and all that. Everything normal in the meeting and then we went out and the police were waiting for us outside and they made an intervention to all of us. In this way we are not helping anything because what they are doing is for young people to become more rebellious. (King Manaba, January 15, 2012)

The fourth, the *corner*, refers to the connections and alliances that allow these borders to be crossed or mitigated, as well as the refuge-places (parks, youth centres, parishes, discos, etc.) where fraternal and friendship ties can be made.

When we established ourselves as a legal association here in Barcelona, many things changed: young people were no longer afraid of being on the streets, because previously they saw a group of four or five people in a park or on the street and the police were probably going to I asked for documentation, but then they also mistreated you either verbally or physically. When we were established, all that decreased, from that moment the '*hermanitos*' gave themselves the opportunity to occupy the youth centers, receive training workshops and many of the young people now have their jobs, are professionals and some continued studying. In those days it was positive. (King Manaba, October 24, 2019)

The fifth, *gold*, refers to both the first phase of the protagonist's life (that of the Primitive King) and the luminous and creative moments experienced inside and outside the Nation.

Many '*hermanitos*', when they read the prayers and there is a part below, when the prayer ends, it says 'peace in black and gold', right? But the '*hermanitos*' never really put that into practice. We should live in peace in black and gold always like kings. And I believe that it is possible to live with any street organization, because we are all organizations formed on the street. A dialogue is always possible, a personal relationship of saying: 'I respect yours and you respect mine.' As long as there is respect between the organizations, I believe that one can coexist peacefully. (King Manaba, November 27, 2012)

The sixth, *black*, refers both to the second phase of the protagonist's life (that of the Conservative King) and to the dark and depressive time in prison or in spaces of seclusion and failure.

At one point in my life here I had the sad experience of spending almost five years in prison and it is one of the things that I would like to forget because it is not the example that I would have wanted to give to my son, nor to the youth, to the members of my organization. I did suffer in there, I did cry. Because whoever says he hasn't cried is a liar. Anyone who doesn't feel like a child inside is a liar, because that's where you remember your parents, remember your wife, remember your children. (King Manaba, October 24, 2019)

Finally, the seventh, the *brown coffee force*, refers both to the third phase in the protagonist's biography (that of the New King), and to the experiences of cultural hybridization and mediation in which he has participated, from his commitment to the process of constituting the association, including his task as a 'peacemaker' between different factions of the group and between rival groups. The coffee brown force is the magic potion that allows you to be reborn as a king, according to the classic Phoenix bird metaphor that resurfaces from its own ashes.

These [tattoos] every season I have been doing them. I have a phoenix on my right leg. It means that all the kings rise from the ashes to continue fighting, do you understand me? One resurfaces little by little. When one is in the ash, it is when one is in difficult situations. And when it resurfaces is when you go out. And every day, when you get out of something, or get something, you are making a comeback; that is, you can resurface every day. (King Manaba, March 9, 2016)

Final Remarks

Each one is a builder of his own history, of his own life sheet, each one builds his own path. I did not have the opportunity to tell the judge, but I am saying it here, it was the desire I had to say looking into the eyes of each of the 'hermanitos', because I taught each of them and told them: 'I don't want nobody commits a crime, I don't want anyone to end up in jail. And if you make a mistake, if you stumble, you have to get up, because that's the life of a king.

(King Manaba, January 8, 2019)

On 27 January 2020, when I was with King Manaba in a practical seminar of the subject 'Crime and mass media', part of the criminology degree at the university, while the students commented in groups on the news items about Latin gangs, we received a whatsapp from Manaba's lawyer, with an attached document that included a long text of 190 pages: judgment 10/2020, issued by section 21 of the Provincial Court of Barcelona, by the procedure of summary 11/2017, for the crimes of 'Criminal organization, threats, obstruction of justice, murder, against public health, illegal detention, abuse of worksites and theft' against 23 defendants, presumably members of the Latin Kings legal sector, including César Andrade as principal accused, for whom the prosecution requested a sentence of 28 years in jail as leader of the criminal organization. The decision of the three judges who drafted the sentence is conclusive: they condemn six of those accused for minor offences, but César Andrade and the remaining defendants are acquitted of all charges. When we read the news, we jumped for joy: the students, to whom we had just explained the complex relations of the Latin Kings with the press, the police and the criminal justice, observed us with surprise and we could not avoid giving them the good news.

The sentence can be read as the crucial moment of the structure / agency dilemma in the life history / story of King Manaba. Coming back to Ferraroti's (1981) vertical / horizontal axes of a biography, this moment can be read as the resolution of his career as a person, as a gang member and as a migrant citizen. On the one side, the structural forces that have modelled his life appear without masks: his class and ethnic background, the criminal justice, the prison, the formal structure of the gang, the impact of mass media, his legal status (as an undocumented migrant that has lost their legal status during his prior confinement in prison). On the other side, also the agency capacities arise: his will to reborn after the darkness, his option to not accept a short condemn with the risk to receive a long sentence, his decision to

recognize his gang membership risking to be condemned for that, the active role of his family, his 'hermanitos', his lawyers and even me -his academic dialogical Other. In this case, the 'biographical illusion' (Bourdieu, 1986/2004) has a real 'happy end', completed with the success of the publication of the book in which his life story is presented (Feixa and Andrade, 2020), in Barcelona but also in Ecuador and in the US, as a metaphor of the transnational dimension of his biography. The life story is a mirror of social structures, but also a tool of personal and collective agencies.

So that, to read a society through a biography (Ferrarotti, 1981) means reading contemporary society (Barcelona, Catalan, Spanish, Ecuadorian, transnational), through the biography of a gang member. On one hand, King Manaba's story can be read as the vertical synthesis of a social history: that of the Latin American exodus to Europe (the crisis in Ecuador, dollarization, emigration to Spain, arrival in times of plenty, the crisis in Spain, voluntary return *versus* permanence, clandestinity *versus* regularization). On the other hand, his story can also be read as the horizontal synthesis of a social structure that originates, maintains and persecutes gangs (originating in the North American ghettos, re-founded in Latin America as an effect of the deportation policy, transnationalization towards Europe, social segregation of emigration, 'zero tolerance' *versus* 'inclusive' policies, the influence of media representations, xenophobic discourses, expansion of the neoliberal criminal state, etc.) But far from being a puppet trapped between the two coordinates (horizontal and vertical), King Manaba shows himself to be a conscious and thoughtful actor, able to face his destiny and take charge of his life.

As we have pointed out, the structure / agency dyad has been seen as a dilemma in social theory, opposing 'downward conflationists' (structuralists, functionalists) to 'upward conflationists' (interactionists, ethnomethodologists) (see Block, 2013). That is, as a crossroads of paths in social history and in life history: either we are puppets moved by the structure or we are free to act without hindrance. But it can also be seen as a dialectical possibility, as an intermediate way to be agents not in spite of, but thanks to being aware of the structural forces that move us and that in turn we move. Something similar happens with the two births and with the three lives of King Manaba. It is undoubtedly a metaphor, but also a dialectical -reflexive-⁶ reading of the past: rebirth as a Latin King does not mean burying his primary identity as César Andrade, but adding a new facet; and rebirth as a New King does not mean denying the Primitive King or the Conservative King, but rather taking new paths after erring in the shortcuts or backing down the dead lanes. Of course, every biography is unique and integrates all dimensions (both structural and agency); but it contains many life stories, many stories from the past that refer to erratic or imagined paths and suppose experiences in the present and reinterpretations based on the future.

Not every crossroads is a break. This refers to the etymological origin of the term crisis [from the Greek *κρίση*]: the crisis as a bodily or mental disorder (the biomedical crisis); the crisis as catharsis or social dramaturgy (the therapeutic crisis); the crisis as an expression of economic, social and political changes (the symptomatic crisis). In King Manaba's life, crises break structures (family, gang, institutional) but are overcome through the capacity of agency, transforming resistance into resilience.

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1 All the quotations from books and articles other than english had been traslated by myself.

2 This life story is part of the European Research Council project TRANSGANG: *Transnational Gangs as Agents of Mediation* (see Feixa *et al.*, 2018). The complete version of this life story has been published in Spanich (Feixa and Andrade, 2020).

3 In this text I use some vernacular expressions of the members of this street group, like ‘*hermanito*’ (littl brotgher = member), ‘*corona*’ (krown = symbol of the initiates) and so on.

4 When we use *Nation* with a capital letter we are referring to the ALKQN; *nation* with a lower case letter refers to any other nation.

5 This life story compiles a total of 12 conversations that I had with him over the last 15 years. The first, still untrusting, is a focus group with the protagonist and two other Latin Kings, which took place in September 2005, at the headquarters of the Ombudsman for Children of Catalonia. Then there are four in-depth interviews (three individual and one with his partner at the time) from 2006, in the middle of the legalization process and research-action. There are two other follow-up interviews in 2008, two interviews on leaving prison in 2012, and three interviews between 2016 and 2019. In the quotations we add the date of the interview.

6 Margaret Archer punts reflexivity at the heart of the relationship between structure and agency, defining it as ‘the regular exercice of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) context and vice versa’ (Archer, 2007, p. 4; in Block, 2011, p. 12).