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Music with a Racial Nexus:  
Culture Clash in Los Angeles Punk Rock Communities, 1976-1981

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of History  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
for the requirements of the degree  
Master of Arts in History

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by  
Lawson Garrett Hammock  
December 2023

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Dr. Elwood Watson, Chair  
Dr. Henry Antkiewicz  
Dr. John Rankin

Keywords: L.A., punk rock, Chicana/o, culture

## ABSTRACT

Music with a Racial Nexus:  
Culture Clash in Los Angeles Punk Rock Communities, 1976-1981

by

Lawson Garrett Hammock

The chief argument of this work rests on the idea that culture-blindness—especially White ethnic-cultural blindness—contributed as much as issues of race to the heavily documented social rift between predominantly Chicano, Eastside punk and the mostly-White, Westside punk rock communities of Los Angeles, 1976-1981. To date, historical blame for the divide has centered on racism, including racist intent. The second area of analysis directly relates to the first in that it demonstrates the inextricable link between cultural and spatial identity formation and assignment among the various scenes. This aspect of the study evaluates the complaints of some Eastside acts who have contended that based on racist attitude(s), they were prohibited from playing in Westside venues, thereby limiting their opportunities for gaining notoriety in the industry overall. This evaluation attempts to weigh the validity of that complaint against other determinative, influential aspects of the entire punk phenomenon. Lastly, through historically tracking the remnants of cultural Chicanismo clear into L.A.'s first and succeeding punk waves, this work analyzes the art of protest, and the protest in art as applied to that city's diverse punk aesthetics.

## DEDICATION

For Perri  
My one and only

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thanks be to God. I further thank the entire faculty and staff at Rogers Stout Hall, including the Anthropology and Political Science teams, but especially the History department, from our executive aide and professor Kim Woodring, and our graduate coordinator Dr. Mayo-Bobee to our department chair, Dr. Doug Burgess, who talked me down off the ledge more than once. Special thanks to Dr. Brian Maxson, who took great pains in helping me to develop a better sense of effective reading and writing along with the basic understanding of thesis definition. Thanks to my committee, including Dr. John Rankin, who has always patiently listened and encouraged as I explored diverse cultural and historical concepts; for seeing them through from mere ideas and questions to completed theses. Many thanks to Dr. Henry Antkiewicz, a man after my own heart, and especially to my committee chair Dr. Elwood Watson, who not only helped me pick up and reform the pieces of my fragmented thesis, but also helped me to recover after I had in fact slipped off the edge. Other special thanks to Dr. Daniel Newcomer, without whose inspiration this thesis would never have seen the light of day. Lastly, regarding scholarship, these acknowledgements would be woefully abridged without the recognition of mi hermano mejor—scholar, author, and philosopher—Jud B. Barry, who has always demonstrated to me the incalculable benefits of fostering and balancing both empirical and divergent thought processes.

Last but certainly not least, I thank my mother, Elaine A. Reyna, who along with single-handedly-providing for the physical needs of her children, also prioritized our cultural enrichment with her amazing “Culture Days.”

I love you mom.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Much of the discussion surrounding spatial acceptance and denial among L.A.'s punk rock communities during the late 1970s and early 1980s has centered on racial conflict. In this work I also consider the critical factor of cultural diversity to help explain the various instances of individual and collective social unrest in those scenes. I argue that as much as racial recognition and differentiation, the ascription of cultural identity to the self and others assisted in the formation of spatial identity in those communities.

Part of the historical inspiration for this thesis was derived from an event that occurred in recent history. It begins with the spontaneous yet unwittingly profound eight-word-testimony of a 15-year-old, creamy-skinned US American girl by the name of Caprice: “I don’t need culture; I’m white; I’m fine.”<sup>1</sup> Before we jump to conclusions regarding what by all accounts sounds like a racist remark, there are a few internal and external social factors that should be considered: her age, gender, and socioeconomic position among others. These can then be used as clues to help evaluate first the accuracy of her statement. She has been taught by her moderately progressive yet fiercely anti-racist parents that in terms of humanity, there is no difference between people with white skin and people of color. I contend, rather, that for US Americans at least, there is: namely, cultural ethnicity. In the US especially, White supremacy constitutes the source of all racism. Yet we also know that White supremacy is built on more than just race. In the United States, as in many other parts of the world, White supremacy facilitates the perpetuation of myths turned institution.

So, why ethnic Blacks, or ethnic Mexicans, or ethnic Jews, but not ethnic Whites? Because white is not an ethnicity, it’s a skin tone. And because in the US, the homogenization of pale-skinned ethnic European cultures—having minimal historical and cultural connection with other European descendant white societies—proliferated in the US under the hegemonic banner of collective Whiteness. While there is neither scientific, nor ethnographic validity to the concept of an ethnic “White” America, the institution of White ethnicity remains the

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<sup>1</sup> Tran scripted from an international group call, May 20, 2023.

bedrock of this nation’s founding and maintenance to date. According to Toni Morrison, the idea is completely apolitical, that regarding the rights of man, Americanism is “inevitably yoked to Africanism.” In his 2022 publication *Teaching White Supremacy: America’s Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity*, Donald Yacavone adamantly aligns with Morrison’s socio-historical analysis, and in directly citing her statement simply puts it, “American democracy depended on Black inequality to sustain white equality.”<sup>2</sup> Investigating one of White America’s most hallowed institutions, education, Yacavone’s book exposes the white elephant in the American classroom: “the nation’s deliberate fashioning of ‘American identity’ as fundamentally, inevitably, and unalterably ‘white,’” according to Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., Director of the Hutchins Center for African American Research at Harvard University.<sup>3</sup>

Then why write Blacks and Whites as opposed to blacks and whites, or worse, Blacks and whites? Although colors represent a poor source of nomenclature for the description of human beings in the first place, not capitalizing blacks and whites allows White social dominance—as enforced by American institution—to fly below society’s radar. It hides the fact of White Power and projects the false notion of “See? We’re all the same.” Additionally, the capitalization of both unmasks the feigned respect by the dominant culture for cultures the US systemically marginalizes through the use of a capitalized “B” alongside a lowercase “w.” People of color in this melting pot we call the USA have historically sought for equality before respect. According to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “...The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the expression of its roots.”<sup>4</sup> Not capitalizing the w in the designation only serves to silence the past and the expansion of that inequality. In “Should ‘white’ be capitalized? It feels wrong but it’s the way to go.” Eric Zorn of the *Chicago Tribune* writes, “I find it disturbing to see the word ‘white’ capitalized in reference to race —

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Yacovone. *Teaching White Supremacy : America's Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity*. First ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 2022. p. xv.

<sup>3</sup> Yacovone. *Teaching White Supremacy*. 2022. Liner notes.

<sup>4</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press 1995. p. xxiii.



“candidates will be courting the White vote” for example — mainly because it “echoes a typographical convention adopted long ago by racist hate groups and supremacists.”<sup>5</sup>

The MacArthur group offers this: “We will also begin capitalizing White in reference to race. Choosing to not capitalize White while capitalizing other racial and ethnic identifiers would implicitly affirm Whiteness as the standard and norm. Keeping White lowercase ignores the way Whiteness functions in institutions and communities...” Author, scholar, and cultural critic Eve Ewing argues: “When we ignore the specificity and significance of Whiteness—the things that it is, the things that it does—we contribute to its seeming neutrality and thereby grant it power to maintain its invisibility.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, such ignorance may only result in the quiet acknowledgement of—and thereby contribution to—the endurance and expansion of the unseen White American hegemon.

If you asked Caprice today about her views on racism, she would resoundingly exclaim, “but some of my best friends are black!” And her statement would not be a lie. The family lived for a number of years in different African states, and have toured many others during her father’s tenure as special liaison to those nations. As a major in the US Army, her dad has received assignments for detail at various localities on multiple continents and is now stationed in Germany, which is where Caprice and her family currently reside. Living in Europe now represents a significant factor for our inquiry because that mainland allows easier access to its geographically smaller and culturally diverse countries. It also helps to provide context for Caprice’s statement, the one in which she connected her skin color with her indifference towards culture. It came in response to the family’s discussion on what region in Spain—“Barcelona?, Madrid?”—to visit for a vacation this past Summer. She asked, “Why do we have to go to Madrid?” Her father’s response: “For culture.”

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<sup>5</sup>Eric Zorn. Column: “Should ‘white’ be capitalized? It feels wrong but it’s the way to go.” *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 2020. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/eric-zorn/ct-column-capitalize-white-black-language-race-zorn-20200709-e42fag6ivbazdblizpopsp4p2a-story.html>

<sup>6</sup>MacArthur Foundation.org: “Capitalizing Black and White: Grammatical Justice and Equity” August 26, 2020. <https://www.macfound.org/press/perspectives/capitalizing-black-and-white-grammatical-justice-and-equity>

Yet, this information still does not provide us with a complete picture as to the veracity of her declaration. Does Caprice need culture? Because of her phenotype and nativity in the United States, the answer is no; her survival may not necessarily depend on it. But if she is to thrive, if she is to live, move, and breathe in harmony with the rest of this world then the answer is a resounding yes. Although Caprice is already an accomplished globe-hopper, she is yet a very young and culturally inexperienced woman of the world. During her stints in Africa, she of course made friends with kids of darker skin tones but most of the schools she attended were on-base-American-schools and it is highly unlikely that their curriculum for geography and social studies supported the truth concerning the vast cultural differences between what it means to be African as opposed to African American.

Such cultural immaturity forms a partial basis for this work and, when applied to the youthfulness that marks nearly every aspect of L.A. punk rock history, it helps to explain the social tussles that have previously been solely ascribed to racial dispute. Yet “cultural immaturity” does not equate to youth, nor does it stop short at just youthfulness combined with cultural inexperience to describe L.A.’s social strife. To do so would in no way account for the myriad social factors that govern race and culture wars there or in any American city. Every US American institution, not just education, promotes White, male hegemony. It is designed to feed the suppression of women, individuals and communities of popular class, LGBTQ+ culture, people of color, including immigrants, the differently abled, the homeless and food insecure, and a host of others. But worse than this, US institutions are in the business of suppressing American historical and social consciousness. In short, American institutions systematically discourage and suppress ethnic enculturation. Here is where youth, with all its natural sense of rebellion against the traditions of its preceding generations, may hold the upper hand. Combined with rebellion, young people may be encouraged to transcend institutional restrictions when their sense of adventure and invincibility outweighs their sense of fear.

But all people, young or old, of any ethnic descent, can better muster the courage to breach cultural boundaries when they possess a sense of confidence as to their individual

cultural and spatial identity. As it has been said, “You can’t know where you’re going if you don’t where you came from.” One American—Smokey Robinson—perfectly embodies every aspect of the sentiment. From his Los Angeles home in 2022, while talking to the hosts of a morning TV talk show, the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame inductee explained where he comes from. He began with saying how blessed he is, that from where he grew up as a child he could not have begun to imagine the eventual fulfillment of all his dreams in show business as a singer, songwriter, and performer on the biggest stages of the world. Also an accomplished poet, one of Robinson’s pieces called *Black American* has been animated to help bring young people to their own sense of belonging, regardless of where they were born or the predisposed social environments they may have been raised in. Robinson resents being called an “African American.” Although he has travelled the world over, Robinson says that as of yet he has never set foot on the continent of Africa. This same sentiment has been expressed by many L.A. punk artists in declaring, “Don’t call us Hispanic ‘cause we aint never been to Spain,” and further, “Call Us Americans, ‘Cause We Are All from the Américas.”<sup>7</sup> Robinson points out that using the designation African American disclaims “all the things—all the contributions Black people have made to America.” Robinson considers himself to be a “Black American” and enjoys being called Black. He adds that “Black has been so negativized as a color through history by those who have wanted to negativize it, and so, it spilled over into the Black community. And even Black people back in the day calling each other Black was a sign for a fight.”<sup>8</sup>

The term “Chicano” too has historically similar negative implications, and like “Black” was received by the human objects of that negativity, refashioned into a connotation symbolizing pride in Brown identity, and thrown back into the faces of those who originally sought the degradation of the name.<sup>9</sup> This information should underscore the importance of

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<sup>7</sup> See Michelle Habell-Pallán. *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture*. NY University Press, 2005. pp. 12-13, 212, Epilogue

<sup>8</sup> The View. “Why Smokey Robinson Resents Being Labeled ‘African American.’” YouTube video 7:41. 9/15/22. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsAYHxjLzg>

<sup>9</sup> Ruben Salazar. “Who is a Chicano? And What Is It the Chicanos Want?” *Los Angeles Times*. Feb 6, 1970.

careful and researched approach in both historical and modern nomenclature. Because identity classification is important to those being distinguished, it is important to the body of scholarship that labors to present historical equity in Chicana/o Studies, funneling clear through and down to Chicax punk in L.A. (1976-1981). I have purposely written this last sentence as such to demonstrate the evolution of terms that continue to distinguish historical characters according to time (or in this case more specifically era) and geographic space. The perfect example of this practice comes from Maylei Blackwell who points to the significance of the fact that “the political speech of the Movement was gendered: ‘vatos’” (meaning street warriors, the term does not include the female street warriors of *La Movida*).<sup>10</sup> Another great example pointing to the evolution of Chicax terminology in scholarship can be found in R.C. Davila’s “No hay Sólo un Idioma, No hay Sólo una Voz: A Revisionist History of Chicana/os and Latina/os in Punk”: “the term Chicax is not widely used in academia but likely will be.”<sup>11</sup>

While in *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda* Deborah Vargas discusses the use of the terms Mexican American, Chicana, *Tejana*, and the difference between *mejicana* and Mexicana, on page thirty of *Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* Rosa-Linda Fregoso offers the best definition of the term pachuco I have yet found: “urban street youth.” So, what’s in a name? Answer: everything. What more than a name ascribes and prescribes identity and place? A pachuco can be described as being anything from a bad man, a gang banger, or a punk to a fashion-conscious youth clad in a zoot suit. More than just who’s who, as Deborah Vargas has shown us, livelihood can be wrapped up in a name. But so can life and limb, and liberty. Consider the derogatory designation “Wetback.” During the very same eras that Mexican American youth began to experiment with expressing a non-Anglo image of themselves, many of them—along with their parents—were rounded up

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<sup>10</sup> Maylei Blackwell. *¡Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*. University of Texas Press, 2016. p. 66

<sup>11</sup> Richard C. Davila. “No hay Sólo un Idioma, No hay Sólo una Voz: A Revisionist History of Chicana/os and Latina/os in Punk” (2016). Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository. 3532. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/3532>

and so-called “repatriated” (deported) to Mexico under the US federal government’s “Operation Wetback.” Numerous of those seized and deported were US citizens.

Jesus’ or Jesus’s; Davis’ or Davis’s; Sanchez’ or Sanchez’s; Williams’ or Williams’s? Mexican names are American names. Thus when referring to people from anywhere in the Americas, I intentionally denote possession simply with an apostrophe for all names ending with an “s” or a “z,” regardless of national or ethnic origin. Here is an interesting query: Why is it that WORD (Microsoft Office) flags the noun Tejana with a red squiggly line under it but not the noun Tejano? The same is true with the appellations pachuco and pachuca. Is WORD flagging the “foreign” Texan or just the female Texan? As anthropologist and author Arlene Dávila puts it “‘Latinx,’ ‘Latin American,’ and even ‘American’ are not fixed, homogenous, or universally accepted terms.” In her 2020 publication *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, and Politics*, Dávila explains that “[t]hese categories are specifically contested in the art world, where any hyphenated art has long been regarded as less genuine, less creative, and of generally lower quality and value than ‘unmarked’ art.”<sup>12</sup> Pages one through four of Anthony Macías’ book *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935-1968* are dedicated to the author’s take on culturally-specific terminology. Macías thoughtfully outlines the use of the term Mexican American (the unhyphenated form) as opposed to the sometimes haphazard use of the term Chicano, which is often incorrectly used regarding culture and historicity.<sup>13</sup>

The concept of identity is central to this work, especially as it is related to a connection with a place and time, specifically punk scenes on either side of the Los Angeles River. Besides her definition of “pachuca/o,” I also appreciate Rosa Linda Fregoso’s matter-of-fact description of “identity” as cited by Michelle Habell-Pallán: “Put simply, ‘identity’ can be understood as how one perceives oneself, while ‘subjectivity’ can be seen as how one imagines oneself in relation to others.”<sup>14</sup> This study adds to this explanation the ascription of

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<sup>12</sup>Arlene M. Dávila. *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, Politics*. Durham : Duke University Press, 2020. p. 3

<sup>13</sup> See for example, *Land of a Thousand Dances: Chicano Rock 'n' Roll from Southern California* by David Reyes and Tom Waldman

<sup>14</sup> Habell-Pallán. *Loca Motion*. 2005. p. 7

identity by some towards others based on perceived ideas as to the countless racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds of participants among the many scenes in L.A. that constituted punk rock in that era.

Chapter two explores the various mechanisms used to assign identity and place, such as *Con Safos*, by Eastside graffitists and muralists to mark artistic identity, copyright, and territory. This chapter also marks the critical social connection between cultural identity and spatial identity through the exploration of interaction between punk artists specifically at Westside punk venues and at the Vex in East L.A.

Chapter three considers the Black musical influences on both Brown and White popular music in Los Angeles and beyond. This chapter piggy-backs the important cultural and historical aspects of Anthony Macías' *Mexican American Mojo*, again highlighting the social and spatial acceptance and non-acceptance of various musical artists based on the US American-instituted, three-tiered social scale in place from the birth of popular music to the present era.

Chapter four, "Challenging the Assumption of Memory in Los Angeles Punk Rock" analyzes the motivations of various Hollywood and Eastside scenesters for the assemblance of individual and collective memories. Here the examination of cultural and spatial identity in L.A. punks rock forms the discussion platform in that it focuses on the allegations by some Eastside artists that they were prohibited from performing in the more lucrative Hollywood and Westside venues based on race. Among other venues, this chapter focuses on the cultural distinctions of the Masque and the Vex. Crucially, this chapter, along with two and five, interrogates the validity of outside assignments of identity onto Eastside scenes, including one that suggests "they wore Chicano identity on their sleeve."<sup>15</sup>

Lastly, chapter five of this study compares the protest of the Chicano Movement with L.A. punk protest. "Art vs. Protest: Generational Transmission of Cultural Chicanismo in L.A. Punk" also tracks musical and other cultural elements (such as patriarchy and Catholicism) of *La Movida* (*El Movimiento*) clear into Los Angeles punk rock. This chapter also examines

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<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Pell, "The Vex and Chicano Punk: A Very Brief History." *LA WEEKLY*, March 12, 2013.

and cites punk rock's multi-faceted fascination with violence in L.A. All five chapters examine and expose the institutional and cultural transmission of violence—ultimately manifested as punk violence and practiced throughout the City of Angels. The entire body of this work demonstrates that in conjunction with race, cultural oblivion within the various scenes spurred social tension in L.A. punk from 1976 to 1981.

## CHAPTER 2. CON SAFOS (C/S): CHICANO IDENTITY AND THE STRUGGLE TO ASSERT IDENTITY AND PLACE IN L.A. PUNK ROCK

In November of 1980 the punk rock venue Vex found itself in need of relocation to a new address in Los Angeles for the second time in less than one year. Beginning as a speakeasy-like space below Joe “Vex” Suquette’s flat at the Navarro apartments on Alvarado Street, in March the Vex had moved into a second-floor art studio space at Self Help Graphics and Art in East L.A..<sup>16</sup> But after only eight months in operation there, a single punk rock show saw vandals obliterate not only much of the interior and contents of the Chicano community, youth and cultural arts center, but also the partnership between the Vex and Self Help.

Beginning with the tumult that spurred Joe Vex’s hasty evacuation of Self Help in search of a space better suited to hosting a wildly spontaneous punk rock contingent, this chapter explores the powerful social forces that helped trigger the Vex’s departure: the ascription of identity and place in the late 1970s Los Angeles punk scene. This is to suggest that the convergence of two varying and often conflicting punk sensibilities—geographically divided east from west by the Los Angeles River—forced the demise of a space that some had hoped would come to symbolize a kind of artistic unity among White and Chicana/o punk rockers alike.<sup>17</sup>

At Self Help Joe Vex initially booked Eastside bands, primarily made up of Mexican American youth. Willie Herrón III, by then an established mural artist in his own right, had already procured the space for regular rehearsals with his punk band Los Illegals. Other East L.A. regulars to the DIY-style setup included The Brat, The Plugz, the Odd Squad, Stains, The Fenders, and Thee Undertakers, to name a few. But in booking Hollywood punk rockers X for the first “Punk Prom,” Joe Vex in many respects chaperoned a kind of community first

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<sup>16</sup> Javier Cabralmay, “Joe Vex Speaks! Our Interview With The Mysterious Vex Club Proprietor.” *LA WEEKLY*, May 13, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> “The focus of Los Illegals was to unite Eastside and Westside,” Herron says. “It was this idea of unity that finally opened the doors for us in Hollywood.” Agustin Gurza. “L.A. punk history is a serious subject.” *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 2008.



date in Los Angeles by pairing Westside Hollywood punk with East L.A. pachuco punk.<sup>18</sup> The attraction of the Vex grew substantially in just a few months. But not long after, when for the first time Black Flag from Hermosa Beach along with other hardcore bands from South Bay, and especially their fans descended upon the Vex, that attraction had been traded for contempt and had worn out its welcome—to the folks at Self Help Graphics, at least. “The focus of Los Illegals was to unite Eastside and Westside,” Herron says. “It was this idea of unity that finally opened the doors for us in Hollywood.”<sup>19</sup>

There are surprisingly few recorded second-hand, let alone first-hand, accounts detailing the last hoorah for the Vex at Self Help. Secondary sources liken the event to everything from a typical hardcore punk free-for-all to an all-out-race-riot.<sup>20</sup> These accounts often contradict each other on a number of other details as well. But for those who had envisioned the artistic and culturally developmental possibilities for the venue—the ones whose allegiance lay first with Self Help over the success of any punk club—the incident represented a slap in the face. These include Willie Herrón and Sister Karen Boccadero, the tough-talking, chain-smoking Franciscan nun who founded Self Help Graphics in 1971.<sup>21</sup> Certainly Teresa Covarrubias, frontwoman for The Brat, stands among these as well. In her book chapter “Starry Nights in East L.A.” she offers a heartbreaking rendition of the incident beginning with noting that Self Help Graphics was first a community arts center dedicated to lifting Chicana/o youth from a sense of racial separation and spatial hopelessness. Covarrubias, who throughout her memoir endearingly refers to the Self Help art community as her/she, remembers:

That last show at the Vex—that Black Flag gig—brought in the hardcore kids, including a few incendiary hooligans who came

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<sup>18</sup> Michelle Habell-Pallán. *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture*. New York: New York University, 2015.p. 154

<sup>19</sup> Agustín Gurza. “L.A. punk history is a serious subject.” *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Pell, “The Vex and Chicano Punk: A Very Brief History,” 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Cathy Weiss and Julia Wasson, “Part One: Tomas Benitez on his friend Sister Karen of Self-Help Graphics.” *HUFFPOST*, October 24, 2013. Updated December 6, 2017.

in and trashed Self Help. They tore the place up. [...] and these guys broke into where they had the prints and destroyed these works of art that had been archived there for who knows how many years. It was such a disrespect of that place and our community. They broke windows and smashed statues and other works of art. [...] Even though the “new” space [the Vex] remained open until 1983, it never regained the cultural importance of the Self Help location; it was simply another venue.<sup>22</sup>

Not only the debacle itself, but the time and the place, the Vex at Self Help, makes for a superlative backdrop to interrogate the “cultural importance” of place and identity to both east and west L.A. punks. Moreover, even this short paragraph from Covarrubias’ memoir begs for cultural analysis in hopes of addressing a number of important questions. Why was it a relatively smooth ride for Joe Vex until he introduced what Covarrubias called “that new attitude...the downside of what punk evolved into, this sort of nihilism”?<sup>23</sup> And, why did she equate the physical “disrespect” of the space with disrespect for her community? These questions and more form the basis for this chapter, which centers on two themes: identity and place. This section endeavors to critique the cultural forces that urged the assignment of each in L.A.’s both Chicana/o and white punk rock history. Certainly not precluding the FTW (“Fuck The World”) attitude of the predominantly Anglo Hollywood scene, this chapter focuses on gaining an understanding of what Covarrubias perceived as “our” community. And for East L.A. in particular, Chicanismo and *Mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness) played as big a part in forming Covarrubias’ community as did any social factor or phenomenon, including punk rock.

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<sup>22</sup> Teresa Covarrubias and Tom DeSavia. “Starry Nights in East LA.,” in book *Under the Big Black Sun: A Personal History of L.A. Punk*, edited by John Doe and Tom DeSavia, Boston: Da Capo Press, 2017. p. 117

<sup>23</sup> Covarrubias, “Starry Nights in East L.A.” p. 118

So, what is Chicanismo? Veteran-professor of Chicano Studies Mario T. García describes the ideology as being the consolidation of multiple concepts that begin with the notion that Chicana/os represent an indigenous mestizo people, dispossessed of their native spiritual homeland. Mystical Aztlán includes all of what is today called modern Mexico and nearly half of what is now recognized as the United States. Displacement of *La Raza* (The People) occurred under the Anglo conquest of North America during the *Intervención estadounidense en México*, aka the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). To this García adds the centrality to Chicanismo of both *La Familia y Carnalismo*, family and brotherhood—both personal and communal. Lastly, and just as important to this study, Chicanismo represents Mexican American “revolutionary heritage, and self-determination, or Chicano Power.”<sup>24</sup>

But even with having a virtual textbook definition of Chicanismo, there exists no all-encompassing method for identifying it with all its various facets, because Chicanismo meant and still means different things to different people. Likewise the punk aesthetic, Chicana/o or otherwise, cannot be monopolized by a particular identity, whether individual or collective. There is no *the* punk aesthetic. It was not one thing, and both anarchism and the DIY (“Do It Yourself”) mentality can be historically traced to both camps.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, the task of critiquing the cultural forces that spurred the ascription of identity in Chicana/o punk rock is made all the more complicated when considering the powerful social forces of generation, racism, genderism, feminism, sexual orientation, and social class. Of further importance, the work of this chapter builds on what George Lipsitz calls the strategy of “anti-essentialism in popular music...the adoption of identities that permits individuals and groups...and Chicana/o punk rockers in Los Angeles, to become more themselves by appearing to be something other than themselves.”<sup>26</sup> Reaching further still, another function of this chapter moves beyond the identification of the varied ideological elements of Chicanismo, nihilism, and anti-

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<sup>24</sup> Mario T. García. *Blowout!: Sal Castro and the Chicano Struggle for Educational Justice*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. pp. 8,9

<sup>25</sup> Habell-Pallán. *Loca Motion*. 2015. p. 173

<sup>26</sup> George Lipsitz. *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place*. London: Verso, 1994. p. 63

essentialism in punk rock in an effort to investigate and reveal the cultural transmission of those ideas.

A much less ubiquitous cultural symbol than either DIY or FTW is *Con Safos* (C/S). But it likely carries more cultural connotation than the other two. Beyond meaning the literal English translation of “with respect,” *con safos*, or simply C/S, trademarked mural and graffiti artists’ expressions of Chicanismo from the birth of the urban Chicano Movement in 1968 to the present day. Along with copyrighting an artist’s work, the term has also come to mean that any insult applied to this work “slips off” or bounces back.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the presence of C/S in an existing artwork cautioned against altering or covering it by penalty of the same, but not necessarily through direct retribution. Additionally, the symbol afforded later generations of Chicana/os a historical connection with Chicanismo as a way of identifying beyond oneself, with the larger Chicana/o community.<sup>28</sup> In this last sense C/S can also be found accompanying an artist’s signature on paintings and even below one’s signature on a letter. According to Josh T. Franco, national collector for Smithsonian’s Archives for American Art, while not all Chicana/o art bears the mark, if a poster or other work of art exhibits the *con safos* symbol, “you can be 99.9% sure that it’s by a Chicana/o artist.”<sup>29</sup>

As much or more than any Chicano artist of any medium, Rubén Funkahuatl Guevara captured, developed, and has disseminated the spirit of Con Safos for descending generations of Chicano/o youth. Guevara, the self-proclaimed “Culture Sculptor,” adapted the words from a poem he wrote in 1975 to a song he titled “Con Safos” in 1983. In a 2021 documentary, cultural historian Josh Kun calls the song “quintessential.” And not in terms of just Chicano rock, he rates the song among L.A.’s greatest. Kun considers “Con Safos” “an important piece of history on the [Chicano] movement, [an] important commentary on the history of L.A. as a Mexican city...because it’s just like a history lesson,” and as if speaking directly for Rubén

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<sup>27</sup> Jose Antonio Burciaga. *Drink Cultura: Chicanismo*. Santa Barbara (California): Joshua Odell editions, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> Scott L. Baugh and Víctor Alejandro Sorell. *Born of Resistance: Cara a Cara Encounters with Chicana/o Visual Culture*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> “What is Con Safos?, Con Safos Artists” (DSI-AAA)1736, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, September 25, 2018.

Guevara, he adds, “it’s just like, let me tell you the history of Chicanos. Let me tell you the history of conquest, colonization, of indigenous life and how it relates to Mexico, and how it relates to Los Angeles.”<sup>30</sup>

In his own words, actor/film-maker and Chicano art collector Cheech Marin reflects on his experience with the cultural symbol in saying, “you can’t cross this out, because if you do, everybody who’s in the con safos side is gonna talk to you about it.” However, a more militant attitude can be detected in graffiti artist Chaz Bojórquez’ explanation of C/S: “That was something that was for us. It was something that you put on your graffiti. Con Safos means anything you do to this, we’re gonna do to you. So, do not touch this wall. This is ours. You do not belong here. This is our territory.”<sup>31</sup>

But certainly there are myriad personal or cultural reasons why Chicana/o artists might not add the C/S symbol to their work. Among them might include having a closer connection with Queerness or feminism than with the hetero-masculinist formations of Chicano nationalism. In fact, until only recently traditional academic Chicano Studies and research has all but sidestepped cultural symbolism, along with Queer and feminist studies. Thankfully, a newer generation of Chicana/o music and art historians now diligently labor to set the record straight. For example, with Mario T. García’s *Blowout!: Sal Castro and the Chicano Struggle for Educational Justice* much of contemporary Chicana/o scholarship will take exception to his simplified timeline of the multi-faceted Chicano Movement. Whereas he correctly points to its beginnings in 1965 with the farmworkers movement and then through its various political fronts (including educational reform), he ends his list with stating that Chicana feminism also found its origins within the movement.<sup>32</sup>

Maylei Blackwell’s powerful 2016 cultural and oral history *¡Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* cites the roots of Chicana feminist activism as emerging long before the term “Chicano” even came into popular use. Examples

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<sup>30</sup> Con Safos/*Artbound*/Season 12, Episode One/KCET. YouTube video, 54:35, October 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QP0OX6wkubc>

<sup>31</sup> Con Safos/*Artbound*/KCET, 2021. (26:10, 26:33)

<sup>32</sup> García. *Blowout!* 2014. p. 8

include, among others, the transnational feminist organization *Hijas de Cuauhtémoc*, founded amidst the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), and the impact *Tejana* (Texan) feminists made on the formation and spread of LULAC, the League of United Latin American Citizens in 1929. Dr. Blackwell calls this “adding on feminism after the fact [which] reflects the politics of periodization,” a historiographic tool that denies female agency by signaling that the only important contributions made by women and girls to any movement occurred after its climax.<sup>33</sup> Feminist author and university professor Deborah Vargas reverberates this sentiment by arguing in her work against “simply reconciling non-normative genders and sexualities within Chicano music by inserting their now-sanctioned citizenship as women.”<sup>34</sup>

Among Mexican American scholars of Chicano history, Mario García represents one of at least four men who since before the 1980s have set the academic standard for Chicano Studies in American universities. Along with PhDs Rodolfo Acuña, Manuel G. Gonzales, and Carlos Muñoz, Jr., none of the four has more often been cited in Chicana/o historiography. Moreover, no other Chicana/o historiographers’ works have proliferated in as many editions. García’s *Border Correspondent*, for example, began in 1994 and reached its fourteenth edition in 2020, while Rodolfo Acuña’s *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* has seen fifty-eight renditions between 1980 and 2019. Again in *¡Chicana Power!* Professor Blackwell considers Acuña’s earlier versions of *Occupied America* typical examples of adding on feminism after the fact. Blackwell also cites Carlos Muñoz, Jr.—the first to chair a university Chicano Studies program—for the same. She maintains that the idea of an as-widely-disseminated counterpart, “Chicana” Studies, “as an extension or at times a competitor of Chicano Studies” likely remains the greatest challenge to the entire field.<sup>35</sup>

Part of the rift between Chicano nationalist history and Chicana feminist history stems from the false notion that feminism within the Chicano movement triggered its demise. Not

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<sup>33</sup> Maylei Blackwell. *Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*. Austin : University of Texas Press, 2015. p. 12

<sup>34</sup> Deborah R. Vargas. *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. xi

<sup>35</sup> Blackwell. *Chicana Power!* 2015. p. 205

only Blackwell, but Deborah Vargas, Rosa-Linda Fregoso, and Vicki Ruiz adamantly refute the charge. Randy Ontiveros, in his work, isolates the chauvinistic perpetuation of the theory in and beyond the works of the founders of Chicano Studies. Ontiveros specifically ranks activist-turned-historian Ignacio M. García's book chapter "Juncture in the Road: Chicano Studies Since 'El Plan de Santa Barbara'" foremost among traditional Chicano nationalist anti-feminist treatises. Essentially a bereavement over the loss of spirited militancy within *El Movimiento*, García blames a significant portion of the decline on lesbian-feminism and on "gender nationalists who have gone so far as to suggest that homosexuality is an integral part of Chicano culture."<sup>36</sup> But in what is probably a more scathing indictment, García calls UC Berkeley and UCLA "hotbeds of feminist discourse," which have promoted the reduction of the "Chicano family" to single parent households led by women beyond the traditional Chicano mother/daughter relationship.<sup>37</sup> This last point is understandably critical to Ignacio García because of the "centrality of family" to the Plan de Santa Barbara, as outlined above. While the Chicano Movement began with a rejection by Chicana/o youth of Anglo image and assimilation, current Chicana/o historical research shows that young Chicanas have stridently rejected the patriarchal constraints of Chicanismo.

In *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda* Professor Deborah Vargas draws from critical race feminism, queer-of-color, and borderlands theory to establish a musical and lifestyle separation from the heteronormative constructs of *la onda*, "the wave" in English, or the "happening," or scene. Historically speaking, *La Onda* refers to the Mexican counterpart of the 1960s worldwide waves of counter-culturalism, which among many musical genres includes Chicana/o music, lived and experienced on either side of US-Mexican borders.<sup>38</sup> Vargas argues that the voice, the music and lifestyles of these Chicana performers remain in direct contrast to canonical Tejano music narratives. Vargas also maintains that apart from the few very famous artists she focuses on, these dissonant divas

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<sup>36</sup> Blackwell. *Chicana Power!* pp. 2015. 205, 206

<sup>37</sup> Randy J. Ontiveros. *In the Spirit of a New People: The Cultural Politics of the Chicano Movement*. New York: New York University Press 2014. p. 170

<sup>38</sup> Eric Zolov. *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture*. University of California Press, 1999. p. 12

have gone largely unrecognized because they have not fit into *la onda*'s social constructs of gender, class, citizenship, femininity, and family. Even the more well-known of Vargas' subject artists, such as Selena and Rosita Fernández, have gone either "misheard or overheard." Vargas' "feminist-of-color" analysis offers a new survey of border cultural production that counters traditional renditions.<sup>39</sup>

While modern variations of *la onda* in Tex-Mex music now include rock, R&B, blues, funk, punk, and hip hop, some of the dissonant divas Vargas writes about began to test the limits of Tejano social constructs as early as the 1930s and 1940s. Rita Vidaurri and Lucha Reyes were among the first to wear charro pants while performing their rancheras.<sup>40</sup> Chapter three of *Dissonant Divas*, 'The Queer Discord of Eva Ybarra and Ventura Alonzo' focuses on Tejano masculine debasing of the female body as being diametrically incompatible with playing the accordion. With the accordion jealously regarded as a strictly masculine domain of Tex-Mex *conjunto*, these Tex-Mexicana musicians, both of whom have been dubbed "Queen of the accordion," navigated the culturally-entrenched taboo with various degrees of precarity. Vargas states that especially the early career of Ventura Alonzo (1904-2000) as the only woman playing among all-male lineups forms a "queer" analytic.<sup>41</sup>

In chapter five Vargas focuses on the "brown soul" of Selena (Selena Quintanilla Pérez—1971-1995), "the Queen of Tejano music," revealing the musical crossover, the Black sound in Selena's music that remains undetectable within the social constraints of Tex-Mex music. And she claims that Selena's funk and soul-influenced *cumbia* sounds produced a uniquely "queer-of-color" Chicana musical configuration.<sup>42</sup> Vargas brings her treatise full circle with an epilogue that compares and contrasts the Mexicana rock 'n' roll voice of now ninety-four-year-old Gloria Ríos to the screams of Tejana indie-punk band Girl in a Coma. In *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture*, author and historian Michelle Habell-Pallán likens this signature reverberation of Chicana rock to a border

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<sup>39</sup> Vargas. *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music*. 2012. viii

<sup>40</sup> Vargas. *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music*. 2012. vii

<sup>41</sup> Vargas. *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music*. 2012. p. 113

<sup>42</sup> Vargas. *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music*. 2012. p. 186



feminist politics in which feminism “exists in a borderland not limited to geographical space.”<sup>43</sup> Music is power. And *Dissonant Divas* skillfully exposes the relationship between the power of music and place. The women Vargas writes about cannot be pigeonholed into any singular identity or modus operandi. Instead these women—in imagining their own desires whether for love, revenge, public recognition, home, family, or fortune, both future and past—have channeled their artistry (their bodies, their voices, their musical instrumentation) in a way that transcends the male-dominated powerbase of Chicano music.<sup>44</sup>

In Los Angeles the larger music industry’s virtually all-white-male powerbase ceaselessly worked to create artist images according to maximal racial and sexual marketability. Especially in East L.A., similar power structures in both the music scene and the local city council capitalized on the inextricable cultural connection between identity and place. In both, racialized notions of gender roles ranked social status in neighborhoods, classrooms, and music venues. Both objectified and treated Mexican Americans, especially women, as expendable labor commodities in the workplace.<sup>45</sup> Somewhat different than cities in South Texas, L.A. represented a multicultural hybrid of both Mexicano and American musical genres to the *Bajalta* California borderlands. For Chicana/o musicians of any genre, L.A., U.S.A., promised an international environment where individual identities could be formed beyond ethnic and gender stereotype.<sup>46</sup> This study has found that when punk rock’s first wave hit L.A. in the mid-1970s, the social space for practicing anti-essentialism dramatically expanded beyond what had already existed in the world’s entertainment capital.

Although Tony Rettman’s book *Why Be Something You’re Not* specifically concerns Detroit hardcore punk from 1979 to 1985, during the same period in L.A. the question asked by Rettman’s title could have just as easily been answered with, “Why not?” Appearing to be something other than you are is the name of the game in any performance art, especially in

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<sup>43</sup> Habell-Pallán. *Loca Motion*. 2015. p. 17

<sup>44</sup> Vargas. *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music*. 2014. xxi

<sup>45</sup> George Sánchez. *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021. p. 215

<sup>46</sup> Habell-Pallán. *Loca Motion*. 2015. p. 183

Hollywood. A more honest answer to the interrogation might be, “for money and fame.” But fame especially stands in direct contrast to what has generally been regarded as *the* punk aesthetic. A perusal of any punk fanzine from anywhere around the world quickly reveals punk rockers’ rage against the machine of political and corporate greed, not to mention their seething hatred of popular rock music and the artists who perform it.<sup>47</sup> A number of Hollywood punk rockers from both east and west sides did however, move past their disdain for fame and fortune, eventually achieving world notoriety not only in music, but as actors, authors, and even educators. These include among others, John Doe and Exene Cervenka of X, Alicia Velasquez (Alice Bag) of the Bags, and Robert Lopez (El Vez) of the ZEROS. In 1981 Penelope Spheeris produced the best film footage depicting Hollywood punks’ nihilism in *The Decline of Western Civilization*. Doe, Cervenka, Alice Bag, and Brendan Mullen (1949-2009), owner of the Hollywood punk club Masque, were featured to varying degrees in the film.

But where did cultural Chicanismo fit into the hodge-podge of social influences that formed L.A. punk rock? Did Chicanismo play as big a part as fame, anti-essentialism, nihilism, gender, or sexual identity in spurring the musical aspirations of Mexican American youth? The most recent attempts to historicize East L.A.’s predominantly Chicana/o punk scene in its cultural relationship with L.A.’s overall punk movement have been conducted using race as a means for assigning identity and place, rather than its conceivable connections with the slightly earlier, yet much larger Chicano Movement.<sup>48</sup> Casual observers of the scene have mistakenly presumed that race and Chicano Power primarily drove East L.A.’s punk expression as evidenced by one journalist who wrote in *LA WEEKLY* that “Unlike Hollywood, this scene wore Chicano identity on their sleeves...”<sup>49</sup> While it is true, as Nicholas Pell also stated in his article, that many East L.A. Chicana/o punk bands “displayed a consciousness of La Raza in words, sounds and images,” and that some even incorporated “Spanish lyrics,

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<sup>47</sup> Claude Bessy. “Exclusive Interview: The Damned.” *Slash* fanzine. Vol.1 no.1. April 17, 1977. pp.3, 5

<sup>48</sup> R.C. Davila. 2019. ‘See No Colour, Hear No Colour, Speak No Colour: Problematizing Colourblindness in Los Angeles Punk Historiography.’ *Punk and Post-Punk*. 8, no. 1: 89-104.

<sup>49</sup> Pell. “The Vex and Chicano Punk: A Very Brief History.” 2012.

Mexican imagery and mariachi influences into the music,” many more limited their expression of Chicano pride to just that, their art. Be it the byproduct of ethnic heritage or otherwise, most desired recognition of their individual art as opposed to any expressions of corporate or institutionalized culture. Again, Teresa Covarrubias provides one of the best examples of this sentiment:

I don't think when we (The Brat) first started out that that was the intent, that we're going to be an East L.A. band. I think that's just what we were. I think like any other artist we just wanted to create music. We just wanted to perform. We just needed to get that creative part of ourselves out. I think it was more people outside of the group that started to label. They had these really strange expectations about what they expected to hear. If you came from East L.A. you were expected to represent. You know, what about these other bands, like from Hollywood? I mean, did they have to represent their cultures too? No. You know, it was always like this, like, a double-standard.<sup>50</sup>

Covarrubias' testimony speaks to the validity of this study's thesis by pointing out the difference between art-driven ethnic culture and culture by institution, for institution (“institution” meaning religion, militarism, and neoliberalism, etc.) “These other bands...from Hollywood” possessed no culture(s) to represent, certainly not wholeheartedly. Then as now, because White American culture stood superior to all, White punk rockers had no need, nor specific desire for culture. By pointing to what she recognized as being a double-standard, Covarrubias testifies to the cultural clash that socially divided White and Brown punk rock during the nineteen-seventies and eighties in Los Angeles.

Although White punk rockers in L.A. also struggled to assert identity, unlike Mexican American punk rockers, they faced much less pushback in securing established venues for expressing their individual distinctiveness. But time and again, this study has found that their

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<sup>50</sup> RazorCake, Gorsky. Eastside Punks, Episode 2: The Brat, YouTube video, 9:20, May 18, 2020.

“art” took a backseat to attempting the display of individuality through the total rejection of, and flamboyant protest against their institutionalized White American culture. White punk rockers most often denied any association between their music and the idea of it being art.<sup>51</sup>

*Slash* fanzine pointedly exposed the cultural angst commonly held among many Mexican American punk artists through conducting a pair of interviews in 1977 with the San Diego-based Zeros and The Ramones of New York City. In the August edition, one of *Slash*'s nameless interviewers suggested to the Zeros: “When people talk about you, some compare you to The Ramones.” But before the interviewer could say anything more, the band instantly retorted, “Yeah, the Mexican Ramones!” *Slash* came back with “What does that do for you?” Although *Slash* did not distinguish between which band members made particular responses, later sources show us that it was Javier Escovedo who quickly replied, “It makes me sick. We don’t believe we sound like The Ramones. WE have leads!” With that jab at The Ramones’ signature rudimentary, three-chord song progressions, the Zeros set themselves apart as being *real* guitarists. And, when further along in the interview *Slash* attempted a return to the question of the band’s ethnicity by asking, “Are you all from Mexican background?” one band member replied, “Yeah, I guess so.” This amounted to an attempt by the Zeros to evade white punk’s continual expectation of Chicano artists “to represent,” as Teresa Covarrubias put it. But *Slash*'s follow-up question cornered the band, forcing them to engage: “Has it (their Mexican backgrounds) influenced your music?” The band, all of them in unison, cried NO! “Because how Mexican are we? We don’t live in Mexico, we don’t speak Spanish...”<sup>52</sup> The Zeros’ band members understandably considered themselves no more Mexican than any and all White American teenagers.

The following month The Ramones toured the West Coast, including, of course, L.A., and *Slash* fortunately scored an interview with the nationally-famed, quintessential White punk rockers. With only two members of The Ramones present (Joey and Dee Dee Ramone—not their real names), the very first question of their interview—three times longer than that of

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<sup>51</sup> Bessey. “Exclusive Interview: The Damned.” *Slash*. Vol.1 no.1. p.5

<sup>52</sup> Bessey. “Zeros” *Slash*. Vol.1 no.3. p.13

the Zeros’—amounted to just “a joke” according to *Slash*’s editor: “How do you feel about being labeled the East Coast Zeros by some people?” Dee Dee Ramone replied, “Very angry...it’s a bunch of bullshit. How long have the fuckin’ Zeros been together? Who started this whole thing about punk rock and how can we be...?”<sup>53</sup> Obviously The Ramones had known something about the Zeros or Dee Dee would not have mentioned that the Zeros entered the punk scene after they did. Thankfully, while he made no mention of the Zeros’ Mexican ethnicity, the only ammunition Dee Dee could come up with to defend The Ramones’ identity and place in the genre was longevity. His only defense lay in bolstering their pioneering image in the punk rock world. In reality, the Zeros formed just two-years after The Ramones did in 1974. Other bands from New York City regarded as glam rock or proto-punk, such as Television and The Dolls, preceded The Ramones by as many years. And as far as longevity goes, the Zeros outlasted The Ramones by fourteen years. But most pertinent to this chapter, the only reference to art that The Ramones made in their interview with *Slash* was “...we have beaten up a few people but we’re not a gang, we’re a rock band,” and later, “We’re musicians.”<sup>54</sup>

The Ramones by no means represent the only White punk rockers who lacked the technical chops to achieve notoriety as musicians. The Germs’ Darby Crash (Born Jan Paul Beahm in 1958 and dead of an intentional heroin overdose in 1980 at age 22) aka Bobby Pyn also had to rely on the audience-spurred violence at live stage shows in Hollywood to propel the band’s celebrity. In *The Decline of Western Civilization* (DWC) Part I, Germs’ manager Nicole Panter stated, as a matter of fact, that the band had to spend a period of time learning how to play their instruments after they had already come out as a musical unit, and that “they did things to kind of camouflage [their musical ineptitude]. Darby would smear peanut butter all over him, he’d dive through broken glass, he’d break glasses on his head on stage.”<sup>55</sup> Their

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<sup>53</sup> “Ramones” *Slash*. Vol.1 no.4. p.23

<sup>54</sup> “Ramones” *Slash*. Vol.1 no.4. p.24

<sup>55</sup> Penelope Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization* Part I. 1981. Spheeris Films Inc., New Line Cinema. 1:40.

first few shows saw the band thrown out, their equipment unplugged mid-set by the house.<sup>56</sup> Nicole (identified in the film by her first name only) likened her job as the band's manager to "being the mother of four three-year-olds who are always fighting with each other... He did this to me, she did this... Sometimes I get to the end of my rope." And with a grin on her face she offered, "I just want to batter my children."<sup>57</sup> In 2016 Andrew Cahill turned the tables on the film's maker, director and interviewer when discussing the inherent violence displayed in *DWC* parts I, II, and III: "...with all three of the films, there are plenty of self-destructive impulses flying around with these guys. What do you make of that? I mean, it's kind of a big question to ask, but do you have any ideas, just from your own experiences, about where that comes from?" Like Nicole, who quit managing the Germs in 1980 before Crash's suicide, Penelope Spheeris recognized her subjects' desires to be recognized as artists in answering:

Here's the thing, I think a long time ago there was this stigma attached to music which is, and a lot of the arts actually – painting and maybe even filmmaking – "If you suffer, then that equals that you are creative." And, well, that's not necessarily true. You can be creative without suffering. But I think a lot of these guys self-impose pain – and, ultimately, abusive drug use is pain and causes depression and everything else – and I think it was just them trying to prove their creativity or somehow support it. And people think, "Oh, if I smoke a big joint I'm going to be creative." And, well – not so much.<sup>58</sup>

Penelope Spheeris' poignant questioning of Darby Crash for *DWC* part I successfully coaxed intelligible words from him; intelligible words that help explain some of the unintelligible lyrics he spewed when performing live. After much arm-twisting by Nicole to

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<sup>56</sup>Pleasant Gehman. "A Non-stop Party," in book *Under the Big Black Sun: A Personal History of L.A. Punk*, edited by John Doe and Tom DeSavia, Boston: Da Capo Press, 2017. p.45

<sup>57</sup> Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization Part I*. 1981. (23:20)

<sup>58</sup> Penelope Spheeris: "The Decline of Western Civilization" Interview by Andrew Cahill. *Cyclical Frost*, March 3, 2016. <https://www.cyclicdefrost.com/2016/03/penelope-spheeris-the-decline-of-the-western-civilization-interview-by-andrew-cahill/>

get him to do it, Crash's interview took place in his friend Michelle's parent's kitchen.<sup>59</sup> But quickly, however, Michelle almost protectively assumes the duty of narrating what it was like for them to be an integral part of L.A.'s first-wave punk scene. Both Crash and Michelle display a kind of sardonic human indifference. During the interview both exhibit little regard for human life and meager sympathy for both emotional and physical pain. Crash's own willingness to self-destruct remains the only detectable difference between their respective cognitive dissonance. On stage or off, Darby Crash quintessentially embodied the spirit of violence towards self. And even if through no recognizable cultural vehicle, he creatively pioneered the art of violence in Hollywood punk. The scene opens with the two close friends frying eggs and bacon.

Spheeris cuts to the chase and addresses Crash's self-destructive tendencies with "Tell me, how's it that you're always getting hurt?" Unsure of how much of himself to reveal he answers, "Well, at first I used to do it to myself...to keep from being bored." Pressing further on his propensity for self-harm and its costs, Spheeris asks, "When's the worst time you ever got hurt at a show?" Crash mumbles, "Um, the Whisky," meaning the Whisky a Go Go, which is still located on Sunset Strip in West Hollywood. At this point Michelle jumps in explaining that he cut his foot open, and Crash laughing about it allows, "I had to go to the hospital with blue hair and all the nurses..." Crash begins to open up when Spheeris asks him why he gets so loaded to perform: "I mean, it's really scary out there, you know, it's really scary 'cause like when we play we're right down there in the audience. There's lots of creeps out there, and there's lots of people who have grudges against us now too. If I didn't get loaded I wouldn't be able to do it."<sup>60</sup>

But Michelle seems to steal Crash's spotlight when detailing an incident that had previously occurred while her parents were away in China (the reason for their trip not given). Her story begins gleefully with, "Oh! The dead painter!" She explains that her parents had

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<sup>59</sup> Nicole Panter and Alice Bag. "Interview with Nicole Panter—Conducted April 2005" Alice Bag.com. Jan. 21, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization* Part I. 1981. (21:00)

already left by the time house-painters were finishing up with the home's exterior.<sup>61</sup> Listing in attendance that night: Darby, Donny, Dinky, and Mark Sommer, and "my brother," she recalls, "...and my brother and I went to take the trash out...One in the morning or something...and it was on a Tuesday. We hadn't been out in the backyard since my parents left. It was like the Friday before. And so, anyways,...I went outside and I must have walked right over the guy, I couldn't see anything anyways." Chuckling she adds, "And then my brother goes to me, isn't there somebody sleeping in the backyard? ...I was just joking and said this guy's dead and kicked him in the stomach." Then in full-on laughter she bellows, "And he *was* dead!"<sup>62</sup>

The rest of Michelle's (and Darby's) testimony concerning the dead painter speaks for itself: "Donny had a camera. We went and lied down...I lied down next to him. We all got around him. We took a bunch of pictures, like family pictures. And we're all going like (waving), hi and taking pictures." Here Spheeris returns to Nicole's interview to get a sense of "what really happened to the guy?" With a completely straight face she simply replied, "They think he had a heart attack and fell off the ladder and no one found him for two days." Then panning back to Darby Crash's interview, Michelle continues with, "It was really funny actually. And the paramedics came. They were joking with us, and the coroner came!" Here Darby makes what almost seems a shy attempt at conversational significance with: "Yeah! Remember all those jokes? (Michelle: "Oh yeah!") Instead of John Doe they put down Jose Doe 'cause it was a Wetback." Spheeris returned with, "Didn't you feel bad that the guy was dead?" Michelle immediately shaking her head responded, "No. Not at all, because I hate painters." At that Darby looks up quizzically from frying bacon over at Michelle.<sup>63</sup> Decades after the Germs' demise, Nicole Panter claimed that Darby "fancied himself such a little toughie, but he really wasn't..."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization* Part I. 1981. (26:50)

<sup>62</sup> Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization* Part I. 1981. (27:52)

<sup>63</sup> Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization* Part I. 1981. (28:39)

<sup>64</sup> Bag. "Interview with Nicole Panter" 2016.



Elsewhere in *DWC* Part I Nicole Panter conceded that her “three-year-olds” eventually learned how to play.<sup>65</sup> And while it is true that apart from Crash the band matured enough musically to hold their own alongside almost any other act of their era, the Germs’ only person of color, Georg Ruthenberg, better known as Pat Smear, went on to world fame as guitarist with the Mega-group Nirvana. After Nirvana’s leader, Kurt Cobain committed suicide in 1994, Smear stayed on with Dave Grohl forming the Foo Fighters, another incredibly popular rock group that owes its inception to the Pacific Northwest’s 1990s Grunge wave. As for the Germs’ manager, “her story does not begin and end with the Germs,” according to Alice Bag (who with her band was also featured in *DWC*, although she was not personally interviewed). “Nicole is also a respected author, college professor, feminist, and political activist.”<sup>66</sup>

Besides rendering racially diversified and gender inclusive looks at what motivated punk rock performers in Hollywood, the real genius of Spheeris’ trilogy can be seen with her illumination of the angsts, the fears and frustrations of their youthful audiences. Just as her no-holds-barred approach of exposing not only punk solidarity, but the social mal-adaptions of the artform (racism, genderism, misogyny, homophobia, and other forms of violence, including self-harm), Spheeris dedicated a lengthy portion of Part I to interviewing (although mostly White, as per the demographic) equal numbers of both male and female, gay and straight kids in L.A. as they sought to ascribe their individual and collective identity in punk rock. This section raises the following question in contrast to George Lipsitz’ statement on the prevalence of anti-essentialism among “Chicana/o punk rockers in Los Angeles”: How much anti-essentialism also prevailed with Westside punk rockers?

Each presented with first names only, the young, White, and the handsome Eugene stands out in this section as his time before the camera far exceeds that of his fellow interviewees. The entire film opens (and closes), in fact, with the head-shaven fourteen-year-old, offering his take on punk rock and how he sees it as just rock and roll, “because that’s

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<sup>65</sup> Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization* Part I. 1981. (23:33)

<sup>66</sup> Bag. “Interview with Nicole Panter” 2016.

what it is.” When Spheeris asks “What do you like about it?” Eugene replies, “Well, I like that it’s like, something new and it’s reviving like, old rock and roll. And it’s (indistinguishable), and it’s for real. And it’s fun. And you know,” shaking his head negatively, “it’s like...it’s not bullshit, there’s no rockstars, you know?”<sup>67</sup> Others of the cast of young interviewees include the couple, Malissa and Lorna, themselves aspiring artists, who in just a few words reiterate the most prevalent notion found in this study regarding White kids’ yearnings for affiliation with L.A. punk: “We were trying to change something, the music industry, the way we live, you know?...to be accepted any way we want to...You know?” Pretty and make-up clad, with milk-white skin and jet black-dyed hair, Carla echoes the two girls’ sentiment with, “At one time, maybe I was considered different, but now I’m in a comfortable lifestyle and I can be myself.”<sup>68</sup>

Fairly quickly, however, Spheeris gets to the meat of her objective for her interviews with punk youth, to expose and culturally critique punk violence, and to gain a better understanding as to Malissa’s (and the balance of the kids’ interviewed) reasons for exalting violence in the genre: “There’s a lot of violence in the music; there should be.”<sup>69</sup> Less than happy about punk’s “fine line between pogo dancing and fighting,” as a bouncer for the Arena punk club once stated, Eugene explains with a frown that, “Like, when I go to concerts, it’s like my friends get beat up by my friends,” and also, “Like when you see a fight, everyone will just run over and it doesn’t matter who it is, they’ll just start kicking and punching.” Another interviewee, Jennifer, adds, “It seems like little crowds will be dancing and then they’ll start punching.” When Eugene is asked “Why do you think they do that?” he candidly replies, “Just to get their aggression out, you know ‘cause I don’t know. I don’t know. That’s why I do it, to get aggression out, all this fucking pent up shit.”

Another young man, a different club bouncer named John, who judging by his manner and attire does not appear to be a fan or a part of the punk scene, offers his take on his witness of the violence: “They cut their hair and then they dye it, and then they come up there and you

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<sup>67</sup> Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization* Part I. 1981. (00:13)

<sup>68</sup> Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization* Part I. 1981. (1:19:52)

<sup>69</sup> Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization* Part I. 1981. (1:16:38)

know. A lot of them cause problems. You know you see the young kids with their heads shaved, and uh, they really get belligerent.” John’s statement relates belligerence to outward appearance and Penelope Spheeris runs with that for a short spell by asking Eugene about his shaved head. Eugene replies somewhat sarcastically, “Short hair is the clean-cut American look. It’s cool.” But quickly returning to his stated “aggression,” Spheeris follows with, “Where’s that come from?” and Eugene provides an interesting account of his social environment:

Well, with me it just comes from living in this city and seeing everything. Seeing all the ugly old people and just the fuckin,’ the buses, just the dirt, that you know, just... And that, that’s what I just see all the time, so just, [I’m] just all the time bummed just thinking about that. So, when I go there I just...sometimes, I can get out some aggression by beating up some asshole, you know?<sup>70</sup>

John’s answer to Spheeris’ question, “Why are they so angry?”: “Um, they don’t know...I don’t know...they think that’s what punk rock is, violence.” And further that, “...punks against hippies, that’s one thing, if the hippies are starting it. But...punks against punks, you know, it’s not...it’s not what it’s meant to be.” While it may be true that many could in no way pin-point the source of their violent aggression, others such as Eugene articulated and confirmed for Spheeris support for her theory on the decay and *Decline of Western Civilization* (at least in late 1970s Los Angeles) through the descriptions of their world. Michael too, another teen-aged interviewee, candidly recounts along with other events, putting “a guy in the hospital a little while back.” But one of the most revealing of Michael’s explanations details his nonexistent relationship with his parents, his mother and step-dad. Eugene also answered in the same way when asked, “Where are your parents?”: “I don’t know.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization* Part I. 1981. (1:15:44)

<sup>71</sup> Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization* Part I. 1981. (1:19:14)

Lacking the potential support of ethnic/familial culture, most of the kids featured in *DWC* (including the performers) formed their own identities according to their individual perception of society. From the on-stage sexist and homophobic taunts of Lee Ving and his band FEAR in the film to Eugene's casual use of the "n" word, they also labeled others using the same method: Michael calls himself a "total rebel; I just rebel against everything," and then shyly reveals his misogynistic tendencies to the attractive (adult) female interviewer in saying why he had no girlfriend: "Because they're terrible!" Kenny, who appears to be of Asian descent wearing full-face makeup offers, "I swear to god, I hate cops to the max!" Pat, a gay, brown-skinned young man concurs with Kenny in saying, "...the police are all calling me names" describing his first time in jail, but he also agrees with Michael, in stating with a smile, "I've probably hit a lot of girls in the face...I don't like girls very much." Kenny later justifies the swastika on his jacket by saying, "But this doesn't really mean, like, you know, I'm sure I'm really gonna go and kill some Jew, you know. I'm not gonna do *that*..." Then laughing he adds, "maybe a hippy though." Eugene, who considers himself a loner, also rails against hippies, as much as he does against Blacks. But his favorite target for ridicule is what he calls Hollywood poseurs. Carla, who said she had found comfort in the punk lifestyle admits, "I guess I'm an alcoholic." Jennipher, claims she is very good at hiding her feelings, which she maintains enables her to "not feel depression anymore." And then later in the interview she offers, "Everyone's hair should be blue, 'cause that's the best color." However, Michael probably best sums punk's perception of its surrounding world (L.A.) by proclaiming with a laugh, "Society stinks!"<sup>72</sup>

Nicole Panter's eyewitness account of a period police raid on a punk club exhibits the foremost propagator of institutionalized cultural violence—witnessed, experienced, and survived by participants of the punk movement on both sides of the Los Angeles river:

During the Elks Lodge Riot, Lorna (Doom) and I were coming out of the rest room -- in true contrarian punk fashion, we'd gone into the men's room -- just in time to see the cops working their way up that huge wide

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<sup>72</sup> Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization* Part I. 1981. (1:14:49—1:20:07)

grand staircase in a wedge. They were holding up thick lucite shields with one hand and just whacking the hell out of people with their billy clubs as they moved up the stairs. We went into the auditorium part to get away from them, we were just a few steps ahead of the carnage. The Go-Go's were onstage, I think. We worked our way through the audience telling people to leave through the stage exits, to get out of there because the cops were going crazy. We went through the backstage labyrinth and out the stage doors only to walk into what looked like downtown Beirut. There were sharpshooters on every rooftop spaced three feet apart from each other, hundreds of them. and the ever-present helicopters with their spotlights, and down on the sidewalk, the swat squad was in full riot gear, like the guys who'd come up the stairs and they were just whaling on people. It was something I never hope to see again in my lifetime...<sup>73</sup>

Panter's testimony came from an interview taken by Alice Bag, which was posted to her website in 2016. At least in Hollywood, both of these women represented forces to be reckoned with during the formation of what Bag refers to as L.A. punk's "first wave."<sup>74</sup> Like Panter, Bag is also a respected author, feminist, social activist, and onetime educator. However, one difference between the two women remains. Alice Bag, born Alicia Armendariz, not only experienced the same exhibitions of police violence as Panter but additionally, repeated demonstrations of violence born of ethnic Mexican cultural tradition. Even though the Alice Bag Band performs only two songs in *DWC* ("Prowlers in the Night" and "Gluttony") Bag's ferocious vocal delivery and stage presence convincingly supports her use of the aka, Violence Girl, a handle which doubles as the title of her 2011 publication, *Violence Girl: East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage : a Chicana Punk Story*. Bag's book details

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<sup>73</sup> Bag. "Interview with Nicole Panter" 2016.

<sup>74</sup> Alice Bag. *We Were There: Voices from L.A. Punk's First Wave: An Oral History*. 2018.

her childhood living in the bleakest of conditions in an East L.A. barrio, and the domestic violence perpetrated on her mother by her father.

Patriarchal extremism only begins to describe the social order of the Mexican nation with its clearly defined gender roles of machismo, or hypermasculinity, and marianismo, which exalts female submission, the home and family, domesticity, self-sacrifice, and sexual purity. Manuel Armendariz was born to a Mexican society that not only accepted heavy-handedness from the family patriarch, but also normalized domestic violence, wife-beating. Alice Bag writes, "...the seeds of Violence Girl were sown way before I was even born...He grew up in Mexico and always considered himself a Mexican; not a Mexican-American, not a Chicano."<sup>75</sup> While Alice Bag states that she never had reason to doubt the total love and adoration of her father for herself, she also wrote, "...everything I know about the deep, dark ugly side of mankind, I learned from my father." And, "It's not that he actually did every cruel and evil thing imaginable, but he tapped into the energy which makes humans capable of committing any atrocity."<sup>76</sup>

Although Old Mexico's social-maladaptation of cultural machismo remains integral to Chicanismo, not all Mexican American kids from East L.A. experienced its negative effects to the degree that Alice Bag did. Just as many parents, both Mexican and Chicana/o, encouraged cultural assimilation into the White-dominant society they knew their children would eventually have to learn to navigate. Evidence of this contrast can often be detected by looking simply at the cultural experiences of the members of just one Eastside band. The Brat, for example, was fronted by a second generation Chicana, Teresa Covarrubias, who experienced a less rigid, more Americanized adolescence—while her first generation Chicano bandmates, Rudy and Sidney Medina were raised by very traditional, non-English speaking Mexican immigrant parents who actively maintained close connection with their ethnic cultural identity.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Alice Bag. *Violence Girl: East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage : a Chicana Punk Story*. Port Townsend, Washington: Feral House, 2011. p.9

<sup>76</sup> Bag. *Violence Girl*. 2011. p.20

<sup>77</sup> Covarrubias. "Starry Nights in East LA." In book *Under the Big Black Sun*. 2017. P.120

For Teresa Covarrubias, whose parents encouraged her with “You’re an American and you need to blend in,” the idea that creating a sense of artistic community came before any expression of her Chicana roots. This is not to say that she denied them either, because she understood the important cultural connection between art and her ethnic Chicano heritage, and that her band’s “music continued to reflect that.” In her memoir she concedes that although the Eastside scene also had nihilistic hardcore bands such as Stains and Violent Children, whom she could not speak for, she maintains that “for us there was a sense of camaraderie, more so from the bands centered on the art scene—the Vex/Self Help world.” Early on in that world Covarrubias gained a sense of “[w]ow, this is really a scene and a community and we’re creating this space.”<sup>78</sup> She laments the passing of “that community thing it had in the beginning,” playing “wonderful art openings” that featured the likes of master printer, Richard Duardo, the photography of Harry Gamboa Jr., and poetry reading by Marisela Norte.<sup>79</sup> For Covarrubias at least, “the beginning of the end” of “really joyful gigs” like playing alongside Los Lobos at Madame Wong’s East, came with the infiltration of outsiders to the scene, whether the new audiences who thought “punk” had nothing to do with art, only “fuck everything”—or the A&R reps who sought to control how The Brat presented itself, i.e. “white dudes who came at the whole Chicano experience from what they had learned from the mainstream culture, which was all about lowriders and cholos.”<sup>80</sup> Mainstream White-dominant culture (meaning void of culture) spurred the stereotypical labeling, the projection of identity and prescription of place that not only marked the end of the Vex at Self Help Graphics and Arts, but also The Brat. Though the Eastside artistic community survived and thrives to this day, so does the divide between Chicana/o art—protected by the spirit of Con Safos—and White-American mainstream culture.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Covarrubias. “Starry Nights in East LA.,” in book *Under the Big Black Sun*. 2017. P.117

<sup>79</sup> Covarrubias. “Starry Nights in East LA.,” in book *Under the Big Black Sun*. 2017. p.118

<sup>80</sup> Covarrubias. “Starry Nights in East LA.,” in book *Under the Big Black Sun*. 2017. pp. 118, 120, 121

<sup>81</sup> Arlene Dávila, M. *Latinx Art : Artists Markets Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2020. p.12

### CHAPTER 3. CULTURAL IMPACTS OF BLACK ON BROWN POPULAR MUSIC IN LOS ANGELES

While academia and public historical sectors have extensively covered Black artists' creation of American—and therefore, global—popular music from Jazz and the Blues through R&B, Rock 'n' Roll, and beyond, this chapter emphasizes Black pop-cultural influence through its inroads via L.A.'s Latino artistic communities into dominant white-America's insatiable consumer base. Of the few studies made on this topic, Anthony Macías' 2008 publication *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935-1968* remains the gold standard. The object of this chapter is not just to evidentially corroborate Macías' findings, but also to contribute to the conversation employing additional historical sources. In 1955 intellectual James Baldwin wrote, "It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story."<sup>82</sup> Beyond music and other artforms, this chapter probes language, demographics, fashion, fame, money and politics to establish a semblance of Black on Brown cultural contrast and congruity.

No different than the balance of this study's chapters, '...Black on Brown Popular Music...' also carries historical display of the cultural transmission of Chicanismo, asserting identity and place, and problematizing memory in especially L.A.'s Chicano punk rock era. As with the other three, this chapter provides a historical baseline from which to draw cultural elements of each while also tracing the historical roots of assimilation versus resistance in greater L.A. punk rock. But in an attempt at emulating Macías' specific methodology, this chapter also tracks various reciprocal cultural impacts of Latin rhythms on uniquely Black American popular music genres. Additionally, this section adds to and draws from Macías' critique of current historiography. Lastly, and most crucial, this chapter represents a continuum; it joins with and builds upon Macías' work in the telling of "how people used

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<sup>82</sup> James Baldwin. *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984. p. 24



popular music...and style to articulate a point of view—an identity—both Mexican and American.”<sup>83</sup> The following is a brief overview of Macías’ 2008 publication.

*Mexican American Mojo* retraces the cultural consciousness, including the pride and the prejudice, of a Mexican American generation. At the same time this book serves as an urban cultural history because it analyzes multiracial neighborhoods and social spaces that confronted attempts to corral both African Americans and Mexican Americans in manageable sectors of a city historically known for its racial discrimination. Also a Chicano cultural history, this volume from the series edited by Josh Kun and Ronald Radano, *Refiguring American Music*, shows how through performance art Mexican Americans prototyped Chicana/o cultural expression as they simultaneously contributed to and pushed back against Anglocentric social structures. Additionally, Macías asserts that this “Mexican American generation,” which spanned the Great Depression and the Vietnam War, neither shied away from nor shirked their sociopolitical pursuits. Instead they played a major role in opening and expanding social dialogue among Black, Brown, and White people, especially through the medium of popular music. Above all, *Mexican American Mojo* both quantifies and qualifies the human agency of L.A.’s social minority. Through the eyes of everyday actors, it historically and musically situates a socially complex Chicana/o population at the apex of US civil rights impasse.

The book’s title marries not only Mexican but all Latin American musical traditions to the prevailing African American aesthetic. At the outset Macías elucidates the origins of a West African cultural symbol, *mojo*, and follows its evolution clear through to its modern expression of magnetism or charisma—made popular in a song by blues artist Muddy Waters in 1957. Importantly, the book’s introduction provides helpful explanation of culturally specific terminology and labels, including music and dance genre. From there, Macías explores the tangible social connections that resulted in the natural melding of Latina/o music and dance genres with Black New Orleans-born jazz during the swing era. Macías compares

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<sup>83</sup> Anthony Macías, Ronald Radano, and Josh Kun. *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935-1968*. Duke University Press, 2008. p. 4

the original African American zoot suit-style “hep cat” with its adaptation by Mexican American “pachuco” pop-culture to draw conclusions concerning American enculturation among all ethnic backgrounds in the 1940s. Chapters three and four interrogate the many post-war social flashpoints that spurred what Macías calls a developmental “cultural cold war.” But such an objective approach also yields as many accounts of internal social tension, principally due to Mexican Americans’ “complicated relationships with whites, Blacks, Mexican nationals, and other Latina/os.” One example of many cites the exclusion of Blacks but not Mexican Americans from the Westside Palomar Ballroom, which boasted a seating capacity of 10,000. This exemplified not only the city’s period racism, but the degrees of its racial segregation with Latina/os ranking higher than African Americans on the social ladder.

While chapter four discusses and documents Black/Brown cultural cross-pollination and shared socioeconomic struggles in Los Angeles with the emergence of R&B into the rock ‘n’ roll era, ‘*Con Sabor*’ begins with an ethnographic reconstruction of LA’s distinctive Latin music scene. With the expansion of Latin jazz, rumbas, boleros, and mambos, this period marked a critical de-escalation of gendered and generational division commonly associated with ethnic Latina/o social structures. Macías temporally links the youth-driven urban Chicano movement with the push for female liberation and egalitarianism in the job market, especially in the Los Angeles music and dance scene. Although many artists sought to sever their cultural connections with Latin America in opposition to segregation and Anglo-imposed identity, others developed a sophisticated cosmopolitanism that celebrated the Spanish language and demanded inclusion and respect. In effect, these actions allowed both Chicanas and Chicanos to create their own brands of *Latinidad*—Latin(ness). From examples of Latina musicians’ battle of attrition against “macho” lyrics to displays of Chicana/o youth projection of a non-Anglo image of themselves, chapter five critically demonstrates Mexican American rejection of homogenous label.

Not precluding the words and actions of cultural icons like Benny Goodman—who both exalted and protected African American musical prowess and composition in the coinciding swing and Jim Crow eras—Anthony Macías’s self-proclaimed “case study”

records the voices of “unsung artists and unknown fans” to counter canonized historical accounts of the city and its music. It reconfigures and challenges traditional Black/White binaries found in popular music histories. Moreover, Macías exposes the inextricable cultural connection between identity and place, which ranked social status in neighborhoods, classrooms, and music venues as it objectified and treated Mexican Americans as expendable labor commodities in the workplace. Additionally, his work compares and contrasts the everyday Mexican American experience with accounts of Black and Latina/o musicians competing for notoriety and place in the overwhelmingly Anglo-dominant music business. It takes into full consideration the subtle and explicit attempts of Angelenos to maximize every opportunity for social advancement. Crucially, however, Macías claims that despite LA’s overtly racial social environment, a developed Mexican American aesthetic created multiracial democratic spaces that eventually helped reduce LA’s racialized geography. Lastly, Macías suggests that as an urban cultural history, this book “can help illuminate the ways that other people navigate the public spaces of, and construct democratic civil societies in, other multicultural cities”. Be that as it may, *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935 -1968* provides a clear and objective cultural correlation between a “Mexican American generation” and their political and culturally representative performance art.

Researching the origins of jazz versus the blues presents a conundrum closely akin to investigating the mystery of “which came first, the chicken or the egg?” Of course the same is true with punk rock as attested to by Eugene: “It’s just rock “n” roll,” in *The Decline of Western Civilization Part I* (See chapter two). Early punk rockers, such as The Damned and The Ramones jealously guarded their trail-blazing status with statements like “We were the first to...” and by drawing historical lines between punk, glam rock, and proto-punk, in a rock genre typically associated purely with Whiteness.<sup>84</sup> Although Londoners and New Yorkers imagined themselves the originators of punk rock, in 1964 Los Saicos of Lima, Peru, catalyzed garage rock—the first form of music called punk rock—more than a decade before

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<sup>84</sup> Claude Bessy. “Exclusive Interview: The Damned.” *Slash* fanzine. Vol.1 no.1. April 17, 1977. p. 5

bands like Television, the Sex Pistols, and the New York Dolls made the scene. While punk genre, waves, dates, and locations are yet disputed, no one debates the fact that Black men and women formulated jazz and the blues in the American South before the turn of the twentieth century. Likewise, there should be no doubt as to whom represented the forerunners of garage rock, glam, and punk, as Mark Guerrero heralds in his song, “You Gotta Thank the Black Man (For Your Rock & Roll).”<sup>85</sup>

Unlike rock “n” roll, however, identifying by name the various Black women and men who first generated jazz and the blues remains a nearly unsearchable mystery for the same reasons that most modern era Black Americans rarely succeed in fully recovering their Black, let alone, African ancestry. Dot coms, and both academic and public history all inform us that the harbingers of jazz and blues music sang their first blue notes while laboring as slaves, former slaves, and sharecroppers on the Mississippi Delta and surrounding slave plantations. Born of work songs, folk songs, field hollers, African spiritual chants, and Negro spirituals, the earliest blue notes were often characterized by a call and response pattern that is yet easily recognizable in some modern pop-rock and rhythm and blues tunes.<sup>86</sup>

But while the nameless artists who birthed the blues proliferated from throughout the entire Delta region—New Orleans, Louisiana boasts the specific birthplace of jazz (encompassing blues, jug, Ragtime, and Dixieland brass in its evolution toward Swing) as its own unique genre. Early US demographic reports state that unlike cities on the East Coast, New Orleans did not have mono-cultural ghettos, and that, although racism (even among people of color) existed, segregation occurred mostly along class lines. This explains the reasons that in the 1890s pushback against Reconstruction in the form of stiffening segregation laws not only led to the reduction of the once-elevated Creole of color social

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<sup>85</sup> Mark Guerrero. “You Gotta Thank the Black Man (For Your Rock & Roll)” Mark A. Guerrero, 1979. All Rights Reserved.

<sup>86</sup> Note the pattern, for example, in “Come and Get Your Love” (1974) by Redbone, originally an all Mexican American and Native American pop rock band that derived its name from the Cajun word meaning, a mixed race individual and/or community. <https://youtu.be/Dj0drevGOgA>

status but spurred the unification of Black musicians from all levels of means and education.<sup>87</sup> However, the history of jazz stretches back at least 150 years prior to the United States' failures at national reunification.

Today engulfed by Louis Armstrong Park (just north of the French Quarter in New Orleans), The National Register of Historic Places lists Congo Square as being the epicenter of “early jazz and rhythm and blues.” The NRHP plaque set at the southwestern corner of Armstrong Park reads in part: “...The gathering of enslaved African vendors in Congo Square originated as early as the late 1740s during Louisiana’s French colonial period and continued during the Spanish colonial era as one of the city’s public markets. By 1803, Congo Square had become famous for the gatherings of enslaved Africans who drummed, danced, sang, and traded on Sunday afternoons.”<sup>88</sup> After that year, when Indigenous New Orleans had once again traded colonizers (this time French for American) under the Louisiana Purchase, English speaking Anglo and African American populations inundated the city bringing with them their own cultural variety and musical taste. Compounding New Orleans’ population influx, folks of all shades of melanin and levels of liberty poured in from Cuba, Haiti, the West Indies, and from throughout the Caribbean. These brought with them habanera, Latin rhythms. Legendary jazz pianist and composer Jelly Roll Morton called habanera the “Spanish tinge,” telling celebrated ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax that “habanera must be present before the music can be labeled as jazz.”<sup>89</sup> Morton’s statement represents one of many nascent attempts by artists at an ontological sorting of the early artform.

Born Ferdinand Joseph LaMothe in 1890, Morton—who unabashedly declared himself “the inventor of jazz,”—rounded out a large cohort of jazz pioneers whose height of musical excellence directly coincided with jazz’s coming of age and initial explosive

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<sup>87</sup> National Park Service. *New Orleans Jazz*. National Historical Park, Louisiana. Updated 9/9/19. [nps.gov/jazz/learn/historyculture/history\\_early.htm#:~:text=Each%20ethnic%20group%20in%20New,was%20documented%20in%20New%20Orleans](https://www.nps.gov/jazz/learn/historyculture/history_early.htm#:~:text=Each%20ethnic%20group%20in%20New,was%20documented%20in%20New%20Orleans).

<sup>88</sup> Congo Square Preservation Society. *Who We Are*. Congo Square Preservation Society 2023. All Rights Reserved. <https://www.congosquarepreservationsociety.org/who-we-are.html>

<sup>89</sup> Alan Lomax. *Mister Jelly Roll; the Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and Inventor of Jazz*. 2d ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

dissemination across all of North America.<sup>90</sup> Using New Orleans as homebase, both Anglo and Black jazz acts launched their national careers during the genre phase known as “Hot jazz,” the nineteen-tens and teens. Beginning his musical life in a Creole community, Jelly Roll Morton, for example, had already boomed-out (left home in search of gig work) from New Orleans as early as 1907. The National Park Service informs us that as far back as the active days of Congo Square, Creole of color musicians were particularly known for their skill and discipline.”<sup>91</sup> And although he cannot be legitimately designated the inventor of jazz, most music historians confidently credit Morton for being jazz’s first musical arranger; he is also credited by some for introducing the novel innovation of improv to the musical genre.

Along with Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong, many other New Orleans-born jazz icons made their mark in Chicago while others opted for career debuts in New York City, forever enshrining the two cities at once as “America’s jazz capital.” By the 1910s, other jazz Meccas such as Kansas City, Philadelphia, and D.C. spontaneously sprang up as the result of New Orleans’ Big Bang of American popular music. Still other greats decided for a westward migration. One of the earliest of these includes Freddie Keppard and his Original Creole Orchestra which boomed out for Southern California in 1912, greatly fueling Los Angeles’ pre-Swing era jazz craze. Jelly Roll Morton, incidentally, meted out his own musical legacy in 1941, passing away in Los Angeles while attempting to restart his by-then waning career.

On many levels, Los Angeles closely resembles (yet differs from) New Orleans’ musical heritage in that both cities’ popular music has intensely relied upon the amalgamation of diverse ethnic cultural/musical contributions. In New Orleans various influences originated with Indigenous Americans; Black slaves and their mixed-race descendants; white European, especially French-speaking, including Cajun; Creole of color ; and, free (and/or escaped) Indigenous, Latino, Black, and White immigrants fleeing any number of Spanish, French, and Portuguese—Caribbean ports (especially refugees of the Haitian Revolution in 1791, for example. Note that by then, New Orleans had already existed for seventy-three years; this, as

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<sup>90</sup> Lomax. *Mister Jelly Roll; the Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton*. 1973. Title.

<sup>91</sup> National Park Service. *New Orleans Jazz*. Updated 9/19/19

the founders of Los Angeles—the first Angelenos—marked only the tenth anniversary of their establishment). Scholars have thoroughly documented the founding of Los Angeles, and period sources tell us that “[o]n September 4, 1781, a group of settlers consisting of 14 families numbering 44 individuals of Native American, African and European heritage journeyed more than one-thousand miles across the desert from present-day northern Mexico and established a farming community in the area naming it “El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles de Porciúncula”<sup>92</sup> This points out a major cultural distinction between the two cities’ popular musical roots. While the first Anglo-French European colonists emigrated from overseas to claim New Orleans among their new territories—commoners of mixed Indigenous Mexican, African, and Hispanic European descent found Los Angeles on foot. Nevertheless, modern public and cultural historians alike continuously promote the notion that the evolution of mixed-race communities in both cities directly fostered racial tolerance in the democratic formation of 1930s swing.<sup>93</sup>

Swing-era musicians developed what professor of history and religion David Stowe calls a “swing ideology” of “ethnic pluralism and democratic equality.”<sup>94</sup> In 1946, American author and scholar Ralph Ellison related African American music (jazz) and culture to “an agent of racial democracy.”<sup>95</sup> According to professor Lewis Erenberg, swing amounted to a “creolization of American youth culture;” one that “offered a new model of social democracy.”<sup>96</sup> Beyond the musical creolization of American youth culture, many more contemporary cultural historians and anthropologists contend that the imposed blending of ethnic diversity in segregated communities consistently spirited unity and support among residents. In his 2021 publication *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became*

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<sup>92</sup> LACITY.GOV. *Meet Your Government*. “The History of Los Angeles.” Copyright 2023. City of Los Angeles. All rights reserved. <https://lacity.gov/government/history-los-angeles#:~:text=On%20September%204%2C%201781%20a,El%20Pueblo%20de%20Nuestra%20Se%C3%B1ora>

<sup>93</sup> Anthony Macías. *Mexican American Mojo*. 2008. p.14

<sup>94</sup> David W. Stowe. *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994. pp. 142,143

<sup>95</sup> Ralph Ellison. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House, 1964. p.256

<sup>96</sup> Lewis A. Erenberg. *Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. pp.56, 41.

*the Future of American Democracy*, for example, Dr. George Sánchez illuminates the cultural history of Boyle Heights (a socially-repressed, mixed-race neighborhood on the Eastside) and argues that the community's strength arose and endured specifically due to its ethnic diversity and its willingness to welcome and socially bond with the swell of immigrants who later arrived bearing similar hopes and dreams.<sup>97</sup>

Often mistakenly attributed to the 1960s American countercultural movement, terms such as swing, hip, cool, gas, and groove (or groovy) all originated in jazz slang phraseology.<sup>98</sup> Composed by Duke Ellington and his lyricist Irving Mills in 1931, for example, "It Don't Mean a Thing (If it Ain't Got That Swing)"<sup>99</sup> represents the first recorded application of the term swing, which indicates a particular feel of a rhythm. Ellington stated that his onetime band member, trumpeter Bubber Miley championed and stressed the importance of swing in rhythm. In his memoir, Ellington describes swing "as the expression of a sentiment which prevailed among jazz musicians at the time."<sup>100</sup> By the 1960s and 70s the song title might have been reworked to say, "It won't make you move (If it ain't got that groove)," especially if covered by rock guitarist Keith Richards, who cited groove as being the essential element of real rock and rhythm and blues. In his own memoir, Richards names his bandmate, Rolling Stones drummer Charlie Watts, the source of his groove: "Charlie Watts has always been the bed that I lie on musically."<sup>101</sup>

At a display called "American Cool" in the National Portrait Gallery, the wall text accompanying Billie Holiday's image bears the words of Duke Ellington who dubs her "the essence of cool." National Endowment for the Humanities writer, David Skinner offers his assessment of what constitutes cool based in part on his perusal of the exhibit: "...I tally up three ingredients that my vague sense of history tells me are essential to cool at this point in

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<sup>97</sup> George J. Sánchez. *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021. pp.11-15

<sup>98</sup> Douglas-Harper. *Online Etymology Dictionary*. 'Cool,' 'Groove,' 'Hip,' 'Swing'. Douglas-Harper. Copyright 2001-2023.

<sup>99</sup> "It Don't Mean a Thing (If it Ain't Got That Swing)" Duke Ellington and Irving Mills. 1932

<sup>100</sup> Duke Ellington. *Music Is My Mistress*. [1st ed.]. Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1973. pp.419, 106

<sup>101</sup> Keith Richards with James Fox. *Life*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2010 pp. 266, 283, 345



time: Cool is urban; it is strongly associated with jazz; and it has something to do with race.” “In a word,” Skinner states, “cool is black. Or, to be more accurate, there was a historical period in the evolution of the modern concept of cool when it seemed to be a property, largely but not exclusively, of African Americans.”<sup>102</sup> Other symbols of American cool whose images grace the walls of the National Portrait Gallery include, Zora Neale Hurston, Miles Davis, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, Jimi Hendrix, Sam Cooke, and John Coltrane, but also White icons such as James Dean, Elvis, and Madonna. But of the over one hundred images of authors, thinkers, actors, painters, dancers, athletes, and musicians donning the gallery halls, jazz artists make up the lion’s share. Listed alphabetically, one of these, jazz saxophonist Lester Young, or Prez, falls in line third from the last, just before Neil Young and Frank Zappa.<sup>103</sup> Scholars such as Professor and journal editor Gena Caponi-Tabery credit Prez with introducing “cool” to the American pop-vernacular.<sup>104</sup> Others, such as Ross Russell, have documented Lester Young’s purported sole creation of the jazz’s entire hipster jargon.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, the sheer mass of public and academic historiography on the birth of “cool,” as with the origins of jazz, prevents this study from conducting a comprehensive historical survey of cool as a social aesthetic. Some anthropologists, for example, even trace the cultural marker to precontact Yoruba and Igbo peoples living in the southern regions of what today (since October 1960) constitutes modern day Nigeria.<sup>106</sup> But regardless of what part of African America the cool aesthetic most

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<sup>102</sup> David Skinner. “How Did Cool Become Such a Big Deal?”. *Humanities: The Magazine Of The National Endowment For The Humanities*. July/August 2014, Volume 35, Number 4.

<sup>103</sup> Smithsonian Institution. National Portrait Gallery Presents, “American Cool” *100 People Who Define Cool in Arresting Photographs*. News Release-Jan 8, 2014. <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/national-portrait-gallery-presents-american-cool>.

<sup>104</sup> Gena Dagele Caponi. “Lester Young and the Birth of Cool,” *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin’, & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, ed. Gena Dagele Caponi (1999). See also Smithsonian. National Portrait Gallery Presents, “American Cool.”

<sup>105</sup> Ross Russell. *Bird Lives: The High Life and Hard Times of Charlie (Yardbird) Parker*. DaCapo Press. p.186

<sup>106</sup> Robert Farris Thompson . “An Aesthetic of the Cool.” *African Arts* 7, no. 1 (1973): 41–91. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3334749>.

proliferated, its standards as to what is socially cool and what is not cool, or uncool, are understood and culturally accepted virtually the world over.

More than with Chicago, New York, or any other city, Angelenos during the swing era developed a hybrid adaption of the cool aesthetic drawn equally from both ethnic Black and Brown American culture. Not just in music and art, but in food, fashion, lifestyle choices, and in public action, L.A.'s racial minority groups borrowed social elements of each other's cultural pasts to effectuate individual terms of both affirmation and resistance (what is cool and what is uncool). Although the swing era in Los Angeles (1933-1947) survived the Great Depression and WWII, it never saw the end of Jim Crow. Nonwhiteness stimulated empathy between Black and Mexican Americans and naturally encouraged accord among them in a city whose leaders rated minority populations' humanity according to their shade of Whiteness. But with the social class gauge displaying a range of only White through Brown, Black Americans of all occupations, including jazz musicians, worked harder for less money, less quality of life, and less liberty than all other racial minorities including ethnic Mexicans, Jews, Chinese, and Japanese.

Written by Delta blues legend Big Bill Broonzy in the mid-1940s, lyrics for the song 'Black, Brown and White (Blues)' exemplify the too-often common experience of Black Americans in the workplace:

This little song that I'm singin' about People, you know it's true  
If you black and gotta work for a livin'  
Now, this is what they will say to you They says, if you's white,  
be all right If you was brown, stick around But as you black, oh  
brother, get back, get back, get back  
Me and a man was workin' side by side This is what it meant  
They was paying him a dollar an hour  
And they was paying me fifty cent They said, if you was white,  
should be all right If you was brown, stick around But as you  
black, oh brother, get back, get back, get back

I helped build the country And I fought for it too Now, I guess  
that you can see what a black man have to do They says, If  
you's white, she's alright If he was brown, stick around  
But as you's black, oh, brother, get back, get back, get back  
I helped win sweet victory With my little plough and hoe  
Now, I want you to tell me brother What you gonna do about  
the old Jim Crow? Now, if you's white, she's alright If you's  
brown, stick around But if you's black, oh brother, get back, get  
back, get back<sup>107</sup>

In *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, author LeRoi Jones aka Amiri Baraka, noted that white society's sentimental take on the tune's ironic humor only served to reinforce the dominant cultural assumption that "successful adjustment to the society had at least been understood by Negroes..." Broonzy's song therefore underpinned White cynicism towards the plight of Black Americans. Further critiquing White America's social dissonance, Baraka wrote: "It was not that a Negro was uneducated or vulgar or unfit for the society which determined why he was not accepted into it, it was the mere fact that he *was* a Negro. No amount of education, taste, or compromise would alter that fact."<sup>108</sup> Numerous sources in fact demonstrate that the social paradigm remained no less prevalent clear through the bebop generation and beyond.

According to Anthony Macías, "[t]his racially constrictive environment prompted one young bebop artist, Lee "Babs" Brown, to take on the surname Gonzales."<sup>109</sup> Ira Gitler's revealing *Swing to Bop : An Oral History of the Transition in Jazz in the 1940s* gathers the motivation behind Babs Gonzales' assumption of the Latino designation in his own words:

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<sup>107</sup> "Black, Brown And White" Track-A1 on album Black, Brown And White. Bill Broonzy. Black and Blue records, 1969.

<sup>108</sup> Amiri Baraka . *Blues People : Negro Music in White America* 1st Quill ed. New York: William Morrow, 1999.

<sup>109</sup> Macías. *Mexican American Mojo*. 2008. p.69

...to avoid “being treated like a Negro.”<sup>110</sup> In his autobiography Gonzales admitted to at times attempting to pass for an Indian national wearing a turban and calling himself Ram Singh. Other episodes in the colorful bebop singer’s life include his showing up for military induction wearing a dress, thus prompting his swift rejection from further consideration of serving as a soldier in the US Army.<sup>111</sup> In addition to the self-publication of his memoirs, Babs Gonzales is incidentally credited with writing a bebop dictionary, earning him the title “inventor of the bebop language.”<sup>112</sup> Gonzales’ lifestyle choices mirror what George Lipsitz describes as exercised anti-essentialism, a social phenomenon in which practitioners (Lipsitz specifically includes 1970s and 80s L.A. Chicano punk rockers) adopt identities that permit individuals and groups “...to become more themselves by appearing to be something other than themselves.”<sup>113</sup> The story of Babs Gonzales indicates just one way that the sharing of cultural style between Black and Latino musicians afforded them greater opportunity to articulate individual and corporate sociopolitical points of view.

In 1940s L.A., while both Black and White band leaders incorporated elements of the Latino-based habanera to their musical compositions, Mexican American youths invested in “big-balloon pants pegged at the ankle and long baggy coats, a style borrowed from African Americans.”<sup>114</sup> In *Blues People* Amiri Baraka goes so far as to geographically pinpoint the original, Black-stylized zoot suit: Lenox Avenue, Harlem.<sup>115</sup> Interestingly, he also associates the nationwide embrace of the fashion with only White America apart from its prevalence in L.A.. This suggests a grouping together of white and Brown kids similar to Big Bill Broonzy’s assessment of the ‘Black, Brown, and White’ American experience. However, during the zoot suit riots of 1943, some 50,000 sailors in opposition to what they considered

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<sup>110</sup> Ira Gitler. *Swing to Bop : An Oral History of the Transition in Jazz in the 1940s*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1985. p.231

<sup>111</sup> Babs Gonzales. *I Paid My Dues : Good Times - No Bread*. New York: Expubidence. 1967. pp. 5, 11, 19

<sup>112</sup> Jimmy Smith. Record Album. *A New Sound... A New Star*. Blue Note Records, 1956. Album liner notes.

<sup>113</sup> George Lipsitz. *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place*. London: Verso, 1994. p. 63. Also see chapter one.

<sup>114</sup> “Chapter One/Zoot Suit Riots.” Season 14-Episode 6. *American Experience*. PBS Films. 3/29/22. YouTube clip 10:30. (10:15). <https://www.pbs.org/video/chapter-1-zoot-suit-riots/>

<sup>115</sup> Baraka . *Blues People*. 1999. p.187

an outwardly rebellious fashion statement did not target White youths, only the Black and especially the Mexican American ones. Overly zealous American servicemen awaiting deployment overseas besieged downtown Los Angeles with clubs, chains, and brass knuckles. They forcibly entered movie theatres and other business establishments seeking, finding, and beating especially Mexican American adolescent males; then, often stripping them of their supposedly audacious apparel.<sup>116</sup>

However, not all of the 50,000 sailors joined the race riot via the Port of Los Angeles. Headlines and editorials in newspapers across the country quickly spread the report of “The Zooter Problem” in Los Angeles.<sup>117</sup> By the third day of the onslaught Anglo uber patriots of various military and civilian backgrounds poured into the city from as far away as Las Vegas just in time to help the local contingent spread out from the downtown areas and converge upon the predominantly ethnic Mexican Eastside barrios. (By the second night the mob had virtually cleared downtown L.A. of its youth of color, even those whose dress in no way mimicked Anglo-perceived gang wear). At this point the mob violently chased down and assaulted not just pachuco street youths, but all ethnic Mexicans along with other ethnic minorities including Blacks, Filipinos, Japanese, and Russian Jews.<sup>118</sup> The 1943 Governor’s Citizen’s Committee Report on Los Angeles Riots stated, “It is significant that most of the persons mistreated during the recent incidents in Los Angeles were either persons of Mexican descent or Negroes. In undertaking to deal with the cause of these outbreaks, the existence of race prejudice cannot be ignored...” Though not a desirable one, this exhibits another method of social connection made between young Black and ethnic Mexicans that directly galvanized unity between them: both groups represented L.A.s foremost criminal element to the dominant white social structure. Another excerpt from the official report described the organized attack

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<sup>116</sup> “How Did the Zoot Suit Riots Begin?”/Zoot Suit Riots/*American Experience*. PBS Films. YouTube clip posted 3/17/22. 1:58. Eyewitness testimonies of Arthur Arenas and Gloria Rios Berlin. (0:00-0:40)

<sup>117</sup> “The Zooter Problem” *Herald Express*. Thursday June 10 , 1943. Frank F. Barham, publisher. Retrieved from The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Garden digital archive. Call Number: mssMiller papers. <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/iiif/p15150coll7/40104/full/full/0/default.jpg>

<sup>118</sup> “Zoot Suit War.” *Time Magazine*. June 21, 1943. Transcript of article retrieved from Sandra Effinger collection at [https://mseffie.com/assignments/zoot\\_suit/Zoot\\_Suit\\_Riot\\_Sources.html#SourceJ](https://mseffie.com/assignments/zoot_suit/Zoot_Suit_Riot_Sources.html#SourceJ)

on minority neighborhoods of which many hundreds of White L.A. citizens also participated in:

Throughout the night the Mexican communities were in the wildest possible turmoil. Scores of Mexican mothers were trying to locate their youngsters and several hundred Mexicans milled around each of the police substations and the Central Jail trying to get word of missing members of their families. Boys came into the police stations saying: “Charge me with vagrancy or anything, but don’t send me out there!” pointing to the streets where other boys, as young as twelve and thirteen years of age, were being beaten and stripped of their clothes... not more than half of the victims were actually wearing zoot-suits. A Negro defense worker, wearing a defense-plant identification badge on his work clothes, was taken from a streetcar and one of his eyes was gouged out with a knife. Huge half-page photographs, showing Mexican boys stripped of their clothes, cowering on the pavement, often bleeding profusely, surrounded by jeering mobs of men and women, appeared in all the Los Angeles newspapers...<sup>119</sup>

The report also states that because the police stood by idly monitoring—other accounts allege, *condoning*—the violence, the Military Police and Shore Patrol finally issued an “out of bounds” in L.A. for all military personnel, which succinctly quelled the uprising. Renowned American historian and author Dr. Eduardo Obregón Pagán informs us that in addition to the military’s actions, L.A.’s city council as quickly passed a resolution making it a crime to publicly wear a zoot suit anywhere within the city limits. But the most fascinating point Pagán makes in his article for *American Experience* demonstrates one more example of L.A.’s well-documented history of racism and racial violence. While the Governor’s Citizen’s report “determined racism to be a central cause of the riots... Mayor Fletcher Bowron came to his

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<sup>119</sup> “Governor's Citizen's Committee Report on Los Angeles Riots Date:1943” Retrieved from *Digital History*, University of Houston. [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp\\_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=606](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=606)

own conclusion. The riots, he said, were caused by juvenile delinquents and by white Southerners. Racial prejudice was not a factor.”<sup>120</sup>

The first of L.A.’s most significant race riots saw a weakening in the strong cultural bonds between Blacks and Mexican Americans; connections (such as the zoot suit, the jitterbug, and neighborhood jazz instructors), that survived to a degree, as Anthony Macías notes, “from boogie woogie and jump blues to doo wop, Motown, and Afro-Latin music.” While both ethnic Black and Mexican Americans began the 1940s as “despised racial groups,” social obstructions such as segregated military troops (White and Brown from Black until 1948) heightened a racial and social class divergence of the two groups. Yet, collaboration between Black and Latino musicians remained strong. In wartime Los Angeles and in the postwar economic boom Mexican Americans seized every opportunity to benefit from “the slight but significant advantages they enjoyed over African Americans.”<sup>121</sup> However, Black Americans in L.A. no less stridently worked to secure fair and equitable living and working conditions throughout the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. Celebrated author and poet Wanda Coleman (aka “the L.A. Blueswoman”) described the period this way: “I grew up in the South Central of the Fabulous 50s, which was in relentless flux as a steadily increasing Black population demanded more access to financial, health, and recreational facilities and an end to housing along racial lines.”<sup>122</sup> In particular, Central Avenue represented L.A.’s Black jazz hub from the genre’s initial migration westward to nearly the birth of rock ‘n’ roll. It also explains the designation “South Central” L.A. as the area was then known.

Demographic maps show us that while in the decades following the war the population of Eastside Los Angeles grew more and more Latinx, Black Americans remained partitioned off to South Los Angeles because of racially restrictive housing rules called racial

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<sup>120</sup> Eduardo Obregón Pagán. “The Rise of Riots, The Sleepy Lagoon murder and zoot suit riots of 1943,” *American Experience*. PBS. 2023.

<sup>121</sup> Macías. *Mexican American Mojo*. 2008. pp.4,5

<sup>122</sup> Wanda Coleman. *The Riot Inside Me: More Trials & Tremors*. First edition. Jaffrey, N.H: David R. Godin, Publisher, 2005.

covenants, virulently enforced by the police.<sup>123</sup> In *L.A. City Limits, African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* Professor Josh Sides asserts, “Few issues troubled African Americans in postwar Los Angeles more than the complete deterioration of their relationship with the Los Angeles Police Department.” Largely due to the motives and actions of L.A. Police Chief William Parker from 1950 to 1966, efforts to expand racial integration in the city only intensified even after the repeal by California of legalized redlining and racial collusion between white property owners, real estate boards, and city planners in 1948, and the passage of fair housing legislation in 1963.<sup>124</sup> In *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* writer and political activist Mike Davis wrote that “Under Parker — a puritanical crusader against ‘race mixing’ — nightclubs and juke joints were raided and shuttered.”<sup>125</sup>

But Davis’s book also tells of the push back by Black Americans against White institutional tyranny through recounting the story of John Dolphin (1902-1958), a highly respected and successful music producer, record store and label owner, who conducted his business on South L.A.’s Central Avenue. Dolphin’s of Hollywood, which also featured a radio broadcast station frequented by period great D.J.s such as Dick “Huggy Boy” Hugg, significantly contributed to the emergence of rhythm & blues not just on the West Coast, but nationwide. Davis wrote that in 1954 Dolphin “organized a protest of 150 Black businesspeople against an ongoing campaign of intimidation and terror directed at interracial trade.”<sup>126</sup> Dolphin alleged that in their continual harassment of Black-owned businesses, South L.A.’s Newton precinct had even blockaded his storefront, adding that officers told his

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<sup>123</sup> University of Southern California. Race-Ethnic Majority Map, Los Angeles County, 1950 (Highlighting Central Avenue) Jul 20, 2015. <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/historic-central-avenue-los-angeles/race-ethnic-majority-map-los-angeles-county-1950--highlighting-central-avenue>

<sup>124</sup> Andre Comandon and Paul Ong. 2020. “South Los Angeles Since the 1960s: Race Place and Class.” *The Review of Black Political Economy* 50–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034644619873105>.

<sup>125</sup> Mike Davis. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. 1st ed. London: Vintage Books, 1992. p.

<sup>126</sup> Mike Sonksen. “The History of South Central Los Angeles and Its Struggle with Gentrification.” *KCET*. Sept. 13, 2017. <https://www.kcet.org/shows/city-rising/the-history-of-south-central-los-angeles-and-its-struggle-with-gentrification>



White patrons, “it was too dangerous to hang around Black neighborhoods.”<sup>127</sup> Corroborating not only Davis’s accounts, but portions of those in *Mexican American Mojo*, Josh Sides wrote that in L.A. “by the early 1960s” African American agency had forced a significant degree of elevation in Black citizens’ social status; that their “protests were widespread, their demands were well known, and their political influence—if still uneven—was undeniable.”<sup>128</sup>

“I want you to know tonight that rhythm and blues had a baby and somebody named it rock ‘n’ roll!”<sup>129</sup> With these words Little Richard loudly and passionately schooled an audience of his youthful fosterlings in closing his 1997 acceptance speech for the American Music Awards’ most prestigious honor. Born Richard Wayne Penniman in 1932 (Macon, GA), Little Richard’s loved ones, his bandmates, his family and friends, describe him as being one who knew what he wanted and unrelenting in going after it; that he was loud and proud, and that on stage or off, he constantly filled his need to promote himself in hopes of gaining the recognition that to his understanding (and to those of the millions who affirm his merit) he had always rightly deserved.<sup>130</sup> In stark contrast, Ritchie Valens, or, the “Little Richard of San Fernando,” as he was called by his schoolmates, strived little in self-promotion. According to his friends and family, Richard Steve Valenzuela (1941-1959) was soft-spoken, sweet, gentle, and shy.<sup>131</sup> But in so many more ways than just temperament the two legendary rock and rollers could not have differed more. Little Richard died at age 87, Valenzuela at age 17; Little Richard’s career spanned decades, from before the birth of rock ‘n’ roll to 2020, Ritchie Valens’ career lasted just eight months; Richard Penniman grew up during the Depression at the pinnacle of the deep South’s Jim Crow society while Richie Valenzuela, a product of the post-war divorce generation lived with his dad until his father’s death, and then

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<sup>127</sup> Davis. *City of Quartz*, 1992. p.

<sup>128</sup> Josh Sides. *L.A. City Limits African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. p.134

<sup>129</sup> James House. ‘Little Richard: King and Queen of Rock ‘n’ Roll.’ *American Masters*. PBS Films. 1:29:31. (1:25:56) 6/2/23 <https://www.pbs.org/video/little-richard-king-and-queen-of-rock-n-roll-ocx1zu/>

<sup>130</sup> House. “Little Richard: King and Queen of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” (6:15-13:45)

<sup>131</sup> Rockin John Henry Archives. “The History of Ritchie Valens.” YouTube video 51:18. May 13, 2020. Testimony of Ritchie Valens’ younger sister Connie Alvarez and his schoolmate Donna Ludwig Fox (9:10-30:30) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHFj9JltzBE>

with his mother in the Eastside barrio of Pacoima, Los Angeles until his own death in the Iowa-cornfield plane crash that also claimed the lives of Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper in 1959. Valenzuela idolized Little Richard growing up; but of their respective skin pigments, music—namely rock ‘n’ roll—and its controllers, may represent their only area of similar cultural experience. Both artists lived and worked during eras in which the dominant society differentiated them by the color of their skin. Concerning Southern California, this class distinction induced issues of assimilation with racial minorities, issues that for Mexican Americans at least, had to do with being caught up somewhere in the middle of L.A.’s social casting system: not Black, but not quite White either.

Anthony Macías’ research clearly demonstrates that the idea of assimilation “means something different in Southern California,” where Spanish newcomers forced the native populations to become at least nominally “Hispanicized,” and where migrants such as jazz musicians from New Orleans and Anglo farmers seeking refuge from the Dust Bowl “acclimated to a foreign environment with a Native American and ethnic Mexican presence.”<sup>132</sup> During the zoot suit riots, for example, young Mexican Americans wrestled with the notion that they should have to adhere to white supremacist social structures instituted after their ancestors had founded Los Angeles less than a hundred years prior.<sup>133</sup> (Los Angeles was incorporated as a US city five months before California succeeded statehood in 1850.) For Mexican American kids growing up in Los Angeles (such as Richie Valenzuela), assimilation occurred by degree, and as Anthony Macías points out, represented a two-way process in which never being fully absorbed, “[they] selectively assimilated cultural elements from whites, and also from blacks, both of whom have themselves appropriated elements of Chicano culture.” Although both Little Richard and Ritchie Valens each blazed new trails in popular music, Valenzuela’s *Mexicanidad* (his Mexican-ness), his home and community life, and his ultimate journey toward super stardom all required him to form a sense of self that never completely adopted middle-class White values along with stopping short of totally

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<sup>132</sup> Macías. *Mexican American Mojo*. 2008. p.9

<sup>133</sup> “Chapter One/Zoot Suit Riots.” Season 14-Episode 6. *American Experience*. (4:45)

rejecting his working-class Mexican roots. Valenzuela's father discouraged speaking Spanish at home, for example, while his mother encouraged it.<sup>134</sup> As *Mexican American Mojo* evinces, this unique form of assimilation remained common among most twentieth-century Mexican Americans living throughout Southern California, if not throughout the entire state.<sup>135</sup>

Some of the best testimony supporting this idea of a multifaceted Chicano assimilation—Valenzuela's not Black, but not quite White cultural experience—are detailed by his both dead and surviving friends and family members in various interviews and in a few newspaper articles. Connie, Valenzuela's younger sister, for example, fondly remembers laughing and joking, regularly helping her two older brothers Richie and Bob in the kitchen making flour tortillas.<sup>136</sup> Conversely, Valenzuela's White manager/producer Bob Keene, who had himself changed his surname from Kuhn to Keene, and then again later to Keane, added the letter "t" to Richie. Soon after Keene counseled Valenzuela to change his surname to Valens because "disc jockeys would read the Spanish name on the label, assume it was Mexican mariachi or Latin mambo music, and throw it away without ever listening to it."<sup>137</sup> Chicano crossover artist (doowop>rock 'n' roll) Rubén Funkahuatl Guevara testifies to this same treatment from the White-male-dominated music industry with the conversion of his name to Jay P. Mobey in his initial bid for success as a solo artist.<sup>138</sup>

Moreover, L.A.'s musicians of color during the period have consistently testified to the pilfering of their financial legacies by the same entity. For example, Little Richard sued Specialty Records for 112 million dollars in 1984 claiming he had been defrauded of royalties due to him since 1959. He eventually won his settlement out of court for an undisclosed sum.<sup>139</sup> Speaking to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter in 1987, Ritchie Valens's mother, Connie, from whom Valenzuela's sister takes her name, said "You know Bob Keane has controlled

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<sup>134</sup> Gregg Barrios. "Ritchie Valens' Roots." *Los Angeles Times*. July 19, 1987. [latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-07-19-ca-4551-story.html](https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-07-19-ca-4551-story.html)

<sup>135</sup> Macías. *Mexican American Mojo*. 2008. p.9

<sup>136</sup> Henry Archives. "The History of Ritchie Valens." (19:30)

<sup>137</sup> Macías. *Mexican American Mojo*. 2008. pp. 185,186

<sup>138</sup> Con Safos | *Artbound* | Season 12, Episode 1 | KCET. YouTube video 54:36. Oct 14, 2021. (9:40)

<sup>139</sup> House. "Little Richard: King and Queen of Rock 'n' Roll." (16:04)

Richie's music for all these years. Oh, I get a bit of money now and then. BMI sends me a statement. But do you know that Keane presented me with a bill of \$4,000 for Richie's funeral?" And regarding a 1957 black Ford Thunderbird that Keane purportedly had given to Valenzuela, his mother said, "...he [Keane] kept it in his garage after I lost Richie. We went over to his house one day to get it away from him...but he kept insisting it was his." "Ridiculous," responded Keane. As for his part in the *Times* article he stated: "She was in worse financial condition than I was...I put up over \$7,000 so they'd ship the kid's body back and put him in a decent coffin. I still have the check somewhere." And, "As far as the Thunderbird ... I may have told Ritchie at one time that if he kept doing as well as he was, I might get him a car. But I never really promised him one."<sup>140</sup>

Larry Lehmer, a Des Moines, Iowa-based writer and personal historian shows how celebrities of color experienced double jeopardy when the all-White music business routinely teamed with the all-White legal system to achieve the highest level of all-White profits. In *The Day the Music Died*, Lehmer wrote that Keane, in bringing a plagiarism suit against the English rock band Led Zeppelin, strategically procured half of the songwriting royalties for Valenzuela's 'Ooh My Head' ('Boogie with Stu' on Led Zeppelin's album, *Physical Graffiti*) even though the band had already credited Valenzuela's mother Connie for the song in their album's liner notes.<sup>141</sup> At the same time, wittingly or not, Lehmer's account of the last tour for Buddy Holly, The Big Bopper, and Ritchie Valens testifies to the validity of Big Bill Broonzy's musical assessment of American society because although Latinx artists and their heirs often struggled hard to obtain their full financial legacies, Black celebrities found themselves systemically compelled to fight even harder for their due, and from the lowest spot on an uneven playing field. In the PBS film "Little Richard: King and Queen of Rock 'n' Roll," Deacon John Moore, former band leader of The Ivories at New Orleans' legendary Dew Drop Inn, states "For Black performers," himself and Little Richard included, "the

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<sup>140</sup> Gregg Barrios. "Ritchie Valens' Roots." *Los Angeles Times*. July 19, 1987. [latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-07-19-ca-4551-story.html](http://latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-07-19-ca-4551-story.html)

<sup>141</sup> Larry Lehmer. *The Day the Music Died : The Last Tour of Buddy Holly the Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens*. New York London: Schirmer Books ; Prentice Hall International. 1997. p. 166

standard view back then, for royalties, was like two percent!” Then chuckling he adds, “Who gets the other ninety-eight percent? ...Hey, you know it!”<sup>142</sup> Little Richard’s headline-making suit against Specialty may well have been the most effective attack on anti-Black racism in American popular music. It not only spotlighted what amounted to legal theft by racial default in the music industry, but also in the complete history of the United States. One clip from the film shows Little Richard pleading his reasons for bringing suit against Specialty: “I’m not only standing for myself but I’m standing for many Black people that have been ripped off, that was not paid, and they was used and abused.” Speaking on behalf of his fellow Black Americans he adds, “I’m not asking for nothing that don’t belong to me. All I want is what I have earned...and I would appreciate it, so much.”<sup>143</sup>

In stark contrast to this narrative and to that of Ritchie Valens’s story, Buddy Holly’s widow, Maria Elena Santiago-Holly was succinctly awarded sole rights to his estate, including his royalties despite the fact that he died at just age 22, only eight months married, and without a will. But just as quickly, Maria Elena turned around and gave half the rights to his music to Holly’s parents.<sup>144</sup> Those who remain privy to the ins and outs of her personal life, her love for Holly, and her amazing success in the music and film industries subsequent to their brief union, attest to Maria Elena’s position as the sole architect, builder, and protector of Buddy Holly’s rock ‘n’ roll legend. In 2007 Maria Elena divulged the key motivation for her success in that capacity to a *Seattle Times* columnist: “Buddy died for his music, and I have to be out there telling people about it.” And, “My whole life has been revolving around Buddy Holly. It’s very difficult. But we were so attached to each other. I just feel I need to do this for him.”<sup>145</sup> But amazing as the legacy that she has built is (not only for Holly but for herself), her testimony concerning her Puerto Rican roots, her migration to New York City as

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<sup>142</sup> House. “Little Richard: King and Queen of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” (1:16:28)

<sup>143</sup> House. “Little Richard: King and Queen of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” (16:21 and 16:44)

<sup>144</sup> Stephen A. Mendel. Blog: “Famous Estates-Champ or Chump? Buddy Holly, (1936-1959) American Rock and Roll Legend.” The Mendel Law Firm, L.P. April 26, 2019. <https://www.mendellawfirm.com/famous-estates-champ-or-chump-buddy-holly-1936-1959-american-rock-and-roll-legend/>.

<sup>145</sup> Misha Berson. “Love not fade away: Guarding Buddy Holly’s legacy” *The Seattle Times*. February 11, 2007. <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/love-not-fade-away-guarding-buddy-hollys-legacy/>

a child, and especially her time with Buddy Holly all bear clear witness to the White, Black and Brown social scheme of the US in the late 1950s. Just as important, her reflections offer a glimpse into how mixed-race communities sometimes dealt with it.

Maria Elena directly attributes the absence of racial prejudice in her heart to her Caribbean island nativity and early childhood cultural experience. In her words: "...I came from an island, and in an island we don't see color. We're all together. In other words, you don't see the black, the white; we're just people. We didn't actually [see] color coming from an island. We were never taught that there's a difference." But as she explains in a 2011 interview with Glen Joseph, her institutional social reality differed from her ethnic cultural experience: "Puerto Rico is part of the US, so we had an American governor...in school they taught in English only...and that's why a lot of Puerto Ricans speak English...because we had to learn the language." But although the public school system in Puerto Rico may not have directly promoted institutional racism, Maria Elena learned all about it upon her registration in the Bronx, New York school system. Maria Elena remembers the culture shock: "I didn't like the Bronx, and I didn't like...they were busing people because it was a black and white situation and they went to integrate the schools...and so I was taken to an all-black school, which to me, I had a great time." Both cultures, American institution combined with island sensibilities prepared Maria Elena for her role as wife and business partner of a fast rising rock 'n' roll superstar. They also gave her the social skills she needed to navigate Jim Crow America. Glen Joseph asked her about her own experiences with racial persecution—how she handled it—when touring with the all-White Buddy Holly and The Crickets. She answered with,

...when we were on tour there was also black entertainers...it was a nice tour...so when we went to the hotel to register they said to Buddy, "You can stay but they can't," meaning the black people. Buddy said "No, we have to stay together"...they went to the hotel for blacks. When we got there, Buddy and I, and Buddy said "Well, we want a room," and this time they said, "No, they can stay but you can't." So it was the same

thing reversed. Finally, we decided so be it. It was the same thing if we go to a restaurant; they couldn't get in, and to me, I was appalled to see that because as I say, I never know this prejudice, even though I also receive that when I went to Lubbock. What we did is, when we have to stop to eat something...then I took orders...what would you like, what would you like? ...And then Buddy and I would go and get the food.<sup>146</sup>

Maria Elena's stories display her sense of knowing just how far to push the envelope for the maximum return while drawing the minimal degree of persecution. These stories speak to her not Black, but not quite White social status. But they also illuminate ways she as a Latinx woman implemented the D.I.Y. sensibility of *rasquache*, the first tenet of which promotes "making do" with limited resources. At the same time, however, her actions reflect a more complex aspect of *rasquache*, "the revindication of humble, everyday traditions as sources for anchoring artistic production."<sup>147</sup> Inherently Chicano, *rasquachismo* represents one cross-cultural trait gifted to both Black and White American rock and rollers, not solely by ethnic Mexico, or even Mexican America, but by all of Latin America. *Rasquachismo* thrives throughout the Caribbean, from Cuba to Haiti, Puerto Rico to the Yucatan. It informed rock 'n' roll from California's 1960s hippy patchwork regalia clear through the safety pin-stuck, paper bag-clad Hollywood punk aesthetic. And, because of its cultural capacity as mediator between agency and art in D.I.Y. reasoning, Latinx *rasquachismo* yet succeeds as part of countless artforms and musical genres.

Additionally, Maria Elena's words testify to the notion that despite the omnipresence of institutional segregation by skin tone, numerous musicians interracially expanded the appeal and the influence of their art through unified collaboration. Uninhibited by social constraint, Anthony Macías writes that their world consisted of "Mexican American swing

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<sup>146</sup> Glen Joseph. "Buddy meets"... Maria Elena Holly (part 1) from The Buddy Holly Story. YouTube video 13:55 . Oct. 12, 2011. (2:22-8:20) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RfTbFU2hCU>

<sup>147</sup> Tomas Ybarra-Frausto "Raquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility." From C.A.R.A. Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation - An interpretive exhibition of the Chicano Art Movement, 1965-1985, Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles. 1991

bandleaders with Japanese American drummers and Jewish arrangers; [and] young whites who became Mexican Americanized after growing up around ethnic Mexican families.” (This writer, incidentally, belongs to those “Mexican Americanized” at youth through cultural upbringing). Other associations included “Jewish American composers who wrote rhythm and blues songs for African American musicians; and Mexican Americans who played Afro-Cuban music.”<sup>148</sup> For example, before his transformation to Ritchie Valens, Richie Valenzuela sang and played doo wop-style guitar for The Silhouettes, a nine-piece band that featured ethnic Black, Asian, Mexican, Italian, and White members.<sup>149</sup> These mixed-race collaborations also cultivated and spurred the progression of musical crossover, and, in the case of Little Richard, the animation of entirely new musical genres and subgenres, even if unwittingly.

During a filmed conversation with Ron Jones, his White bandmate and confidant, Little Richard lamented, “When I came on the scene, there was no rock ‘n’ roll; everybody was playing blues...you know...I created rock ‘n’ roll; didn’t even know what I was doing.”<sup>150</sup> But fully cognizant of one thing from a very early age, his Queerness, he alludes to fashion elements (hair, makeup, and dress) that inspired, and continues to inspire his countless followers in genres that range from the British rock invasion including glam, punk, new wave, metal, and emo to funk, soul, hip-hop, and mainstream pop: “When I was a boy I knew I was different...I was so flamboyant, you know, I was wearing my mother’s makeup and lipstick everywhere and all over me. I used to play house with my cousins and I always wanted to be the mama.”<sup>151</sup> But fashion does not constitute the whole of ways Little Richard enlivened musical crossover. His performance, his vocals, his music, his onstage moves are all carry-overs from his upbringing in the Black Christian Church. “And in those churches...they would improvise, they played loudly; people are sharing with their feelings,” according to

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<sup>148</sup> Macías. *Mexican American Mojo*. 2008. p.10

<sup>149</sup> Tom Meros. “Gil Rocha brought Ritchie Valens into his band The Silhouettes.” YouTube video. 37:43. Oct. 20, 2021. (11:10) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAqPtgY5H8s>

<sup>150</sup> House. “Little Richard: King and Queen of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” (6:04)

<sup>151</sup> House. “Little Richard: King and Queen of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” (10:20)



writer/historian Tyina Steptoe. In that environment Little Richard most esteemed “the women singers,” because as he said, “I liked the way the ladies sing high.” Acknowledging his favorites he added, “I loved Mahalia Jackson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and the Clara Ward singers, all gospel acts. Ron Jones commented, “Absolutely, you can hear it in that famous woo.... Richard took elements of gospel and made it rock ‘n’ roll with a high voice.”<sup>152</sup> Pop rock, hard rock and metal rockstars such as Paul McCartney, Robert Plant, Ian Gillian, and Bruce Dickenson (The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, and Iron Maiden) all took their cue from Little Richard and owe the creation of their own brand of high-pitched whooping and wailing directly to him.

Unabashedly gay at the beginning of his professional career in 1947, Little Richard was the first in rock ‘n’ roll to wear makeup and suggestive, sometimes gender-neutral clothing; the first to openly revel in his (period-perceived) alternative sexuality and lifestyle on stage. Richard’s nonapologetic exhibitions freed countless of his musical proteges—White, Black, and Brown—to express their own individuality through onstage musical performance. Too numerous to list, some of the beneficiaries of Little Richard’s flamboyancy and candor include the likes of Mick Jagger, David Bowie, Freddie Mercury, Elton John, Prince, and Michael Jackson, but then also, Queen Latifa, Brittany Howard, K.D. Lang, Melissa Ethridge, and Big Freedia. Two other Richards, Ringo Starr and Keith Richards testify to the monumental degree of Little Richard’s cultural impact on their musical lives and careers with Ringo stating first, “Back in the fifties we’d never seen anything like that; he was a huge influence on us.” Keith Richard followed with, “...watching him, I mean, that’s how The Rolling Stones became The Rolling Stones.”<sup>153</sup>

The results of this study’s research demonstrate that the idea and action of musical crossover prevails louder in musical communities of color. The Delta blues musician, Lead Belly (Huddie Ledbetter), who died near the beginning of Little Richard’s career, exhibited cross-genre proficiency long before White musicians in America even pondered its

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<sup>152</sup> House. “Little Richard: King and Queen of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” (8:02-11:05)

<sup>153</sup> House. “Little Richard: King and Queen of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” (1:01-1:45)

potential—writing songs for genres that had yet to be established. Lead Belly boasted, “I can sing five-hundred songs and never go back to the first one.”<sup>154</sup> But Lead Belly could never have known how many of his compositions (and contrafactums) would carry over into the future of popular music. ‘Black Girl (Where Did You Sleep Last Night)’ for example, changed to ‘In the Pines’ when appropriated by Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys in 1941. The song’s title reverted back to simply, ‘Where Did You Sleep Last Night’ when it was again covered in 1993 by Curt Cobain of the grunge rock band Nirvana. This and many others of Lead Belly’s repertoire have been covered by modern performers such as The Grateful Dead, Tom Petty, Led Zeppelin, The Beach Boys, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and Tom Waits, to name a few. Although this group of all-White musical megastars can rightfully tout exceptional songwriting abilities, many White megastars of rock ‘n’ roll’s infancy, such as Elvis Presley and Pat Boone, merely capitalized on the musical and lyrical genius of others. Boone, for example, netted many times the amount of proceeds recording ‘Tutti Frutti’ and ‘Long Tall Sally’ as did the songs’ author, Little Richard. (Regarding Pat Boone’s appropriation of ‘Tutti Frutti,’ New Orleans-based Trans rapper Big Freedia once commented: “I mean, you have this white, straight man that sang ‘Tutti Frutti’ when he really don’t know the meaning of the song.”)<sup>155</sup> The same rang true with Elvis’s cover of Big Mama Thornton’s ‘Hound Dog.’ Our two Richards, on the other hand, not only performed, but while also borrowing from their predecessors, contributed their own original compositions to the burgeoning artform.

To a greater degree than within solidly Black or Brown communities, the concept of crossover artistry proliferated in communities of uniquely mixed-ethnicity such as New Orleans with funk and in L.A. with the introduction of soul by Sam Cooke. Bob Keane, incidentally, had already coaxed Sam Cook into changing his surname to Cooke and had

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<sup>154</sup> Sound Check. “New Music: Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection Unveils New, Unreleased Recordings After 55 Years.” *AFROPUNK*. February 23, 2015. <https://afropunk.com/2015/02/new-music-lead-belly-the-smithsonian-folkways-collection-unveils-new-unreleased-recordings-after-55-years-soundcheck/>

<sup>155</sup> House. “Little Richard: King and Queen of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” (27:40)

already sold over one million copies of Cooke's chart-topping hit "You Send Me" by the time he met Richie Valenzuela. Countless numbers of L.A.'s multi-genre acts, such as Rubén Funkahuatl Guevara (Ruben and the Jets and Con Safos), Los Lobos, El Vez, War, and Frank Zappa owe homage in part to Cooke's legacy.

The band Los Lobos defies all generic labeling and likely represents L.A.'s most dramatic of evolutionary acts. Beginning in 1974 as Los Lobos del Este Los Angeles, the high school-aged original members played norteña folk music using traditional Mexican instrumentation. In order to expand their scope of influence and income, but especially to satisfy their own individual musical tastes, they soon dropped the suffix "del Este Los Angeles," electrified the unit, and added their already firmly established and practiced favorites of R&B, hard rock, funk, and cool Chicano soul to their ethnic Mexican-rooted repertoire. In his 2015 publication *Los Lobos: Dream in Blue*, journalist and longtime friend of the band, Chris Morris, details one of many incidents that not only demonstrates the band's unrelenting determination to excel in the music business, but also the main argument of this thesis: that indifference and ignorance of ethnic culture on the part of White America's generic culture provoked the rejection of anything deemed "race music" through the 1950s, and anything produced by non-White artists in later eras. Filmmaker Luis Valdez, for instance, suggests that few people realized that Ritchie Valens was Mexican American, even after his release of 'La Bamba.'<sup>156</sup>

In 1978 The Sex Pistols finally began their long awaited US tour. But before they could make the L.A. scene the band imploded, and for those who had missed their only California show at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco, seeing Johnny Rotten, English punk's greatest icon, fronting his new act, PiL, amounted to "the next best thing for them," according to Los Lobos founding member, Cesar Rosas. Louie Pérez answered the call from Tito Larriva, guitarist/vocalist with the all-Mexican American punk unit, The Plugz. He invited Los Lobos to fill in for a band that had dropped out of the lineup for PiL's first show at the Olympic Auditorium on the south side of L.A.'s downtown. Hungry, the gig

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<sup>156</sup> Richard Harrington. 'Luis Valdez/The Roots of La Bamba.' *The Washington Post*. July 27, 1987.

represented Los Lobos' first high-profile appearance beyond the Eastside. The trouble was that at this point in their evolution they had yet to lose their traditional Mexican costumes, their acoustic folk music and traditional instrumentation. Both Pérez and Rosas experienced foreboding apprehension at the prospect: "We knew that they threw shit," Pérez cautioned, and they spit at people." He thought, "we're taking a big chance here, but we're just gonna do it." Rosas added, "I told Tito, 'Are you sure, man? I know what the fuck's gonna happen—we're gonna go out there and it's gonna be a battle zone, man. Imagine a bunch of Mexicans playing fucking traditional music. They're gonna have a field day with us.'" <sup>157</sup> As Pérez recalls,

We went up onstage, and we went into the first couple notes of the first song, and I swear I could feel a rush of air come from the audience, from all the middle fingers that went up at the same time. They were throwing shit like crazy. We didn't play a whole set, because by the time the serious projectiles started to fly, we booked it. I don't know how many songs we did, maybe three, maybe four of 'em. Then we beat it. They started throwing real shit at us, and it hurt.

"The pennies and the dimes started coming in, and the quarters started coming in," Rosas remembers, "...they threw a big wad of wet paper, and it hit Dave in the face." Laughing, Conrad Lozano admits, "I was terrified. But we stood there, man. We fucking stood there. We said 'fuck this shit. Just keep doing it. Let's shove it down their throats.' So we did, man, until the bottles started flying. [Then] we said, 'OK, time to go!'" <sup>158</sup>

Chris Morris states that "by any measure the, PiL show was a catastrophe for the band," but also that Los Lobos left the Olympic with a new resolve as explained by Pérez:

Because it was kind of a big deal for us, our wives came with us, and everyone in the family came, and they were all hanging out in the wings... We went around the curtain and went back[stage]. Our families were in tears. I

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<sup>157</sup> Chris Morris. *Los Lobos: Dream in Blue*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 2015. p.45

<sup>158</sup> Morris. *Los Lobos*. p.46

had spit hanging from my chin. But of course we had an adrenaline rush because it was like being on a roller coaster or something. I suppose most people would have run back to East L.A. But we were kind of invigorated by it. We were taken aback a bit by the violence, and the formal rejection. But we didn't feel like we were beaten. We said, 'OK, let's move some shit around, and go back.'<sup>159</sup>

And that they did. By 1980 Los Lobos had made the leap and joined their friends, the Plugz and The Blasters, along with other influential (and eventual crossover) acts in L.A.'s Hollywood punk clubs, throwing off the White punk cultural void and succeeding on their own terms.

Before a packed Wembley Stadium in 1972 Little Richard cried, "Let it all hang out!, with the beautiful Little Richard from down in Macon, Georgia. I want you all to know that I am the king of rock 'n' roll!"<sup>160</sup> Using terms like the "king" or "queen of," the "first to," or the "father" or the "mother of," academic and public historians alike have in one respect colluded with White-America's consumer-driven assignment of generic identity. Ritchie Valens is commonly called the forefather of Chicano rock, or of the Chicano rock movement, even though historically, Valenzuela cannot be cited as ever having embraced the movement. This despite his Mexican-ness and his East L.A. upbringing amidst ethnic Mexican gang activity. Called the father of Chicano music, for another example, Lalo Guerrero only became aware of his legend among Chicana/o student activists—due to the birth and proliferation of Chicano Studies: public university-level manifestations of the Chicano Movement—just as his career in multi-genre band leading, singing and songwriting had all but expired. But the far-reaching cultural effects of Black and Brown music from L.A. can also be detected in the reflections of Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page and Robert Plant who are sometimes referred to as the fathers of hard rock. Both rank Little Richard and Ritchie Valens among their greatest

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<sup>159</sup> Morris. *Los Lobos*. p.47

<sup>160</sup> BBC Archive. "LITTLE RICHARD lets it ALL HANG OUT" YouTube video, 0:57. August 4, 2022. (0:14) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrDzLNOCPTc> . See also House. "Little Richard: King and Queen of Rock 'n' Roll." (2:35)

influencers. Plant calls Ritchie Valens “one of my favorite singers back then,” while Page remembers practicing Valens’ guitar riffs over and over in his very early teenage years.<sup>161</sup> While the Mexican American punk band The Plugz (besides Los Lobos) covered “La Bamba,” the quintessential White punk band The Ramones also covered Valenzuela’s ‘Come On, Let’s Go.’ This while the New Jersey based horror-punk band The Misfits covered ‘Donna’ in 2003. In an article for *RollingStone* magazine, gay filmmaker, John Waters said of Little Richard, “He was always a great figure of rebellion and sexual confusion...He was the first punk. He was the first everything.”<sup>162</sup>

By collecting the words of both stars and unsung actors alike, this study has revealed the validity of Big Bill Broonzy’s American social assessment. Ritchie Valens’ ‘Donna,’ a soulful R&B number that decries youthful love-loss, bears witness to his not-quite-Whiteness in 1950s racially-preoccupied Los Angeles: “I had a girl...Donna was her name...Since she left me...I’ve never been the same.”<sup>163</sup> According to Anthony Macías, Donna Ludwig’s father purportedly “forbade her to date a Mexican.”<sup>164</sup> Similarly, young Richie Valenzuela’s cultural experience with Los Angeles racism can be compared to that of Maria Elena Santiago-Holly’s experiences of racism on a national scale with her visits to Buddy Holly’s West Texas hometown of Lubbock, a habitually White-dominant enclave that still vaunts a White population of over 73 percent.<sup>165</sup>

Beyond revealing the three-tiered social structure of twentieth-century America, and how folks dealt with it, like *Mexican American Mojo*, this chapter rewrites many of the hallowed cultural histories of Los Angeles while diminishing the assumed perceptions of a

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<sup>161</sup> Chris Riemenschneider. Blog: *Artcetera*. “Robert Plant remembers Ritchie Valens (if not Iowa) in thrilling Surf Ballroom show.” *Star Tribune*. September 24, 2019.

<sup>162</sup> Kory Grow. “John Waters on Little Richard: He Was the First Punk. He Was the First Everything.” *RollingStone*. May 9, 2020. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/john-waters-little-richard-996961/>

<sup>163</sup> “Donna” Track 4 on album *Ritchie Valens*. Ritchie Valens. Del-Fi Records. 1959.

<sup>164</sup> Billy Vera. Album, *Jumpin’ Like Mad: Cool Cats and Hip Chicks Non-Stop Dancin’*, Liner notes, Capitol Records, 1996.

<sup>165</sup> Lubbock Economic Development Alliance. “11th Largest City in Texas.” <https://lubbockeda.org/population/>

Black/White binary in the whole of American popular music.<sup>166</sup> Additionally, it parallels the experiences of Black and Latinx musicians as they vied and competed for the acceptance of, and compensation from the top tier of American society, including its virtually all-White-male music business. Besides expanding on some of Anthony Macías' sources, this study has introduced new players such as Lead Belly, Big Bill Broonzy, and Maria Elena Santiago-Holly to the discussion in order to further expose the inseparable social connection between identity and place. Lastly, this study has explored the various cultural connections (fashion, D.I.Y., culturally specific slang, etc.) to illustrate what Anthony Macías sees as a simultaneous “cultural war” and, “natural melding” of ethnic Black and Brown popular music in twentieth-century Los Angeles and beyond.

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<sup>166</sup> Macías. *Mexican American Mojo*. 2008. p.290

## CHAPTER 4. CHALLENGING THE ASSUMPTION OF MEMORY IN L.A. PUNK ROCK

In 1979 Jeffrey Hyman, better known as Joey Ramone (1951-2001), confirmed his utter lack of reverence for the institution of public education by penning the line “Well I don’t care about history” for The Ramones’ song and movie *Rock ‘n’ Roll High School*.<sup>167</sup> Just as some L.A. punk rockers eventually overcame their disdain for the world and everything in it, other “[a]ging punks decided that they *did* care about history” according to historian Joseph M. Turrini.<sup>168</sup> Both John Doe of X and Alice Bag rank among these. Turrini’s important work centers on the proliferation of oral histories from these and other punk scene participants. In it he shows how groups use oral interviews as “narrative tools” from their specific “cultural toolkit” to create their collective memory. He joins James Wertsch in arguing that collective memory “functions to provide a usable past for the creation of coherent individual and group identities.”<sup>169</sup> Turrini questions the expanded preeminence of historical authentication attributed to oral histories by the authors of these books. They somehow assume a certain degree of credibility because of their direct connection with the scene. He objects to the coupling of the word “definitive” with oral history. But his biggest gripe against these publications, not all of which are autobiographical, is how they cut and paste from hundreds of different oral interview samples to form their narrative. Thus, creating a self-flattering, and deemed “definitive” punk collective memory.<sup>170</sup>

This allows the writer to cherry-pick the sources most aligned with her/his particular punk narrative. It’s all about what to leave in and what to leave out. Turrini’s article notes the fact that they “sometimes refer to themselves as the authors and sometimes as the editors [which] indicates the uncertainty of who are the...creators of the book.” And moreover that “none of them print the questions asked, and it is unlikely that any of these hundreds of

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<sup>167</sup> “Rock ‘N’ Roll High School” Track A1 on album *Rock ‘N’ Roll High School*. The Ramones. Sire Records, 1979.

<sup>168</sup> J.M. Turrini. 2013. “Well I Don’t Care About History: Oral History and the Making of Collective Memory in Punk Rock”. NOTES -NEW YORK- MUSIC LIBRARY ASSOCIATION-. 2013. 70, no. 1: 59.

<sup>169</sup> James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*. New York : Cambridge University Press, 2010. pp. 31, 57

<sup>170</sup> Turrini. “Well I Don’t Care About History” pp.62, 63, 66



interview transcripts will ever be deposited in an archival facility where they would be available for others to see.”<sup>171</sup> Turini identifies numerous publications that are clearly prone to blatant omissions of key historical figures (and their testimonies) and events by alleged experts on Los Angeles punk.<sup>172</sup> At the same time, adding on after the fact allows for extreme bias and the glorification of a particular artist, band, or even punk scene (as in east vs. west). Besides those of Turrini’s list, this study has located several more that exhibit specific leanings on both counts.

Some of these surround the ongoing public turned scholarly debate concerning a supposed post-racial-identity or colorblind Hollywood punk scene once waged between Brendan Mullen, founder of the Masque, one of Hollywood’s first punk clubs, along with Alice Bag on one side; and Willie Herrón together with assorted news columnists on the other. Historian R.C. Davila examines, and in many ways challenges Michelle Habell-Pallán’s assessment of the debate by isolating and examining the instances where opposing ideologies on anti-racialism have actually extended racially disparate outcomes.<sup>173</sup> Davila contends that in an effort “to dispel the notion of racial discrimination in the Hollywood punk scene, figures such as Mullen and Bag likewise silence particular voices and obscure the ways in which the scene, which they tout as an egalitarian moment [...] may have in some ways replicated the racialized ideologies of the larger culture.”<sup>174</sup> For her own 2014 oral history project, Alice Bag asked several Latinx participants of first-wave Hollywood punk to talk about whether

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<sup>171</sup> Turrini. ‘Well I Don’t Care About History’ p. 67

<sup>172</sup> See Turrini. “Well I Don’t Care About History” p. 63. *Please Kill Me* (1996) by Leggs McNeil and Gillian McCain; *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk*. (2001) eds. Brendan Mullen and Marc Spitz; *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (2001) by Steven Blush; *Punk Rock* (2006) by John Robb; *Give Me Something Better: The Profound, Progressive, and Occasionally Pointless History of Bay Area Punk* (2009) eds. Jack Boulware and Silke Tudor; *Burning Flight* (2009) by Brian Peterson; *Treat Me Like Dirt: An Oral History of Punk in Toronto and Beyond, 1977-1981* (2009) eds. Liz Worth and Gary Pig Gold; and *Why Be Something That You’re Not: Detroit Hardcore, 1979-1985* (2010) by Tony Rettman

<sup>173</sup> Michelle Habell-Pallán. “Death to Racism and Punk Revisionism: Alice Bag’s vexing voice and the unspeakable influence of Canción Ranchera on Hollywood Punk,” in E. Weisbard (ed.), *Pop When the World Falls Apart: Music in the Shadow of Doubt*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. pp. 247–70.

<sup>174</sup> R.C. Davila. ‘See No Colour, Hear No Colour, Speak No Colour: Problematizing Colourblindness in Los Angeles Punk Historiography.’ *Punk and Post-Punk*. 8, no. 1: 89-104. 2019. p. 91

they had experienced racial discrimination within the scene.<sup>175</sup> But her subject panel did not include Willie Herrón of Los Illegals, who in 1980 told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter “We can’t even get booked into most of the Hollywood clubs. Call it racism or whatever you like, but they shut the doors when they see us coming.”<sup>176</sup>

Alice (Bag) Velasquez’s 2018 publication, *We Were There: Voices from L.A. Punk’s First Wave: An Oral History Hosted By Alice Bag*, presents an open forum-style conversation with her peers that discusses what one of her guests, Tito Larriva, calls “The East L.A. Syndrome.” Velasquez labels the cultural angst as such: “The myth that the Hollywood scene was racially discriminatory is sometimes used to explain the genesis of the East L.A. scene which blossomed around the Vex in late 1979, early 1980.” Citing the results of the discussion she adds, “I think we can call that myth busted.”<sup>177</sup> Willie Herrón cofounded the Vex in its space at Self Help Graphics and Art on Brooklyn Avenue in the Boyle Heights community of East L.A.<sup>178</sup> Velasquez makes clear distinction between the two scenes, temporally and spatially separating herself and her panel from Herrón’s Eastside scene through her assertion that “[t]he Hollywood punk scene predated the East L.A. scene; they were not concurrent.”<sup>179</sup> This distinction between “first wave” and later waves of L.A. punk represents one of three major points for her argument which manifested due to a particular interaction she experienced with institutional public history.

Dubbed by its curators *American Sabor: Latinos in U.S. Popular Music*, the museum exhibition originated at the University of Washington, but when it was picked up by the Smithsonian as part of their Traveling Exhibition Service, it underwent considerable revision

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<sup>175</sup> Alice Bag. *We Were There: Voices from L.A. Punk’s First Wave : an Oral History*. Los Angeles, California : Razorcake Press, 2018.

<sup>176</sup> Stuart Goldman. “New Wave Rides High on a Latin Beat” *Los Angeles Times*. October 12, 1980, p.338. See also Davila. ‘See No Colour, Hear No Colour, Speak No Colour.’ p. 93

<sup>177</sup> Alice Bag. *We Were There*. 2018. p. 35

<sup>178</sup> For a fuller historical description of Self Help Graphics and Art, see the opening paragraphs of chapter one.

<sup>179</sup> Alice Bag’s assumption overlooks the East L.A. scene that pre-existed the Vex through venues, such as backyards, living rooms, car shows, and rented halls. The “first Chicano punk band, Stains,” who began in Boyle Heights but labeled themselves a Hollywood unit, formed in 1976. This, according to Anthony Macías in his book chapter, ‘Black and Brown Get Down: Cultural Politics, Chicano Music, and Hip Hop in Racialized Los Angeles,’ 2014

that produced some historical discrepancies.<sup>180</sup> Velasquez states that in preparation for attending a condensed version of the exhibition presented at her own alma mater (Cal State, where she earned her Bachelor's degree and teaching certificate) she perused the Smithsonian's webpage for *American Sabor* and found that "some of the information was wrong and misleading." Besides some of the most blatant errors, such as categorizing the East L.A. band The Brat as an all-female group, Velasquez found major historical contradiction to the exhibition's "assertion that Westside venues would not allow Eastside punks to play in the early days." The third leg of her challenge to the institution's narrative stems from what Velasquez lists as being "most disturbing" to her: "the implication that the early punk scene was inhospitable to people of color, specifically Latinos."<sup>181</sup>

Of much more pertinence to this study than engaging that argument, however, are the aspects of its discussion which relate especially to ethnic cultural identity and its connection with self-determination in the quest for spatial acceptance. For example, Velasquez' testimony regarding her youthful gravitation toward punk support the findings of analyses by Chicano-cultural historian and author Anthony Macías. He observes that Mexican Americans forged a contested run of the city for themselves; they "were not trapped in Eastside barrios." And quite contrary to simply reiterating a generic story of victimization under a dominant society, Macías maintains that "they [Mexican Americans] refused to be held back physically or artistically...[this] allowed them to occupy different spaces."<sup>182</sup> As Velasquez put it, "It was an exciting time to be in Hollywood, so I moved there from East L.A. shortly after that gig (the Bags' first gig: summer of 1977 at the Masque)." Then alluding to punk's novelty in California, Velasquez reflectively mentions, "Hollywood and San Francisco were the two scenes that were happening at that time..." and then offers: "I think many of us migrated

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<sup>180</sup> Smithsonian Institution. *American Sabor: Latinos in U.S. Popular Music. Toured 2011-2015.* <https://www.sites.si.edu/s/topic/OTO36000000TzHIGA0/american-sabor-latinos-in-us-popular-music?topicId=OTO36000000TzHIGA0>

<sup>181</sup> Bag. *We Were There*. 2018. p. 2

<sup>182</sup> Anthony Macías, Ronald Radano, and Josh Kun. *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935 -1968*. Duke University Press, 2008. p.5

from the suburbs to the city because we found acceptance there. It seemed that it was okay to be a weirdo in Hollywood. In fact, it was preferred.”

Just as there were few places to play, there were as few burgeoning punk artists ready (or not) for the stage. Velasquez’ panel includes many who certainly were there from the beginning, such as herself and Tito Larriva of The Plugz. Larriva who identifies as “Mexican” for the symposium, “distinctly remember[s] Charlotte and Joe Ramirez coming home one day all excited about a new club opening up in Hollywood.” Velasquez then gleefully beats Larriva to the punch with, “The Masque!” But with an equal expression of fondness for the particular space in time (the era of their youth in Tinseltown, USA) Larriva quickly retorts, “Yes! Within weeks we all had bands.”<sup>183</sup> Mike Ochoa of Nervous Gender, at a different point in the conversation, concurs with what Velasquez and Larriva attest to concerning the early scene with Brendan Mullen’s Masque at its iconic center: “The scene was very small and everyone would tell each other what bands were coming up.” Ochoa submits for his ethnicity “Mexican American” and also self-identifies Queer, and his further reflections demonstrate the tandem social effects of spatial identity in conjunction with cultural identity: “If you went to more than a couple shows, people would begin to recognize you and start talking to you. It made me feel included... We were Nervous Gender—a band made up of two gay Mexicans, a gay Irish guy, and a Jewish lesbian.” Ochoa offered lastly, “I do not remember any band that was not welcome.” With that Velasquez interjected, “You would fit in at the Masque, if you were going to fit in anywhere!”<sup>184</sup>

At the same time, Velasquez’ comparisons of the Masque and the Vex at Self Help Graphics indicate a couple of realities: one, that just as much as the Masque affirmed Westside punk solidarity, the Vex represented a place from which at least some Eastside Chicano punk rockers also derived cultural and spatial identity (both venues have been touted early L.A. “punk incubators”<sup>185</sup>); and two, that somewhere in between what Michel-Rolph

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<sup>183</sup> Bag. *We Were There*. 2018. p. 18

<sup>184</sup> Bag. *We Were There*. 2018. p. 12

<sup>185</sup> See for example UC Santa Barbara’s “Vexed,”: <https://www.library.ucsb.edu/events-exhibitions/vexed-east-la-chicano-punk-scene>

Trouillot calls the two sides of historicity—what happened and what is said to have happened—animosity between the two camps existed on some level: “The Masque and the Vex scenes weren’t even concurrent and somehow we had a rivalry?” Indeed, the need for such a discussion on the topic animates its reality.

Besides commendably catching and then acting upon the inaccurate historical representations made by the Smithsonian Institution, Velasquez also took great exception to a 2012 article posted in the *L.A. Weekly* by Nicholas Pell who wrote, “...once punk proper hit with all its safety pins and mohawks, L.A. was home to two rival punk scenes: One in Hollyweird, another in East Los,” a statement on which Velasquez exclaimed, “I don’t remember this rivalry at all.”<sup>186</sup> On that point, Larriva commented, “I don’t really remember a divide other than a geographical one.” Robert Lopez, who along with two other founding members of the Zeros, Javier Escovedo and Hector Peñalosa—all of whom preidentified themselves as “Mexican American[s]” for the discussion—offered, “Well, I don’t remember any rivalry,” and added later that, “I don’t remember ever playing the Vex. I quit the Zeros in 1978.” Peñalosa echoed with, “I never even heard of the Vex.”<sup>187</sup> This, despite Pell’s casual grouping of the San Diego based band together with the Eastside Punk groups that identified with the Vex.

But Velasquez’ panel consisted of more than just punk rock performers. Self-identifying as “Mexican,” Sean Carillo, for example, participated in the talks through his presence in the early Hollywood scene as a visual artist. Carillo joined Asco in 1980. (Asco: An L.A.-based multi-media Chicano arts collective founded in 1972 by Harry Gamboa Jr., Patssi Valdez, Glugio (Gronk) Nicandro, and Willie Herrón). Another non-punk rock musical performer, X-8 (Sam Diaz), wrote for *FlipSide* fanzine that he along with four other Eastside high school friends founded in 1977, the same birthyear as its more historically ubiquitous competitor, *Slash*.<sup>188</sup> Listing his multi-ethnicity as “Mexican/Spanish/Native American,” X-8

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<sup>186</sup> Nicholas Pell, “The Vex and Chicano Punk: A Very Brief History.” *LA WEEKLY*, March 12, 2013.

<sup>187</sup> Bag. *We Were There*. 2018. pp. 24-28

<sup>188</sup> Note that while Slash likely remains more widely recognized in Los Angeles pop-culture, *FlipSide* outlasted them by more than two decades, closing up shop in 2000.

concur with the others adding, “There was no rivalry that I know of. I had already left the punk scene by 1979-1980 because it became too violent and it was no longer that fun. I never even made it to the Vex.”

Maintaining her interrogation of Pell’s piece, Velasquez complains that he “attempted to record the scene at the time, but only managed to paint an inaccurate picture that has continued to live on today.” Demonstrating the multidirectional aspects of ageism—which not only taints memory of both the near and distant past, but orders the design of the future’s pasts—the group enjoys a few jokes and chuckles regarding Pell’s youth: “...a lot of these writers were still in grammar school,” and such. But what if like Velasquez and her panel, Pell was also there? Might he have painted a different picture, or might his improvisational narrative still have emerged with as much inventiveness? In other words, does Nicholas Pell’s physical absence from the scene alone explain his construction of a narrative that stands in such stark contrast to that of Velasquez? She stresses, “The problem is that this narrative is starting to take hold.” And further, “The Smithsonian website for American Sabor has made similar claims saying that “Almost all the famous venues would not allow Eastside Chicano punks to play.” I’m from East L.A. No one kept me out of anything.”<sup>189</sup>

Velasquez makes a valid point—that narratives take hold—because even in academia, purely fictitious historical accounts, often canonized accounts, continue to “live on today.” James Baldwin takes the notion a step further in his belief that “The way you write memories become memories”<sup>190</sup> What portion of *We Were There*, for example, might be committed to personal memory, and canonized in the pasts of its readers and their descendants?

After establishing consensus on the egalitarianism of the Hollywood scene as a whole, the conversation surrounds elevating the cultural symbol of the Masque to the center of the scene’s equal opportunity. From there it focuses on the by-then-deceased founder of the Masque, Brendan Mullen, and the idea that “Brendan Mullen’s Ears Knew No Color.” R.C. Davila claims that Mullen and Bag have “employed a rhetoric of colourblindness [sic] that

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<sup>189</sup> Bag. *We Were There*. 2018. p. 26

<sup>190</sup> James Baldwin. *Nobody Knows My Name : More Notes of a Native Son*. New York: Dial Press, 1961. p. 227

equates any discussion of race and racial inequality with actual racism, and that treats racism as primarily an individual character flaw rather than a systemic force.” Dissenters of the US Supreme Court’s 2023 repeal of affirmative action in higher education supports and demonstrates the criticality of Davila’s argument concerning American institutional racism. Justice Sotomayor, for example, wrote, “the Court cements a superficial rule of colorblindness as a constitutional principle in an endemically segregated society.”<sup>191</sup> Part of Justice Jackson’s dissent states, “The majority seems to think that race blindness solves the problem of race-based disadvantage.”<sup>192</sup> Davila argues that “in their desire to control the history of the Hollywood punk scene, scene members, such as Bag and Mullen, by attempting to discredit those whose remembrances of Los Angeles punk history clash with their own, obfuscate efforts to present a more nuanced understanding of the roles of race and racism within its history.”<sup>193</sup>

Davila evidences his claim by pointing to at least one object of Brandon Mullen’s disrepute, Willie Herrón. As part of the ongoing, heated debate over Hollywood punk’s assumed colorblindness, Mullen fired a fiercely combative 5000-word email in response to the *Los Angeles Times* concerning the 2008 *CULTURE MIX* article “‘Rebels with a cause,’ ‘Vexing: Female Voices From East L.A. Punk...’” by staff writer Agustin Gurza. Mullen’s rant accuses Herrón of “playing the race-card to cover up for being a horrible rock band,” as cited by Davila.<sup>194</sup> Like Nicholas Pell’s later piece (2013) in *LA Weekly*, Gurza’s narrative paints a picture of an exclusive early Hollywood punk scene. Certainly, both Bag and Mullen took offense with Gurza’s cultural and historical assertions regarding his both omissive and improvisational narration. Exercising his right of reply, Mullen’s editorial response lines up

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<sup>191</sup> Nadra Little. “The Supreme Court Ends Affirmative Action in College Admissions” *The 19<sup>th</sup> News*. January 29, 2023. <https://19thnews.org/2023/06/supreme-court-overturms-affirmative-action-college-admissions/>

<sup>192</sup> The United States Supreme Court. 20-1199 Students for Fair Admissions Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College. Argued October 31, 2022—Decided June 29, 2023. p.228

<sup>193</sup> Davila. ‘See No Colour, Hear No Colour, Speak No Colour.’ 2019. Abstract.

<sup>194</sup> Agustin Gurza. “Rebels with a cause.” *Los Angeles Times*. Sat. May 10, 2008. Cited in Davila. ‘See No Colour, Hear No Colour, Speak No Colour.’ 2019. p.90

with at least two of Alice Bag's key points of contention for the later disposition of her oral history in 2018:

Re "Rebels With a Cause" (by Augustin Gurza), May 10): While the "Vexing: Female Voices From East L.A. Punk" exhibition will in no doubt add another layer to the rich history of L.A. music, I'm perplexed at the assertion in the article that Chicano punks were somehow rejected from the Hollywood punk scene (ditto the idea that the scene was male-dominated...). The column ignores—with the exception of the Bags—many of the Chicano- (and Latino-) led bands and musicians such as the Zeros, the Gears, the Plugz, the Gun Club, Tito Larriva, Danny Hidalgo, Victor Bissetti, Geraldo Velasquez, Michael Ochoa and Margaret Guzman, to name a few, who helped create the original Hollywood punk scene.<sup>195</sup>

Of the "few" named by Mullen in his reprisal, seven rounded out the total fourteen participants who made up the panel for Alice Velazquez' *We Were There* forum (Robert Lopez, Javier Escovedo, and Hector Peñalosa of The Zeros, Tito Larriva of The Plugz, Kid Congo Powers of the Gun Club, Margaret Guzman—who listed her vocation "artist" and her ethnicity "Chicana"—of The Skulls, and Michael Ochoa of Nervous Gender), which began with her question: "Did you ever personally experience racism from other punks, bands, club owners, magazine writers, or record promoters involved in the early punk scene?" Velasquez' question remains important to any study that centers on American punk cultural clash because disregarding race and racism, (or gender and genderism) amounts to a denial of the inextricable connection between ethnic culture and skin tone and womanhood. But according to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "What matters most are the process and conditions of production of such narratives. Only a focus on that process can uncover the ways in which the two sides

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<sup>195</sup> Brendan Mullen. 'Important voices.' *Los Angeles Times*. Sat. May 17, 2008. p.60



of historicity intertwine in a particular context. Only through the overlap can we discover the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others.”<sup>196</sup>

Because of the natural flow and evolution of the conversation, not all of Velasquez’ panelists ultimately answered the question directly. However, those that did are listed first in an effort to establish a baseline from which to recognize various overlapping power struggles that allow the construction of diverse and often contradictory histories specific to early L.A. punk. The following represents only the first sentence of each direct response to Velasquez’ question:

Tito Larriva: I don’t recall ever being discriminated against at all by anyone involved in the early punk scene.

Margot Olavarria: Without denying that racism is institutionalized in the broader U.S. culture, I can’t say that I experienced racism from folks involved in the early punk scene, in L.A. or elsewhere.

Hector Peñalosa: I never experienced any racism from any other people in the punk scene whatsoever.

Kid Congo Powers: I never felt any racism in the first wave of punk.

Margaret Guzman: I didn’t experience racism directly, though there did seem to be a bit of underlying hostility or non-acceptance from a few individuals.

If the above answers are to be taken at face value and represent “what happened,” then the following responses, according to Trouillot, exemplify “what is said to have happened” in the context of first wave punk rock in Los Angeles:

Trudie Arguelles: The scene actually broke down the walls of racism.

X-8: It was a lot of young kids coming together for a variety of reasons, but most it was about the music and having fun.

Hellin Killer: Girls and Guys were equals for the first time ever in the music scene!

Seal Sanchez: It was a very accepting scene.

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<sup>196</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot. *Silencing the Past : Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2015. p.25

Robert Lopez: It was open. We didn't have the luxury to discriminate.

The aggregate of the intertwining sides of historicity—including the power differentials—in this context are better exposed by some of the second and third responses to the question, as with Trudie Arguelles who subsequently stated, “I never experienced racism because I don't look ethnic.” However, the side exchanges, as led by Velasquez, best reveal the wide ranging socio-historical perspectives of some of the participants. For example, after Margaret Guzman (who like Velasquez identified “Chicana” for the meeting) testified to sensing some “underlying hostility or non-acceptance” in the early scene, Velasquez replied, “Like what? How did the non-acceptance display itself?” Guzman answered, “It wasn't out in the open. Once I remember Philomena, from *Slash* (Magazine) was talking to me and she told me I looked Spanish, when another girl who was in the room added, “She doesn't look Spanish. She looks stone-cold Indian.” The non-acceptance was in the tone of her voice.” When Velasquez asked about her reaction, Guzman offered, “It caught me off guard. I just let it go, probably walked away.” Pressing further, Velasquez asked her if she told the girl how she felt and in this short dialogue her answer reveals another social power base, likely far beyond the influence of *Slash*: “No, but I get that, even from my own people. It has to do with skin color.” Then, somewhat uncharacteristically Velasquez interjected, “You know I would take ‘stone-cold Indian’ as a compliment.” Guzman's retort displays the difficulty involved with attempting to standardize a collective narrative based on the idea of a uniform social experience through the compilation of individual cultural experiences: “Well, it wasn't meant that way!”<sup>197</sup>

Just as telling, Velasquez' side exchange with Javier Escovedo evidences the likely varied social views—both past and present—among members of a community the size of a handful of bands and a few places where they interacted with their fans, or even as slight as an individual punk rock band. In this case, the Zeros. Represented only in the conversation by the sixteenth page of the transcript (the pages are not numbered), well after his bandmates had already contributed several comments, Escovedo finally engages through Velasquez' spurring,

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<sup>197</sup> Bag. *We Were There*. 2018. p. 8

“But since we are speaking of race-specific expectations, how did you feel about the nickname the Mexican Ramones?” Short and direct—Escovedo responded, “I hated it.” Velasquez’ response to learning the truth about how the nickname offended Escovedo lines up with her other reactions to described racism throughout the publication: “Oh no, I’m sorry. I think I might have even parroted that, thinking you were okay with the nickname, though when I really stop to think about it, I don’t know why I would think that.” Indicating her own contempt for racial exclusion, Velasquez, in fact, begins her transcribed conversation with, “As I write this, I want to state that it is not my intention to deny or diminish those deeply personal experiences of perceived bias, spoken or unspoken.” But Escovedo’s first objection to the comparison of the two bands did not come from the standpoint of race, but from the view of a musician and performer. Only after stating, “I don’t think we sounded like the Ramones, we didn’t look like the Ramones” did he say, “and I wasn’t Mexican. Mexican means you were born in Mexico, the people in Mexico called me Chicano.” Then perhaps in considering the primary tenet of *con safos* —whose is what, and the record of its establishment, whatever “it” means—he added, “Also, calling us the Mexican Ramones seems to imply that what we did was not original.”<sup>198</sup>

Putting the situation in historical context, Peñalosa interjected, “The story goes like this: *Slash* was interviewing The Screamers and Claude Bessy—may he rest in peace—asked Tomato Du Plenty what he thought of the Zeros and his response was...ya sabes (you already know).” Velasquez replied reservedly, “They’re the Mexican Ramones?” The interview that Hector Peñalosa refers to comes from *Slash*’s first volume, number two, issued in June of 1977. And according to the rendered transcript Tomata du Plenty (born David Xavier Harrigan in 1948 to Irish immigrant parents) answered Claude Bessy’s actual question (What of the local groups?) with “We saw the Zeros in San Diego last week. They’re fantastic, like the Mexican Ramones!”<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Bag. *We Were There*. 2018. p. 16

<sup>199</sup> Steve Samiof. *Slash: A Los Angeles-based punk rock fanzine in tabloid newspaper format*. Los Angeles, CA. 1977 p.10

Plenty's racialized compliment supports as evidence this work's thesis; it is remarkably reflective of the same precociousness displayed by Caprice with her coy response to the notion that she should "need" to experience diverse ethnic culture for culture's sake.<sup>200</sup>

Interestingly, Bessy interviewed the Zeros in the very next issue. And in calculated succession he interviewed The Ramones for the following issue, number four. In all three interviews Bessy, aka Kickboy Face, stoked the coals of "race-specific expectations" with his comical references to "the Mexican Ramones" and "the East Coast Zeros." Escovedo's last comment on the issue: "When we were called the Mexican Ramones, I didn't like it but I was happy we were getting written about at all and reviewed in the *L.A. Times* and other places so I took it all in stride." Similarly, Peñalosa added, "I didn't like it but I had to accept it since it stuck like a barnacle on the Zeros boat." Regarding some, like Margaret Guzman, who "probably walked away," or like Peñalosa and Escovedo, who "had to accept it" and "took it all in stride," whether these examples of race-specific expectations demonstrate an inhospitality on the part of the scene toward people of color, "specifically Latinos," is validated, therefore, by the incidents' primary actors and, as Trouillot teaches us, its subsequent narrators.

The evidence from this research demonstrates that an additional unspoken rule of *con safos*, that turnabout is fair play, also applies to punk oral histories, and even further to university-press publications. While not truly serving as an "alternate history of pop music," as advertised in its liner notes, *Land of a Thousand Dances: Chicano Rock 'n' Roll from Southern California* does provide some important insight into the lesser-known aspects of Mexican American contribution to pop music's history. However, while the authors consistently tout the cultural and artistic value of these musicians, they fall prey to the conventional trappings of gauging their claims based on individual commercial success. Some of this favoritism is evidenced in the titles of chapters four and thirteen: 'The One and Only Ritchie Valens' and 'The One and Only Los Lobos' respectively. At the same time authors Reyes and Waldman effectively incorporate the stories of managers and agents, local radio

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<sup>200</sup> Outlined in this work's introduction.

jocks, and club owners to illuminate the careers of as many obscure performers. But chapter twelve ‘Thank God for Punk!’ raises red flags for both scholars and aficionados of the Los Angeles punk scene from all ethnic backgrounds. While Reyes and Waldman rightfully exalt the impactful contributions of Chicana/o punk bands (such as Los Illegals, The Brat, the Zeros, and the Odd Squad) to the scene, they virtually omit Alice Bag, an elemental force in the creation of the entire L.A. punk aesthetic. ‘Thank God for Punk!’ gives protracted voice to Teresa Covarrubias of The Brat and Angela Vogel of the Odd Squad. Yet when narrating the development of the later-formed all-female group Las Tres, the trio’s membership is listed as Vogel, Covarrubias, “and a friend, Alicia Armendariz,” Alice Bag’s given name.<sup>201</sup> This represents a major historical omission on the part of the authors, even according to the criteria that guided the creation of their book. Regarding longevity, ubiquity, and fame, they could have plausibly named chapter twelve ‘The One and Only Alice Bag.’

A veritable who’s who of Los Angeles punk, *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk* epitomizes Joseph Turrini’s poster-child for punk rock oral histories on a number of levels. While not specifically advertised “an oral history” in its liner notes or in its contents, Marc Spitz’ 2001 publication was coauthored by Brendan Mullen, and represents a collage of cut-and-paste statements taken “straight from the mouths of the scenesters, zinesters, groupies, filmmakers, and musicians, *who were there*.”<sup>202</sup> This assemblage of monologues, quotes, and comments by more than a hundred and seventy-five contributors (not all of whom actually authorized the use of their testimonies) amounts to tools in the authors’ culture kit to animate a particular storyline; one that pursues the authors’ mutual goal: “to give Los Angeles punk rock the respect and consideration it’s due (even if it doesn’t want it anymore).”<sup>203</sup> All of the contributors are listed by both name and affiliation with the scene (scenester, performer, chronicler, roadie, DJ, groupie, fan, etc.) through a system much

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<sup>201</sup> David Reyes and Tom Waldman. *Land of a Thousand Dances: Chicano Rock 'n' Roll from Southern California*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009. p. 143

<sup>202</sup> Marc Spitz, and Brendan Mullen. *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk*. 1st edition. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001. Liner notes

<sup>203</sup> Spitz. *We Got the Neutron Bomb*. 2001. p. xv

like Velasquez later used to list her participants, only she offered the optional declaration of ethnicity for her survey. But unlike in Velasquez' *We Were There*, the authors of *We Got the Neutron Bomb* print none of their interview questions—as Turini complains—making it difficult for the reader to determine the validity of context for each entry in relation to each chapter theme.

In fact, very little of Brendan Mullen's 2001 cowritten version of the scene resembles his and Velasquez's later testaments to the historical existence of an all-inclusive—in terms of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality—microcosm in Hollywood, lasting two short years. Just as with Reyes' and Waldman's near erasure of Alice Bag from L.A. punk, *We Got the Neutron Bomb* barely footnotes the East L.A. Vex scene, allotting just three pages of text (of nearly 300) for touching on an entirely other punk rock scene, autonomous and separate from Hollywood, yet integral to, and inextricably entwined with L.A.'s unique punk history. Additionally, *We Were There* and 'Death to Racism and Punk Revisionism,' (the title of Mullen's five-thousand word email reprisal aimed at Willie Herrón) overlook the racism, homophobia, and misogyny of many individuals in the early scene, some of whom the authors had no dealings with, and others that they did interact with, and still others, some of whom they respected as friends or loved ones. In their introduction (listed as written by both authors) Spitz and Mullen plainly commemorate Hollywood's dead punk rockers. And the book, besides trying to bring due respect to the entire scene, is reverently dedicated to them:

With the exception of Black Flag's Greg Ginn and the Germs' Pat Smear and Lorna Doom, who refused to cooperate with us directly, the rest, the Darby Crashes, Black Randy's, Jeffrey Lee Pierces, Tomata Du Plentys, and Claude Bessey, are deceased. Really Dead. We include their testimony as respectfully as we can, but realize that they do not have the privilege of hindsight or revisionism (as several of our beloved subjects attempted).<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup>Spitz. *We Got the Neutron Bomb*. 2001. p. xv

Besides the five above, the dedication lists over twenty more, many of whom have been documented, whether through photograph, film, or text (including in *We Got the Neutron Bomb*) displaying either racist, or homophobic, or misogynistic words or behavior. Jan Paul Beahm (1958-1980) aka Darby Crash, for example, is seen and heard using a derogatory term in racial reference to a dead Mexican migrant worker in the period film, *The Decline of Western Civilization*.<sup>205</sup> He is also depicted by Spitz and Mullen as repeatedly shouting homophobic curses at random pedestrians on route to his first ever public punk rock performance at the Orpheum in Hollywood.<sup>206</sup> Also listed among the honored dead, Mirielle (or Muriel) Cervenka is shown in a photograph with her sister, singer for X, Excene Cervenka, sporting a blouse bearing a large swastika front and center.<sup>207</sup> Note that the pervasive use of this cultural symbol turned pop-cultural symbol by especially White punk rockers is attributed by some to youth-possessed, “faux-fascist” shock- fashion <sup>208</sup> In the pursuit of puffing Hollywood’s first wave egalitarianism, Mullen’s and Bag’s later versions of the scene turn a blind eye to the abhorrent behavior of other early scene characters, such as the brazen sexism of the misogynist, girl-band creator, Kim Fowley; or of the well documented anti-Semitism frequently displayed by one Fay Heart, who called herself Farah Fawcett-Minor. Jenny Lens, a prolific early scene photographer, once disclosed, “Farah hated me because I’m Jewish.” In *We Got the Neutron Bomb* she details her dealings with a young woman who the former manager of the Go Gos claims “is the racist bigot John [Doe of X] wrote about in the lyrics to ‘Los Angeles.’ You know. “She started to hate every nigger and Jew.””<sup>209</sup> <sup>210</sup> Alice Bag’s 2018 *We Were There* clearly omits even her own personal

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<sup>205</sup> Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization* Part I. 1981. (27:52)

<sup>206</sup> Spitz. *We Got the Neutron Bomb*. 2001. p.73

<sup>207</sup> Jenny Lens. Photo: “Excene and Muriel Cervenka, backstage at the Whisky a Go Go, March 5, 1978.”

<https://www.tumblr.com/ridingwithmary/180805599710/exene-and-muriel-cervenka-backstage-at-the-whisky>

<sup>208</sup> Crispin Sartwell. “The Decline of Western Civilization; WE GOT THE NEUTRON BOMB: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk, by Marc Spitz with Brendan Mullen, Three Rivers Press: 296 pp., Paper DANCE OF DAYS: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation’s Capital, by Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins, Soft Skull Press: 420 pp.” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan 20, 2002.

<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/decline-western-civilization-we-got-neutron-bomb/docview/421861325/se-2>.

<sup>209</sup> Spitz. *We Got the Neutron Bomb*. 2001. p. 94

<sup>210</sup> See also “Los Angeles.” Track B1 on album *X(5) Los Angeles* by X /John Doe. Slash Records, 1980.

encounters with Heart and Cervenka, as detailed seven years earlier in her memoir, *Violence Girl: East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage : a Chicana Punk Story*:

Exene had an obnoxious little friend known as Farrah Fawcett Minor, a nickname she shared with Cheryl Ladd, who had been given the moniker after being selected as Farrah Fawcett Majors's replacement on the hit TV series *Charlie's Angels*. Exene's friend bore no resemblance to Cheryl Ladd; she was a short, dishwater blonde who dressed with no originality and showed up at parties to whisper about others. F. F. Minor was one those women who try to make themselves feel superior by claiming they aren't like ordinary girls, as though all women share an inherent weakness which she had managed to rise above. She was a racist, misogynist, anti-Semite, and a wimp. If she had ever had the gumption to look me in the eye while spewing her malice, I would have happily punched her in the face, but she spread her poison in backhanded, cowardly ways that allowed her to avoid standing up for what she said. I remember one time I was standing in the kitchen at a party when Farrah leaned over and whispered something to Exene about Mexicans. I heard the word *Mexican*, but I didn't hear anything else. She was looking in my direction, so I looked at her and said "What?" She looked away. "Did you say something to me?" I added.

"No, I was talking about something else," she replied. I stared hard at her until I made her uncomfortable enough that she left the kitchen. Years later, when I heard the X song *Los Angeles* (which is written about her) I remember thinking that the line "every Mexican who gave her a lot of shit" was about me.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Alice Bag. *Violence Girl: East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage: A Chicana Punk Story*. Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2011. pp. 222, 223



But while Bag's *We Were There* clearly exhibits all the characteristics of revised historical narrative—the act of consciously deciding what to leave in (or add in, in many cases) and what to leave out in support of a specific thesis—her testimony on early-scene racism in *Violence Girl* admirably exposes the stealth cowardice of systemic White supremacy. Indeed, her willingness to physically unmask its artifice exposes the cultural irony of imagining that Whiteness constitutes ethnicity, or unthinkably worse, supreme ethnicity. Her physical action should encourage other writers, including scholars, to diligently seek to dismantle the ambivalent, yet socially secure refuge of White supremacy, even if only by depriving it of its feigned, banal use of the lowercase “w.”

The title of R.C. Davila's 2016 doctoral dissertation not only shows that all L.A. punk rock histories represent a degree of revisionism, it also indicates at least one of the reasons why: "No hay Sólo un Idioma, No hay Sólo una Voz: A Revisionist History of Chicana/os and Latina/os in Punk." Borrowed from the lyrics to “Hardcoregoismo” by the all-Latino hardcore punk band Los Crudos—in English, the dual sentiment of the phrase translates to “More than one language/More than one voice.” Or literally, “There is not just one language/There is not just one voice.” The song continues with the idea that neither is there only one race, nor is there only one country (*Ni una raza/Ni un pais*).<sup>212</sup> This kind of language promotes the clear-eyed recognition of society's colorful and diverse ethnic makeup. Conversely, the contemporary rhetoric of racial colorblindness tritely champions such sayings as “There is only one race, the human race,” taking its message completely out of context and ultimately changing its original meaning.<sup>213</sup> Dr. Davila's 571-page book centers on the reality of racial multiplicity in American punk rock while arguing “against a singular notion of “Chicano punk,” in which all participants in predominantly Chicana/o and Latina/o punk scenes are assumed to hold similar motivations, objectives, ideologies, and aesthetic sensibilities.” In the abstract for “No hay Sólo un Idioma, No hay Sólo una Voz” the present-day research specialist at Michigan State University also cites the “importance of critically engaging

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<sup>212</sup> “Hardcoregoismo” Track 25 on Doble LP *Discografía* by Los Crudos. Lengua Armada Discos, 2008

<sup>213</sup> EDuKitchen. Interview with Jane Elliot: “There is Only One Race, the Human Race.” YouTube video 1:34:35, February 2023.

questions of race, class, nation, and power in punk's past and present." Moreover, recognizing the benefits of looking closely at several individual scenes, Davila's dissertation determined to show how discourses of race, among other important social factors, "shape Latina/o's relationships to punk at particular times and in particular places," thus, effectively laying the essential groundwork for arguing his case in "See No Colour, Hear No Colour, Speak No Colour: Problematizing Colourblindness in Los Angeles Punk Historiography" in 2019.<sup>214</sup>

Yet, despite the proliferation of discourses surrounding race and L.A. punk rock—generated by innumerable sources, including from within academia—we are left with an incomplete understanding as to Brendan Mullen's public rejection of Willie Herrón and Los Illegals. There are, however, a few conclusions we can draw based on the multitude of accepted punk sensibilities described by these same innumerable sources. One of these assumes the idea that a punk band's level of talent and musical chops, even if nonexistent, placed no bearing on their ability to procure bookings in L.A.'s early punk clubs.<sup>215</sup> The Germs, an eventual mainstay of Brendan Mullen's Club Masque, likely remain the most ubiquitous example of the practice (no pun intended) across the board in both public and academic L.A. punk historiography.<sup>216</sup> However, more tangible, historical events also serve to delegitimize Mullen's angle of attack alleging Los Illegal's lack of musical proficiency: "Sometimes a horrible rock band is just a horrible rock band, Willy, no matter which way you try to slice it with the race card."<sup>217</sup> The first of the Eastside scene to get picked up by a major label (A&M Records), Los Illegals co-produced their first album, *Internal Exile*, with the critically acclaimed record producer and revered guitarist for David Bowie's *Spiders from Mars*, Mick Ronson. Additionally, the band has been celebrated in the press both regionally and abroad. In fact, if anyone other than Mullen has cast the musicianship of Los Illegals in a negative light, this researcher has yet to locate that source.

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<sup>214</sup> Richard C. Davila. "No hay Sólo un Idioma, No hay Sólo una Voz: A Revisionist History of Chicana/os and Latina/os in Punk" (2016). Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository. 3532. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/3532>

<sup>215</sup> Spitz. *We Got the Neutron Bomb*. 2001. pp. 72-76. See also "Hector" and "Seal" p.10 in *We Were There*

<sup>216</sup> Spitz. *We Got the Neutron Bomb*. 2001. p.131

<sup>217</sup> Agustin Gurza. "L.A. punk history is a serious subject." *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 2008.

However, another sensibility, one more central to the established Hollywood punk aesthetic, and more pertinent to this study, rests on the foundation of “punk identity.”<sup>218</sup> It stresses that everyone, male or female, young (but not old), gay or straight, misfits of all skin tones found community among Hollywood’s first wave punk family provided they in no way elevated their own particular ethnic or racial background, or their sexual persuasion over being first, punk. Besides striking the very heart of this work’s thesis, a closer look at this cultural trait offers alternative insight as to the varying rationales that engineered the professional rift between Mullen and Herrón. Willie Herrón clearly showed his callous contempt for the unwritten rule during an interview with *Times* staff writer Agustin Gurza in 2008: “They weren’t flying the Chicano flag and we were.” “They” referenced “other Chicano bands [who] may have had an easier time by disguising their Chicanismo...” But Herrón’s next statement demonstrates the historical act(s) of breaking the established rite: “They [Westside punks] hated us because we were throwing it in their ...faces...”<sup>219</sup> His assertion supports as evidence the theory that neither colorblindness nor lack of it, but culture-blindness on the part of White, Westside punk rockers, directly engendered the tribalistic rivalry that *We Were There* alleges never transpired.

Gurza’s May 24<sup>th</sup> article, ‘L.A. punk history is a serious subject’ came as a follow up to the “bruising verbal brawl” that ensued after Mullen read the original account (May 10<sup>th</sup>) of the “Vexing: Female Voices” show in his column, *Culture Mix*.<sup>220</sup> It also came somewhat as a peace offering from Gurza to both Mullen and Herrón, one in which Gurza seemed satisfied was accepted by both. Giving equal voice to the two contenders, Gurza carefully laid out the battle lines of the argument beginning with “Herrón’s contention that he started the Vex because Chicano punk bands were shut out of the Hollywood club scene.” From Mullen: “I’m reacting basically because something that I stood for is being called racist by people who weren’t even there.” Critically, Gurza points out that the original article “never mentioned

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<sup>218</sup> Bag. *We Were There*, 2018. p.10

<sup>219</sup> Gurza. “L.A. punk history is a serious subject.” 2018

<sup>220</sup> Agustin Gurza. ‘Museum showcases female punk scene.’ *Los Angeles Times*. E12 May 10, 2008

race.” Here again in the follow-up article we find no mention of race from Herrón either, only cultural Chicanismo.

Brendan Mullen died about a year and a half after Gurza’s skillful exit from the feud that by then had already spanned decades. Yet all the points of Mullen’s argument are taken up again nearly a decade later in *We Were There*: that the early scene was not racially exclusive; that a rivalry did not exist between East and Westside punks; that the Vex was not started because Chicax bands could not get booked into Westside clubs; and, that the space called the Masque, including its owner, was not racially exclusive. Although many ethnic Mexican punk artists made up the early scene, most specifically considered themselves Hollywood or Westside punkers and claimed little connection with the later Eastside Vex scene; even those such as the Stains who hailed from Boyle Heights and stressed, “We were the first punk rockers in East L.A.!”<sup>221</sup> Additionally, this writer recounts the nonexistence of any ethnic Mexican Hollywood punk club or café owners until well after the early Hollywood scene, the given “roughly-two-year-period” prior to the 1980s as specified by Alice Bag.<sup>222</sup> But while the work of this study in no way seeks to historically record the level or absence of racism attached to a particular place and time, much less that belonging to any individual’s heart, the remembrance of the White, ethnic Scot club owner that closes out Gurza’s article vividly characterizes more of a cultural, rather than a racial disconnect in L.A.’s unique punk history:

Mullen says Chicanos were always a big part of the punk scene in all its manifestations, and a big reason for his success. Raised in Britain, Mullen admits he had lived here for four years before stepping foot in East L.A. He got his first barrio tour after Chicano friends challenged his racial attitudes. “It was Chicanos who corrected me -- a once dumb, real illegal immigrant from another country myself -- when I once made a stupid stereotyping

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<sup>221</sup> Razorcake Gorsky. “Eastside Punks Episode 3: Stains.” YouTube video 13:48. (6:28, 11:26-12:00).

<sup>222</sup> Bag. *We Were There*, 2018. p.2

statement in passing without realizing it,” writes Mullen...“Even more embarrassingly [and] inexcusably . . . I realized I’d never once been over the bridge before opening my trap. Thank God they forgave me at the same time as they expanded my learning about people.”<sup>223</sup>

Since we can rule out the idea that Willie and his Los Illegals did not somehow musically measure up, and if not for racist reasons, then why did Mullen reject Willie Herrón and his Los Illegals? The evidence derived from this chapter’s study again supports the main thesis of this entire project: the idea that the rift between Mullen and Herrón stemmed rather from L.A. White punk fear of ethnic cultural expression by some Eastside punk rockers, namely Herrón. Additionally, it is important to remember that in its genesis, the punk scene in Hollywood saw fewer acts than venues; while approaching the grave less than two years later, newer acts were coming out of the woodwork.<sup>224</sup> Mullen could at that point pick and choose those that made his stage. Naturally, he likely favored those who were there with him at the start, say perhaps, the “Chicanos who corrected” him, among others.

Regarding oral histories, Dr. Davila’s introduction for ‘No hay Sólo un Idioma, No hay Sólo una Voz’ footnotes a kind of disclaimer that parallels the findings of other oral history theorists.<sup>225</sup> He maintains that “...oral histories as accurate records of past events are constrained by the limits of memory, as well as the personal investments of those speaking in the way history is told.” To this he wisely adds, “As such, my inclusion of these transcripts should not be read as an endorsement of the accuracy of every statement made.”<sup>226</sup> However, Davila’s statement exhibits the potential for applying another meaning and use for James Wertsch’s declaration that “collective memory functions to provide a useable past for the creation of coherent individual and group identities.”<sup>227</sup> This writer sees the usability of L.A.

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<sup>223</sup> Gurza. “L.A. punk history is a serious subject.” 2018

<sup>224</sup> See John Doe’s testimony in Spitz. *We Got the Neutron Bomb*. 2001. p. 126

<sup>225</sup> Turrini. “Well I Don’t Care About History” 2013. p.60

<sup>226</sup> Davila. “No hay Sólo un Idioma, No hay Sólo una Voz.” 2016. pp. ix, x

<sup>227</sup> Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*. p.31, in Turrini. “Well I Don’t Care About History” 2013. p.60

punk's collective memory as fodder for cultural critique of their multiple communities. Additionally, because of the duly noted "limits of memory" in all oral histories, even its disseminators can no better endorse their accuracies than can scholarship. Ultimately, this writer is forced to leave the she said/he said of L.A. punk oral histories for sociologists and cognitive psychologists to determine their myriad individual and collective motivations of memory. Consequently, this chapter has focused more on where and when she said this or he said that in an effort to analyze the evolutionary memory of some of the scenes' participants. But, unfortunately, like the punk scrapbook *We Got the Neutron Bomb*, most L.A. punk oral records provide next to nothing on the "[w]ho exactly, and where?" as demanded by Mullen in arguing against the idea of racial exclusion in first wave punk.<sup>228</sup> Lastly, this chapter has spotlighted more of the inextricable linkage between cultural vs. spatial collective identity in L.A. punk.

Regarding *We Were There*, unlike Velasquez and her panel assume, I contend that White, first wave punks did not care at all whether they were—or appeared to be—conducive to race and gender equality. I attribute the greatest share of the social disconnect to ethnic cultural ignorance. In contrast to the "colorblindness" expressed by the panel (unfortunately, the same mindset recently commandeered and weaponized in current US politics) I further submit that it takes more than a trip or two across the river to initiate meaningful ethnic cultural rapport.<sup>229</sup> <sup>230</sup> Lastly, as part of this writer's own revisionist history of L.A. Chicano

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<sup>228</sup> Gurza. "L.A. punk history is a serious subject." 2018

<sup>229</sup> Michelle Habell-Pallán. "'Death to Racism and Punk Revisionism': Alice Bag's vexing voice and the unspeakable influence of Canción Ranchera on Hollywood Punk" in E. Weisbard (ed.), *Pop When the World Falls Apart: Music in the Shadow of Doubt*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. p.261

<sup>230</sup> "Colorblindness," as it is used today by White institution requires an overlooking of skin color, and an overlooking of the past that facilitates a kind of bait and switch scenario; one that offers feigned racial tolerance in exchange for quiet contentedness with the United States' past and current social structure. Much more than mere acceptance, the alternative involves seeing with eyes wide open—with admiration, validation, and embrace—the kaleidoscope of skin tones that represent the invaluable worth of People in our collective ethnic culture worldwide.

and Latinx punk, I respectfully offer an alternate subheading for page twenty-nine: Trade  
'Brendan Mullen's Ears Knew No Color' for 'Brendan Mullen's Ears Knew No Culture.'

## CHAPTER 5. ART VS. PROTEST: GENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF CULTURAL CHICANISMO INTO L.A. PUNK

During a heated exchange over ideology in literature, the ex-mentor shouted at his disenchanted protege, “All literature is protest!... You can’t name a single novel that isn’t protest,” to which the much younger of the two world-famous novelists bluntly replied, “Maybe so, but not all protest is literature.”<sup>231</sup> Why should it be considered important to trace the roots of Chicano Power in L.A. punk? Answer: Because not all aspects of Chicanismo represent nationalistic intent and purpose, e.g. the reality of the parallel, Chicanisma. Separating out the art from the protest and the alt-cultural from anticultural energies necessitates an historical investigation of Chicanismo in punk, at very least, east of the Los Angeles River.

So far, this inquiry represents the first to undertake the task. Until now attempts to historicize East L.A.’s predominantly Chicana punk scenes have mainly relied on race to analyze how punk rockers experienced the critical social relationship between identity and space. But beyond race, and even Chicanismo, this cultural critique maintains that other social maladies, including sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, classism, and generational standoff weighed as heavy on the minds of those who forged the often confusing and contradictory identities and attitudes that birthed L.A.’s unique punk aesthetics. Although the ideas of race and racism inherently pertain to both punk rock and Chicanismo, this study’s thesis points rather to L.A.’s cultural clash between dominant White society and ethnic Mexican culture to explain the recurring social rift between Westside and Eastside punk rock.

L.A.’s punk era differs from the city’s earlier expressions of popular music with their mixed ethnic musical collaborations. As early as proto-punk and garage rock, bands such as Cannibal and the Headhunters and the Premiers emerged all-Brown, while other groups such as The Starfires and The Syndicate presented all-White lineups. Here, it is also important to

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<sup>231</sup> James Baldwin. “Every Protest’s Novel” in Book: *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.



point out, as does Anthony Macías, that during the punk era, some formed non-East L.A. bands that featured one Chicana/o member, “such as The Weirdos (Cliff Roman), Black Flag (Anthony Martinez), The Deadbeats (Scott Guerin), Catholic Discipline (Robert Lopez), and the Bags.”<sup>232</sup> Additionally, two social energies that greatly impacted popular culture in Southern California, and far beyond, the hippy movement and El Movimiento (the Chicano Movement), rose and receded simultaneously—just before the punk movement took hold in Los Angeles. This removed Eastside punkers no more than a generation apart from cultural icons like American journalist Ruben Salazar, or the dubbed Father of Chicano music, Lalo Guerrero. However, evidence attained from research for this chapter demonstrates that over gender, race, sexuality, or any social movement, the idea of artistic creativity (D.I.Y.) mattered most to young Chicana punk rockers as they fought to make their mark in a scene that is still believed by many to be an all-White artform. Likewise, this chapter continues to illuminate various historical examples of the opposite persuasion within the dominant culture, namely that of many young White punk rockers and fans.

Youth represents the only cultural common denominator among punkers from both the east and west sides of the Los Angeles River. Unlike country music, punk rock falls in line with all other American popular music genres from jazz through rock ‘n’ roll in that it emerged in conjunction with a total rejection of the previous generation’s social values.<sup>233</sup> The prevailing attitude of ageism in punk rock explains the scant presence of older people (29 years of age and above), especially in the Hollywood scene, apart from club owners, radio personalities, and record, film, and fanzine producers.<sup>234</sup> It also accounts for L.A. punk

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<sup>232</sup> Anthony Macías. “Black and Brown Get Down: Cultural Politics, Chicano Music, and Hip Hop in Racialized Los Angeles” in Book, Brett Lashua, Karl Spracklen and Stephen Wagg. *Sounds and the City : Popular Music Place and Globalization*. Houndmills Basingstoke Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. 2014. p. 57

<sup>233</sup> Dr. Elwood Watson postulates that country music represents the only form of American popular music that reflects the nonexistence of ageism among both its creators and consumers. Cited in a graduate-level seminar on the history of rock ‘n’ roll at East Tennessee State University. September 12, 2023.

<sup>234</sup> Pleasant Gehman. “A Non-stop Crazy Party.” In book *Under the Big Black Sun: A Personal History of L.A. Punk*, edited by John Doe and Tom DeSavia, Boston: Da Capo Press, 2017. p. 47

rockers' disdain for hippies.<sup>235</sup> Whether in cognizant protest or otherwise, young L.A. punks refuted the failings of their parents' cultural symbol, "peace, love, and music" with a louder, faster, more violent form of rock music delineated by cultural symbols of their own including F.T.W. (nihilism/anarchy), and D.I.Y. fashion that often comprised of painful body piercings and swastikas.<sup>236</sup> They countered the chief symbol of the folk-inspired hippie movement—long hair—with spiked or butch, if not completely shaven, hair styles designed to instill fear and loathing among those contrary to L.A.'s exclusive punk aesthetic.<sup>237</sup> With the number of accounts detailing L.A. street fights between punks and hippies, this study has determined that hippies ranked high on the hate-list of L.A. punk in general. Closely trailing hippies on this presumed list were "poseurs," that is those of their peers who publicly exalted their own musicianship, and/or their professional connections with the record industry over other acts. followed by "spoiled rich kids."<sup>238</sup> But none of these outweighed the broad-ranging disdain for the old.

This suggests that for most scene contributors the idea of old encompassed much more than just "ugly old people," as per Eugene, the fourteen-year-old protagonist of Penelope Spheeris' 1981 film, *The Decline of Western Civilization*. And even beyond the White, male thirty-somethings that literally made or broke most L.A. punk acts, "old" embodied the most hated representation of the word: the old order. *What* was old mattered as much, or more than *who* was old. Countless testimonies by both White and Brown punk rockers (no matter the scene or wave) disclose their nihilistic pushback against all things institutional, ranging from religion and racism to corporation and classism, cap-stoned by the American rule of law.<sup>239</sup> Often mounted and outfitted in full riot-gear, complete with

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<sup>235</sup> See for instance "Margot" in Alice Bag. *We Were There: Voices from L.A. Punk's First Wave : an Oral History*. Los Angeles, California : Razorcake Press, 2018. p.10

<sup>236</sup> Venue Llama. 'Woodstock 1969: A Symbol of Peace, Love, and Music.' YouTube video 0:15. August 15, 2023

<sup>237</sup> Penelope Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization Part I*. 1981. Spheeris Films Inc., New Line Cinema. 1:40, (1:59). See also Chris Morris. *Los Lobos: Dream in Blue*. Austin: University of Texas Press. pp. 46, 47.

<sup>238</sup> Alice Bag. *We Were There: Voices from L.A. Punk's First Wave : an Oral History*. Los Angeles, California : Razorcake Press, 2018. pp.9, 10.

<sup>239</sup> Alice Bag. *Violence Girl: East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage: A Chicana Punk Story*. Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2011. pp. 128-129, 349-351

polycarbonate shields and billy clubs, the L.A.P.D. (Los Angeles Police Department) remains the utmost object of loathing for all of L.A. punkdom.<sup>240</sup>

Titled “I Totally Hate Cops to the Max,” chapter twenty-three of *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold story of L.A. Punk* by Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullen offers testimony by a dozen or so punk scenesters which detail the infamous “Saint Paddy’s Day Massacre, March 17, 1979 [at] the Elks Lodge police riot.” Some of these include Mullen himself, along with Mark and Shawn Stern, Keith Morris, Charlotte Caffey, Margot Olavarria (spelled Olaverra in the book), and Jane Wiedlin who stated, “There was no riot. The cops just came in slamming. They just started beating everyone up.”<sup>241</sup> At the same time, these accounts hardly make up the totality of first hand testimonies regarding the raid. (See, for example, Nicole Panter’s verification of the incident in this work’s first chapter.) Additionally, there are as many accounts by other L.A. punks, such as Henry Rollins of Black Flag and Mike Watt of the Minutemen, describing several other incidents of police brutality within the multiple punk scenes.

However, all these accounts suggest that because L.A. punk aesthetics represented no singular ideology beyond FTW (Queer vs. straight, ethnic vs. White, rich vs. poor, etc.), it was reverse ageism more than anything that drove the L.A.P.D.’s crackdown on punk’s new world order. Not all of punk rock’s youth, for example, rejected their parents’ social values. As Mike Watt put it, “Parents worried, but being working-class, the Minutemen never took on our parents—what the fuck was there to fight with them over, that they had too much?”<sup>242</sup> Additionally, while some scenesters relished their purported newfound gay and/or female liberation, some Westside acts incorporated homophobic and misogynistic antics into their shows.<sup>243</sup> Pushback against the categorically “hardcore” brand of punk can be appreciated in the lyrics of ‘Misogyny’ by Teresa Covarrubias, frontwoman for The Brat: a distinctly

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<sup>240</sup> War Wolf Spirit. ‘Henry Rollins-L.A. Cops: The John Macias Story.’ YouTube video, 28:44. September 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtM73JG1qL8>

<sup>241</sup> Marc Spitz, and Brendan Mullen. *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001. pp. 188-190

<sup>242</sup> Spitz. *We Got the Neutron Bomb*. 2001. p. 291

<sup>243</sup> Spheeris. *The Decline of Western Civilization Part I*. 1981. (1:27:00-1:37:00)

Eastside band that in many ways epitomized the antithesis to the nihilistic violence encouraged especially by groups formed in L.A.'s predominantly White, middle-class bedroom towns such as Torrance, San Pedro, and Hermosa Beach.<sup>244</sup> In other words, the focus of L.A. punk rock's protest was manifold and deeply divided, while youth in conjunction with the dawning of new musical crazes have historically represented the object of L.A.P.D. repression, from jazz through rock 'n' roll, hip hop, and beyond.<sup>245</sup>

In stark contrast to L.A.'s punk phenomenon, barely more than a decade earlier stood the grass-roots-yet-masterfully-organized, and doggedly unified Chicano Movement. From its first stirrings in 1962, *La Causa* amalgamated both young and old, female and male, Chicana/o and migrant Mexican (and other people of color, especially Filipino) farm workers alike under the banner of the USA's first United Farm Workers—the vision and subject of the supervision of its co-founders, Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez (1927-1993). The preamble for the organization's nascent constitution reads, “We the Farm Workers of America, have tilled the soil, sown the seeds and harvested the crops. We have provided food in abundance for the people in the cities, and the nation and world but have not had sufficient food to feed our own children.”<sup>246</sup>

Protest marked every turn of the UFW, from the earliest lettuce boycotts staged under its original designation NFWA (National Farm Workers of America) through the 1965-1970 Delano grape strikes in California (birthplace of *La Causa* movement) to the embattled strikers' convergence on Austin, Texas where they confronted Texas Rangers' violent strike-breaking tactics. The pushback leveled at the participants of these rallies and countless other protests spurred the fanning out of hundreds of grape strikers, union volunteers, and supporters across the US and Canada to organize the first international grape strike (1967-1970). The UFW's webpage states that in turn, “Millions of Americans rally to *La Causa*, the

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<sup>244</sup> “Misogyny” Track B4 on album *Straight Outta East L.A.* The Brat/Teresa Covarrubias. Re-release, RockBeat records. 2017.

<sup>245</sup> See, for example, the section outlining L.A.'s 1942-3 zoot suit riots in this work's second chapter, pp. 11-13.

<sup>246</sup> Library of Congress. *Research Guides*. ‘A Latinx Resource Guide: Civil Rights Cases and Events in the United States/1962: United Farm Workers Union.’ <https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/united-farm-workers-union>

farm workers' cause."<sup>247</sup> However, the private institutions of US vegetable growers, in their goals of squelching the UFW movement, did not represent the only source of resistance to La Causa. Multiple government agencies, such as the many police forces amassed to enforce the demands of the growers' widely supported political lobby, were also included.

According to the UFW, during the Spring and Summer of 1962, a "strike and boycott of the DiGiorgio Fruit Corp. (the fictional Gregorio Fruit Corp. in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*) forced the grape growers to agree to an election among its workers. The company [brought] in the Teamsters union to oppose Chavez's NFWA." Meanwhile, this same period also saw the merger of the NFWA with the Filipino American-centered AWOC (Agricultural Workers Organization Committee) to form the UFW, which soon procured full affiliation with the national labor federation, AFL-CIO. But although the DiGiorgio strikes of the early nineteen-sixties ended with the employees' (of the largest fruit processing and packing enterprise in the nation) ratification of the UFW's contract, this was not the last time the UFW jostled with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Only this time (August 2, 1973) their clashes amounted to a war that ironically pitted organized labor against organized labor, and one that ultimately documented warlike casualties, as per the UFW's historical timeline:

**Spring-summer 1973**—When the UFW's three-year grape contracts come up for renewal, growers including the E&J Gallo winery sign sweetheart pacts with the Teamsters without an election or any representation procedure. That sparks a bitter months-long strike by grape workers in California's Coachella and San Joaquin valleys. Some 3,500 nonviolent strikers are arrested for violating anti-picketing injunctions, many of which are later overturned as unconstitutional, hundreds of strikers are beaten, dozens are shot and

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<sup>247</sup> United Farm Workers. *UFW Chronology*. Copyright 2023, United Farm Workers. All rights reserved. <https://ufw.org/research/history/ufw-chronology/> Incidentally, this writer's immediate family—single mother and siblings—should be counted among those millions.

two are murdered. In response to the violence, Chavez calls off the strike and begins a second grape boycott. Once again, strikers, union staff and volunteers spread out to cities across North America, organizing popular support for the boycotts of table grapes, lettuce and Gallo wine.<sup>248</sup>

Nationwide media coverage of the event presented the news story quickly but with varying details according to each outlet's varying degree of sympathy for organized labor, or for La Causa. For example, on the following day (August 3) the *New York Times* reported multiple clashes between striking pickets on one side and Teamsters reinforced by Tulare County sheriff's deputies on the other. But the article makes no mention of the strikers' nonviolence. Additionally, it reduces the otherwise-reported thousands of arrested pickets to hundreds, nor is there any reference to the "hundreds of strikers...beaten." Worse, when the writer describes "the cause of most concern...an outbreak of shooting that began late yesterday," he cites a Sheriff's department report that claimed, "a farm picket had been shot," yet he offers no details as to the striker's condition after the shooting, or whether he survived; only that "during the same attack several bullets had also pierced the car of a free-lance photographer from San Francisco. The photographer was not injured. In all, the sheriff's department said that about a dozen shots had been fired."<sup>249</sup> If the sheriff's report is accurate, then each of the "about a dozen shots" fired would have had to pierce at least two pickets, killing two, in order for it to line up with the UFW's chronicle.

Besides the external detractors La Causa faced, the movement also struggled internally. According to a December 1981 *New York Times* article, "The rancor within the farm union first broke into the open in September in a dispute in which 50 dissident delegates from the Salinas Valley walked off the floor of a union convention in Fresno amid shouts of 'traitor' from supporters of Mr. Chavez." The former UFW officials alleged that their dismissals from positions of leadership stemmed from the notion that "the union hierarchy has

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<sup>248</sup> United Farm Workers. *UFW Chronology*, 2023.

<sup>249</sup> Earl Caldwell. 'Picket Shot, Many More Arrested in Grape Strike.' *New York Times*, p.29, August 3, 1973.

become preoccupied with what it regards as clandestine plots hatched by elements trying to destroy the union,” adding that Chavez “vehemently denied” their claims.<sup>250</sup>

However the historical record clearly shows that the element(s) most despised by the dissenters, in fact, boiled down to a single element: *Feminismo*, and centered on the singular elemental force who most threatened their power base within the organization: *La feminista* Dolores Huerta. Softspoken and unassuming, Chavez knew that Huerta remained the source of the union’s numerous triumphs and that she was the best hope for the future of La Causa. He trusted her to bullhorn the realities of farmworkers’ dismal existence, not just to the growers and competing unions, but to the United States’ highest political offices and to the world. Referring to Huerta seated beside him, Chavez told one interviewer “...she’s the leader of the union...” But the context of the exchange between Chavez and the interviewer perhaps best reflects one of the most structurally engrained social tenets of the Mexican motherland—patriarchy—generationally transmitted and cogently infused into especially the male Mexican American persona via cultural chicanismo:

Chavez: One of the things that was very helpful in the beginning was that Dolores being out there made it alright for women to be in the picket line. So, it made it alright for the husbands to permit their wives to be on the picket line; their daughters, their mothers and so forth...

Interviewer: Cesar, you represent a culture that says the woman must be protected at all cost. Yet you take Dolores right out to the picket line, right out into the demonstration. Do you ever worry about her life?

Chavez: We worry, sure. There are some situations that are very dangerous, but she’s the leader of the union, and those are the risks that have to be taken.<sup>251</sup>

Chavez’ uncanny foresight rang true in 1988 when at 58, Huerta suffered at least two broken ribs and a ruptured spleen at the hands of the San Francisco Police Department.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Wayne King. ‘Chavez Faces External and Internal Struggles.’ *The New York Times*. Dec. 6, 1981. Section 1, page 1

<sup>251</sup> Peter Bratt. PBS Films ‘Dolores’ *Independent Lens*. 1:35: 39. March 27, 2018.

<sup>252</sup> Dan Morain. ‘Police Batons Blamed as UFW Official Is Badly Hurt During Bush S.F. Protest.’ *Los Angeles Times*. Friday, Sep. 16, 1988. p. 3

Huerta had led her contingent (of about 1000) to the Bay City specifically in peaceful protest of then Republican-presidential-nominee George H.W. Bush's political support for California growers and total rejection of the UFW, including their seemingly endless grape strike, precisely as did his Republican predecessors Reagan and Nixon.<sup>253</sup> According to the *Los Angeles Times*, "[Huerta's] injuries were caused by a baton-wielding police officer outside the St. Francis Hotel," where "Bush was holding a \$1,000-a-plate fund raiser..." Additionally, Mayor Art Agnos, Huerta's longtime friend and political ally, declared his desire "to know the exact cause of any police incident that results in someone being injured, whether or not that person is well-known."<sup>254</sup> Like the *L.A. Times*, in San Francisco the *Chronicle* reported that Agnos visited the 58-year-old grandmother and union vice-president in the hospital, but they also accounted for her state in the aftermath affirming that Huerta was under sedation and was in fair condition after doctors at San Francisco General Hospital performed emergency surgery to remove her spleen and treated two broken ribs. They additionally quoted Agnos in saying that he doubted that the 5-foot-2-inch Huerta who weighs 110 pounds resisted police, and, after he had reviewed video footage of the incident "with Chief Jordan," that "We could see she was being very cooperative... We could even read her lips, saying I'm moving!"<sup>255</sup> During her protracted recovery, Huerta's absence from leadership of the union weighed heavily on Chavez. Upon her return Chavez reportedly renewed his commitment to Huerta, expressing thanks to her for their partnership, her honesty, and for keeping him honest throughout the years.<sup>256</sup>

Indeed, as chief negotiator, no one secured more contract benefits for farmworkers than Huerta.<sup>257</sup> These included yearly pay raises, paid vacations, and other fringe benefits, the most important—insurance and a good medical plan—all barely dreamed of by most of the

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<sup>253</sup> Bratt. PBS Films 'Dolores,' 2018. (57:32-59:10)

<sup>254</sup> Morain. 'Police Batons Blamed...' *Los Angeles Times*, 1988. p.3

<sup>255</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*. Sept 16, 1988. Retrieved from SFGate/Johnny Miller. 'Dolores Huerta hurt at protest. Sept. 16, 1988' *SFGate*. Sept. 12, 2013. <https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/dolores-huerta-hurt-at-protest-sept-16-1988-4809592.php>

<sup>256</sup> Bratt. PBS Films 'Dolores,' 2018. (1:16:15)

<sup>257</sup> Note: three-year term contracts.



pickers in the preceding years. She spearheaded the fight against the deadly use of pesticides in the fields and in 1972 saw DDT banned in the US for her efforts. Ever the community builder, she worked tirelessly, day and night, to reverse the legacy of the farmworker as outlined in the union's preamble. And by all accounts her work saw that goal realized, albeit temporarily. Yet despite her seniority, her loyalty and dedication to La Causa, Huerta did not succeed Chavez as union president after his death in 1993. Not only Huerta but many others directly attribute her rejection by the male UFW leadership to her gender. Calling it "machismo," as did Huerta in one interview, is really just a nicer way of saying sexism; and the UFW's executive board was rife with sexists. They resented her myriad achievements and would not bear to have Cesar Chavez' legacy overshadowed by a woman, much less be subject to one themselves. From then on they began to push her out, and in 2002 Dolores resigned, stepped out of the public spotlight, opting for an intensely private life; the same one that she continues to lead today at age ninety-three.<sup>258</sup> Via ballads, folktales, children's books, and television, both Chavez and Huerta transmitted at least three facets of Chicano Power to descendant East L.A. punk: catolicismo, machismo, and feminisma.

However, the saddest chapter in the history of the UFW may well be the one they began after turning the page on Dolores Huerta. A 2016 article by Miriam Pawel for the *Los Angeles Times* questions the UFW's protection of Chavez' legacy, whether it focuses on his championing of farmworkers' civil rights, or ultimately, his descendants' financial legacy. She wrote:

Today a Times investigation has found, Chavez's heirs run a web of tax-exempt organizations that exploit his legacy and invoke the harsh lives of farmworkers to raise millions of dollars in public and private money...Most of the funds go to burnish the Chavez image and expand the family business, a multi-million-dollar enterprise with an annual payroll of \$12 million that includes a dozen Chavez relatives. The UFW is the linchpin of the Farm

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<sup>258</sup> Bratt. PBS Films 'Dolores,' 2018. (1:03:00-1:05:20)

Worker Movement, a network of a dozen...organizations that do business with one another, enrich friends and family, and focus on projects far from the fields...

Worse, according to Pawel, “The current UFW leaders have jettisoned other Chavez (and Huerta (my emphasis)) principles:”

The UFW undercut another union to sign up construction workers, poaching on the turf of building trade unions that once were allies.

The UFW forfeited the right to boycott supermarkets and stores, a tactic Chavez pioneered, in order to sign up members in unrelated professions.

And Chavez’s heirs broke with labor solidarity and hired nonunion workers to build the \$3.2-million National Chavez Center around their founder’s grave in the Tehachapi Mountains, a site they now market as a tourist attraction and rent out for weddings.

This, while in Carlsbad—according to the investigation—transient farmworkers annually set up squalor camps, some burrowing into hillsides and covering their shelters with tree branches to avert the gaze of multimillion dollar homeowners. They lived without clean drinking water, toilets, and refrigeration. Pawel adds that at a larger camp to the south in Del Mar, “farmworkers wash their clothes in a stream, bathe in the soapy water, then catch crayfish that they boil for dinner.” Pawel quotes UFW president (since his father-in-law Chavez’ death in 1993) Arturo Rodriguez as saying “Man, it’s sad down there,” adding, “Yet his union has done nothing to help.” Regarding legacy, Pawel writes that “[in] the fields the only Cesar Chavez many farmworkers have heard of is the famous Mexican boxer.”<sup>259</sup> Regarding Huerta’s legacy, a perusal of the UFW’s own chronology page reveals her virtual erasure from the history of the movement with its single reference to her as having (along with “others”) joined him later.<sup>260</sup>

Within the multi-interpreted historiography of the Chicana/o movement, the concept of identity—both cultural and spatial—and the struggles associated with its attainment, remains

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<sup>259</sup> Miriam Pawel. “Farmworkers Reap Little as Union Strays From Its Roots,” *Los Angeles Times*. Sunday, Jan. 8, 2006.

<sup>260</sup> United Farm Workers. *UFW Chronology*, 2023.

its defining factor. The theme of identity interweaves every aspect of the movement's birth, its existence, and its present interpretation. Award-winning American journalist Ruben Salazar put it in its simplest terms by writing for the *Los Angeles Times* that Mexican American youth came to embrace a non-Anglo image of themselves.<sup>261</sup> This is to say that through their refusal to assimilate, Chicana youth formed their own cultural world views: views that countered racist, classist, and legal oppression of ethnic minorities while promoting civil rights and ethnic community empowerment. Unlike the labor movement, while El Movimiento did have many adult encouragers, youth represented the foremost protagonists of the urban campaign, with public protest being their main vehicle for effecting social change.

Although sociologists, historians, and general advocates of the US Civil Rights movement agree that most anti-war protests were led by students, some may have overlooked the fact that on August 29, 1970, in East L.A., Chicana/o youth (mostly student activists) staged the largest peaceful, anti-war protest ever held by a racial minority.<sup>262</sup> But the significance of that distinction lies with the many-layered focus of their contention with the war in Vietnam. First and foremost, the national Chicano Moratorium protested against the disproportionate numbers of Mexican Americans drafted into the war. This, of course, led directly to their unequal and unjust number of casualties sustained during the conflict. But with uncanny insight they also made the connection between the war and disparities in public education, including systematic exclusion from higher education, and high unemployment rates among Mexican Americans, which also contributed to Mexican American deaths in Vietnam at twice the rate of any other group.<sup>263</sup> This national moratorium represented the culmination of many Chicano moratoriums previously conducted around the United States,

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<sup>261</sup> Ruben Salazar. "Who Is a Chicano? And What Is It the Chicanos Want?," *Los Angeles Times*. Feb. 6, 1970

<sup>262</sup> The 20,000-30,000-strong Chicano Moratorium was also made up of many other Latinx advocacy groups and organizations from around the nation, along with local contingencies such as the Brown Berets and MELA—Mothers of East L.A.

<sup>263</sup> Library of Congress. *Research Guides*. "A Latinx Resource Guide: Civil Rights Cases and Events in the United States/1970 National Chicano Moratorium." <https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/national-chicano-moratorium>

and well displays the idea that “there was no single Chicano Movement but instead a composite of movements committed to the same goal of Chicano self-determination.”<sup>264</sup>

Whatever successes young Angelenos may or may not have achieved for their efforts in the creation and execution of the Chicano Moratorium, they gained an iconic champion of the movement through its events and the events of its aftermath. Chief of these, Ruben Salazar (1928-1970), was slain when an L.A. County sheriff’s deputy fired tear gas canisters into a Whittier Boulevard cafe that he had stopped into with his KMEX camera crew for a beer and break from his most recent (re)assignment as the *Times*’ senior news correspondent to L.A.’s Chicano affairs. He was dead on impact, with one of the projectiles squarely passing through the center of his cranium at the left temple, according to the coroner’s report.<sup>265</sup> Salazar was not the only one killed in the onslaught besides the many hundreds wounded and detained.

Film footage of the Moratorium shows Latinx families from all backgrounds peacefully relaxing, enjoying the parade, dinner on the ground, and ethnic Mexican music in a festival-like manner, when terror struck the crowd as they suddenly noticed themselves being surrounded by hundreds of personnel from area law enforcement agencies, fully outfitted in tactical riot gear. The police quickly commenced to dispersing the crowd, firing tear gas canisters and randomly beating individuals of all ages with their night sticks. One frame shows a young woman attacked from behind, struck across her back by an officer who left her crumpled in a pile on the field at Laguna Park before pursuing his next target. Another young woman stated:

Well, I was gassed along with thousands of other Chicanos-Chicanas. I was in the restroom with little children that were there, they were very scared, they were crying. Their mother had never seen such a thing. She never thought something like that would ever occur. She thought she would be safe, you

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<sup>264</sup> Mario T. García and Ellen McCracken (eds.) *Rewriting the Chicano Movement: New Histories of Mexican American Activism in the Civil Rights Era*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. 2021. Back cover

<sup>265</sup> José Angel de la Vera, "1970 Chicano Moratorium and the Death of Ruben Salazar," in Manuel P. Servin, ed., *An Awakened Minority: Mexican Americans Beverly Hills*: Glencoe Press, 1974. p.274

know, seeing that it was made clear that it was going to be a legal and peaceful demonstration. A tear gas canister [was fired] into the restroom and the children were gassed along with the adults and other people that were there.<sup>266</sup>

Other video footage clearly demonstrates that the later inquest, supposedly held to determine liability for Salazar's death, was flipped on its ear, with the office of the District Attorney's line of questioning turning it into an indictment of the moratorium and functioning in fact as defense attorneys for the Sheriff's Department. The inquest officer Norman Pittluck, for example, questioned the photographs taken by Raul Ruiz of *La Raza* magazine who was outside the Silver Dollar Café when Salazar was murdered, noting that some of the demonstrators carried signs bearing the name Che. In an attempt to label participants of the moratorium "subversive," he asked Ruiz, "Is that Castro's man?" Ruiz responded, "Che Guevara was a great hero to the people of Latin America. He struggled against oppression and injustice." The courtroom filled with Mexican Americans cheered wildly.

Later the County Sheriff, Peter Pitchess, testified that there was "absolutely no misconduct on the part of the deputies involved or in the procedures they followed." Pittluck submitted that "the moratorium was an unruly mob determined to do violence," and furthermore that the Sheriff's deputies "were there only to protect the community and restore law and order."<sup>267</sup> The number of testimonies, printed in hundreds of newspapers, magazines, and aired on radio and television, contradicting those who had the power to serve justice but did not are innumerable. Beyond these, there are many more that decry the White socially-accepted systemic police violence perpetrated against Mexican Americans of all ages and socio-political classes, not just in L.A. or California, but nationwide. For example, after his arrest at the moratorium while trying to mediate a truce between the police and angry Chicana/o demonstrators, Dr. Rodolpho Acuña, founder of Chicana/o studies at California State University, told the New York Times: "The cops don't want peace. It doesn't matter

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<sup>266</sup> Chimalli Media/Brand Mex Media. "Requiem 29: The Chicano Moratorium" YouTube video 31:12 October 2013. (10:55-11:34)

<sup>267</sup> Requiem 29; de la Vera, "Chicano Moratorium." p.274,75

whether you have a Ph.D. or anything else. You're still a greaser to them. It's suicide to even try to talk to them." In the same article, Manuel Aragón, former director of the Los Angeles Anti-Poverty Program, stated, "The police have adopted the policy of pre-emptive strike. They see the organization and militancy that's developing in this community and they are determined not to let it get as strong as the black movement has become."<sup>268</sup>

Many protesters of mixed-Anglo and other European descent also joined the multi-platformed fight for Chicana/o self-determination. For example, on September 16, one young school teacher, Mrs. Jewel Mehlman, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "I marched with such varied peaceniks as UMAS, MAPA, MECHA, LUCHA, the Brown Berets...etc....with people from Chicago, New York, Puerto Rico, Texas, Arizona, and from all over California."<sup>269</sup> This raises questions concerning the legacy of protest and police brutality generationally handed down to White L.A. punk. The age of most Hollywood/Westside punkers at the time of the national moratorium would have ranged from between about nine to fourteen. Evidence from research conducted for this chapter suggests that because of the cultural, spatial, and educational disconnect between White and Brown (and Black) Los Angeles, children raised in ethnic Mexican homes profoundly absorbed the negative social effects of the Chicano civil rights movement, in contrast to the nearly negligible emotional impacts it made on most White kids. Yet, at the same time, there remains enough evidence to demonstrate the fact that some of the Anglo kids who matured into L.A.'s regional punk rockers also developed a social consciousness that recognized and pushed back against White America's institutional brutality, which attacks, maims, kills, incarcerates, and suppresses groups that do not line up with its unbending system for law and order in the name of the USA. These include women, all people of color, LGBTQ communities, alt-political affiliation (including communists), and most pertinent to this study, punks of all ethnic descents, anarchistic or otherwise. Consider

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<sup>268</sup> Stephen V. Roberts. "Mexican-American Hostility Deepens in Tense East Los Angeles." *New York Times*. Sept. 4, 1970. p. 20

<sup>269</sup> William J. Drummond. "How East L.A. Protest Turned Into Major Riot." *Los Angeles Times*. Sept. 16, 1970. p.1  
UMAS-United Mexican American Students, MAPA-Mexican American Political Association, MEChA-Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlan, LUCHA- La Unión Chicana por Aztlán

the testimony of Henry Rollins—the longest running frontman for Black Flag, L.A.’s notorious pioneers of hardcore punk—who, speaking about the United States, once said, “...It’s a tragic American fact, we kill people; we ruin peoples’ lives...”<sup>270</sup>

At just forty-two years of age at the time of his death, Salazar left behind a wife and three children. And although he did not consider himself a Chicano, a Chicano activist, or even a Civil Rights activist, his assassination propelled his image to canonized sainthood before a young Chicana/o nation.<sup>271</sup> To these he handed down a legacy of protest against America’s racial and ethnic discrimination through its institutions, i.e. the US military and selective service, criminal justice, economics, education, employment, and racialized city planning in Los Angeles. Additionally, Salazar represents another direct, generational transmitter of Chicanismo clear into the L.A. punk scene via memory.<sup>272</sup> Artistically, the evolution of his legacy can also be appreciated through listening to the many *corridos* (ethnic Mexican ballads), reading the poems and other literature, and viewing the visual art, that have all been created in his honor.<sup>273</sup> But whether recognized by ethnic Mexicans throughout the Americas or not, Salazar also illuminated internal, generational conflict specific to the 1960s and ‘70s Chicano Movement.

Born in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, Salazar’s work as a Chicano affairs news correspondent afforded him a unique perspective as to Chicana rejection of traditional Mexican values. In March of 1970, when reporting on one of the several precursory Chicano moratoriums, Salazar wrote that “Chicanos and traditional-minded Mexican-Americans are suffering from the ever-present communications gap. Traditionalists, more concerned with the, to them, chafing terms like Chicano, are not really listening to what the activists are

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<sup>270</sup> War Wolf Spirit. “Henry Rollins-L.A. Cops: The John Macias Story.” YouTube video, 28:44. September 2017. (00:01-00:10) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rxd61BAFjY>

<sup>271</sup> Ruben Salazar and Mario T. Garcia. *Border Correspondent: Selected Writings, 1955-1970*. p.8

<sup>272</sup> Razorcake Gorsky. “Eastside Punks Episode 3: Stains,” YouTube video. 13:48. October 2020. (0:45-0:56) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-u-H5u4fUsY>. See also, Alice Bag. *Violence Girl: East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage: A Chicana Punk Story*. Port Townsend, Washington: Feral House, 2011. pp. 69, 70.

<sup>273</sup> See, for example, “Homenaje a Ruben Salazar” by Lalo Guerrero; “La Tragedia del 29 de Agosto” by Mark Guerrero; “Ruben Wrote for Justice” by Norma Landa Flores; and the graphic art of Frank Romero, “Death of Ruben Salazar.”

saying.” But in allowing equal space for generational expression he adds: “And the activists forget that tradition is hard to kill.” Quoting Mexican poet-essayist-diplomat Octavio Paz, Salazar divulges some of Old Mexico’s culturally entrenched social expectations for masculine expression. According to Paz, the (male) “Mexican builds a wall of indifference and remoteness between reality and himself, a wall that is no less impenetrable for being invisible. The Mexican is always remote, from the world and from other people. And also from himself.” To Salazar, this raised a question: “Is it any wonder, then, that the more conservative Mexican-Americans—and there are many of them—are embarrassed and angered at Chicanos...who say they don't want to fight the war in Vietnam and *Catolicos* (Catholics) who are questioning the church and the world about them?” While Paz theorizes that the (male) “Mexican wears his face as a mask and believes that opening oneself up is a weakness or a betrayal,” Salazar concurs by providing context with the movement: “The Chicano activists are trying to rid themselves of their masks and to open themselves to themselves and to others. It is significant that in doing this they should pick as a means the Vietnam war and the Catholic Church.”

Salazar relates the disproportionate number of Mexican American Medal of Honor awardees and, along with Blacks, their disproportionate number of deaths in Vietnam, in part, to “the machismo traditions, and that when called to war, Mexican-Americans showed everyone how ‘macho’ or manly they were and never questioned the justification for the war.” Yet some of the most revealing testimony on Chicane rejection of traditional Mexican social values in Salazar’s article comes from one young male marcher who stated, “We weren't shedding our machismo. We were proving our machismo by asking the establishment the tough question: ‘Why are we dying overseas when the real struggle is at home?’”<sup>274</sup>

For many Chicane punk rockers in Los Angeles, the idea of “home,” with all its cultural and spatial complexities, often amounted to more than just a place to lay their head at night. Some, like Alice Bag, seeking escape, in part, from the abuses of Mexican traditionalism (such as the paternalistic machismo and distinctly Catholic religiosity

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<sup>274</sup> Ruben Salazar. ‘Chicanos vs. Traditionalists’ *Los Angeles Times*. Friday March 6, 1970. p.45



displayed by the farmworkers movement), bolted at a very young age, preferring to assume home and family within a burgeoning artform, L.A. punk's first wave in Hollywood.<sup>275</sup> However, because of US American youth's callowness of ethnic culture, some newcomers to L.A. punk, such as Teresa Covarrubias, undoubtedly encountered more trouble finding a home in the Westside scene that, according to her and many others, had changed for the worse with its later infusion of nihilistic-skinhead and hardcore elements. Over the decades since the late 1970s and early '80s, Covarrubias and her band, perhaps, have best explained the cultural disconnect between West and Eastside punk sensibilities, and why White, Westside punk, at least, "had no respect" for the Chicana art community east of the river; the one that centered on the Vex at Self Help Graphics.<sup>276</sup>

One account by Covarrubias speaks to the heart not only of this work's entire thesis—in that it additionally reflects White corporate America's indifference toward, and exploitation of, ethnic culture—but also of the main argument of this chapter that either Chicanismo or protest mattered less to most Eastside bands than did artistic expression:

Things started turning bad for the band as soon as we hooked up with management...It started to erode, the creativity, the genuineness of the band started to erode. I look at it mostly as being manipulated by management. So they were trying to cater to these A&R people. And so what they ended up doing was like manipulating the music, and trying to do things to the music to make it more sellable to the ears of people. So they had this big client that they were going to play this tape to the A&R people. So what management did is they got like a fleet of lowriders, drove them over to Capitol, put them into the lowriders and then drove them around Hollywood listening to the demo, you know. And for me was like, you know what?...this is bullshit. Really just kind

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<sup>275</sup> Alice Bag. *Violence Girl: East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage: A Chicana Punk Story*. Port Townsend, Washington: Feral House, 2011. pp. 95, 108-09, 128-9, 231.

<sup>276</sup> Teresa Covarrubias and Tom DeSavia. 'Starry Nights in East LA.' In Book *Under the Big Black Sun: A Personal History of L.A. Punk*, edited by John Doe and Tom DeSavia, Boston: Da Capo Press, 2017. p. 118. See also Alice Bag. *We Were There: Voices from L.A. Punk's First Wave: an Oral History*. Los Angeles, California: Razorcake Press, 2018. p. 26.

of like wanting to expand, maybe?.. the idea of what a Chicano is, beyond this...and there's these guys playing up that image again, you know?<sup>277</sup>

Elsewhere Covarrubias called the incident “so embarrassing” and “probably the saddest day my musical life;” that management’s cultural stereotyping “had nothing to do with us,” and further that, “It makes me cringe to this day.”<sup>278</sup> But at the same time, other testimony by The Brat testifies to what *did* have to do with them.

In a video collage featuring The Brat’s former members, Rudy Medina stated that, “they [the Eastside community] were all into the arts, and painting, and murals, and it got us more into thinking more creatively, more artistically, but it really formed like a bond, all that creative community.” Covarrubias followed with: “All these different creative things coming together. It wasn’t just the music. There were poets there. There were artists there. It was just one big community and it just felt like this pivotal point.”<sup>279</sup> In John Doe’s *Under the Big Black Sun*, Covarrubias offered, “The collaboration between musicians and these artists was what made the East LA scene unique.” And also that “Although there were others [Mexican American punkers] who were part of the LA/Hollywood punk scene of 1977, few if any really embraced their East LA roots. East LA was the place you ran away from to find others who shared your interests.”<sup>280</sup> This statement may in one sense corroborate Willie Herrón’s cry to Agustín Gurza, “They weren’t flying the Chicano flag and we were,” as cited in chapter three of this work. But in another way it may also illuminate the differences between Covarrubias’ cultural arts and community based Chicanismo as opposed to male-centered Chicano nationalism.

However, because of the context of Herrón’s declaration, readers should not be led to question his foundational commitment to East L.A.’s multi-faceted cultural arts scene, with his visual and mural artistry predating his punk-musical outlet. Nor should we necessarily take

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<sup>277</sup> RazorcakeGorsky. ‘Eastside Punks, Episode 2: The Brat.’ YouTube video, 9:20. October 2020. (6:10-7:20) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97Y7sBVWkI0>

<sup>278</sup> Teresa Covarrubias and Tom DeSavia. ‘Starry Nights in East LA.’ In Book *Under the Big Black Sun: A Personal History of L.A. Punk*, edited by John Doe and Tom DeSavia, Boston: Da Capo Press, 2017. p. 120.

<sup>279</sup> RazorcakeGorsky. ‘Eastside Punks, Episode 2: The Brat,’ 2020. (3:40-4:07)

<sup>280</sup> Covarrubias ‘Starry Nights in East LA,’ 2017. p. 116.

it to mean that he and the balance of the L.A. Chicano renaissance was in any way dismissive of Chicanisma, the female quintessence of its birth and vitality. Besides co-founding the Vex, culturally and geographically set apart from Hollywood—which, according to Covarrubias, boasted a core of bands that included Herrón’s Los Illegals, Los Lobos, Thee Undertakers, The Odd Squad, The Stains, and The Brat—he also cofounded the multi-media arts collective, Asco. The fact that Herrón also cofounded Los Illegals in the late 1970s with bassist Jesus “Xiuy” Velo and guitarist brothers Manuel and Tony Valdez only added to Asco’s punk image and L.A.’s entire punk aesthetics that Asco’s street performance, graffiti and mural art, photography, journalism, and literature—had created in East L.A. years before actual punk rock music even existed—anywhere.

But why did the four original members name their art collective “Asco,” which roughly translates in English to “nausea” or “disgust,” or the uncontrollable urge to vomit? In one interview, Patssi Valdez candidly remembers, “...we hung a show and we looked around the room, the four of us, and we thought, oh my god, this work gives us *asco*.” However, as honest and humorous as Valdez’ explanation is, Harry Gamboa Jr.’s response to the question provides useful cultural insight as to what it meant to grow up in East Los Angeles during the 1950s and 1960s: “there was a lot to be nauseated about.” He keenly states that “even the usage of the term *asco*, of inverting it and making it into a positive term...was very much like the term ‘Chicano,’ for instance, that had been a very negative term that was sort of inverted and inserted back into society with positive attributes...” Gronk (Glujio “Gronk” Nicandro) informs us that in Asco’s youth, even the word Chicano was a new term. And that, “...at the time... we embraced a new word because I think one of the mottos of Asco was, if it’s new, I like it.”<sup>281</sup>

The word “new” perhaps best explains Asco’s foremost influence on the evolution of L.A. punk rock. Robert Lopez\*, of the first wave L.A. punk band the Zeros, and who self-identifies as both Mexican American and Gay, has been quoted in numerous sources claiming

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<sup>281</sup> Nottingham Contemporary. ‘The Asco interviews.’ YouTube video. 25:29, October 2014. (2:40-3:53) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyFVIWGU06I>

that “The roots of punk is glitter” aka glitter rock, or glam.<sup>282</sup> Gronk embodies all of these proto-punk elements. Patssi Valdez remembers that she met Gronk when she was about seventeen years of age. He was doing a performance at a park called “cockroaches have no friends.” She says that “my mom would be driving me around the neighborhood, and all of a sudden I would see this guy sitting like on a curbside wearing like a glitter top and jeans, and I mean [I was] like who is... who is that?”<sup>283</sup> Early on, outlandish dress (and costume) signified all four members of Asco’s physical appearances, not only for street performances but for social events as well. Gamboa said that “the glitter of the era allowed us to constantly take chances.” He added that in performance it was commonplace to see Willie wearing makeup and baby clothes, Gronk wearing “some kind of crazy costume and Patssi wearing big, enormous hats, and I used to walk around wearing [painted on] yellow eyebrows.” And further, “...to show up somewhere, and so transforming any event into a performance, and to see how people would respond. And it wasn’t always pleasant. Sometimes it made things more exciting.”<sup>284</sup> On that note, one anecdote by Willie Herrón speaks to the heart of this chapter’s thesis, and well typifies the separation between East L.A. art and pachuco street culture within the same Chicano barrios:

Well, I think we poked fun at everything. To us, it was like...when we would get dressed up we would really...try to dress as outrageous as we could and we knew we were gonna go to a party

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<sup>282</sup> Alice Bag. *We Were There: Voices from L.A. Punk's First Wave : an Oral History*. Los Angeles, California: Razorcake Press, 2018. See also Robert Lopez aka El Vez. ‘Punk-Rock Teenage Heaven’ in Book *Under the Big Black Sun: A Personal History of L.A. Punk*, edited by John Doe and Tom DeSavia, Boston: Da Capo Press, 2017. pp. 95-109. And, Marc Spitz, and Brendan Mullen. *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk*. 1st edition. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001.

\*To simply state that Lopez co-founded and played with the Zeros would be like saying that Louis Armstrong merely played the trumpet. After leaving the Zeros in 1978 (and Catholic Discipline in 1980), this multi-talented artist went on to world renown in theatrics and musical-performance art with the reinvention of himself as ‘El Vez.’ Mixing the style of Elvis Presley and his own Mexican American roots, he is known for humorously satirizing the dominant society’s suppression of women, Queer, and ethnic cultures. In Michelle Habel Pallan’s 2008 *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture* she states that as an Elvis translator (not impersonator), the “Cross-Cultural Caped Crusader” sings for “truth, justice, and the Mexican American way.”

<sup>283</sup> ‘The Asco interviews.’ 2014. (5:38-5:57)

<sup>284</sup> ‘The Asco interviews.’ 2014. (6:30-7:11)

where everybody was gonna be pretty straight and pretty standard looking. I mean it was very scary when sometimes we would show up. I remember one party I went to and, you know, and I had pink corduroy, cut-off-Daisy-Dukes with red platforms, and my hair was red and my eyebrows were shaved. And I had a little red t-shirt that said twenty-one on it. And of course the cholos followed me out, and so there I was in the middle of the street...fighting with the cholos, and my platforms, one platform busted, so I had the platform flapping on the back, still stuck to my foot. And so I was all like doing a lopsided Frankenstein. And I don't know, it was all like (chuckling) very interesting. And all these girls came out from the party and started hitting the guys and like trying to jump in for me...Those are the kinds of things, events that were social that fueled our artwork, that fueled our concept, and fueled what it is that we felt that we really had to do so that people could be free and have the freedom of expression to be how they want without their lives being in danger. And we felt that we were always challenging that because we used our bodies to express ourselves.<sup>285</sup>

If there be any doubt as to the primary source of Asco's inspiration, Harry Gamboa Jr. sums it up quite well with a notion he says he has often detailed: "East Los Angeles functioned like a separate country within the city," cordoned off by freeways and from entering other parts of the city (especially Hollywood) in either direction for fear of bodily or psychological harm. Gamboa explains that, "...this idea of repression of your voice played a tremendous role in influencing. And so, the idea was how can someone create something that could be understood in your own voice while being simultaneously translated to the language of the others."<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> 'The Asco interviews.' 2014. (6:30-8:34)

<sup>286</sup> 'The Asco interviews.' 2014. (0:24-1:49)

Sometimes at risk to life and limb—besides Chicanisma, and to a degree, Chicanismo—Asco translated a number of personal and collective identifiers to the language of the others; in the context of this thesis, meaning L.A. punk on both sides of the Los Angeles River. They pioneered the practice of challenging both White and Brown societal norms. Compare, for instance, the last sentence of Herrón’s report to a statement made by Alice Bag in 2018: “We challenged the status quo with everything at our disposal—race, class, gender—but we did it by just being ourselves. We were happily, if inadvertently, messing with the outside world’s preconceived notions of what those things meant and that often pissed people off.”<sup>287</sup> Asco modeled Gayness and glitter on the Eastside simultaneously with—as former Stooges guitarist Ron Asheton put it—“the glam capitol (Los Angeles/Hollywood, not New York).”<sup>288</sup> They demonstrated that glitter was not just for White artists, such as Liberace, David Bowie, Iggy Pop, T-Rex, The New York Dolls, Suzy Quatro, or Elton John.

Above all, Asco translated creative art, in all its forms—not just as protest—but for the sake of both individual and community creative expression, most evident in the works of L.A. punk artists of ethnic Mexican descent, again, from both the East and Westside scenes. Certainly, this is not to say that all White punk rockers in L.A. were void of ethnic cultural appreciation, or that none played for the sake of creativity. But even the ones who did embrace the art of punk—such as John Doe of X—forged friendships, collaboration, and inlets with/for Chicana Eastside artists. Doe, for example, invited The Brat to open for X at the Whisky, which began their ultimate, albeit brief, presence in the Westside scenes.<sup>289</sup> And although Los Lobos—even though they have always incorporated way too many artistic influences to be labeled strictly “punk”—are another example, having found their way into the

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<sup>287</sup> Alice Bag. *We Were There: Voices from L.A. Punk's First Wave : an Oral History*. Los Angeles, California : Razorcake Press, 2018. p. 21

<sup>288</sup> Marc Spitz, and Brendan Mullen. *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk*. 1st edition. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001. p. 21

<sup>289</sup> RazorcakeGorsky. ‘Eastside Punks, Episode 2: The Brat,’ 2020. (4:30-5:21)

Hollywood scene via their fellow rockabilly-punker colleagues, Dave and Phil Alvin—The Blasters.<sup>290</sup>

Lastly, regarding the presence of Chicano Power in East L.A. punk rock, while there is plenty of evidence to support the idea that Chicanismo found a conduit to the 1970s and 1980s through the era's musical predecessors—such as Lalo Guerrero, Thee Midnitters, Ruben Guevara, El Chicano, La Tierra, Cannibal and the Headhunters, and host of others—there were/are many with whom the movement short-circuited for reasons of personal and/or ideological perplexity. Members of Thee Midnitters, for example, who recorded a number of tunes under the banner, including 'Chicano Power' and 'The Ballad of Cesar Chavez,' have had their thoughts and feelings on the subject documented by David Reyes and Tom Waldman in their 1998 and 2009 revised publication *Land of a Thousand Dances: Chicano Rock 'n' Roll from Southern California*. They state that Jimmy Espinoza "felt that politics was an intrusion on artistic freedom," and that Romeo Prado did not appreciate "the creation of a new identity for his people." During an interview for the book, Prado offered, "I never liked the word Chicano...I still don't like it. I'd rather be called Mexican-American. I don't even like Hispanic." Regarding Thee Midnitters' homage to Cesar Chavez, the book's authors report that Espinoza "cringes at the memory of the song, not because he is against Chavez or the United Farmworkers, but because he felt he was not being honest." As part of his interview Espinoza said, "The band did not have any altruistic reasons for recording that song," and added, "I actually questioned doing it. I was a bit resistant being forced [by management] to make a statement about something I did not completely understand."<sup>291</sup>

So how much did Chicanismo actually deposit into the psyche, the self-determination, and artistic expression of Chicano contributors to the Eastside scene? Beyond Willie Herrón's purported declaration of Chicano pride as per Agustin Gurza, the historical record on Eastside Chicanismo remains scant. There are many more testimonies denying its authority than those

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<sup>290</sup> See the photos of Los Lobos in onstage collaboration with The Blasters in Chris Morris. *Los Lobos: Dream in Blue*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. pp. 100-109

<sup>291</sup> David Reyes and Tom Waldman. *Land of a Thousand Dances: Chicano Rock 'n' Roll from Southern California*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009. pp. viii, 95, 96

claiming it, too many more to credibly substantiate Nicholas Pell's 2012 report in *LA Weekly* that, "...this scene wore Chicano identity on their sleeves." But since we have already analyzed the reflections of Willie Herrón, and Rudy Medina and Teresa Covarrubias of the Brat, we can explore others from groups Covarrubias stated were part of the core Eastside acts.

In a 2020 video presentation by RazorcakeGorsky, the now deceased Stains co-founding member Jesus "Jesse Fix" Amezcuita can be heard factually stressing, "We were the first; WE-WERE-THE-FIRST-PUNK-ROCK-BAND-IN-EAST-L.A.." <sup>292</sup> In the same video he can also be noted as offering, "I'm an atheist, I am an anarchist, an alcoholic, I'm a drug addict... scum-of-the earth, etc." Even though the band began in Boyle Heights and played alongside all of the Eastside bands (even at the Vex at Self Help), their nihilistic hardcore-driving sound and stage presence (Fix sometimes appeared in Mariachi attire at one gig and a Nazi stormtrooper uniform the next) repelled many in the Eastside arts community. This prompted the feeling of alienation on their Eastside home turf. "They looked west and soon were antagonizing Hollywood audiences." Vocalist Rudy Navarro said "We were like the house band at the Vex, you know? But we're more popular with white people." Interestingly, according to investigative reporter and author Jimmy Alvarado, who has been active in East L.A.'s underground music scene since 1981 (and who boasts one of the largest collections of personal interviews with the scene's contributors), Jesse Fix also noted that "before punk, female rock musicians were not looked upon favorably:" "Women did not play instruments;" "Women were groupies. Punk rock gave an avenue to women to go out there and play music." Fix also added that punk "also provided a platform to others stifled by traditional, male-dominated music—It was okay to be gay. It was okay to be whatever you wanted to be." Statements such as these help to substantiate the main argument of Alice Bag's *We Were There*. <sup>293</sup> But most interesting to this writer in the final phase of this thesis, Jimmy Alvarado also documented Amezcuita's reflections from his standpoint as a songwriter: "I didn't really

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<sup>292</sup> RazorcakeGorsky. 'Eastside Punks, Episode 3: Stains,' 2020. YouTube video, 13:48. June 30, 2020. (11:12-11:20, 0:01-0:15) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-u-H5u4fUsY>

<sup>293</sup> See chapter three



buy into the Chicano movement thing because I saw them as trying to isolate themselves and put themselves in a cubbyhole. None of my songs were about being Chicano. My songs were about being human.”<sup>294</sup>

*Los Lobos: Dream in Blue* by Chris Morris, the great 2015 biography of a band Reyes and Waldman dub the best, the most important band in the world, provides readers with an excellent in-depth look at the motivations, the intents of the hearts (including the political views) of an Eastside unit that began as Los Lobos del Este de Los Angeles. They produced their first album of the same name in 1977, but also recorded *Si Se Puede* (“yes it can be done,” or more simply, “Yes we can”) as Los Lobos for the United Farm Workers the same year. Titled after the union’s longtime slogan developed by Dolores Huerta, Morris tells us that “Though the members of Los Lobos were no doubt pleased to be associated with the union that had become the most prominent expression of Chicano political power to date...[the band] remained resolutely opposed to presenting themselves as a political unit but instead”—more important to this study—“viewed their work as cultural in nature.” Morris quotes David Hidalgo as saying, “The fact that we were young Chicanos playing this music was enough of a statement.” And more telling, Louie Pérez added “We weren’t politicized at all. [The movement] was going on at the same time.” He said that “[e]ven though we played for Cesar Chavez and...a lot of stuff for MechA...we stuck to the music part...We were musicians first.”

In Anthony Macías’ book, *Mexican American Mojo* (featured in chapter three of this study), he notes and counters an interesting premise made by anthropologist and author Manuel Peña. In *The Mexican American Orchestra*, Peña discusses Mexican American assimilation during the Mexican big-band-jazz era in L.A. According to Macías, Peña claimed that Mexican Americans of that period “embraced selected aspects of American culture,” while simultaneously “clinging to Mexican ‘symbolic antecedents’ like mariachis and rancheras because of their ‘persistent allegiance to the mother culture.’” Macias argues that

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<sup>294</sup> Jimmy Alvarado. “Backyard Brats and Eastside Punks” *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, Vol.37, Issue 2. 2012 pp. 159-165

though they “may have experienced “a ‘frustrated assimilation,’ this alleged allegiance to the culture of the Mexican motherland was not as pronounced during the swing era, and even less so in the rhythm and blues and rock and roll periods.”<sup>295</sup> The evidence of this study’s research indicates that it was much less pronounced, even than that throughout L.A. during the punk era.

Moreover, as we have seen with Los Lobos’ cultural work at one end and the Stains’ driving hardcore at the other end of the Eastside L.A. punk spectrum, in fact very few if any Chicano punks “wore their Chicano identity on their sleeves.” So, why then were (originally) Eastside hardcore bands like Stains (and to a lesser degree, Thee Undertakers) without a frustrated assimilation in Hollywood? Because they were part of the Westside/Hollywood nihilistic, hardcore-wave culture that included bands like Black Flag, FEAR, Germs, and later, Dead Kennedys from San Francisco, ultimately touring coast to coast. This study has shown that as long as a group fit into the White-punk aesthetic, started in the US by the New York City-based Ramones (the band that most inspired the Stains to switch from hard rock to hardcore) skin color did not matter as long as the ethnicity behind it was not flaunted.

In 2008, Willie Herrón told Jimmy Alvarado that “We made our ethnicity the platform of our music and the platform for our purpose to do the kind of music that we were doing, and we could have picked any genre of music.” Throughout the historical excavation of cultural L.A. punk for this thesis, the idea of racial conflict as an explanation for the social rift between Chicano vs. White scene contributors has taken center stage. The only reference to punk “Cultural Clashes in the City of Angels” that I have uncovered comes from a journal article written by Alvarado in 2012.<sup>296</sup> It is my hope that this work has done his work justice, and that it has somewhat helped to broaden the field of Chicano punk studies.

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<sup>295</sup> Anthony Macías, Ronald Radano, and Josh Kun. *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935-1968*. Duke University Press, 2008. p. 54

<sup>296</sup> Jimmy Alvarado. “Backyard Brats and Eastside Punks,” 2012. p. 165

## CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

The chief argument of this work rests on the idea that, from 1976 through 1981, culture-blindness (and deafness)—especially White ethnic-cultural blindness—contributed as much as race to the social rift between punk rock communities in Los Angeles, where Eastside punks were predominantly Chicana and Westside punks were mostly White. Additionally, I have sought to demonstrate how the critical connection between cultural identity and spatial identity in any society remains virtually inseparable. Finally, this project exposes the negligible degree of Chicano Power and/or ethnic Mexican traditionalism that has been historically exhibited by punk artists from either side of the Los Angeles River.

Although the conclusion of any treatise frees its writer(s) to hammer home the various points of their thesis, it also affords them an opportunity to fairly and objectively present oppositional views to their arguments apart from what they may have already covered in the body of their work. But the final inquiry of this project emphasizes not so much oppositional argumentation as it does the fact that myriad cultural factors—including place, nativity, generation, gender, and sexuality—all contribute to an individual's concept of self. Regardless of the ruling concepts of race and culture, it is nonetheless a fact to be thrown onto the interpretive balance that the idea(s) of what it means to be “punk” or “Chicana/o” are innumerable. In other words, no two individuals (even if identical twins) see Chicanismo or punk rock the same.

This work began with a focus on some Eastside artists' contention of their alleged prohibition from performance in Hollywood and Westside clubs. Following the natural course of research into that argument, however, I have discovered a different scenario of cultural disconnection in L.A., one prompted by individuals who initially considered homebase to include not only Hollywood, but the Westside and beach scenes. According to Exene Cervenka, singer with X, much of the contention came from South Bay surfer-scenesters who more and more forcefully rejected the notion of wannabe rock-stardom in L.A. punk. In *We Got the Neutron Bomb*, she details her rejection by the “anti-rock-star/anti-whatever”

contingent on that basis. She noted, “When the South Bay scene first started happening, I really liked the new bands like Black Flag...then there came this divide between Hollywood and the beach scene.” She also notes a familiar-sounding expression by Greg Ginn, Black Flag’s guitarist and co-founder: “they wouldn’t let those [South Bay] bands play in Hollywood so they had to create their own scene.”<sup>297</sup> Just as the predominantly Chicana/o Eastside punks created their own DIY scene in backyards and living rooms, at *quinceaneras* and car shows, rented halls, and at the Vex—South Bay punkers found their novel hardcore brand a bit too hardcore for either Hollywood or the Vex; they banded together with the likes of the Stains and many others and branched out across the country seeking like-spirited audiences. This kind of cultural clash goes beyond skin color and cannot be attributed merely to artistic preference, but comes down to individual world view. Hence the many sub-categories of punk: proto-punk, garage rock, new wave, skate punk, etc. They are too numerous to list.

Hardcore punk is typically aligned with nihilism and the destructive force that accompanies it. Besides the fact that East L.A. was/is heavily associated with ethnic gang violence, this may be the reason there are neither police reports nor newspaper accounts that detail the trashing by Hermosa Beach and Orange County punks of the Vex at Self Help Graphics. The vandalization of venues represented a rite of passage for many punks, not just in L.A., but the world over. On the Westside, the club owners of The Starwood, The Whisky, The Olympic, The Orpheum, and the Masque—to say nothing of Madame Wong’s or the Hong Kong Café—all experienced similar material losses, except for the collateral loss of the personal artwork that befell the Vex on November 22, 1980. This anti-everything, or “anti-whatever,” as Cervenka put it, marks the stock and trade of White punk. As we have seen with Darby Crash and others, this type of violence extended to self. Punk rock is famous for the marking, cutting, slashing, busting, and bruising of the self, along with the same for anyone in immediate proximity. John Doe of X, for example, cites a hair raising experience when while

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<sup>297</sup> Marc Spitz, and Brendan Mullen. *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk*. 1st edition. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001. p.223, as cited by Jimmy Alvarado in: Jimmy Alvarado. “Backyard Brats and Eastside Punks” *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, Vol.37, Issue 2. 2012 pp. 164, 65

playing on stage at the Starwood he avoided the airstrikes of a very long and heavy chain being swung in a circle like a cowboy's lariat by a young man in the audience who sported an X shaved into the top of his skull.<sup>298</sup>

I only re-state some of the White punk violence covered in this thesis to stress the difference between music made for the sake of artistic creativity—so prevalent to ethnic yet culturally inclusive communities on the Eastside—and music created in the name of FTW. And additionally, to underscore the difference between pushback against everything and the organized, targeted protests of Chicano Power, which sought equality and justice from and within the US institutions of labor (including employment), education, war, socioeconomics (including property ownership and land reclamation), and the criminal justice system.

Although there are few documented words and actions of L.A. punks that reflect self-determination on the basis of Chicanismo, some of the punk era's musical predecessors stridently presented themselves—their persona, their art, their social vision—on its platform. 'The Story of Chicano Music Pioneer Rubén Funkahuatl Guevara' recounts his musical life, and his performance art and activism, not just in his own words, but in the words of his peers and successors, including Alice Bag: (chuckling) "Rubén Funkahuatl Guevara is a bad ass." Personally, I not only agree with her statement, but I share in her joy, because I understand the context in which it was given. At the same time, another of his peers, in my estimation, offers the best description of the enigma that he represents: "[He] is [a] piña mango papaya swirl of culture and history from pre-Columbian to postmodern times."<sup>299</sup> Others simply call him the 'Culture Sculptor.' He has re-sculpted—meaning redefined—the Chicana/o cultural trait of Con Safos, as outlined throughout this work. Rubén Guevara wears Chicano identity on his sleeve.

The evidence derived from this research overwhelmingly demonstrates that, in the realm of pop music, ethnic culture communes with its past, its art, its language, while in White America, the practice remains nearly negligible. In my opinion, the best descriptions of

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<sup>298</sup> Spitz. *We Got the Neutron Bomb*. 2001. p.229

<sup>299</sup> Con Safos/*Artbound*/Season 12, Episode One/KCET. YouTube video, 54:35, October 2021. (00:05-00:20) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QP0OX6wkubc>

what it means to be a Chicana or a Chicano come from those who have been afforded time and space to culturally reflect on their past. My favorite comes from Alice Bag: “To be a Chicana for me, that’s knowing that my language is valid, that it’s beautiful. To speak Spanish in the United States is normal because we were...especially here, part of Mexico, and we spoke Spanish before you all came over here.” The last part of her statement speaks to the very essence of what has fueled and continues to fuel the culture wars of these United States since its inception: “So, feeling like my place in the United States is not only valid, but for you to deny it is you denying your own history.”<sup>300</sup>

Unfortunately, to state as a fact that the US denies its own history virtually falls on deaf ears in today’s dominant culture. Donald Yacavone’s *Teaching White Supremacy: America’s Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity*, which shows how scholars sustain(ed) White supremacy, for example, would likely be banned in Florida were it to fall under the radar of that state’s current governmental administration. My point is that in just the institution of education alone, young White punkers in L.A. have been systematically denied communion with their own and other cultural pasts, including cultural arts and sciences, which leads to a potential explanation for the culturally-disproportionate, art-oriented-motivation for creating punk rock music in L.A.

From genomics, “the art-gene” accounts for one such motivation. Not to be confused with the product of immunodeficiency virus, this science concerns itself with “the genetic underpinnings of creativity in dancing, musicality and visual arts.”<sup>301</sup> Yet to contend that the art-gene was more prevalent among Eastside punk rockers than among those of say the mostly White South Bay crowd, would not only be erroneous but dangerous, and likely as socially disparaging as historical censorship. I am suggesting, however, that the art-gene may have encouraged and—more importantly—continues to facilitate friendship, communion and collaboration among many artists in L.A., and the world over, because apart from race, creed,

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<sup>300</sup> Con Safos/*Artbound*/Season 12, Episode One/KCET, 2021. (21:45-22:12)

<sup>301</sup> Sotiropoulos MG, Anagnostouli M. Genes, brain dynamics and art: the genetic underpinnings of creativity in dancing, musicality and visual arts. *J Integr Neurosci*. 2021 Dec 30;20(4):1095-1104. doi: 10.31083/j.jin2004110. PMID: 34997732.

color, gender, sexuality, or even age and cultural experience, some have held true respect and honor for the importance of others' cultural ethnicity and some have not.

In Los Angeles, the historical record is replete with instances of Black, Brown, and White musical solidarity ranging from well before the onset of jazz to the present day. Even within L.A.'s punk cultural clash (1976-1981), we find, for instance, that the hardcore cultural bond struck between Greg Ginn's Black Flag and the Stains afforded both bands to seek and find both cultural and spatial identification. While Los Lobos found spatial acceptance in the Hollywood scene through Dave Alvin's extended hand of friendship, Cesar Rosas (Los Lobos' founder) returned the gesture by producing The Blasters' first-released album some twenty years later.<sup>302</sup> John Doe too can be seen as a kind of ambassador of art in braving East L.A. gang violence, not just by playing the Vex at Self Help, but in entering a completely different world (that of Eastside DIY) to invite both The Brat and Los Illegals to open for X at the Whisky. Incidentally, the art-gene remains vibrant in and among the communities of John Doe and X, Cesar Rosas and Los Lobos, Dave Alvin, and certainly Self Help Graphics and Art.

So what are we to conclude from Teresa Covarubbias' statement, "It was such a disrespect of that place and our community" (cited in chapter one of this work)? This study has shown that though Covarrubias was raised in Boyle Heights, the epitome of an L.A. Chicano barrio, she was not necessarily referring to her neighborhood, but to the community of artists she claimed; the one centered by Self Help Graphics. Regarding the South Bay intruders, the disrespect perpetrated on Covarrubias's community could not be retaliated against according to the doctrine of *Con Safos*. In the first place, most white youth (punk or otherwise) possessed no unifying culture to insult, disrespect, or retaliate against. Secondly, the dominance of Whiteness within popular music is such that it remains blind to the existence of culture except as a quaint attribute of foreigners. Lastly, the all-encompassing factor of youth—the immaturity and the sense of immortality or invincibility—played as much of a role

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<sup>302</sup>David Reyes and Tom Waldman. *Land of a Thousand Dances: Chicano Rock 'n' Roll from Southern California*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009. pp. 155, 56.

in the tragedy as did the disregard for human life and limb displayed by Michael (the kid with the X shaved into the top of his head with the chain at the Starwood X show) who was featured in *The Decline of Western Civilization* Part 1.

Unlike my granddaughter Caprice, Michael's personal testimony sadly speaks of a terrible home-life, his total rejection by his father. He even mentions seeing his father in public from time to time, and that he pretended not to know him. Just as any young person (whether they are willing to admit it or not) needs family, community, and a sense of belonging, Michael gravitated toward the Hollywood punk scene, heavily steeped in violence; not just violence towards self, but towards anyone and everything, especially if that thing does not fit into the beholders' conception of what they consider their world, which included females in his case. Michael was likely just as much a victim of US-White institutional cultural vacuum as any of the characters—of any skin color or gender—detailed in this thesis.

Thankfully, Caprice's cultural outlook is way more promising: first, because of her nurturing homelife that features progressive minded parents who constantly seek her ethnic-cultural enrichment; and second, because the family is blessed with the means to support her socialization through travel. Yet, I believe that travel and good intentions can only help so much. Caprice, like any other US American White kid, will still have to navigate this nation's cultural void. And while Joseph Rosendo (quoting Mark Twain) tells us that "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness....," cultural anthropologists know that the only way to resist the pitfalls of American exceptionalism, including colorblindness—to truly participate in another culture's scene—requires immersion.



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