

AMERICAN CROSSROADS

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and Nikhil Pal Singh

Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity

*Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement
in Los Angeles*

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CHAPTER 4

"Teeth-Gritting Harmony"

Punk, Hip-Hop, and Sonic Spatial Politics

To reawaken, in the midst of a privatized and psychologizing society, obsessed with commodities and bombarded by the ideological slogans of big business, some sense of the eradicable drive towards collectivity that can be detected, no matter how faintly and feebly, in the most degraded works of mass culture just as surely as in the classics of modernism—is surely an indispensable precondition for any meaningful Marxist intervention in contemporary culture.

—Fredric Jameson¹

In order to understand the importance of spatial entitlement, we have to do more than just recognize the ways people assert entitlements to new and different spaces. We have to identify how aggrieved groups invest critical meaning into the spaces and situated identities they inhabit in everyday life. Yet the critical value of these meaningful spaces is not always easy to distinguish, even by the members of the communities that contain them.

When conservative economic policies produce joblessness, poverty, and declining infrastructure, an outsider's observation of a low-income neighborhood may yield only the most obvious indicators of economic inequality. It may be impossible to see how a dilapidated backyard becomes a weekly venue for music performances or how a discarded industrial warehouse can become an unauthorized cultural center. It may be even more difficult to distinguish why those spaces would hold spatial and historical significance for a community that has a seemingly compelling interest in overcoming the obstacles produced by their spatial location.

In previous chapters, I illustrated how Black and Brown communities enacted spatial entitlement through claiming physical space when it was possible to do so. When those places were destroyed or otherwise made unavailable, they were re-created in symbolic discursive spaces. This chapter examines how spatial entitlement occurs when people articulate the right to situate themselves within particular spatial histories and when they express a spatial claim to change the stakes of an existing space and to remake its meaning in relation to themselves and their communities. Collectivities based on shared geography often infuse local spaces with profound meaning based on memories of the past and hopes for the future. The desire to do so may be a result of collective historical displacement or cultural memory, or it may be grounded in visions of spatial democracy tied to a particular location or identity.

In the 1970s and 1980s, supply-side economics exacted devastating fiscal damages upon working-class people. In response, a radical new cultural form emerged—punk music. This cultural form and its subcultures created new categories of identity through dreams of colorless solidarity and in the process predicated these categories upon a color-blind anarchy that demanded the subversion of all other forms of identity before it. One of the most illustrative examples of the articulation of the right to retain spatial and cultural identities rooted in meaningful history is registered in the cultural creations of Black and Latino punk musicians and their audiences from the late 1970s to the 1990s.

It is hard to imagine how Pedro Infante, the most famous actor and singer of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, might have reacted had he lived long enough to realize his impact on punk music. As a child in the early 1960s, Alicia Armendariz accompanied her parents to the Spanish-language movies on “dos por uno” nights at The Million Dollar Theater on Broadway in downtown Los Angeles. At that time “Broadway was still the vibrant commercial center of downtown L.A. and an important part of Latino life in the city.” As soon as the theater lights went down, Armendariz remembered, “we were transported to an impossibly glamorous black-and-white version of Mexico.” Movies with actors like Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, Libertad Lamarque, Pedro Armendáriz and Silvia Pinal were, to the Armendariz family, “escapism at its finest.” Armendariz found another mode of escape through the songs and performance style of Spanish pop singer and movie star, Rafael Martos Sánchez: “He had made a lasting impression on me with his dramatic, passionate singing style, while Pedro Infante . . . well, Pedro could wrap

me around his finger with his romantic songs, bring out the feisty side of me when he was telling someone off or yank a tear from my eye if he was doing a sad song.”²

A decade later, Alicia Armendariz became Alice Bag, who was first a member of punk band Masque Era and then the visionary leader of The Bags. Bag remembers that while the other members of Masque Era refined their playing by practicing in traditional ways, “I always practiced using my own methods. . . . I danced and posed and made faces at myself.”³ Bag opined that in this respect, she was more like Rafael or Pedro Infante than any of her rock idols. As she remembered:

Rafael and Pedro didn’t just sing a song; they delivered it, they exuded it; they lived it. Every word was audible, every syllable and inflection in their voices meant something. Imagine comparing a silent-era movie star to a modern actor; Pedro and Rafael did with their voices what silent actors did with their gestures. They were outsized and playing to the last row of the theater. At the time, I didn’t realize that Pedro and Rafael had more to do with how I felt about music and performance than did David Bowie, Elton John, or Freddie Mercury.”⁴

In his cultural history of British punk, Dick Hebdige argues that style—through the subversion of common objects—allowed punk youth to separate themselves symbolically from their cultural contexts, challenging tradition by denying the local and mass cultures from which they emerged. He contends that punk refused “to be grounded, ‘read back’ to its origins because punk style had made a decisive break not only with the parent culture but with its own location in experience.” As a result, white working class, “otherwise powerless” youth, transformed themselves into a subculture with much more significance.⁵

Yet Black and Latino punk artists, audiences, and their collective cultural productions tell a very different story. Uruguayan-American punk musician and cultural critic Martin Sorrondeguy explains,

For us, singing punk doesn’t mean letting go . . . of these ties that we have to our parents, to our families, or to where we’re from or to our language. It [doesn’t] mean breaking away from that. It means working with them to try to get somewhere, to get to a new level.⁶

Bag’s and Sorrondeguy’s narratives stand in sharp distinction to Hebdige’s claim. Bag’s entrenchment in Mexican and Mexican-American popular cultural traditions and Sorrondeguy’s characterization of a punk identity rooted in family, place, and language require a radical rethinking of the meaning of punk politics and their relation to race and place.

As working-class subcultures, Black and Latino punk musicians, audiences, and their productions divulge more than the terrible costs of economic downsizing and deindustrialization for communities of color: they reveal social identities forged from the collective witness and shared experience of racial and class inequality. They create a new framework of interracial and transnational affiliations rooted in local experiences of racism, struggle, and displacement. In the 1970s and 1980s in Los Angeles, Black and Brown antiracist politics were fashioned from a unique sense of self that included collective memories of displacement because of urban renewal, exile, and labor migration and memories of struggle in race-based mobilizations for rights, resources, recognition, and peace. This shared sense of self was connected to the people and places surrounding these social actors.

The rejection of inequality and the embrace of social justice that characterize the cultural productions examined in this chapter produce what Louis Althusser (in another context) has called “teeth-gritting harmony.” In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser describes how the different parts of the social formation—the family, education, the mass media, and cultural and political institutions—together serve to perpetuate submission to the ruling ideology. However, these institutions do not perform this function through the direct transmission of “ruling ideas.” Instead, it is the way in which they work together in this teeth-gritting harmony that the ruling ideology is reproduced “precisely in its contradictions.”⁷ I use the term ironically here to suggest a “harmony of rejection” that exposed the effects of deindustrialization, worsening poverty and racism, and the xenophobia that appeared poised to permanently destroy the futures of Black and Brown communities in the 1980s and 1990s. *Teeth-gritting harmony* refers to the cultural productions and interracial coalitions that sought to *interrupt* submission to the ruling ideology.

Several scholars have examined working-class-identified punk music and musicians,⁸ as an important intersection between state power and the subcultures that resist it, or that at least, as Hebdige observes, “represent the experience of contradiction.”⁹ But punks of color created critical interventions that reveal significant gaps in academic scholarship and popular historiography on punk subcultures. Traditionally, historiographies of popular music pay very little attention to the critical crossroads of punk, poverty, racism, and racial identity. The contributions of punk groups of color, such as

Bad Brains, Fishbone, The Brat, Los Illegals, The Bags, The Undertakers, and The Plugz have too often been elided in research that focuses on more mainstream punk groups.¹⁰ Our understanding of Black and Chicano music and politics in this period is incomplete without engaging the crossroads occupied by Black and Latino punk subcultures. Doing so reveals the staggering results of Reaganomics on Black and Chicano communities in Los Angeles and evidences collective grassroots responses through themes engaged directly by punks of color: a frustration with urban decay and persistent racism and a struggle to create new collective identities that reflect radical new perspectives on race, gender, class, and location. Punk music from Los Angeles illustrates a rejection of economic inequality—the things that were, literally, shouted back at sources of injustice. The narratives offered by Black and Chicano punk musicians and audiences transform the historiography of punk, offering a unique optic through which to understand alternative modes of self-representation and cultural expression. They provide us with alternative understandings of social and discursive space and reveal the sources of collective power that have generated new racial, sexual, and gender identities among marginalized youth. Racial and spatial politics found in Black and Brown punk cultural productions require an alternative understanding of why and how situated knowledge is valued by its creators, even when there is a strong impetus for them to set it aside in lieu of a seemingly more privileged collective identity vis-à-vis mainstream assimilation. In order to understand the value of these productions, we must first look at the context out of which they emerged.

REAGANOMICS AND LOS ANGELES

Reagan never used blatantly racist language, because he didn't have to.

—Manning Marable¹¹

“Reaganomics” was the most serious attempt to change the course of U.S. economic policy since the New Deal. When Reagan took office in 1981, his solution to the worst economic downturn since the Depression was to propose that the supply side of the economy be stimulated through tax cuts for the wealthy, providing an opportunity for the upper class to acquire, and presumably invest, more money. Economic terms like “supply side” and “trickle down” suggested that reducing taxes

for the wealthy would free individuals and businesses to expand their operations domestically and internationally, thereby maximizing economic gain for all social classes. The central theme of Reaganomics, therefore, was that a reduction in taxes for the wealthy would provide greater investment opportunities to the upper class, eventually leading to the creation of more jobs for the working class.¹² Instead, the United States accrued more debt during the Reagan administration than in any other era: when Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, the national debt was approximately \$1 trillion, a figure that included all accrued debt from the Revolutionary, Spanish-American, Civil, Korean, Vietnam, and both World Wars. While it took the United States more than 200 years to accumulate that balance, in the eight years that Reagan was in office it had increased by \$2.5 trillion.¹³ The redistribution and expansion of wealth during this period set the stage for the decline of living standards for the poorest Americans, while the incomes of the wealthiest citizens soared.

The Reagan administration diverted American angst about the economy toward the Soviet Union. According to Michael Rogin, Reagan succeeded in making himself "the benign center of America, placing malignancies outside our borders." Having raised anxiety about the permeability of American boundaries, Reagan "split the good within the country from the bad without. Evil, he reassure[d] us, [was] out there in visible spots that [could] be identified and removed."¹⁴ This ideology supported a national economy focused on defense. During the 1980s, California's share of primary defense contracts averaged 20 percent¹⁵; in 1984, federal primary defense contracts in California were valued at \$28.5 billion, more than double the volume just four years earlier.¹⁶ This commitment to defense spending meant a drastic reduction in government programs for the working class. By the mid-1980s, for example, the Liberty Hill Foundation (a strong supporter of social services) was reporting dozens of grant applications that proposed basic services formerly provided by the government. Groups such as the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank and the Los Angeles Coalition to End Homelessness and Hunger became major *de facto* service providers.¹⁷

Holly Sklar demonstrates that since the 1970s the top 1 percent of households have doubled their share of the national wealth, while the average net worth of the bottom 40 percent went from \$4,000 to \$900 between 1983 and 1995. Likewise, the percent with zero or negative net wealth increased during the same period, from 15.5 percent to 18.5 percent. Income inequality was staggering: between 1980 and

1993, salaries for American CEOs increased by 514 percent while workers' wages rose by 68 percent.¹⁸

In California, major economic gains were recorded during the 1980s, the most significant in its history in absolute terms. But one of the main factors in the growth of the state was an increase in funds flowing into the state's defense-related industries, a classic indication of Reaganomics at work. The surge in available jobs in defense-related industries was not something from which historically marginalized populations generally benefited: most African-American and Latina/Latino workers had only recently gained access into the well-paying jobs in heavy manufacturing and were increasingly concentrated in service jobs. One study estimated that employees defense-related positions made nearly double the per capita income level of service jobs, an area of labor that was rapidly becoming nearly exclusively Latino and immigrant.¹⁹

There were gains for particular sectors of both the state and national economies in the 1980s. But those gains were concomitant with (and largely based upon) drastic losses for the working class. In Los Angeles, deindustrialization, exportation of jobs to low-wage economies abroad, and the sharp decrease in social spending led to a decline in real wages in traditionally strong union labor sectors. In 1983, the cost of an hour's labor time in the United States was \$12.26. The hourly savings for using foreign labor that year amounted to \$10.81 in Mexico, \$10.09 in Singapore, \$6.06 in Japan, and \$10.97 in Korea: U.S. companies that had been located in Los Angeles relocated to take advantage of this sharp difference in wages.²⁰

On the whole in Los Angeles, African Americans, Chicana/Chicanos, and Latina/Latinos were the most affected by these changes. Not quite two decades after minorities gained legitimate entree into Los Angeles's best-paying blue collar jobs, devastating plant closures hit the city: by 1988 not one of the auto, rubber, or steel plants was left standing.²¹ The resulting loss of industrial jobs caused a 20 percent decline in the area's African-American population. Some 75,000 left South Central for the Inland Empire, doubling its African-American population. This latter trend had its roots in the economic restructuring of the 1970s, when many jobs in heavy industry were eliminated; it was here and in the area of durable consumer goods, traditionally the strongholds of high-wage organized labor, where manufacturers either abandoned factories to imports or shifted overseas or to areas where organized labor is weakest. But Black flight also occurred as a result of upward class mobility: Latino immigrants flocked to Los Angeles service and garment industry

jobs in part because many Blacks and U.S.-born Latinas/Latinos had managed to rise above them during the preceding decade.

Yet the impact of the 1980s economic downturn on young people was most telling: looking back on the 1980s, the Children's Defense Fund reported in 1994 that the percentage of children living in poverty in America rose annually during the Reagan and Bush administrations. By 1991, it had reached 21.8 percent (14.3 million children), marking a twenty-six-year high. By 1994, every day twenty-seven children were dying because of their living in poverty. Among Black males ten to twenty-four years of age, homicide became the leading cause of death.²² The number of young workers entering the job market declined during the 1980s, but unemployment among young people remained high. In 1979, 15 percent of eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds were unemployed, as were 9 percent of twenty- to twenty-four-year-olds. In 1986, unemployment among the eighteen-to-nineteen-year age group was 17 percent, and among the twenty-to-twenty-four-year age group, 11 percent, despite the fact that the size of the eighteen-to-nineteen-year age group declined by 14 percent during this period and the twenty-to-twenty-four-year age group by 4 percent. The recession of the early 1980s was especially difficult for young people, with 22 percent of eighteen- to nineteen-year olds unemployed in 1982.²³ Evidence of a slack job market for young workers appeared in their low labor-force participation rates, more involuntary part-time employment, and persistent unemployment.²⁴ As the service sector clamored for entry-level employees, many young workers opted instead for more education and training. Those who decided to look for work competed with baby boomers who delayed entering the job market while they went to school.²⁵

During the 1980s, much of the 17 percent growth in Los Angeles overall was among the Latino and Asian populations. Swelled by an influx of immigrants from Mexico, Central America, Asia, and other parts of the world, Los Angeles emerged in the 1980s as the nation's most multicultural city, adding almost 1.3 million Latino residents.²⁶ It attracted the largest share of immigrants from 1975 to 1984 (18 percent), with 41 percent of Central American immigrants and 28 percent of Mexican immigrants living there in 1985, leading to the creation of new immigrant neighborhoods, cultural identities, and social realities.

In this dire economic context, oppositional cultures and oppositional identities emerged. In England, punk rock originated as a popular musical movement during the late 1970s among lower socioeconomic communities of youth who saw their families and neighborhoods

suffer devastating losses under the fiscally conservative policies of Thatcherism. Principally associated with the term of Margaret Thatcher (yet well-established by the time she became the Prime Minister of England), Thatcherism was driven by privatization and a radical shift to neoclassical economic practices, and a conscious shift of power away from local government. Eric Evans notes:

Thatcher had no difficulty identifying what she was *against*: state interference with individual freedom; state initiatives that encourage an ethos of "dependence"; woolly consensuality; high levels of taxation; the propensity of both organized labour and entrenched professional interests to distort market forces; and a reluctance to be "pushed around," either personally or as a nation-state . . . their obvious antitheses guide[d] policy: individual rights; private enterprise within a free market; firm, perhaps authoritarian, leadership; low levels of personal taxation; union and vested interest bashing; simple patriotism.²⁷

Taking as its primary nemesis the economic conditions created by Thatcherism, English punk also emerged as West Indian immigration to England was at its height. While it expressed frustrations with prescribed social conventions, some of its white working-class identity politics culminated in xenophobia and a denial of the influences of West Indian musical forms.

Deregulated economies were disastrous for the U.S. working class. Furthermore, their beneficiaries reaffirmed their own ideological authority over historically aggrieved populations in devastating ways. Wealthy elites projected a vision of decentralized public state power while valorizing private power, endorsing perceptions that the working poor, and not government policy or corporate capitalism, were to blame for their own condition.²⁸ In the 1980s, scholars like Arthur Schlesinger, Laurence Auster, and Richard Brookhiser supported this movement by denigrating the institutionalization of histories and contributions of people of color. For these scholars, ethnic studies and the more mainstream "multiculturalism" movement threatened "the American way of life," with the threat lying in what Schlesinger termed an "unprecedented . . . protest against the Anglocentric culture" that "today threatens to become a counterrevolution against the original theory of America as . . . a common culture, a single nation."²⁹ These scholars' approaches to public discussions of race were accompanied by the actions of politicians and pundits, who sanctioned an "authoritarian version of color-blindness," and the manipulation of white racial fears. This discourse strove to protect white privilege and power by pretending that

racial inequality no longer existed,"³⁰ a sentiment that was offered up for mass consumption in political, scholarly, and popular ways.³¹

In popular terms, this often manifested in the expansion of the visibility of people of color in order to project a picture of an economically and morally solid American middle class. The *Cosby* show, for example, presented a positive portrayal of African Americans while simultaneously suggesting that their existence was a result of the end of racism and economic discrimination.³²

In this context, many of the Chicana, Chicano, and Black youth who became punk artists describe the ways that these processes marginalized alternative racial and sexual identities. This occurred not only through white racism, but also through intergenerational misunderstandings within aggrieved communities about style, vernacular culture, and identity. As in other movements in other historical moments, these intergroup tensions revealed the stakes that older generations have in being perceived as deserving and productive citizens. The pressure to conform to middle-class ideals contributed to a compounded process of marginalization: many Black and Brown punks already felt the structural pressures of poverty and racism, but they also experienced marginalization by strict categories of racial and gender identification within their own communities. For example, Alice Bag remembers being spurned by Garfield High School classmates for being nongender normative and unfashionable:

One afternoon during lunchtime, the Garfield High MeCHa [Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanos de Aztlán (Chicano Student Movement of Aztlan)] organizers had set out a table to recruit new students for their organization. I remembered the cool Brown Berets I had seen at the Chicano Moratorium a few years back, and I was excited to think that I was finally old enough to be a Chicana activist and maybe even a Brown Beret, but the people I met that day snickered and whispered conspiratorially to each other as I walked toward their table. Instead of telling me about their organization, they asked me why I was wearing what I was wearing. They made me feel rejected even though they didn't outwardly insult me; their sideways glances and smirks let me know what they thought of me. . . . guess I looked a little too freaky for them, and they thought I couldn't seriously care about Chicano politics, but they were wrong."³³

The experience of being an outsider was one that manifested in different alienations among Black and Brown punk participants, and joining a punk subculture did not always alleviate this feeling. Bag's experience was echoed by Subsistencia drummer José Palafox, who "felt like an outsider to everything, whether it be school, or punk rock, or even the

Chicano movement."³⁴ John McKnight of Fishbone recalled that being Black was "the problem," since white "rock-n-roll kids" couldn't understand a Black band playing rock-n-roll, and the Black listeners "were expecting hip hop."³⁵

For many of these youth, a remedy for exclusion from their own communities was to create and belong to a "culture within a subculture," a space created within the punk movement that expressed the everyday realities of a being a person of color. Many punks of color felt solidarity with one another because of the ways they were different. Bag opines that early punk "was as much a rejection of the status quo as it was the product of the rejects of the status quo."³⁶ In many ways inspired to action by alienation, Black and Brown punk youth fashioned soundscapes and style politics that they could savor and understand together. The following section will focus on the punk expressions of Black and Brown youth, with particular (but not exclusive) attention to Los Angeles.

THE EMERGENCE OF LATINO, CHICANA/CHICANO, AND BLACK PUNK

The Latino punk scene really exploded because all of a sudden we had a hell of a lot to sing about. What started happening politically in the U.S. in the eighties pissed us off so much, and we were feeling targeted and we were feeling so cornered as a community that we began writing songs about it.

—Martín Sorrondeguy³⁷

Beginning in the late 1970s, Black and Latina/Latino punks began creating musical subcultures that drew heavily from working-class histories and identities, that embraced alternative racial and sexual identities, and that challenged widely held assumptions that punk was an exclusively white subculture. The group Bad Brains (from Washington, DC) began their innovations in 1979 after hearing The Sex Pistols, Eater, and The Clash. The Clash's version of "Police and Thieves," as well as music by Bob Marley, introduced Bad Brains to reggae. Bad Brains created a mix of funk, reggae, and punk, which made them one of the definitive American hard-core punk groups of the early 1980s. "It was different, because we were all Black *and* playing punk rock music."³⁸ Daryl Jenifer recounts, "All the while we was jazz, we wanted to innovate. We wanted to be part of something new and different and real. We was continually seeking. And then I saw the Sex Pistols album, and I said, 'BOOM!' This is it!"³⁹

Many Black artists formed punk bands because they had been exposed to the music through their own school and friendship networks

and because they were interested in new directions in Black music. For example, Fishbone vocalist Angelo Moore remembers, "we started out in the [high school] music room playing Bootsy [Collins] and Rick James and Led Zeppelin covers, and we just stuck together."⁴⁰

John McKnight explains, "I went to a very white school . . . they wanted to integrate schools. They bussed in kids from the inner city. That's where I met my band." McKnight's parents had moved to LA from the South, eventually settling in the South LA neighborhood of Crenshaw. Eventually, they moved to the San Gabriel Valley, where "we were like Black flies in the butter milk."⁴¹ Angelo Moore remembers:

[We were] mad about the racism out here in the valley, you the only black family out here, you got people who every once in awhile driving by and calling you a nigger, you know that kind of shit gets to you after awhile man. When I got hip to slam dancin', oh I was all up in the mosh pit. Tryin' to expel them demons.⁴²

The experiences of busing and living in white neighborhoods only served to magnify the differences Fishbone band members observed between Black communities in South Los Angeles and the Valley and led to artistic articulations about these realities:

You grow up Black in America in a neighborhood where you see people get shot and the police not show up . . . it makes you look at the world in a different way. You start to question your government, your purpose, and I think we stylistically went so many different places, because we wanted to unify everybody.⁴³

Punk culminated in a serious musical subculture in the late 1970s in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Originating in the "garage musician" style of the 1960s, punk in its various forms began with musicians who were untrained in musical and vocal performance, situating it outside of formal categorization from its beginnings. In Los Angeles, punk bands began forming in earnest after the popular reception of bands such as The Ramones and The Sex Pistols. By the early 1980s, LA punk sounds emerging from The Germs, The Dils, The Screamers, and The Alley Cats evolved into the most dominant form of punk in LA—hard core and embodied in the sonic articulations of The Circle Jerks and Black Flag. As Bag and other punks of color recount, it was sound *and* social experience that informed their transformation into punks. This is why the experiences of spatial isolation, racism, and personal alienation that Moore describes were important precursors to the sonic spatial entitlements enacted by Fishbone. As

Moore explains, these experiences impacted their style politics, musically and visually. The entitlement they expressed, therefore, was both intergroup and intragroup, in that they commanded the right to exist as they were in Black cultural contexts, in white neighborhoods, and in punk subcultures.

Fishbone's style has its beginnings in funk and rock, but reggae constitutes one of its major underpinnings. The influence of West Indians moved both ways across the Atlantic in this respect, remaining one of the paradigm-changing contributions of Black culture to punk. Some scholars of punk have called reggae a "present absence" in punk music: Hebdige characterizes the formation of the punk sound as intrinsically linked with the incorporation of the reggae sound and politics that influenced it so heavily, saying, "Reggae and punk were audibly opposed. Where punk depended on the treble, reggae depended on the bass. Where punk launched frontal assaults on the established meaning systems, reggae communicated through ellipsis and allusion. . . . To use a term from semiotics, we could say that punk includes reggae as a 'present absence'—a black hole around which punk composes itself."⁴⁴

Most scholarship on British punk has ignored the reggae influences in music by bands like The Clash as well as the Jamaican sounds of ska bands like The Specials.⁴⁵ This is an absence that is manifested not only in scholarship on punk, but also in its everyday practice. Maxwell Tremblay argues:

According to the rhetorical framing of some of its most revered institutions, the punk scene is meant to be "our" refuge from an unfeeling and unjust world, and "punk" as a designator is meant to be salient prior to other differences. Punk is a category that we can all claim before or outside of our other cultural investments, in the face of which we should all be able to remove our various hats, place our hands over our hearts, and salute the (Black) flag.⁴⁶

The first time Martin Sorrondeguy heard punk musicians from Latin America, he noted their urgency: "I mean, it was pissed off. And I realized there was this transnational connection. They were singing about poverty and all these issues. So [our band, Los Crudos] made a conscious decision to sing in Spanish. . . . [W]e were getting some ears that wouldn't have been turning before."⁴⁷ Los Crudos' only English-language song was entitled, "We're That Spic Band." In this song, Los Crudos demanded that "raceless White punks," as Tremblay has argued, "acknowledge the history of people of color in punk rock: Poly

Styrene, The Brat, Alice Bag, The Zeros, Alien Kulture, Bad Brains, and all the non-white bands and fans that were there from the start.”⁴⁸

Migration and exile shape the cultures of expression in which Sorrondeguy participates. His experience as part of an immigrant family, as a Latino in a country that routinely denies his community racial and civic inclusion, and as an actor in Latino punk subcultures make his particular references to Latin America an instructive example of the spatial politics of cognitive mapping. Out of Sorrondeguy’s experiences and their integration into punk musical performance and dissemination, a global vision is constructed that enables audiences and participants to create new meanings for the spatial contexts in which they situate themselves and related historical events.⁴⁹

Tremblay asserts that “the dreams of solidarity of the earliest generations of white punks were predicated upon distinguishing and essentializing punk as white people’s music, eliding the experiences and contributions of punks of color.”⁵⁰ Because punk has historically announced itself as a white space, and because the history of Black and Brown contributions have been historically denied, it is arguable that the decision to sing in Spanish (notably, on the aptly named *Lengua Armada* label) constitutes a spatial claim. *Lengua Armada* (literally, “armed tongue/language”) is a fitting descriptor for a felt entitlement to occupy vernacular space. This invokes what VêVê Clark has called “diaspora literacy,” or

a skill for both narrator and reader which demands a knowledge of historical, social, cultural, and political development generated by lived and textual experience. Throughout the twentieth century, diaspora literacy has implied an ease and intimacy with more than one language, with interdisciplinary relations among history, ethnology, and the folklore of regional expression.⁵¹

Latino punk artists generated alternative cognitive maps through the narration of radical politics and affiliations, narrowing the spatial gap between local and international struggles. Moreover, rejecting the notion that punk must be sung in English, Los Crudos and other all-Spanish bands such as Subsistencia and Huasipungo articulate an entitlement to occupy both literal and vernacular space. Palafox explains the felt meaning of this expressed right to occupy sonic and meaningful space: “Everyday we see our Aunts or our Uncles working these fucked up jobs; those types of bands for me are really important for me because they bring those things out, they bring those issues out. A lot of punk bands don’t talk about those things.”⁵² The rhetorical spatial claim made by Los Crudos and their supporters rejects historical and vernacular erasure by denying the hegemony of white punk narratives.

Black and Brown punk subcultures express not just the articulation of spatial entitlement and the performance of new forms of social membership, but they do so in the context of the material realities among poor and working-class people connected through migration and displacement and through a desire to express these realities across new collectivities. This can change the kind of optic that social actors have, yielding critical understandings of the ways that people are connected over time and space.

As I detailed above, many Black and Brown punk artists experienced marginalization from their own communities for embracing alternative lifestyles. In this sense, punk discourses have often deployed irony to express, evade, or assert the locations of their creators in a hierarchy of social belonging. Alice Bag recalls feeling that once she and her contemporaries had fully embraced punk culture, LA “had grown too small for us. We belonged in Transsexual, Transylvania,”⁵³ referring to the punk style politics that challenged heteronormativity. Bag joined other Brown and Black punks whose embrace of gender-ambiguous clothing and hairstyles often marginalized them even further from their communities. Nonetheless, Bag recognized the ways that multiple social movements and radical histories were interpolated into her own:

I was able to situate my participation in the birth of the West Coast punk scene within a much broader historical context, one that was not at all obvious to me at the time it was happening. What started out as a series of autobiographical blog entries ended up telling the story of several social movements that personally affected me: the Chicano movement, feminism, gay rights. My particular form of punk expression was also deeply affected by my childhood. I was born in East L.A., the daughter of Mexican immigrants and I entered the U.S. educational system as a non-English speaking student.⁵⁴

Black punks facing similar forms of exclusion, from both their communities and society as a whole, often deployed some of the same strategies of irony to address important identity issues. Irony was the foundation of performance by the Black LA punk band the Bus Boys, who dressed like waiters and confronted their most obvious “difference” from other punk artists and audiences by embracing, then diffusing, racial typecasting in their performances. Audience members would hear, “I’ll bet you never heard music like this by spades!” On their first album, *Minimum Wage Rock & Roll*, songs turned stereotypes (such as the phrase “yassuh, boss”) into vicious tools of satire.⁵⁵ The use of irony and parody in performance was a strategic pedagogical deployment of

important messages about being a person of color in an apparently white genre. It often masked the pain felt by its authors. Critic and 'zine writer Tasha Fierce has summed up this sentiment succinctly: "I am ostracized by the black community and I am only partially accepted by the punk rock community as a token of punk's fight against racism."⁵⁶

Juana Rodriguez has observed that:

identity politics' seeming desire to cling to explicative postures, unified subjecthood, or facile social identifications has often resulted in repression, self-censorship, and exclusionary practices that continue to trouble organizing efforts and work against the interests of full human rights, creative individual expression, and meaningful social transformation.⁵⁷

Rodriguez describes how she came to understand, at the age of fourteen, the "yearnings of freedom and desire" through dance. Bars constituted a place where "my dancing body has found a home, each new space requiring a moment of initiation where new rules of spaces and identities are learned and performed, each enacting a process of coding and decoding bodies and spaces." Rodriguez recalls that "these spaces of *familia* . . . taught me almost everything I now know about queer, about desire, about bodies on the margins, and dance floors creating momentary centers."⁵⁸

What Rodriguez describes about queer musical spaces, her scholarly inquiry into queer identity, and the topographies of cyberspace are also a description of how "subjects incessantly engage in encrypting identity and breaking the codes they and others have scripted." In these in-between spaces, "names begin to lose meaning as markers of social positionality, identities come undone from the carnal realities of individual bodies . . . [even as] the social significance and the identity multiples created through them . . . continue to be regulated by the dictates of cultural narratives."⁵⁹

The enactment of new identities and sonic politics from the in-between spaces of punk subculture that Black and Brown punk youth often occupy constitutes a form of spatial entitlement: the right to exist as and express the frustration and liberation associated with being neither simply punk nor unproblematically Chicano or Black.

SPACE, HISTORY, AND CONNECTIVITY

At the beginning of this chapter, I argued that the adherence to familial and cultural ties within Black and Brown punk subcultures constitute a unique form of spatial entitlement. Sorrondeguy's assertion that punk

was *not* about breaking with parental tradition reveals a spatial politics of staying, rooting, and grounding in history and tradition. In articulating these connections, many Chicano and Black artists were trying to do something more meaningful and complex than escape the strictures of their everyday existence: many were finding new ways to make their own and their communities' histories relevant to punk identity. For some Black and Chicano punk artists and participants, the seemingly "raceless" space that punks created in performances was appealing as means of asserting individuality and distinctiveness. Yet, as all of these artists and participants have described, everyday experiences, community living, and meaningful histories made race an inescapable—and often embraceable—part of the way they experienced the punk subculture. In some cases, the spatial politics of "staying" made the relationship of local struggles to distant spaces more visible.

Nigel Thrift has argued that regions matter not only ontologically but also epistemologically and that no social process is manifest in the same way in different places. In that vein, Sorrondeguy observes, "a lot of the Latino/Chicano punks living in the US still have ties to family and friends in Latin America and those ties are strong. So when things get desperate or intense in Latin America it is a concern for many living here as well."⁶⁰ Los Crudos, The Brat, and other bands conscious of these trans-national ties created place-specific narratives that emphasized their situated knowledge while simultaneously creating affinity with what appeared to be distant struggles. For example, Los Crudos' "La Caida de Latino America" ("The Fall of Latin America") connected the racism and economic exploitation experienced by aggrieved communities in the Latino diaspora, describing the ways that countries are "infiltrated" by western powers, and emphasizing the responsibility of individuals to maintain unity:

Atrapados, separados, abusados, torturados
Confundidos, desunidos, abandonados, rejudidos
Y ya no sabemos quien es nuestro enemigo. . .
Se infiltraron en nuestros paises
Es una forma de controlar
Banderas y Fronteras, un espejismo de libertad. . .
Que vas a hacer? Tu sos responsable
Cada uno de nosotros es culpable
Y cada uno de nosotros lo puede combatir.⁶¹

Trapped, separated, abused, tortured
Confused, disjointed, abandoned, rejudidos
And I do not know who our enemy is . . .

They infiltrated our countries
 It's a way to control
 Flags and Borders, an illusion of freedom . . .
 What are you doing? You're responsible
 Each of us is guilty
 And each of us can fight.

"Tiempos de la miseria" argued that Latinos around the world suffered from the same sickness: governments. It called for people to renounce the consumer culture that obscures societal problems:

Todos sufrimos del mismo enfermedad.
 Se llama: gobierno
 Basta! De tener la gente viviendo en la miseria. . .
 Nos dicen comprar! Comprar! Comprar!. . .
 Crean que si no vemos las problemas
 Entonces las problemas no existen. . .⁶²

All of us suffer the same infirmity
 Its name is: government
 Basta! To have the people living in misery. . .
 They tell us, buy! Buy! Buy!
 They think if we don't see the problems,
 Then the problems don't exist. . .

Thrift has termed this process "reconstituted regionalism," arguing that it underscores connections among different regions, their linkages to the global division of labor, and the issue of the production of spatial scale. With respect to punk, reconstituted regionalism allows us to shift our focus to the exercise of power by punk musicians and their cultural productions by emphasizing performative, embodied knowledges. When the spatial symbolism of homeland is expressed through Latino punk subcultures, and when the experiences of school desegregation find their way into Black punk expression, punk reveals its relationship to disjuncture and rupture. Structural racism engenders a spatial activity that would seem, following Hebdige's description, anathema to punk sensibilities: the ability to "stay"—to situate oneself within trans-historical spatial politics that value community history, tradition, and memory—can therefore be as radical as laying claim to a new space. Ash Amin imagines a "relationally imagined regionalism" in which people occupying particular places are immersed in a multitude of relational networks, compelling their inhabitants to understand "what the stakes are in living within difference and everyday global connectivity."⁶³ Taken together, Thrift's and Amin's suggestions describe something that has always occurred in Black and Latino communities: the

understanding that one's political community, or the source of one's solidarity with others, is fluid—without geographic boundaries—even as one's experience in a community may have fixed spatial parameters. In this regard, Amin concludes that regions should be thought of as "nodes in public spheres" that intersect with each other, "supporting different and multiple geographies of belonging and political practice."⁶⁴

For Los Crudos and other Latino punk bands, connections to spaces and places where people were similarly aggrieved were both personal and political. These spaces were invoked in song, and the distance between literal places became less a distance than a connective space, which opened up possibilities of affiliation and resemblance. The relationally imagined regionalism implemented through trans-national affiliations among aggrieved groups was an important form of spatial politics engaged in by Latino punks. It asserted a spatial right to exist in spite of the "borders and flags" that Los Crudos insists are one way of creating divisions among oppressed groups.

Chicanos in Los Angeles had reason to enact other forms of spatial entitlement—namely the right to congregate and perform in meaningful spaces. Lipsitz notes that people seeking freedom have "found it necessary to address the injuries of race by fashioning new understandings of space. [And that others] changed the *stakes of space* through schemes that turned sites of containment and confinement into spaces of creativity and community making."⁶⁵ Chicanos on LA's East Side were forced to change the stakes of space in their community when they found themselves unable to book performances at any of the major West Side punk venues unless it was "East L.A. Night." For example, Chicana punk band The Brat were limited to playing car shows and backyard parties in their own and surrounding neighborhoods. Rudy Brat recalled that booking agents "always wanted us to play rancheras and stuff . . . but that's what they expected, and they had a hard time categorizing us."⁶⁶

Other punk bands chose particularly unlikely venues available to them: Los Illegals' biggest early gig at an East Side Jewish temple yielded a full house of Chicanos in platform shoes and glitter.⁶⁷ The punk scene that established itself on the West Side of Los Angeles by the mid-1980s was, for all intents and purposes, a white space, and Black and Latino punks describe this as a marginalizing experience. "When I went to shows on the Westside," remembers Teresa Covarrubias, lead singer of The Brat, "I always got a sense that I was an outsider. There was always a hint of racism in the punk movement in Hollywood. It wasn't always overt, but it was there."⁶⁸

Chicana drummer Michelle Gonzalez of the Chicano punk group Spitboy and Instant Girl, observed,

People in the punk music scene are notorious for saying "racism sucks" but when it comes down to it . . . there's like, desirable people of color and then there's undesirable people of color. And it's like, you're too Brown, too down, you're gonna like piss somebody off or you're gonna make somebody feel uncomfortable.⁶⁹

"Our scene was invisible and unrecognized," remembered Willie Herron:

It wasn't anything that many other bands or writers were interested in. When they would review our shows, they just didn't get it. We had to remain in the shadows. We couldn't be ourselves and represent the East L.A. we knew. We couldn't be white punkers, and we didn't want to be white punkers. We were trying to come up with our sound.⁷⁰

To remedy this limitation, East LA musical and visual artists created spaces like The Vex, a performance venue housed in Self-Help Graphics, as well as grassroots record companies like Fatima Records. Brian Qualls of The Warriors (a band of predominantly Black East Siders) recalled the antiracist framework erected by "crowds of mixed races from all sides of the city" and mixed bands who came together where "punk was another word for unity. If you showed up, you weren't just pledging allegiance to a new vision of punk, you were pledging allegiance to a new vision of L.A."⁷¹

These spaces were antiracist not because they were "raceless," but because they were spaces of mutual understanding where people produced and shared the sounds that affirmed social and cultural belonging.

Despite the multiple spatial assaults against Latino and Black neighborhoods in every decade of the twentieth century, and despite the reconstitution (and in some cases, evisceration) of those neighborhoods, for many residents, "the lessons learned or transmitted about earlier community-turf battles helped some barrio residents to defend their place-rights."⁷² In terms of punk, the history of displacement has often manifested itself in fiercely expressed entitlements to collective rights to human dignity and respect and to have the spaces that communities *have* held onto treated with respect.

This racially mixed scene was instrumental in creating crossover audiences and recognition for East LA punk bands of the 1980s. For many young people from East LA and Hollywood, these spatial acts became a vehicle for entering, even if temporarily, usually segregated

social spaces across the city.⁷³ There were art shows by Chicana and Chicano artists, specially commissioned mural paintings, cultural street fairs, and even mainstream band performances, such as an event featuring the Chicano band Los Lobos.⁷⁴ Like the weekly broadcast by Dick Hugg and Hunter Hancock made possible by Dolphin's *Ocean* in Hollywood in the 1950s, these events attracted people from all over Los Angeles to see Latino bands in East LA, creating integrated places in a most unexpected way. Chicano youth, marginalized by the West Side rock scene, enticed West Side youth—who otherwise refused to see Chicano culture as cosmopolitan or as worthy of their interest—to the East Side.⁷⁵

Studying punk music reveals an important location of gender spatial politics. Popular and scholarly writing about the racial and gender configurations of punk as a popular practice tend to cast the scene as nihilistic in spirit, only white, and mostly male, thereby closing off analysis of and input from women and women of color. Yet LA was a critical site for the emergence of Chicana punks, and therefore it became one of the few places at that time where women and their bands challenged predominating ideologies of masculinity within punk, not to mention the moralism that characterized the 1980s' New Right politics. The Bags' Alice Bag and The Brat's Teresa Covarrubias, for example, were two of the few female lead singers who emerged from the male-dominated East LA punk scene during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Chicana punks were doing more than making spatial claims as punks, they were claiming discursive and sonic space for themselves within the punk subculture. Covarrubias, an aspiring poet before she helped to form The Brat in 1978, created a style that was characterized by striking lyrics and sonic visceral effects, which distinguished The Brat as an important creative force on the East Side. In a subculture whose sonic spatial authority is achieved in large part by the rapidity and volume of its sonic productions, Covarrubias's unique style was an incisive intervention in establishing women as legitimate members of the punk culture. Covarrubias remembers, "what really attracted me to punk, was the notion that 'Gee, I could do that.' 'Zines had all these paste-up things and all these crazy little articles, and these girl bands and guy bands, and it just seemed like so open."⁷⁶

Nonetheless, Covarrubias encountered persistent sexism, and even though she was able to write and perform songs that critiqued gender norms, such as "Misogyny," she explained, "people look at you and

you're brown and you're a woman and they think, 'she can't do that.' It's like they immediately assume less."⁷⁷

Covarrubias, in particular, disrupted status quo narratives of punk and alternative music in LA by claiming discursive space and aesthetic authority in a male-dominated genre.⁷⁸ After The Brat broke up in the mid-1980s Covarrubias joined Chicana feminist groups Las Tres and Goddess 13. These groups and other Chicana inventions and interventions helped shape the contours of LA's early punk scenes in both Hollywood and East Los Angeles.

Michelle Habell-Pallán has argued that these Chicana "punkeras" reshaped British youth subculture to devise new local cultural expressions, which "allowed them to express their realities in a public context." They transformed punk aesthetics "into sites of possibility for transnational conversations concerning violence against women and the effects of growing corporatization of public space."⁷⁹ Although the experience of being punk held different values for each artist, it was a place where Chicanas could temporarily "reimagine the world [they] lived in; it was a place where she could see herself as an empowered subject."⁸⁰

Creating such spaces had important and lasting effects on personal and social politics. When Alice Bag traveled to Nicaragua as part of an effort to increase literacy, the cumulative effects of her experience as a Chicana punkera and East LA student and citizen led her to realize that "teaching someone to read was itself a revolutionary act. I observed and learned as much as I could, but mostly I learned about myself and about my government."⁸¹ Like Los Crudos' implication in their song "Tiempos de la miseria," emerging from the distractions of consumerism can lead to significant revelations: Bag had to leave the United States in order to see it for what it really was.

QUEERCORE

My race doesn't seem to matter/But why is it not represented/All I see are hard muscle white men/Where the fuck are all the lesbians?⁸²

—S3 Puta

Queer punk became an important component of Chicana/Chicano punk subcultures in the 1990s. Journalist Gina Arnold recalled, "if you're addicted to being a member of the underground opposition, you now have to look elsewhere for the sense of exhilaration that the sight of minority

X LIMP WRIST X



FIGURE 11. Limp Wrist, "Don't Knock It 'til You Try It," 2000.

culture infiltrating the status quo can give, and at the moment, that means looking queerward."⁸³

The term "Queer":

is not simply an umbrella term that encompasses lesbians, bisexuals, gay men, two-spirited people, and transsexuals; it is a challenge to constructions of heteronormativity. It need not subsume the particularities of . . . other definitions of identity; instead it creates an opportunity to call into question the systems of categorization that have served to define sexuality. There is already something "queer" about categories such as lesbian or gay, "inclusive disjunctures" that simultaneously employ speech and silences on sexual practice, desire, identification, anatomy, gender, community, and dare I say love.⁸⁴

Rodriguez's description of "queer" as a challenge to heteronormativity is helpful to understanding the queercore performances examined below.

By the mid-1990s Sorrondeguy had formed Limp Wrist, a straight-edge, openly gay punk band out of Los Angeles whose lyrics connected Latin American revolutionary thought to the struggles of the oppressed in the United States. As a critical creative force underpinning *queer-core*, Limp Wrist addressed queer issues in their live performance and lyrics. Sorrondeguy and his band joined a Latino and Black punk aesthetic that had important history in the physical places of Hollywood, Central, and East Los Angeles, and that grew out of the shared spaces of Afro-Chicano interactions.

Limp Wrist's original lineup "really played with the straight edge thing and with the queer thing."⁸⁵ In several of their shows, Limp Wrist would ask queer men to "stop hating their bodies" and "stop imitating Daddy." At one show, Sorrondeguy reportedly admonished the crowd, "there's not nearly enough guys in here with their shirts off right now"; so powerful was his co-signature on sexual expression that most of the audience summarily went topless.⁸⁶

Los Angeles queercore bands have been a significant presence in the demands for recognition among queer punks. After the breakup of the Bags, Alice Bag began collaborating with a colleague who performed under the name Fertile LaToya Jackson. Jackson performed with "a six-foot-five drag queen named Vaginal Davis . . . a seasoned performance artist [who had] a clear vision for this new band. She insists that every member dress the part and adopt the persona of a teenage Latina."⁸⁷ Vaginal "Crème" Davis ("Davis" is after Black heroine Angela Davis), an African-American queercore artist from Watts, emerged as part of "homocore" punk in the 1980s. Davis's earliest recordings were with the cappella punk performance act The Afro Sisters, with later leadership roles in bands like PME, Gore Gore Girls, Black Fag, Pedro Muriel and Esther, and Cholita! The Female Menudo.⁸⁸ Davis recounts riding her bike to Hollywood "dives" like The Masque to see Covarrubias and Bag perform. Perhaps this is what *Chisme Arte* had in mind when they observed in 1981 that "Teresa [Covarrubias] plays a major role in reaching out to cross-cultural audiences."⁸⁹

Davis has become a punk legend, in part because of a willingness to exploit uncertainties within queercore culture. Davis's critiques of punk sexual, racial, and gender politics echoes the critiques about narrow racial categories lodged by her musical contemporaries. "What most people don't know about the gay world is that it's the ultimate conformist culture. Individuality is not prized. I never fit into the mainstream gay world and never will."⁹⁰



FIGURE 12. Alice Bag and Vaginal Davis.

In her important work, *In a Queer Time and Place*, Judith Halberstam argues that attending to queer and transgender subcultures can effect a redeployment of subcultural theory. Studying female, gay, lesbian, and transgender punk performers and their cultural productions decenters a traditional theoretical preoccupation among theorists of subculture on heterosexual male youth and has a profound effect on methodology, privileging the perspective of the participant-observer.⁹¹ Davis provides us with an illustrative example. Dominic Johnson describes the value of Davis's performances:

Vaginal Davis opens up spaces for their continual struggle towards renewed and greater challenges, over and against [alternative cultures'] practices [of] timid appeasement and appropriation by the mainstream. . . . Disrupting the cultural assimilation of gay-oriented and corporate-friendly drag, she positions herself at an uncomfortable tangent to the conservative politics of gay culture, mining its contradictory impulses to interrupt the entrenchment of its assimilatory strategies.⁹²

Davis's work includes acting in underground films, comedy, writing advice columns, moonlighting as a DJ, and lecturing. Her shows often include personas such as a gay-bashing gangsta rapper and "a Black Muslim for Christ." Sorrondeguy argues that artists such as these "pushed a lot of the boundaries about being punk, queer and straight edge, challenging every different scene."⁹³

One of the strengths of Hebdige's analysis is his assertion of "a deep correspondence" between subculture and its context: he argues that subcultures are themselves produced in response to specific historical

conditions. This grounding in historical specificity leads him to conclude that "if a style is really to catch on . . . it must say the right things in the right way at the right time."⁹⁴ Grassroots interracial struggles during this period constitute an important aspect of the deep correspondence that Hebdige describes. While the specific historical conditions that inspired punk's indignation were unjust moral and fiscal economies, grassroots struggles were also an accumulating ingredient in its context. This is why punk serves as a rich discursive terrain for examining the emerging consciousness that helped shape the personal identities and political struggles of Black and Brown communities. LA punk music, which I have connected to the devastating consequences of Reaganomics, cannot be extracted from the history of coalitional politics that surrounded the genre's emergence.

BREAKDOWNS AND BUILDUPS

Scholars who study the coalitional politics and interracial spaces of leisure in this era know that there were far more social forces tearing people apart than there were pulling them together. Particularly for Black and Brown urban communities like Los Angeles, the effects of supply-side economics were socially and personally devastating and rarely led to sustained cooperation with other groups, mostly because people were doing their best to sustain their own families and immediate communities through the storm.

Critiques about racial, economic, and environmental injustice connected the grassroots and coalitional politics of Black and Brown struggles to punk discourse. Though punk was not the soundtrack of these movements, they shared a weariness with the racial injustices faced by their communities. The articulated entitlements of Black and Brown punks for recognition, human dignity, and spatial justice (both within and outside their immediate communities) were goals shared with movements for social justice.

Given all the efforts to divide Black and Brown communities, instances of unity and cross-pollination become all the more important. Yet we cannot ignore the divisions among these groups. They constitute an important part of the story that helps us to understand all that was at stake, in both spatial and human terms.

For working-class Latinos and Blacks, economic problems have been a crucial source of conflict. Between 1970 and 1980, the population of Latinos in South Central Los Angeles had doubled, with Chicanos

making up 21 percent of the total population of South Central, a traditionally African-American area.⁹⁵ During this same decade, LA County became home to the greatest number of Latinos in the nation. But these immigrants were arriving at a time when the local economy, and consequently the region's demography, were undergoing drastic changes. Moreover, the economic downturn of the late 1980s ended a short-lived era of upward mobility via blue collar work for Blacks.

In the 1980s, both demographics and long-standing antagonisms between African Americans and Latinos in Los Angeles manifested important consequences in electoral politics. A burgeoning uneasiness existed among African-American politicians about the movement of thousands of Latinos into South Central LA. South Central Los Angeles's African-American population had declined from 56 percent to 36 percent during the 1980s—largely because of deindustrialization—and its Latino population had increased from 36 percent to 61 percent. To Black community officials, who had historically depended on South Central as a political power base, this shift was particularly disquieting in light of a slow loss of political ground under the mayoral tenure of Tom Bradley.

Though this shift was a loss for African-Americans, Acuña illustrates how Chicano political leaders came to view it as an opportunity to increase representation when they discovered that a Chicano could be elected in this area.⁹⁶ But redistricting the area to reflect these changes meant that City Councilmember Rita Walters would have to give up downtown Los Angeles as part of her constituency. The Black community was unwilling to do this in a time when Blacks were losing political and economic power in Los Angeles.

The result was that Blacks and Browns fell into the trap of measuring the political successes of each against the achievements of the other. Councilman Mike Hernández and others accused African Americans of making sure that Latinos remained politically disempowered. Conservative Blacks raised the specter of "illegal immigrants," saying that many of the people in the community would not be able to vote anyway.⁹⁷ This was an unfortunate precursor of a later time, when state politicians' exploited these particular antagonisms to pass Propositions 187 and 209: right-wing conservatives garnered African-American support against Latinos for Proposition 187 and Chicano support was garnered for Proposition 209, which abolished affirmative action.

The fact that restructuring in Los Angeles has moved many Latina immigrants into a job previously dominated by African-American men makes understanding the divisions engendered by this process crucial

for organizers, workers, and scholars. In the most immediate sense, some of these divisions can be traced in some measure to scarcity of jobs and economic resources: between 1970 and 1990, for example, African-American women's employment in nondurable goods manufacturing declined by 114 percent and in durable goods manufacturing by 37 percent, which had a significant impact on their occupational distribution in Los Angeles.⁹⁸ One of the consequences of this process was that African-American women became a rising proportion of service-sector employees. Moreover, many of the heavy industrial plants that closed during the deindustrialization in the 1980s were located in predominantly African-American communities. This meant that capital flight and economic restructuring left few options for this group, namely unskilled work staffed increasingly by immigrant laborers. Under the press of immigration, diminishing job opportunities, and media misrepresentation of both groups, Latinos and African Americans have sometimes each identified the other as an impediment to their own communities' progress. Increased competition for scarce resources and the trap of racial chauvinism have often positioned workers in opposition to each other; today this phenomenon is as much about globalization as it is about the ways that racial identity shifts over time.⁹⁹ African-American and Latino communities have been no exception in often misdirected tensions, especially since deindustrialization and the concomitant forces of globalization have collectively cost these communities more than any others in Los Angeles.

Despite the economic and infrastructural downturn of this era, the history of radical interracial politics persisted. Organizations like The Coalition for Women's Economic Development and the Esperanza Community Housing Corporation sought to forge the dozens of separate neighborhood organizations into a broader movement for community development. One such effort was the Jobs with Peace campaign, which sponsored a successful citywide referendum in 1984 calling for the federal government to cut the Pentagon budget and place the savings into job-generating local economic development programs. Black and Chicano Neighborhood Associations witnessed the results of the collapse of government social welfare spending in the decline of community social services, but they also won important gains through steady activism. One of the more notable examples is the struggle against the LANCER (Los Angeles City Energy Recovery Plant) incinerator project. Approved by the Los Angeles City Council in June 1983, the 1600-ton-per-day solid-waste incinerator plant would have been built in South Central Los Angeles on 41st and Alameda Streets.



FIGURE 13. The Mothers Of East Los Angeles protest city plans to build an incinerator in the barrio. Note U.S. Representative Edward Roybal and (now Congresswoman) Lucille Roybal-Allard holding the banner.

Mayor Tom Bradley's administration at first supported the project as a way to alleviate the growing problem of landfill capacity, partly a response to objections of his West Side supporters regarding the expansion of the Lopez landfill. The city's Bureau of Sanitation, in conjunction with major industry, legal, and political interests, created a plan to construct three of these incinerators. The first would be built in South Central, on the assumption that low-income Blacks or Latinos did not care about environmental questions. Proponents such as Councilman Gilbert Lindsey argued that with the \$14.7 million offered to improve the neighborhood, the plant would make the community "a garden of Eden." Lindsey and others consistently pointed to the plant's projected ability to provide 40,000 homes in the community with electricity. The Bradley administration claimed there was a one-in-a-million chance that a new case of cancer might develop; residents responded with their own research, arguing that the majority of studies conducted involved white males between twenty and thirty years of age.¹⁰⁰

Residents of this mainly Black and Chicano community were not concerned just with inevitable noise pollution; they also worried that the incinerator would cause the same respiratory illnesses that were already



FIGURE 14. Mothers of East Los Angeles Rally against incinerator placement.

a problem in other low-income communities located near environmental hazards. From 1985 to 1987, groups in South Central Los Angeles mobilized and other organizations throughout the city formed alliances to stop the project. Chicano and African-American citizens of South Central Los Angeles fought the LANCER project and won, even after bonds had been sold for the project and city officials had confiscated land through eminent domain. These alliances helped promote a potent progressive environmental movement and ultimately forced Bradley to withdraw his support from the waste-to-energy project in 1987.¹⁰¹

South Central and East LA, devastated by plant closures, were now sites designated for “economic development” projects like prisons and toxic incinerators. A multiracial force of activists in the Coalition for Clean Air sued the federal government and ultimately forced the South Coast Air Quality Management District to develop a more far-reaching and vigorous plan to clean the region’s air. The Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA) successfully combated the construction of a \$29 million incinerator designed to burn 125,000 pounds of toxic waste per day.¹⁰² Raul Villa has characterized their activism as rooted in a “materialist experiential consciousness” for whom, he says (referencing Pardo), that “the freeways that cut through communities and disrupted

neighborhoods are now a concrete reminder of shared injustice, of the vulnerability of the community.”¹⁰³

Two notable African-American/Latina/Latino responses to the widening economic divide were the 1987 statewide campaign for a “moral minimum wage” and UAW Local 645’s struggle to keep the Van Nuys General Motors Plant open. The “moral minimum wage campaign” was based in 73 churches, mostly in low-income neighborhoods. The leaders of the United Neighborhood Organization (based in East Los Angeles), the South Central Organizing Committee, and the East Valley Organization (based in the San Gabriel Valley) had seen the living standards of their constituents decline as wages stagnated and housing costs skyrocketed. Their solution was to mobilize a grassroots campaign to increase the state minimum wage from \$3.35 to \$4.25 an hour, the highest in the nation at the time. By bringing in allies among labor and church groups and enlisting the support of some elected officials, this campaign successfully secured an annual raise of \$1,800 for each of the state’s nearly one million low-wage workers.¹⁰⁴

In 1982, UAW Local 645 was one of the most progressive and powerful local unions in the U.S. labor movement. The Local represented workers in the General Motors’ Camaro plant in Van Nuys, one of the last remaining sources of heavy industrial jobs for Black and Latino workers in the county. When GM decided to close the plant and move manufacturing south of the border, workers built a powerful in-plant movement led by Latino, Black, and white male and female workers, in strong alliance with LA’s large Black and Latino community.

A number of key figures, including veteran activist Bert Corona,¹⁰⁵ emerged during the 1980s at the forefront of what became a continuous mobilization against the repeated efforts to threaten the rights of immigrants, who constituted a major new constituency. Demonstrations, such as the massive turnout in March 1982 protesting federal immigration policies, coincided with a wave of organizing, activist leadership, and other ethnic-based organizations (such as the Asian Pacific Legal Center, the Korean Youth and Community Center, and the Korean Immigrant Workers Association). This shift also extended to the labor movement, increasingly defined by emergent leaders such as Maria Elena Durazo, who was elected president of Local 11 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union in 1989.¹⁰⁶

The efforts to organize across race and space in this period flowed from the understanding that environmental and labor-related injuries to one community were indicative of a pointed disregard for particular

communities of marginalized groups. More than coalitions based on shared experiences of marginalization, these social actors articulated human and social entitlements based on mutual understandings of the value of their communities. In spite of the spatial, social, and environmental disregard that city planners showed for these communities, these efforts reflected a profound belief in the value of Black and Brown lives. Creating alternative means to social justice was a shared practice between these movements and particular punk subcultures.

Despite inspiring evidence of radical interracial protest in the 1980s, José Palafox's assertion that his punk identity was not represented in "school" or "the Chicano movement" points to the double marginalization that inspired alternative identities like punk. Surveying literature on punk and popular music in general reveals that the culture African-American and Chicana/Chicano punks created was often absent from the rapidly developing popular and academic discourses on identity. Academic and popular historiographies of punk music, as well as written histories of Black and Latino communities, rarely attend to the identity politics of Black and Brown punk youth.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, some punk artists have opined that without its marginal representation in academic and popular discourse, African-American and Latino punk would not have become the "D.I.Y."¹⁰⁸ genus that it is. According to Sorrondeguy, this kind of networking, in which musicians press their own records and drive their own cars on nationwide tours, "dismantles rock-n-roll concepts. There's no rock stars or bouncers separating who is the band from who is the crowd. We're always dialoguing."¹⁰⁹ Mike Amezcua of *Grito Records* relates, "we're making our own shirts, booking our own shows, not through the club circuit or through promoters. There's a universal network that exists underground."¹¹⁰

The movements and punk subcultures I have examined articulated significant spatial entitlements. Through labor activism, environmental justice efforts, and musical economies of exchange, activists and musicians conveyed the right to make the space one resides in (whether symbolic or physical) more than merely habitable, but meaningful in the present and viable for the future. In so doing, they generated new spaces of creativity and social meaning representing mutual empowerment and understanding. The overlapping influences of Black and Brown punk subcultures became more than practices containing the memory and history of distinct groups. They grew into artistic creations that insisted on recognition and respect.

In 1978, after the passage of Proposition 13 (an initiative that put a ceiling on property taxes and significantly altered state and local

government funding, in turn plunging California into the most vicious cycle of state budget crises in the country), California's K-12 public school system was reduced from a relatively accessible and high-quality system into a system far behind its contemporaries across the country. Jeff Chang records that during the Reagan recession of 1983, the unemployment rate in South Central LA soared to at least 50 percent for youth; a quarter of Blacks and Latinos lived below the poverty line by the end of the year; and infant mortality in Watts was triple the rate in Santa Monica. Chang concludes that these conditions made LA "the epitome of a growing number of inner-city nexuses where deindustrialization, devolution, Cold War adventurism, the drug trade, gang structures and rivalries, arms profiteering and police brutality were combining to destabilize poor communities and alienate massive numbers of youth."¹¹¹

In popular histories of Los Angeles, this is where gangsta rap usually enters the story. Gangsta rap has historically been one of the most promoted styles of hip-hop in the genre's history. It remains a relevant lens through which to view the material consequences of the 1980s "inner-city nexuses" that Chang describes. Yet its historiography often conceals the important spatial politics of its predecessors, expressive politics worth documenting as a record of the everyday circulation of sonic politics among Black and Chicano youth in LA. The story that precedes gangsta rap is arguably more significant to understanding youth cultural production and expression in this historical moment. Moreover, it reveals some of the original directions of the precursors of gangsta rap; that is, what West Coast (specifically LA) rap first set out to accomplish.

For many working-class people in California, swap meets provide sites of important social and commercial activity. They are an affordable alternative to retail shopping for consumers, and for vendors, they can be a supplement to weekly income, an alternative to sweatshop labor, or merely a hobby. Swap meets are a place to trade or sell items that are not popularly bought and sold in mainstream markets or that are household necessities difficult to find elsewhere. Antique dealers, artisans, local farmers, and inventors have found an informal home in swap meets, where one can sell nearly anything. Because of the relative ease with which one can acquire space to sell commodities, swap meets (traditionally held in drive-in theater, arena, or city-college parking lots) have historically blurred the line between legitimate business and black market economy. Today, they remain popular sites of live local music and car shows.¹¹²

LA swap meets serving Black and Brown neighborhoods in the 1970s and 1980s were also important sonic sites. Buying a mixtape containing

the latest (just mixed the night before) hip-hop and dance music meant taking one's purchasing power to a swap meet. Aspiring artists sold mix-tapes out of their cars and played them from their car's cassette decks or set up portable stereo equipment for maximum volume to entice buyers. Eric "Eazy E" Wright made no secret of his humble beginnings, selling his first record, "Boyz-n-the Hood" out of his trunk to a swap meet vendor at The Radium, an abandoned drive-in movie theater and home of the weekly swap meet that served Torrance, Lawndale, Hawthorne, Gardena, Carson, and Compton.¹¹³ Simultaneously local and public, swap meets were important sites of sonic broadcast and circulation of early LA hip-hop.

Radio station KDAY in LA began playing hip-hop in the 1980s and as a result became one of the most popular stations in history. The unofficial, yet fundamental, reason for its success was the strength of popular demand for hip-hop in the mid-1980s. In reality, the middecade transformation of KDAY's playlist and the prominence of hip-hop programmer Greg Mack were the result of a reluctant capitulation to Black and Brown youth, who relentlessly requested the music they heard in swap meets and clubs. Swap meets themselves had become "guerilla" radio stations, a place where one could hear the soundtrack of urban expression that KDAY initially refused to play.

Working-class youth of color had long participated in an informal sonic economy of hip-hop and dance music. Three of the most important generators of LA Black-Brown sonic spatial politics in the 1980s emerged from underground networks of DJs, artists, producers, and audiences. Chang recounts that in the early 1980s:

[a] prominent node on the Los Angeles hip-hop map was a downtown club called Radio . . . presided over by local rap kingpin Ice T and jet-setting Zulu Nation DJ Afrika Islam. . . .

Radio made the Roxy's diversity look like a Benetton ad. Kid Frost and his *cholos* rolled down to the club in their low-riders, sporting their Pendletons and khakis. There were slumming Hollywood whites and South Central Korean-American one-point-fivers escaping long hours at the family business. Everyone but the hardest brothers left the menacing Blue City Strutters—a Samoan Blood set from Carson that would become the Boo-Yaa Tribe—alone.¹¹⁴

Uncle Jamm's Army was also critical to the informal economy of sound in LA. Led by Rodger Clayton, or "Uncle Jamm" to his contemporaries, Jamm's Army was a West Coast equivalent of Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation. He began his career as musical shepherd by throwing parties in small concert halls in South Los Angeles, but by 1983, he could pack an



FIGURE 15. NWA at the Compton Swap Meet, circa 1986.

arena that had an 8,000-person capacity, and he did so regularly. Uncle Jamm employed numerous legendary DJs and performers such as the Egyptian Lover, DJ Pooh, Rodney O & Joe Cooley, and Alonzo Williams and dance crews like the Carson Freakateers, Groups Sex, and the Hot Coochie Mamaz.¹¹⁵ His ability to amass large numbers of Black youth in one social space provoked the ire of city officials, whose plans for the 1984 Olympics did not include an interracial army of urban youth.

A complement to the sonic circulation of early LA hip-hop was the largely informal LA-based pressing plant, Macola Records, which was founded in 1984. Up-and-coming artists could get 500 pressed records for \$1,000. Owner Don MacMillan rented out studios for recording and produced and distributed the albums for many well-known West Coast artists, including LA's World Class Wreckin' Cru, the LA Dream Team, and NWA and the Posse (precursor to NWA).

The city of Los Angeles recommitted to its policy of Black and Brown spatial immobilization, containing Black and Brown bodies in the Southern part of the city as Reaganomics took the most devastating hold. In "postliberal Los Angeles," security fences and walls enclosed a

ten-mile ring, while LAPD police chief Darryl Gates sanctioned brutal policing programs.¹¹⁶ As their mobility was curtailed, Black youth found ways to increase the mobility of their sonic expression. Swap meets, informal production and distribution, and spaces of musical congregation and innovation challenged the staggering mobilization of state force against Black bodies, and evinced a politics of spatial entitlement that was impossible for Gates to ignore. The most persistent soundtrack of this process of enclosure evolved into gangsta rap in short order. But it wasn't *always* gangsta rap, and that deserves to be noted.

The power and reach of this underground sonic economy is, in many ways, most visible in hindsight. The first time Jerry Heller, infamous first manager of NWA, realized the impact of the record, he was watching Run DMC perform a cover of NWA's "Boyz-n-the Hood" at an industry gathering. He was stunned: "the record had never been played on radio anywhere. It's a 12-inch single distributed locally."¹¹⁷

The song had widespread and often surprising appeal. Memphis record distributor Johnny Phillips (nephew of legendary record executive Sam Phillips) recalled when one of his accounts, an independent record store in Cincinnati, inquired about "Boyz-n-the Hood" after its popularity in local clubs inspired several requests for it. It was the first time he had heard of NWA. "I called Macola, bought a couple hundred of them. By the next month we were reordering five, six, seven thousand a week. As soon as we got 'em, we sold 'em."¹¹⁸

From 1985 to 1990, records like Eazy E's "Easy Does It," Ice T's "Rhyme Pays," and NWA's "Boyz-n-the Hood" relayed the effects of supply-side economics upon Black and Brown communities. Toddy Tee's 1985 record "The Batterram" produced by soul and funk artist Leon Haywood, offered spatial and racial commentary about the intimidation tactics of the LAPD, the militarization of Black urban space, and the complicity of Mayor Tom Bradley in the destruction of Black communities. Titled after the vernacular descriptor for the armored vehicle deployed by the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) Division of the LAPD, the song identified police chief Darryl Gates and his force as the principle enemies of Black community well-being, describing how police routinely bulldozed their way into Black homes as if they were earmarked for destruction. "The Batterram" called attention to terrible human costs associated with the proliferation of crack cocaine in Black communities and the malicious and punitive measures approved by Bradley and War-on-Drugs administrators to address drug-related

crime in low-income areas. But it also put Mayor Bradley on notice, signifying that his constituents in low-income Black areas of LA were tiring of police corruption and abuse:

In New York, it's comin'
In Detroit, it's comin'
In L.A., it's comin'. No, it's here. . .
Mayor of the city
what you tryin to do?
They say they voted you in in '82
But on the next term huh, without no doubt
They say they gon' vote your jack ass out
Because you musta been crazy or half-way wack
To legalize somethin' that works like that
And the Chief of Police says he just might
Flatten out every house he sees on sight.¹¹⁹

Robin Kelley describes the spatial-racial imagination of gangsta rap, its artists and its audiences in South Central Los Angeles, noting that the subjects of these rhymes and their communities paid the highest costs in the economic crisis. Showing how youth suffered most from the decimation of social services, the crack cocaine economy, and police repression, he reveals how rising crime rates and longer sentencing contributed to a rapid increase in Black prison populations. Consistently targeted by sanctioned police harassment and programs such as the Gang Related Active Trafficker Suppression Program, youth participated in a politics of resistance by creating a soundtrack that vocalized and circulated descriptions of the crimes of police and by engaging in style politics that tended to draw police attention. Gangsta rappers and their productions, despite the characteristically misogynist and violent lyrics, are "race rebels," nonetheless.¹²⁰

Yet executives and pundits were far more interested in the potential fan base for the music, and in the moral judgments and social policies that rebuked and spatially immobilized the subjects of these rhymes. After 1990, opportunistic producers and record label owners discerned a "gangsta formula," a business hook to attract buyers eager to consume, for varying reasons, the increasing lyrical representations of violence, poverty, and denigration among Black youth and communities that label executives capitalized upon. Despite a short life before the gangsta formula and along with all of its contradictions and male-predominating cultural politics, LA hip-hop and Black-Brown cultural expression (in the barely one-minute span before it became commodified gangsta rap) reveals the persistence of Black and Brown spatial entitlements.

The social spaces and spatial entitlements generated by punk subcultures and early hip-hop in Los Angeles are significant articulations of the rights of disaffected Black and Brown youth to equality and social justice.

Martin Sorrondeguy offers us a significant observation for understanding the complexities of youth expression:

What occurs with the Latino/Chicano punks is also what occurs to the communities they come from. So if they are living in corrupt countries or communities where poverty, drugs, gangs, etc. are part of the every day, this adds to their struggle for change. Punks may be seen as outsiders from a voyeur's perspective but these same punks may go home with their families and deal with life as it affects them all.¹²¹

New meanings of nation, race, politics, and identities have changed the context of Althusser's writings. Increased competition for resources, traps of racial chauvinism, and the divide-and-conquer approach that officials take in undermining opposition often position workers of different origins and ethnic groups in opposition to each other.¹²² In this context, both the antagonisms and the triumphs of interracial politics can articulate eloquent objections to the teeth-gritting harmony that Althusser describes. Yet, too often, scholarly representations of social movements and working-class musical genres depict isolated events and ideologies, when in fact the alternative archives of musicians and listeners delineate complex relationships of coalition, critique, and struggle. When those at the margins of inclusion contest the discourses of race and national belonging mobilized against them, their utterances can be uncomfortable—predicting and exposing an individual's or a community's deepest uncertainties about the parameters of our commitment to social justice. Punk and LA hip-hop in the early 1980s reminded us that there are critical understandings about power and race that have been supplied to us by intellectuals not always credited with brilliance, by historical actors not credited with action, and by artists not celebrated for sophisticated or elegant expressions of situated knowledge. Black and Brown punk and hip-hop identities can illumine new ways to theorize and imagine the rich identities that exist beyond singular categories, while retaining a sense of cultural specificity and politics.

In this moment, anti-immigration policies, economic restructuring, and the prison-industrial complex have come together in teeth-gritting harmony to severely curtail the freedom and mobility of Black and Brown people. Politicians, corporate executives, and moral pundits have displayed such palpable and prolific indifference to human rights on issues of immigration and racial suppression that it can often seem like no one

else is speaking. But studying unlikely sources of articulation reveals the literal "screams" of dissent in popular music. Struggle, and its expression, is central to conscious Black and Brown punk performance and politics. These groups and their audiences enacted struggle through an informed and calculated expression of rage during what many would characterize as a late-twentieth century nadir in Black and Brown histories. If we do not pay attention to what these groups and their audiences have contributed to protracted hope for community progress, we miss a significant lesson in animated, motivated, and deliberate commitment to sustaining social protest. In this respect, it is possible to view the deep contradictions and complexities of Black and Brown cultural productions and interracial struggle as "par for the course when our dreams go into action."¹²³ Studying them can help move us to a stronger position from which to engage in the kind of scholarship that not only pushes us beyond disciplinary borders, but also helps nurture and sustain unlikely alliances and trans-national traditions of radical antiracist and cultural productions.

Black and Brown working-class communities in the 1980s and early 1990s experienced Los Angeles as a space of a deindustrialization marked by migration, incarceration, and evisceration of the social wage, but also the physical places of The Vex and The Swap Meet and their ability to generate the discursive spaces and sonic politics of punk and hip-hop.

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