

The Battle of Los Angeles: The Cultural Politics of Chicana/o Music in the Greater Eastside

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Chicanos are, when you call yourself that, you know your history, you know where you came from, you know where you need to go.

—Yoatl, Aztlán Underground¹

I try to find my own Chicana sensibility in the dance.

—Martha Gonzales, Quetzal²

East Los Angeles is the center of a flourishing musical cultural scene with a renewed “Chicana/o” sensibility.³ This scene is being led by a collective of socially conscious and politically active Latin-fusion bands that emerged in the 1990s, including Aztlán Underground, Blues Experiment, Lysa Flores, Ozomatli, Ollin, Quetzal, Quinto Sol, Slowrider, and Yeska. These groups compose original songs that weave together the sounds of the Americas, from soul, samba, and the *son jarocho* to reggae, rumba, and rap. Multilingual lyrics in Spanish, English, *Cálo*, or Nahuatl that speak to themes of urban exile, indigenous identity, and multiracial unity are layered over the music to produce a sonic Chicana/o imaginary of the global city in the twenty-first century.⁴ Several of the bands within the scene have released full-length albums on their own independent record labels such as Xicano Records and Film (Aztlán Underground and Quinto Sol), De Volada Records (Slowrider and Blues Experiment), and Lysa Flores’s Bring Your Love Records (see discography). The bands often collaborate with one another, producing or playing on each other’s records and touring on the same bill. While their music is sold primarily in California, where they perform most often, the Eastside scene is building an enthusiastic and global following through the growing popularity of Quetzal and Ozomatli. Since releasing their self-titled debut in 1998, Quetzal has released two successful and critically acclaimed albums on the premier folk label Vanguard Records. Ozomatli has sold more than half a million records of their first two CDs, their eponymous debut and the Grammy award-winning *Embrace the Chaos* (2001).

The popularity of the Eastside scene in California reflects a consumer market inhabited by millions of Latina/os with a bilingual and bicultural sensibility.⁵ Latina/os make up a third of California's population and a near majority of Los Angeles County residents. Notably, more than 70 percent of Latina/os in Los Angeles are of Mexican origin.⁶ The musicians and the audience of the Eastside scene are predominantly bilingual ethnic Mexican and Latina/o youth of the one-and-a-half, second, and third generations.⁷ The cultural formations of the East L.A. scene emerge from this Latina/o population, as subjects of their lyrical voices, as potential consumers, and, most important, as cultural producers.

Along with visual artists, activists, and audiences, the musicians of the Eastside scene form an emergent cultural movement that speaks powerfully to present conditions. This community represents a form of political possibility that inheres in postindustrial culture, one that is grounded in the new spatial and social relations generated in Los Angeles in the transnational era.⁸ Thus, it is critical that we consider how these cultural activities reveal an understanding and negotiation of these forces. The very conditions of oppression and disenfranchisement that characterize the new economy have enabled (and required) a particular counterresponse, a response that is necessarily different from older forms of struggle. The Eastside scene is both a product of and a means for countering the impact of globalization on low-wage workers and aggrieved racialized populations. The Eastside scene serves as a floating site of resistance, a mechanism for calling an oppositional community into being through performance. Groups within the scene link together diverse parts of a spatially dispersed community through the activities of live performance, listening to recordings and radio, and following the bands to marches, demonstrations, and direct action protests.

The term *East L.A.*, or *the Eastside*, is commonly used in Los Angeles and within the scene as a reference to the many predominantly ethnic Mexican enclaves of the city. In the 1960s and early 1970s, East Los Angeles became the core site of musical production for a wave of Chicano bands and individual musicians. Although hundreds of groups performed in the Eastside, only a few reached national recognition, including Thee Midnighters, the Village Callers, Cannibal and the Headhunters, El Chicano, and Tierra.⁹ In 1980, the poet Luis Rodriguez recalled this 1960s–1970s musical movement in spatial terms: “They were rock artists based in East Los Angeles. They were part of a phenomenon known on the West Coast as the ‘Eastside sound.’”¹⁰ The contemporary Eastside, however, has expanded well beyond its traditional urban boundaries since the 1960s. Victor Valle and Rodolfo Torres have used the term *Greater Eastside* to describe the majority Latina/o districts of East Los Angeles County (see fig. 1).¹¹

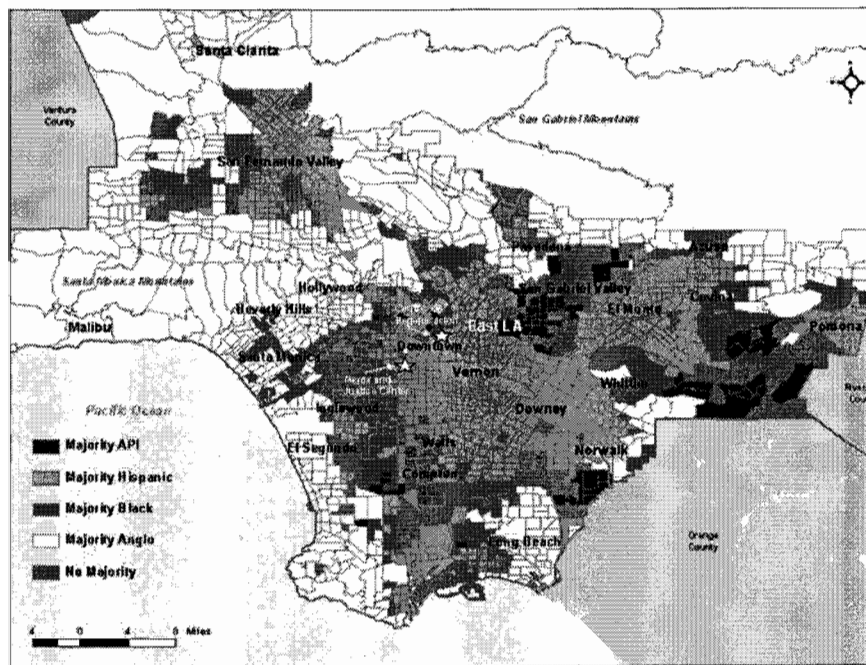


Figure 1.
Courtesy of Michelle Zonta and
Paul Ong of the UCLA Lewis
Center for Regional Policy
Studies, with additional imaging
by Melany de la Cruz.

The Eastside continues to represent a resource of identification and prestige for contemporary Chicana/o musicians. Javier Villalobos, the drummer for the Latin-reggae band Quinto Sol, notes the cultural meaning of the neighborhoods, industrial zones, cultural institutions, and commercial districts that make up the Greater Eastside: "It starts here. Home, East L.A. . . . planting the seed to let you know where you come from and where you are headed—to not forget your roots and culture."¹² Quetzal opened its album *Worksongs* (2003) with "This Is My Home," a ballad about their lifelong love of East Los Angeles. The Eastside scene fashioned by these artists and their audiences is a social institution embedded in a network of other institutions concentrated in the Greater Eastside. Crucial nodes in the network include local businesses such as Candelas Guitars in Boyle Heights, whose traditional Mexican guitars have been popular with Eastside musicians since the 1950s, and small caf  s like the Troy in Little Tokyo, Luna Sol in Pico Union, and the mobile Eastside Caf  , whose tiny stages gave space to young musicians. Established community and cultural arts centers such as the city-managed Plaza de la Raza in Lincoln Heights and the privately endowed Self-Help Graphics in East Los Angeles proper, as well as experimental community cultural centers such as the seminal Peace and Justice Center in Downtown, Centro de Regeneracion in Highland Park, and the Aztl  n Cultural Arts Foundation in Lincoln Heights, have probably played the most critical role in the development of the scene. These community centers offer not only a place to perform but additional services such as studio space, temporary jobs, and even temporary housing. While several of these venues were short-lived, usually lasting a year or two in the mid to late 1990s, their legacy lives on in the music and growing success of the bands they helped nurture.

The emergence of the current Eastside scene paralleled the rise of a postindustrial economy in Los Angeles. When local auto, tire, and steel plants shut down or moved elsewhere in the 1970s, the working-class suburbs of Southeast and Greater Eastside Los Angeles were repopulated in large numbers by ethnic Mexicans taking advantage of the cheap rent available in areas abandoned by white flight.¹³ In the 1980s, as the city began to reindustrialize into a new economy based on high-skill, high-tech industries on one end and industries that relied on low-wage, often immigrant, labor at the other, Mexican and Central American immigrants swelled the Latina/o population in the Greater Eastside, where much of Los Angeles's manufacturing sector remained. Often fleeing the civil wars taking place in their homelands, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans joined Mexican immigrants in providing the bulk of the labor force for the low-wage sectors of the new

economy. Their settlement revived once-abandoned communities in the Southeast and South Central sections of the county.¹⁴ While ethnic Mexicans and Central Americans make up a clear majority of the population in the Greater Eastside, several areas include significant numbers of Asian-Pacific Americans and African Americans. The rise of multiracial communities in the postindustrial era is reflected in the predominantly Asian American and Latina/o suburb of Monterey Park in the San Gabriel Valley and the transformation of the eastern half of South Central Los Angeles from predominantly black into majority Latina/o neighborhoods. The traveling cultures of the Asian, Latin American, and African diasporas have influenced the formation of a multiracial urban culture in Los Angeles. The shifting dynamics of Chicana/o culture as represented in the Eastside scene are shaped by and yet are a part of the multiracial and multinational reality of the Los Angeles polity.

Economic restructuring altered not only the demographic landscape of the Eastside but also the life chances of a new generation of youth. The deindustrialization of the local economy displaced thousands of African American and Mexican American workers and restricted their mobility. African Americans presently constitute the bulk of the jobless poor in Los Angeles, with Latinas/os making up the majority of the working poor. Latinas/os are overwhelmingly concentrated in the low-wage sectors of the reindustrialized economy and currently make up 57 percent of the poor in Los Angeles County and only 27 percent of those with incomes in the "middle or above."¹⁵ The massive unemployment that economic restructuring has brought forth and the increasing profitability of the drug trade have made criminals out of many African American and Latina/o youth looking for a way to get paid. Los Angeles "gangsta rap" and the "narco-corridos" of the Mexican *banda* music scene attest to these consequences. Anti-gang initiatives and increased surveillance in the inner city by the Los Angeles Police and Sheriff Departments has led to massive arrests and the establishment of criminal records for thousands of African American and Latina/o youth, making it even more difficult for them to find employment.¹⁶

Furthermore, the coming of age of the Chicana/o youth culture from which the Eastside scene stems took place in an era of political repression against the state's burgeoning population of color. Since 1994, California voters have been presented with and passed Proposition 187, which sought to restrict rights to education and health care for undocumented immigrants; the anti-affirmative action Proposition 209; and the anti-bilingual education Proposition 227. In 2000 California voters overwhelmingly passed Proposition 21, the "Gang Violence and Juvenile Crime Prevention Act," meant to stiffen penalties for

juvenile offenders while allowing more juveniles to be tried as adults.¹⁷ These measures sought to blame California's most vulnerable populations for the destructive consequences of urban austerity and economic restructuring on the state economy in the 1990s. Undergirded by "the possessive investment in whiteness," these California public policies, as well as private prejudice, are a form of white identity politics that have worked to maintain, and increase, white privilege.¹⁸ Governor Pete Wilson, in his support of Proposition 187, for example, relied more on his whiteness than on his political record to secure his reelection in 1994 despite his low approval rating. The majority-white electorate who passed the proposition chose to ignore the essential role of immigration and immigrant labor in maintaining both a prosperous state economy and middle-class comfort. As Lisa Cacho has argued, "Proposition 187 was not an attempt to close national borders, but an attempt to create borders within the nation."¹⁹

Along with the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, discussed below, Proposition 187 served as a catalyst for the Eastside scene's commitment to activism on behalf of immigrants and people of color. According to Robert Lopez, former guitarist for the band Ollin and co-owner of the now-defunct Luna Sol Café, "We were all playing political benefits during the uprising in Chiapas, and when Proposition 187 passed, we decided to put a compilation out to record a period of our history."²⁰ *Sociedad=Suiciedad*, a compilation album that includes songs by Ozomatli, Aztlán Underground, Ollin, Blues Experiment, and Quinto Sol, was released on the independent punk label BYO Records in 1997 (see fig. 2).

The Eastside scene's history of formation, the multiplicity of its sounds, and its commitment to political activism and coalition building all illuminate the relations between culture and politics at the present moment. The musical practices of the East L.A. scene echo the dislocations and displacements endemic to global cities in the transnational era, but they also reflect the emergence of new forms of resistance that find counterhegemonic possibilities within contradictions. In culture and in politics, groups in the Eastside scene proceed through immanent critiques and creative reworkings of already existing social relations rather than through transcendent teleologies aimed at the establishment of utopian sites and subjects. Rather than a politics of "either/or" that asks people to choose between culture and politics, between class and race, or between distinct national identities, this cultural movement embraces a politics of "both/and" that encourages dynamic, fluid, and flexible stances and identity categories.

The Chicana/o Cultural Politics of the Eastside Music Scene

Musicians in the Eastside scene look to the past and to the present for cultural traditions and formations that they can use to construct their own political and aesthetic practices of Chicana/o identity. One manifestation of this tendency is the affiliation with an indigenous Mexica(n) identity,²¹ signaled by the names of many of the bands

in the scene. Scott and Randy Rodarte named their band Ollin, meaning “movement” in the indigenous language of Nahuatl.²² Quetzal retains the Nahuatl name for a native bird of southern Mexico that is considered sacred by the Aztecs and the Mayans. Ozomatli is named after the Aztec god of dance who is represented as a monkey figure in the famous Aztec Sun Stone. Quinto Sol refers to the historical period of the fifth sun, the present era according to Aztec philosophy. Aztlán Underground uses the name of the original homeland of the Aztecs, Aztlán, to signify their indigenous identity and origin in the Southwest. This understanding of Aztlán was popularized by Chicana/o artists and activists of the Chicano movement in the 1960s, who reclaimed much of the United States Southwest as the homeland of the Chicano/Mexicano nation. The band names that do not explicitly suggest an indigenous Mexican identity implicitly signal their affiliation with other recognizable ethnic Mexican cultural formations. Slowrider, for example, alludes to the popular barrio art of car customizing, or lowrider culture, while Yeska is slang for marijuana, evoking the 1940s’ Pachuco argot of *Cálo*.

The connection to Mexican culture is further expressed in the use of traditional Mexican music styles and instruments. The *son jarocho*, an Afro-Mexican song and dance form originating in Vera Cruz, Mexico, is an important element in the music of Quetzal. Quetzal Flores, its founder and lead guitarist, composes much of the band’s music around the rhythms of his *jarana*, the



Figure 2.
Courtesy of NUKE from the
Under The Influence Crew.

small, four- to eight-stringed guitar that is the main instrument of the *son jarocho*.²³ When performing and recording songs in the *jarocho* style, band member Martha González stomps on the *tarima*, a wooden box with sound holes that is an essential percussive element of the Veracruz *son*. Raul Pacheco, guitarist and vocalist for Ozomatli, makes use of the *bajo sexto*, a twelve-stringed Mexican bass guitar that is the rhythm instrument for *conjunto* groups that play music from the northern states of Mexico as well as the Texas-Mexican variation, *Tejano*. The hardcore/hip-hop sound of Aztlán Underground is layered with the percussion, flutes, and rattles of indigenous Mexico.

These expressions of indigenous and ethnic Mexican identity are not anchored in claims for a separate nation-state of Chicana/os based in the Southwest. Rather, these stylistic markers are used to reaffirm an ethnic origin and identity that precedes the nation-state. As Aztlán Underground explained,

We wanted to bring back the understanding of Aztlán and place of our origin. The connection to the land that was torn from us. To dissect the way in which they have colonized us and made us believe in the white ways and not our own from the Spanish to the English. We wanted and want to resurrect our true identity is how we started. So we united the ancient with the present by fusing our native instruments with hip-hop and our message to create a bridge to our identity.²⁴

This turn toward traditional musical practices is similar to the experience of East L.A. band Los Lobos, who first used the *son jarocho* and other traditional Mexican music styles in their own Latin-rock fusions in the late 1970s. Their adaptation of traditional Mexican elements highlighted the impact of the Chicano movement in East Los Angeles just prior to their emergence. As Steven Loza noted, “A large part of the group’s desire to appropriate folkloric *jarocho* genres into their repertoire was based on an urge not only to preserve such music, but to promote it as a viable art form in an urban and, in many respects, a culturally hostile environment.”²⁵ The musicians of Los Lobos are mentors to the East L.A. scene. David Hidalgo played the *requinto doble* and accordion on Ozomatli’s song “Aquí No Será” on their debut album, and saxophonist Steve Berlin produced Quetzal’s third album, *Worksongs* (2003).

In the context of the contemporary economic and political marginalization of ethnic Mexicans in Los Angeles, the musical practices that emerge from the Greater Eastside continue to serve as a strategic site for the production and negotiation of emergent national, racial, class and gendered identities. Although Chicano/a culture speaks to the shared experiences, institutions, and practices of Mexican Americans as a distinct ethnic community, other expressions of cultural affiliation are also at play. Interethnic identification and unity through

culture rather than nationality or color are integral components of a new Chicana/o sensibility being forged in the current East L.A. scene. Neither assimilationist nor separatist, this complex of Chicana/o cultural production affirms its cultural heritage and history of place in Los Angeles while creatively engaging in and adapting to the diversity of communities and cultural forms that make up the city.

One of the most vital influences of the Eastside scene has come from Mexican immigrant culture. The *banda* music scene that dominates much of the Mexican immigrant cultural, social, and radio space of Los Angeles has captured the imagination of thousands of Mexican American youths in the Greater Eastside. *Banda* originated in Sinaloa, Mexico, and was transformed into “techno-*banda*” in the 1980s when musicians in northwestern Mexico adapted elements of rock and roll and replaced traditional brass instruments and bass drums with the electric bass, modern drums, timbales, and synthesizers. *Banda*’s popularity exploded in Los Angeles in the early 1990s as local Spanish-language radio stations began programming the music in response to the musical preferences of recent immigrants. Nightclubs, radio stations, and swap meets that catered to the emerging ethnic Mexican majority in Los Angeles produced a thriving dance and music scene based on the sound of the *tambora* (bass drum) and the dance of the *quebradita* (little break). Many of the immigrants in the initial market audience had come from rural areas that had not previously sent many migrants to Los Angeles. This audience responded enthusiastically to *banda*’s rural immigrant identity. *Banda* artists presented themselves in the *vaquero* (cowboy) style of dress, wearing hats, boots, and jeans, and sang of life on the ranch and the experiences of crossing the border in the *ranchera* voice of the region.²⁶ In the nativist era of Pete Wilson and Proposition 187, *banda* was a potent source of community prestige for ethnic Mexicans who turned to the musical culture as an active affirmation of their own Mexican background. Mexican American youths and adults now compose a major base of consumers and producers of this transnational musical culture, and the music’s impact has transcended the *banda* scene itself.²⁷ Ozomatli, Ollin, and Quetzal all incorporate elements of *banda* and *ranchera* music into their repertoire.

The Eastside hardcore (punk) scene was another formative musical culture influencing the East L.A. scene. Members of Aztlán Underground, Blues Experiment, Ollin, Quinto Sol, and Slowrider actively engaged in this precursory scene. Punk produced by ethnic Mexican and Latina/o youth in East and Southeast Los Angeles has had a popular following since the late 1970s, despite little radio airplay, minimal recorded work and record labels, and only a

few short-lived clubs.²⁸ Punk is often performed in backyard gatherings, one of the more common ways to celebrate the weekend in the working-class suburbs of the Greater Eastside. The Rodarte twins of Ollin and Robert Tovar of Blues Experiment, as well as members of Aztlán Underground and Quinto Sol, paid their dues in hard-core bands such as Bloodcum, Peace Pill, Subsist, and Golpe de Estado.

The popular music that dominates the audible spaces of contemporary urban radio and local nightclubs has been a fundamental element of the new musical practices of the Eastside scene as well. The increasing popularity of Jamaican reggae in the urban United States is reflected in the music of both Quinto Sol, which blends roots-reggae with Latin rhythms like cumbia, rumba, and son, and Yeska, whose take on Jamaican ska is fused with the sounds of Latin jazz. The electronica sounds of dance music can be heard in the work of Quetzal and the remixes of Slowrider. Yet it is hip-hop that has had the most generative influence on the Eastside scene. Ozomatli and Slowrider incorporate a DJ and an MC into their albums and live performances. One of the pioneers of West Coast *and* Chicano rap, Aztlán Underground is considered one of the innovators of the rap-rock genre.²⁹ Rap groups that are affiliated with the Eastside scene, such as 2Mex, the Black Eyed Peas, and La Paz, record more traditional versions of hip-hop by rhyiming over break beats produced electronically.

The cultural hybridity of the Eastside scene is not new to urban Chicana/o musical practice. The rise of Eastside jump blues bands like the Pachuco Boogie Boys in the 1940s and the growth of the Eastside sound in the 1960s and 1970s showed particular affinities between ethnic Mexicans and African Americans in music, audiences, and band membership.³⁰ What is different about the contemporary Eastside scene is the politicization of these hybrid practices into new forms of political expression. The evolving social movements and cultural practices of Chicana/os are producing an emergent form of oppositional identity that not only draws on their history and collective memory but speaks to new ways of thinking and practicing community across national and ethnic lines. The use of the *son jarocho* by Quetzal, for example, is not only an expression of Mexican identity, but it is a link to the cultural struggles waged by African slaves. As Quetzal Flores explains, "We performed at an academic conference in Kentucky about the influence black culture had on the Americas earlier this year. One of the professors made the point that, as maniacal and genocidal as slavery was, black culture survived and thrived. That's son. The slaves had drums; the Spaniards took them away. The slaves said, 'All right, fuck you. I'll stomp on wood then,' and created this wondrous music. It

shows how rich humans are. Human resilience will always prevail. And that's what we try to convey—the problems and beauty of Los Angeles.”³¹ Quinto Sol bassist Martin Perez characterized his band's movement away from punk to the Latin fusion style and community-oriented lyrics that distinguishes the East L.A. scene as a desire to raise the political consciousness of his community. According to Perez, “We used to play in punk rock bands that maybe were politically aware but not too conscious. That was why we started playing roots. We saw what Bob Marley was doing for his people and we thought, ‘Hey, our people need a message too.’”³² Aztlán Underground echoed this sentiment when asked about the formation of the group: “By 1988, when we first were turned on to black nationalist groups such as Public Enemy and BDP (Boogie Down Productions) in hip-hop, we were moved by their message and realized that there was nothing for our people to look to and we were confined to embracing the dominant culture. Ways of the Iztac.³³ So we wanted to break the notions that we were illegal by affirming to our people our native identity and roots, which are lost in these western schools that teach us George Washington is our father, huh!”³⁴

The political ideology of Chicana/o identity manifested in the current Eastside scene is distinct from previous generations of Chicano nationalism and expression. Several activists and later critics have pointed to the exclusive and masculinist aspects of the “Chicano” subject of the political and cultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s.³⁵ Richard T. Rodriguez has noted how the representations of Chicano nationalism in contemporary “Chicano rap” echo the dominant masculinism of the past. The masculinist element of Chicano rap, such as (Kid) Frost's representation of “La Raza,” makes it susceptible to sexism while its concern with traditional notions of Mexican culture such as *la familia* or *carnalismo* (brotherhood) may reproduce within it notions of the Chicana/o community as exclusively or predominantly masculine.³⁶

In contrast, the East L.A. scene acknowledges and attempts to sustain a vision of gender equity and respect for different sexual orientations. As Quetzal Flores has noted, “[T]he whole East L.A. scene is into the mode of making a conscious effort to acknowledge the struggle of women and for us as men to act on that as well.”³⁷ The participation of woman is critical to the male-dominated Eastside scene. Martha Gonzales and violinist Rocio Maron are central members of Quetzal and their cultural community. The music they produce stakes a claim for a particular female perspective. As Martha notes, “I learned the traditional *tarima* but then took it out of its element into rock 'n' roll. It's not just about the footwork, but there's an upper body movement that

affects the sound as well. I try to find my own Chicana sensibility in the dance.”³⁸ The folk-rock of Lysa Flores eloquently expresses a Chicana standpoint as well. Flores composes songs that deal with her quotidian struggle as a proud and independent woman of color, reflected in her representation as “Queen of the Boulevard” in her self-produced album *Tree of Hope* (1998). Indeed, Chicana feminists are at the forefront of this scene, including spoken word artists such as the all-female crew Cihuatl Tonalli (Woman Force), and the women of color performance art collective Mujeres de Maiz (Women of the Corn).

Another aspect of the new political ideology is being shaped by the struggle to build a politicized cultural community. Quetzal Flores, a child of organizers for the United Farm Workers, argues that Chicana/o identity has to be reformulated in terms of community: “I think that being Chicano now is still valid and still very important in terms of identity and self-determination, but I think more and more people are starting to take this position: how to create an identity as a way to build a foundation so that you can communicate and collaborate with other communities.”³⁹ This idea of community building extends through all of the groups of the Eastside scene. These artists have not only shared the stage at concerts throughout Los Angeles, but have also come together to record and/or produce one another’s albums. Yet this collaborative work is not limited to musicians. In addition to the women’s collectives mentioned above, visual artists, dramatists, and filmmakers have been an important element in the constitution of the East L.A. scene. Chicano visual artists Chaz Bojorquez and Joseph “NUKE” Montalvo designed the cover art for two independent compilation albums: *Sociedad=Suiciedad* (1996) and the 2000 release *Mex-America*.⁴⁰ The Chicana/o comedy troupe ChUSMA, Spanish slang for “Outcasts,” have collaborated with the East L.A. music scene since their founding in 1997. The Latina/o theater troupe Culture Clash’s critical and popular play *Chavez Ravine* (2003), about the displacement of an ethnic Mexican community in 1950s Los Angeles, was supported by Ollin’s musical production. Additionally, the media-arts collective Smokin’ Mirrors has produced videos for Quetzal (“Grito de Alegria” and “Elegua Jarocho”) and Aztlán Underground (“Blood on Your Hands”).

The practices of community building through cultural expression within the East L.A. scene are largely inspired by the rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico. The rebel army of the Ejercito Nacional de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) has been waging a decade-long struggle for the dignity, voice, and autonomy of Indian and peasant communities of the southern region of Mexico and against the policies of neoliberalism, such as NAFTA, that have devastated their way

of life. As they noted in an interview, Aztlán Underground is “[v]ery influenced by the EZLN.”⁴¹ This influence is reflected on the cover of their album *Sub-Verses* (2003), adorned with a colorful and defiant image of a Zapatista woman soldier. Quetzal is also deeply influenced by the Zapatista struggle. The song “Grito Alegria,” on Quetzal’s self-titled debut album, is a tribute to the Zapatista vision of community and collective struggle. The chorus of the song is drawn from the Zapatista slogan “El pueblo unido jamas sera vencido (The people united will never be defeated).” These groups, along with Ozomatli, who originally called themselves “Todos Somos Marcos (We are all Marcos)” in honor of the *subcommandante* and spokesman of the EZLN, have played at several concerts to raise funds for the movement in Chiapas. Quetzal, Quinto Sol, Aztlán Underground, and several local Chicana/o visual artists and activists, have traveled to Chiapas to meet with the rebels and to act as human rights observers.⁴² The significance of the Zapatista struggle for an alternative imaginary of democratic politics has not been lost on the artists and activists of the East L.A. scene. The Zapatista politics of consensus that has opened up grassroots networks of solidarity and produced respect for different political traditions has provided the East L.A. scene with a model for a more inclusive democratic politics in a multiracial city such as Los Angeles.⁴³

Yet, more than just an attempt at affecting a politicized Chicana/o identity, the East L.A. scene emerged in the battle over a space to practice, perform, and produce a creative community. In the mid-1990s the struggle over the Peace and Justice Center was an important vehicle for the development of this cultural movement and its expression of a renewed Chicana/o consciousness. In March 1995, Wil-Dog Abers (future bassist of Ozomatli) and Alfredo Ortiz (drummer for Yeska), along with several other, mostly African American and Latina/o workers, took over the Emergency Resources Building in downtown Los Angeles in an attempt to organize a union among the youth who worked for the Los Angeles Conservation Corps (LACC), a federally funded jobs program.⁴⁴ Local youth working for the corps were trained and employed at minimum wages with no benefits and offered few long-term job prospects. Up to two thousand youth a year—from thirteen- to twenty-three-year-olds—work for the LACC, making it one of the largest youth employers in Los Angeles. The jobs performed by these youth include gardening, landscaping, and janitorial work at schools and other government buildings. Much of their trash pickup is now done in industrial zones—a free government service to corporations. These maintenance jobs used to be done by unionized employees. In California, thousands of such workers have been laid off—their places taken by minimum-wage earners, such as the LACC youth, or others. One of the

main organizers of the strike, Lilia Ramirez, noted how much the uniforms the youth were given reminded her of the bright orange jumpsuits prisoners in the L.A. County jail wore: "Is that what they see us as?"⁴⁵ If not seen as criminals, these youths were certainly looked upon with disdain. "McDonald's is the best job these kids will get," a manager told Ramirez at an LACC meeting called to address the strike.⁴⁶ In the meantime, upper-level management, many of whom were from out of state, received high wages and lavish benefits from the \$6.5 million annual budget.

Conflict began when Carmelo Alvarez, a longtime activist from the Pico Union area and the corps' only Latino site director, began protesting the discrepancy between management and the youth workers.⁴⁷ Soon after, a meeting of the Conservation Corps management was called to question the tactics of Alvarez, who wanted to find more creative and productive ways to train youth. As Carmelo argued at the time, "They only see us as a cheap labor force. The corps has potential to do great things in the community, but how can they be involved in the kids' futures if they have them pushing brooms and picking up trash?"⁴⁸ Despite the protests of the youth workers, Alvarez was fired in a subsequent meeting that included the board of directors of the LACC. Corps workers at the Emergency Resources Building, where Alvarez was program director, also protested the firing and refused to leave the site. In response, agency managers shut down the building and threatened to call in the police. Carmelo, Lilia, Wil-Dog, and Alfredo Ortiz were joined by more than thirty co-workers in staging a takeover of the building. Together, they mounted a two-month sit-in.⁴⁹

The protesters demanded union representation, better wages, benefits, and the opportunity for advancement for corps youth. The LACC responded by giving the organizers of the sit-in "voluntary resignation" slips. Negotiations, prompted by bad publicity for the corps, did not bring about a union but did manage to secure access to the locked-out downtown building for a period of twelve months. The activists transformed the building into a nonprofit community arts center.⁵⁰ While music concerts took place on weekends, the week was dedicated to workshops in studio mixing, theater production, poetry writing, silk-screening, and community organizing. The programs and workshop activities were organized by the youth themselves. As Lilia Ramirez put it, "Carmelo helped us to get consciousness, but he doesn't tell us what to think and do. The kids, we run this center. [It is] the kids who are hired to make the program, not the administrators. That's why we created this center, so we could raise the kids to another level of consciousness."⁵¹ The type of organizing practiced at the Peace and Justice Center relied on the interests of youth to

get them politically active and interested in acquiring the skills in creative production, which can lead to real jobs in a postindustrial economy staked on the fields of communications and informational technologies.⁵²

This local struggle for a community center that promoted political consciousness and training for the new economy also produced Latin bands. The soul band Blues Experiment was born at the center and fund-raising parties brought together the members of Ozomatli for the first time. As Wil-Dog notes,

After the strike, we were given access to this new community center dedicated to youth and art. We had to raise money for the building, so I called all these musicians I knew. Ozomatli got together during the first five gigs. It was a jam thing where everyone's musical past came out. We never set out to play this style. It's just what everybody knew.⁵³

Several fledgling bands took advantage of this experiment in urban cultural politics in downtown Los Angeles. Predominantly Chicana/o groups Rice and Beans, Ollin, and Quetzal, as well as multiracial groups like the Black Eyed Peas, became the official "House Bands" of the center. The bands were given studio space to practice their art. A few individual musicians, such as Randy Rodarte of Ollin and Blues Experiment guitarist Robert Tovar, actually lived at the center free of charge. Many of these bands performed before large, multiracial audiences at the monthly "Unity Fests." These popular events brought together artists, activists, and members of the diverse communities of Los Angeles through a celebration of local urban creativity, including DJ-ing, graffiti demonstrations, skateboarding, and spoken word (see fig. 3).

The Peace and Justice Center was shut down by the City of Los Angeles in 1996, a year after it was taken over by the youth of the Conservation Corps. While it no longer exists, its impact persists. The Peace and Justice Center contributed a great deal to the development of local bands, and its legacy is readily seen in the activism of several of the music groups and activists with ties to center. Groups in the Eastside scene who performed, practiced, or stayed at the center continue to organize spaces for creative expression and political education. These bands have performed at music festivals raising awareness about immigrant, indigenous, and youth rights, often for little or no compensation. They often provide the sound at local demonstrations against police abuse and the death penalty and, since the fall of 2001, in protests against the "War on Terror" being waged by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Peace and Justice Center was a vital space for collective political mobilization, a repository of social memory about past struggles for social change,



Figure 3.
 Courtesy of Lilia Ramirez.

past and present, to generate their own notions of Chicana/o identity through their encounter with contemporary social dynamics and affiliations with other communities' struggles for self-determination.

Conclusion

In August of 2000 the internationally popular rock-rap group Rage Against the Machine performed for the thousands gathered in the "designated protest area" of the Democratic National Convention (DNC) held at the Staples Center in downtown Los Angeles. In solidarity with the demonstrators, lead singer Zach de la Rocha stormed through Rage's tribute to Mayan and Mexica resistance, "People of the Sun," and songs from their 2000 release *The Battle of Los Angeles*, including "Maria," about the struggle of Latina immigrants, and "Guerilla Radio."⁵⁴ The latter song remarks on de la Rocha's work with Centro de Regeneracion in Highland Park, a Chicana/o cultural center he cofounded in 1996, where, among other activities, he subsidized the micro-radio station Radio Clandestina.

Although Rage Against the Machine emerged out of the hard-core scene in Orange County, the group was affiliated with the East L.A. scene through the

and a site for imagining and enacting new social relations in the era of globalization. The multiracial politics of the center emerged from young people's shared experience of racialization and class and spatial location in Los Angeles since the 1970s. Chicana/o activists and artists did not deny their ethnicity in creating a space that would foster interethnic coalitions, but rather drew on their cultural identities to reposition their struggle as connected to other marginalized groups. Collectively and in their own ways, the Chicana/o bands from East Los Angeles have taken the lessons learned from social movements,

activism of de la Rocha, who was a resident of East Los Angeles and the son of Roberto “Beto” de la Rocha, a well-known artist, activist, and founding member of the seminal Chicano art group Los Four. Zach’s Chicano identity informed his band’s commitment to the struggles of immigrants, people of color, and the Zapatistas. Rage provided access to progressive organizations and media by setting up tables for such groups in their concert performances and by offering links to their organizations on Rage’s official Web site. In 1999 Rage invited Aztlán Underground to open its concerts in Mexico City, while Ozomatli opened what turned out to be Rage’s final show at Los Angeles’ Grand Olympic Auditorium in 2000.

The possibilities of collective organization that had been practiced at the Peace and Justice Center inspired Zach de la Rocha’s formation of another significant but also short-lived experiment in community building through cultural practice. He renamed the People’s Resource Center in Highland Park the Centro de Regeneracion.⁵⁵ There, many of the same artists and activists who had participated in the struggle over the Peace and Justice Center maintained their commitment to providing youth a space for cultural expression and training. Along with music workshops and the development of Radio Clandestina, Centro members also organized graffiti workshops and youth film festivals.⁵⁶ Although the Centro lasted only two years, it was an important space in the ongoing institutionalization of the community politics, cultural practices, and social networks of the Eastside scene in the nineties.

The cultural politics waged by the contemporary Chicana/o music scene in Los Angeles registers in precise and detailed fashion the injuries done to low-wage workers and racial others by globalization and transnationalism. But new social forces create new social subjects, who in turn create new social imaginaries. At the very moment when political and economic leaders scapegoated multilingual “mongrel” communities and cultures, music groups associated with the East L.A. scene challenged the cultural and political pretensions of white/Anglo culture. In the process, they exploited the contradiction between the nation’s political reliance on fictions of cultural homogeneity and the nation’s economic dependence on securing low-wage labor, markets, and raw materials from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Speaking from the interstices between commercial culture and the new social movements, Chicana/o musical culture and its political work offers us invaluable bottom-up perspectives on the terrain of counterpolitics and cultural creation at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Selected Discography

Aztlán Underground

Decolonize, D3 Entertainment, 1995

Sub-Verses, Xicano Records and Film, 1998

The Blues Experiment

....*Que Pasa?*, The Blues Experiment, 2000

Lysa Flores

Tree of Hope, Bring Your Love, 1998

Ollin

Sons of the Shaking Earth, Ollin, 2001

Ozomatli

Ozomatli, Almo Sounds, 1998

Embrace the Chaos, Interscope, 2001

Street Signs, Concord Records, 2004

Quetzal

Quetzal, Son del Barrio, 1998

Sing the Real, Vanguard, 2002

Worksongs, Vanguard, 2003

Quinto Sol

Kwikakali, Xicano Records and Film, 1999

Barrio Roots, Xicano Records and Film, 2003

Rage Against the Machine

Battle of Los Angeles, Epic/Sony, 1999

Slowrider

Mas Alla, !De Volada Records!, 2000

Nacimiento, !De Volada Records!, 2002

Historias en Revisión, Nomadic Soundsystem, 2003

Yeska

Skafrocuban jazz, Aztlán Records, 1998

Various

Mexamerica, Angelino Records, 2000

Sociedad=Suciedad, Better Youth Organization, 1997

Notes

1. Quoted in Brian Cross, *It's Not About a Salary . . . Rap, Race and Resistance in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1993), 264.
2. Quoted in Nancy Redwine, "Quetzal Flashes Its Brilliance, in Two Shows," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, December 11, 2003.
3. An earlier draft of this essay was prepared for the Mexican American Studies History Workshop, sponsored by the Center for Mexican American Studies and the Department of History at the University of Houston. I would like to thank the organizers of the workshop, Luis Alvarez and Raul Ramos, and all of the participants for their valuable suggestions and comments. I am also indebted to George Sánchez, Barry Shank, and Raúl Villa, readers for *American Quarterly*, for their helpful comments and prudent guidance on this article. This essay is dedicated to the work and vision of all of the organizers and artists of the Eastside scene.
4. See Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles: America's Global Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). See also Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, and Tokyo*, 2d ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).
5. Lisa Catanzarite, *California's Growing Latino Population: Census 2000 Dismantles Stereotypes* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, March 2003). According to Catanzarite, 71 percent of Latinas/o adults and 80 percent of Latina/o youth, ages five to seventeen, in Los Angeles are bilingual.
6. U.S. Census Bureau, "State and County Quick Facts," HtmlResAnchor <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/06037.html> (accessed on April 28, 2004).
7. I use "ethnic Mexican" to refer to people of Mexican descent residing in the United States, including native-born or U.S.-raised Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants. I use "Latina/o" to describe U.S. residents of Latin American descent across race and national origin. The 1.5 generation refers to immigrants who were raised in the United States.
8. George Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 3–30.
9. Steven Loza, *Barrio Rhythm: Mexican American Music in Los Angeles* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 95–107.
10. *Ibid.*, 95.
11. Victor Valle and Rodolfo Torres, *Latino Metropolis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 21.
12. *Quintosolmusic.com* (accessed on May 3, 2004).
13. Mike Davis, "L.A. Inferno," *Socialist Review* 22. 1 (January–March 1992): 57–81.
14. Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, *Seeking Community in a Global City: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).
15. Manuel Pastor, "Economics and Ethnicity: Poverty, Race, and Immigration in Los Angeles County," in *Asian and Latino Immigrants in a Restructured Economy*, ed. Marta López-Garza and David R. Diaz (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), 106–7.
16. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 267–322. For a historical study of the criminalization of ethnic Mexicans in Los Angeles, see Edward J. Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900–1945* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999).
17. This latter proposition severely affects youth in Los Angeles County, the source for nearly one-third of the state's juvenile offenders, most of whom are African American or Latina/o. See Vince Beiser and Karla Solhei, "Juvenile Injustice: Proposition 21 Aims to Send Thousands of California Teenagers to Adult Prisons," *L.A. Weekly*, February 11–17, 2000.

18. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).
19. Lisa Cacho, "The People of California Are Suffering: The Ideology of White Injury," *Cultural Values* 4.4 (fall 2000): 390. Although the measures prescribed by Proposition 187 were ruled unconstitutional by the state, several aspects of the initiative survived as part of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act that were signed into law by a democratic president in 1996.
20. Yvette C. Doss, "Choosing Chicano in the 1990s," in *Urban Latino Cultures*, ed. Gustavo Leclerc, Raul Villa, and Michael Dear (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications), 151.
21. Mexico is the proper name for the cultural group who migrated from Aztlán in the north to the central valley of Mexico, where they constructed the great city of Tenochtitlan, now Mexico City, in the twelfth century.
22. Randy Rodarte, interview with author, October 21, 2003.
23. Quetzal Flores biography located at quetzalmusic.org (accessed April 28, 2004).
24. Quoted in Kurly Tlapoyawa and Ilwixochitl, "Q&A with AZTLÁN UNDERGROUND," in *Kuauhilahto: Journal of Native Resistance*, n.d., <http://www.mexika.org/CoverStory.html> (accessed April 27, 2004).
25. Steven Loza, "From Veracruz to Los Angeles: The Reinterpretation of the Son Jarocho," *Latin American Music Review* 2.2 (1992): 188.
26. Helen Simonett, *Banda: Mexican Musical Life Across Borders* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001).
27. See Josh Kun's essay in this issue.
28. Duane Leyva, "Teenage Alcoholics: Punk Rock in East Los Angeles," [HtmlResAnchor http://muiscap.net/DuanesPunkPitNotes/elapunk.pdf](http://muiscap.net/DuanesPunkPitNotes/elapunk.pdf) (accessed on June 29, 2004). One of the more popular groups to emerge out of the current scene is the hard-core bilingual group Union 13.
29. See the Aztlán Underground interview in Cross 1993.
30. Loza, *Barrio Rhythm*, 54–128. See also Anthony Macías, "Raza con Raza, Raza con Jazz: Latinos/as and Post World War II Popular American Music," in *Musical Migrations: Transnationalism and Cultural Hybridity in Latin America*, ed. Frances Aparicio and Candida Jaquez (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 183–98; and David Reyes and Tom Waldman, *Land of a Thousand Dances: Chicano Rock 'n' Roll from Southern California* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).
31. Gustavo Arellano, "Have Jarana, Will Travel: Quetzal Find Success Making Money for Others," *OC Weekly*, November 28–December 4, 2003.
32. Quoted in "Quinto Sol," *Reggae Nucleus*, n.d., [HtmlResAnchor http://www.quintosolmusic.com/news.htm](http://www.quintosolmusic.com/news.htm) (accessed April 27, 2004).
33. In Nahuatl the term *iztac* refers to the color white.
34. Tlapoyawa and Ilwixochitl, "Q&A with AZTLÁN UNDERGROUND."
35. Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, "I Throw Punches for My Race, but I Don't Want to Be a Man: Writing Us—Chica-nos (Girl, Us)/Chicanas—into the Movement Script," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 81–95; Ramón A. Gutiérrez, "Community, Patriarchy, and Individualism: The Politics of Chicano History and the Dream of Equality," *American Quarterly* 45.1 (March 1993): 44–72.
36. Richard T. Rodriguez, "The Verse of the Godfather: Unwrapping Masculinity, Familia, and Nationalism in Chicano Rap Discourse," in *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture & Chicano Sexualities*, ed. Alicia Gaspar de Alba (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 107–22.
37. Quoted in Chris Gonzales Clarke, "Forging the Sound of the New Millennium," in *Motion Magazine*, 1998, [HtmlResAnchor http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/quetz.html](http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/quetz.html) (accessed April 27, 2004).
38. Quoted in Redwine, "Quetzal Flashes Its Billiance."
39. Quetzal Flores, interview with author, April 21, 2003.
40. *Sociedad=Suiciedad* (BYO Records, 1997). In the compilation *Mexamerica* (Angelino Records, 2001), East L.A. bands collaborate with musicians from Tijuana and Mexico City.
41. Tlapoyawa & Ilwixochitl, "Q&A with AZTLÁN UNDERGROUND."
42. Quetzal Flores, interview with author, April 21, 2003. In 1997 Quetzal and Martha co-organized the Chicano-Indígena Encuentro in Chiapas.
43. See Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). See also the essays collected in John Holloway and Eloísa Peláez, *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico* (London: Pluto Press, 1998).

44. *Revolutionary Worker*, March 26, 1995, 1.
45. Lilia Ramirez, interview with author, November 5, 2002.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid. Alvarez's critique was provoked when the money from a \$250,000 grant provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency to be used for transportation and day care for the young workers went missing.
48. Tina Barseghian, *Hollywood Independent*, April 12, 1995.
49. Lilia Ramirez, interview with author, November 5, 2002.
50. Marilyn Martinez, "Strike at Jobs Program; L.A. Conservation Corps Workers Stage Sit-In, Demand Benefits and Better Pay," *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 1995; Fred Shuster, "Taste the New Salsa," *Los Angeles Daily News*, July 22, 1998; Josh Kun, "Around the World with Ozomatli," *Color Lines*, fall 1998; Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez, "Ozo Rising," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 1999.
51. Quoted in Dianne Flowers, "Fight for Youth Center Continues in Los Angeles," *Peoples Tribune*, April 24, 1995.
52. Villa and Torres, 167–94. For the ways youth turn play into pay, see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo Mama's Dysfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 43–77.
53. Shuster, "Taste the New Salsa."
54. *The Battle of Los Angeles* (Epic 2000).
55. Kieran Grant, "Multiculturalism Thrives in L.A.'s Ozomatli," *Toronto Sun*, July 9, 1999.
56. Querzal Flores interview, April 21, 2003.