

“We Don’t Need the English!”
Transforming and Reconstructing Punk Politics into Chicana Punk Social Activism
1977-1989

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On June 23, 2019, punk vocalist Alicia Armendariz Velasquez organized the unveiling of Dolores Huerta Square throughout East Los Angeles's 1st street. Supporting the unveiling event, local punk band Trap Girl, Xicana post-punk band ELLA, and Armendariz Velasquez's group The Alice Bag Band played in honor of Dolores Huerta who had co-founded United Farm Workers and coined the phrase, "Si, Se Puede." With a feeling of empowerment in the air, Armendariz captured the spirit of Huerta's ongoing work at the unveiling, melodically screaming, "You say justice is colorblind. I know you're lying. White justice doesn't work for me!!!"¹

The significance of the unveiling brings attention to the often-overlooked civil rights leader Huerta. But it also reveals how Chicana punk rockers or *Chicana punkeras* led to an East Los Angeles plaza being named in honor of Dolores Huerta. Since the beginning of punk around the mid-1970s in England, the subculture's foundation adopted a political conscience, DIY aesthetic, and the releasing of teenage angst through fast-tempo music. The punk scene had its roots in England in the mid-1970s, where the band The Sex Pistols quickly gained national attention through songs such as "God Save the Queen" and "Anarchy in the UK" that critiqued the "fascist regime" of England and called for a less regulated form of government.² Ultimately, the bold commentary about England's government and societal conformity manifested the ideas of a working-class band into a responsive subculture to the political climate. As punk gained popularity among rebellious youth, the subculture began to spread outside of England and appear in the United States around the late 1970s. Adherence to the punk ethos established in England, New York and Los Angeles established their punk movement. Yet, the Los Angeles punk scene

¹ News S City, "Civil Rights Activist Dolores Huerta Gets an Intersection Named for Her in Boyle Heights Today," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, California), June 22, 2019.

² Stacy Thompson, *Punk Productions: Unfinished Business* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 17.

emerging in the late 1970s witnessed the configuration of new punk politics tied with a more significant emphasis on not only expressing dissatisfaction but participation in organizing positive changes made possible by Chicana punkeras.

The historical conversation around the Los Angeles punk scene devotes most of its attention towards uncovering how and why the subculture emerged. Written in 1997, *Make the Music Go Bang! The Early L.A. Punk Scene* by Don Snowden argues how punk began with the unification of the "outsiders" who wanted to express their discontent with the government.³ In *The Politics of Punk*, David Ensminger's analysis of the activism of punk elaborates on how punk money aided the community with the creation of humanitarian programs. Although both of these works mentions the politically charged individuals in the subculture, they focus almost exclusively on white males and all-male bands, thus dismissing punk women's activism in the subculture.⁴ Despite a male-centric narrative, the recent scholarship aims to expand punk history to include the experience of underrepresented individuals such as people of color, queer folks, and women. Music historian Susan McClary notes, "over the course of the 1990s, feminist scholars... have transformed radically the goals, methods, and subject matter of the academic discipline of musicology—a field hitherto devoted to upholding the all-male canon of European art music."⁵ Feminist scholars continue to uncover women's participation in the punk subculture. Helen Reddington's *The Lost Women of Rock Music: Female Musicians of the Punk* explains how punk encompasses more than an examination of the Sex Pistols. Reddington mentions, "I contend that punk, by its anarchic nature, existed in many forms long before and long after this;

³ Don Snowden and Gary Leonard, *Make the Music Go Bang!: the Early L.A. Punk Scene* (New York: St. Martins Griffin, 1997), 2.

⁴ David A. Ensminger, *The Politics of Punk: Protest and Revolt from the Streets* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 6.

⁵ Susan McClary, "Women and Music on the Verge of the New Millennium," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25, no. 4 (2000): 1283, accessed April 12, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1086/495561>.

it existed and continues to exist as a self-definition by certain people regardless of location.”⁶ In addition, published memoirs and interviews of the marginalized participants of the punk scene began sharing their stories. Punk vocalist Alicia Armendariz Velasquez stresses that artists “should document their own scenes and movements because history has a curious way of focusing itself through the biased lens of the dominant culture.”⁷

In line with this recent push towards a more complete and inclusive narrative of punk’s role in a broader culture, this paper explores the relationship between social activism and Chicana punkeras, as shown through the example of Alicia Armendariz Velasquez's efforts to organize the unveiling of Dolores Huerta square. Focusing on two Chicanas in particular, this study uncovers the experiences of Alicia Armendariz Velasquez and Teresa Covarrubias as a narrower approach to Chicanas in the punk subculture. Moreover, using the intersectionality of Chicana, female, and even transnational identities as a framework with which to evaluate the interconnections and transformation of punk politics between local communities and countries creates a lens through which to explore how Chicana punkeras’ identities and politics fashioned a different sense of social activism emphasizing race and gender in the early East Los Angeles/Hollywood punk scene and in other countries between 1977-1989. Although initially a British subculture, the Chicana punkeras of Los Angeles redefined punk in their own image and produced a network of solidarity connecting social activism from local and global communities to advocate for social injustices through punk music and shows. Through the marginalization of being a Mexican American woman, Chicana punkera identities and politics created a "connecting center" where their experiences reconstructed the punk scene. In doing so, punk became an

⁶ Helen Reddington, *The Lost Women of Rock Music: Female Musicians of the Punk Era (Studies in Popular Music)* (Equinox Publishing, 2012), 121.

⁷ Alice Bag, “Work That Hoe: Tilling the Soil of Punk Feminism,” *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* 22, no. 2-3 (2012): 233, accessed March 22, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770x.2012.721079>.

avenue where Chicanas reimagined themselves as empowered subjects to positively change the world, thus expanding punk periphery into local and global interactions.

The commonality of punk as a transnational subculture reflects themes of unconventionality and teenage angst shaped by economic, political, and social factors. Touring bands from Great Britain, such as the Sex Pistols and The Clash, inspired the beginning of punk in New York during the late-1970s. Gaining quick popularity, the New York Dolls and The Ramones toured and sold records throughout the US. Eventually, the appeal of punk sparked the Los Angeles scene. The beginnings of punk music in Los Angeles reveal a multifaceted range of "urban spaces and individual scenes that were affected by different economic, political, and social circumstances."⁸ The Los Angeles punk scene emerged in two different places: East Los Angeles and Hollywood. East Los Angeles' underground setting attracted the presence of Mexican American youth who demonstrated their love for punk music, and at the same time, it reflected a different level of cultural awareness based on the music and fashion. The essay "Soy Punkera, Y Que?" by Michelle Habell-Pallan notes how young Chicanas identified with "the practice of *rasquache*, a Chicana/o cultural practice of 'making do' with limited resources and punk's critique of the status quo-of poverty, sexuality, class inequality, and war-spoke directly to working-class."⁹ Chicanas' cultural identities naturally became embedded in punk. Although the majority of Chicanas became concentrated in the East LA scene, many Mexican American youth participated in the Hollywood scene, which consisted of more diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

⁸ Soraya Alonso Alconada, "Punk Pioneers: Chicana Alice Bag as a Case Point," *Lectora* 23, no.2 (June 2017), 85.

⁹ Michelle Habell-Pallan, "'Soy Punkera. ¿y Qué?'" Sexuality, Translocality, and Punk in Los Angeles and Beyond," in *Rockin Las Americas: The Global Politics Of Rock In Latin/o America*, 160. (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 163.

Chicanas transformed a "global" subculture to modify the politics of punk into a social site expressing new ways to critique "English" punks while creating a liberating space. Punk vocalist and writer Alicia Armendariz Velasquez tells how punk provided a sense of confidence, especially for Chicana women. In her memoir *Violence Girl*, she describes, "I think for women who felt like they weren't sure of themselves, it was very easy to get up and do it anyway, because you weren't being judged on how well you played."¹⁰ LA punk became a source of empowerment. Punk rejected musical virtuosity and instead provided accessibility to anyone willing to express themselves outside of the accepted musical and cultural mainstream. As punk's interpretation transformed in Los Angeles, it manifested away from its English origins. Armendariz Velasquez's band The Bags wrote the song "We Don't Need the English" as a direct reference to the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the UK." The lyrics of the song declare that, "All they [English punks] do is dye their hair. Fuck them, send them into East Berlin."¹¹ Punk for Armendariz Velasquez did not mean wearing leather jackets, buying expensive combat boots, or styling a mohawk; rather, it was a philosophy of liberation not only for herself but for other marginalized groups. It meant the construction of her identity.

As Chicanas witnessed the school system as an engine of cultural conformity, punk added a new outlet for creativity and revolt for young Chicanas. Alicia Armendariz Velasquez's participation and punk expression during the late 1970s developed through the different events in her life, most notably the challenges of being a Spanish speaker in a linguistically suppressive school. Although Los Angeles public schools were officially desegregated in 1945, many Los

¹⁰ Alice Bag, *Violence Girl East LA Rage to Hollywood Stage, a Chicana Punk Story* (Port Townsend: Feral House, 2011) 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

Angeles schools continued to face de facto segregation.¹² The Los Angeles Unified School District placement of students in schools based on geography coupled with patterns of segregated housing, “produced a large number of racially and ethnically unbalanced schools.”¹³ Conversely, numerous white teachers continued to reflect racially discriminatory attitudes towards Mexican American students in East Los Angeles schools. Several teachers enforced a “No Spanish rule” that was part of a broader culturally assimilationist approach. Although the student body of these schools was predominantly Mexican American, white Anglo teachers in East Los Angeles schools (who did not speak the language), saw Spanish as a deficit and barrier towards become a “true American citizen,” thus using punishments to discourage speaking Spanish.¹⁴

As a kindergartener at Eastman Avenue School in 1963, Armendariz Velasquez’s experience reflects the assimilation process as her teacher punished Spanish speaking in the classroom. Armendariz Velasquez’s recalls, “Children at the bookshelf would sometimes whisper to each other in English without so much as a glance from Miss Gibbons, but woe unto those of us who spoke Spanish, because she would keep us from recess if she caught us whispering to each other at the bookshelf.”¹⁵ Entering the US education system as a Spanish speaker, Armendariz Velasquez did not speak English and became reprimanded for speaking Spanish. Many of her educators could not pronounce “Alicia” and ultimately changed her name to “Alice” (later influencing her stage name Alice Bag).¹⁶ Reflecting on her experiences as an

¹² Henry J. Gutiérrez, “Racial Politics in Los Angeles: Black and Mexican American Challenges to Unequal Education in the 1960s,” *Southern California Quarterly* 78, no. 1 (1996): 51.

¹³ Gutiérrez, “Racial Politics in Los Angeles,” 51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶ Bag, *Violence Girl*, 7.

adult, Armendariz Velasquez notes, "I was being colonized within my own country, but I was too young to realize it."¹⁷

The feeling of otherness and discrimination by the dominant culture affected many Chicanas, thus shaping cultural identities and later reconfiguring the construction of punk ideologies. Despite the feeling of "othering" based on race, Armendariz Velasquez used this marginalization to strengthen her cultural identity. As Armendariz Velasquez reached high school in the early 1970s, she became more aware of her cultural identity and the discrimination against Mexican Americans. On August 29, 1970, the National Chicano Moratorium Committee Against the Vietnam War, also known as The Chicano Moratorium, organized a massive protest - held a few blocks from Armendariz Velasquez's home. As one of the most significant demonstrations during the Chicano Movement of the early 1960s and 1970s, the gathering brought together 25,000 Mexican Americans in efforts to bring attention to the disproportionately large number of Latino soldiers who were being killed in Vietnam.¹⁸ However, the protest ended with the Los Angeles police department storming the peaceful protest with spraying tear-gas, arresting many, and murdering three Chicanos. Armendariz Velasquez remembers that "the deadly outcome led to my identification as 'other' and also made me acutely aware that this 'other' was perceived as undesirable and had powerful and dangerous enemies."¹⁹ Gaining a new awareness of the issues in her community, Armendariz Velasquez's story regarding race relations became a common trend in Chicana punkeras' ideologies and eventually brought these experiences to the punk scene.

In addition to the challenges of "racial othering" in mainstream society, gender created

¹⁷ Bag, "Work That Hoe," 238.

¹⁸ Ernesto Chavez, *Mi Raza Primero!: Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Pr., 2002) 3.

¹⁹ Bag, "Work That Hoe," 238.

another layer of marginalization for Chicanas. In the mid-1970s, young Mexican American women began to experience a new sense of cultural pride through the Chicano movement. Soon, however, internal gender contradictions revealed the patriarchal structures present in the broader movement against racialized social injustice.²⁰ Some of this marginalization of women within the Chicano movement may be traced to the gender norms of many Mexican American families at the time. Although born in the United States, Chicanas' parents maintained patriarchal cultural ideals where "men served as the undisputed patriarchs in the family life while women remained cloistered in the domestic sphere."²¹ Defiance against "the man of the house" meant a rejection of cultural norms and assimilation. As Chicana women struggled with being Mexican and American, keeping a connection to their Mexican heritage meant accepting sexism at home.²² Nevertheless, the politics of respectability pressured Chicana women into fulfilling expectations to become the "perfect" wife or daughter through domesticity and purity.

Amidst the sexism present in Mexican American households and the Chicano Movement, Chicana women struggled with the double marginalization of race and gender. The Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) became an option for Chicanas to fight against gender inequality. As the WLM brought forth a new wave of feminism, many feminists of diverse cultural backgrounds joined forces to achieve equality. Pushing against institutionalized sexism and limitations on body anatomy, the WLM successfully began to change women's status in the US. However, Chicanas in the movement described an ongoing feeling of double marginalization.²³ The philosophy of WLM assumed a "global sisterhood of support," while racial and class

²⁰ Alma M. Garcia, *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 17.

²¹ Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 10.

²² *Ibid.*, 10.

²³ Garcia, 20.

identities created different spheres of interests.²⁴ Mostly a white middle-class movement, many members of WLM believed focusing on "all economic, socio-cultural, and political issues through the lens of sexism" would dismiss the initial mission of WLM.²⁵ Therefore, Chicanas sought to create a new space to highlight the intersectionality of patriarchy, racism, classism, and colonialism in efforts to liberate Chicana women.

While many Mexican American women found their liberating space in the Chicana Feminist movement, others found punk as an alternative. Chicanas in punk used their double marginalization to produce a different dynamic in the scene allowing for the expression of realities through music. For instance, coming from a traditional gendered home molded another layer of Armendariz Velasquez's identity and participation in the Los Angeles underground punk subculture. Growing up in an abusive household where her father reigned, the young Armendariz Velasquez witnessed the violence used against her mother and sister. Her father maintained a very "macho" persona who thought women's roles only consisted of housework. As a result, he created an unequal power that fueled her with rage. Armendariz Velasquez recalled how "the relationships within my family and in particular the violence which my father inflicted upon my mother left a visceral impression of the unequal power between the sexes. I longed for a confrontation of equals, and if my mother could not or would not stand up to my father, I knew that one day I would."²⁶

Furthermore, punk became the outlet for Chicanas to express private rage and use music to reject the restrictions on their bodies. Similar to Armendariz Velasquez's experience with machismo in the household, Teresa Covarrubias, lead singer of The Brat, had encountered

²⁴ Kristina Schulz, *The Women's Liberation Movement: Impacts and Outcomes* (New York: Berghahn, 2019), 32.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁶ Bag, "Work That Hoe," 239.

sexism in both her home and the dominant culture. Born to a working-class Mexican American family, Covarrubias discovered punk music during her older sister's backpacking trip through Europe. Receiving punk fanzines from England, Covarrubias became drawn to the DIY attitude and became inspired by the low-tech sensibility.²⁷ She began listening to punk and eventually formed The Brat. Although Covarrubias' family, especially her father, discouraged her from playing punk, she felt the motivation to express herself, using punk music to critique gender norms in her community, and especially the pressure of being "the perfect daughter" and the expectations of gendered submission. The song "Misogyny," written in 1979 gives a glimpse into the challenges within a patriarchal culture:

A woman is a precious thing/Far beyond a wedding ring
 You have kept her under your thumb/Creating the light-haired and dumb
 You don't love her/You abuse her /You confuse her /You just use her
 A woman's mind is a priceless gift /You talk to her as if it's stripped
 Women's beauty is in her mind /All you see is the sexual kind/You don't love her
 Blatant is misogyny /Scattered in our history/You will find it hard to kill
 The strength from within a woman's will /You don't love her²⁸

In the song, she breaks down the elements of misogyny by exposing how everyday life reinforces sexist occurrences: "You don't love her. You abuse her. You confuse her. You just use her."²⁹

Her evaluations of the objectification of women reducing them to property similar to a wedding ring demonstrate how the realities of being a woman create barriers in having agency.

Although both Armendariz Velasquez and Covarrubias experienced similar encounters in the dominant culture and their homes through the shaping of gender and cultural identities, Chicana punkeras' participation in both the East Los Angeles and Hollywood scene reflect

²⁷ Habell-Pallan, "'Soy Punkera. ¿y Qué?," 166.

²⁸ The Brat, "Misogyny," recorded 1980. Produced by Fatima Records.

²⁹ The Brat, "Misogyny," recorded 1980. Produced by Fatima Records.

different experiences based on race. As a subscene, East LA's connection to Hollywood brought eastside bands to cross not only geographic boundaries but cultural boundaries. Composed of all members residing in East LA, most shows played by Covarrubias' band The Brat occurred in their communities. As the band gained popularity, they began to perform more frequently at venues like the Whisky a Go Go and the Starwood in Hollywood.³⁰ However, "critics and audiences outside East LA was often marred by racism, cultural misunderstanding, and ethnic stereotyping."³¹ Moreover, a few East LA Chicana musicians claimed how the early Hollywood scene was still shot through with racial prejudices, and many of the Hollywood bands composed of white men made Chicana women feel out of place. As Teresa Covarrubias recalls:

We started playing a lot of gigs on the East Side. And I remember it was really almost impossible for us to get any shows on the West Side... And I don't want to say that it was racist or anything but it might just be like... every scene has a clique. You know, there becomes like these cliques of people and they only kin-, I mean they see each other's shows. And I guess within the East LA scene, too, it was like a clique of bands from the East Side ... It was kind of sad, you know, like it had to, we had to get our foot in through somebody that was already, you know, a part of that scene. So it had already closed up to that point that unless you knew somebody that could get you in... people didn't really want to know.³²

For Covarrubias, Mexican American in the punk subculture experienced the same marginalization as they did in the dominant culture. At times, audiences in Hollywood reflected stereotypical attitudes towards a Chicana woman playing punk music, attempting to impose an identity on these musicians from the outside. Covarrubias explains, "Since we're from East LA, some people expect to see knives and guns at the shows. Others think we'll sound like Tierra," [a Chicano band with strong Latin influences combined with R&B].³³ Seeking to capture the

³⁰ Pilar Tompkins, "Vexing: Female Voices from East LA Punk—Ways of Living and Models of Action," *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* 42, no. 1 (2009): 72, accessed April 30, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08905760902815982>.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

³² Michelle Habell-Pallan, "Interview with Teresa Covarrubias," East Los Angeles, August 8, 1998.

³³ Michelle Habell-Pallan, "Interview with Teresa Covarrubias," East Los Angeles, August 8, 1998.

Latino/a market in the early 1980s, entertainment industries influenced local music labels “inaugurating a Latin division, hoping to make revenue from signing local Chicano punk bands.”³⁴ As the trend brought attention to Mexican American punk musicians, The Brat landed a record contract with Fatima Records. Despite being signed, music executives suggested the use of more cowbell and the writing of Spanish lyrics to produce an identifiably “Latin” sound.³⁵ Similar to the demands of Fatima Records to become “more ethnic,” in 1981 a review of “East LA Night” by music critic Richard Cromelin of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, “It would be nice, though, to hear a bit more of the Latino heritage in the music, whether it be a mariachi guitar pattern or a touch of ‘Land of 1,000 Dances.’ After all, that’s East LA, too.”³⁶ Rather than accept this attempt at commodification of an ethnic identity, Corvarrubias and the Brat insisted on defining themselves in their own terms and responded to the review through an interview featured on *La Opinión* (LA’s Spanish-language news outlet): “Just because we are Latino doesn’t necessarily mean that we have to play ‘La Bamba’ or oldies to reflect our origins. We simply play contemporary rock.”³⁷ As a Chicana musician, Covarrubias’ navigated through the construction of her cultural identity by the imposition of stereotypical preconceptions. The duality of being Mexican and American created a conflict when entering the Hollywood scene. Many white American participants created assumptions based on skin color; however, Covarrubias still found ways to manifest the complexities of her cultural identity and expression through punk music.

In contrast to Corvarrubias’s experience of marginalization within the punk subculture,

³⁴ Pilar Tompkins, “Vexing,” 78.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁶ Richard Cromelin, “East LA Night,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, California), June 12, 1980, 8.

³⁷ Sean Carrillo, and Daniel Villareal, “Cambiando las reglas.” *La Comunidad*, Sunday supplement of *La Opinión* (Los Angeles), July 13, 1980, 15.

Alicia Armendariz Velasquez remembers a scene free from any racial prejudices and exclusion.

Tom DeSavia's *Under the Big Black Sun: A Personal History of LA* describes the Hollywood punk scene as "Los Angeles's 'golden age' of punk where a wide cross-section of nonconformists, oddballs, rejects, and visionaries who couldn't fit into mainstream society."³⁸

Beside playing fast and loud, early punk bands did not encompass a unified sound or fashion; the scene provided a space for creative young people to express themselves. The artistic aspect of Hollywood punk meant liberation from the burden of conformity, thus generating diversity in gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class.³⁹ Armendariz Velasquez saw it the same way, asserting that "the Hollywood scene became a color blind punk underground where race/racism did not exist."⁴⁰ Furthermore, she claimed:

The early LA punk scene was made up of a broad range of individuals with a variety of motives for being involved. Early punks were rich, poor, gay, straight, male, and female, with a good sampling of LA's ethnic diversity: Latinos, blacks, and Asians were all involved along with whites in the early days of the Masque. The earliest participants and movers behind the scene were united only in the sense of having been identified as "outcasts," either by society or by themselves. We were different, proudly different, and wanted to express our creativity through our art, our music, our fashion, our way of life. Early punk was as much a rejection of the status quo as it was the product of the rejects of the status quo.⁴¹

As a daughter of Mexican immigrants, the punk vocalist highlights the inclusive early Hollywood scene and explains how she did not experience discrimination based on her race or gender. However, she does not dismiss differing opinions.

Whether Covarrubias or Armendariz Velasquez felt a particular marginalization in either the Hollywood scene or East LA scene, both Chicanas continued to participate in the punk

³⁸ Tom DeSavia, *Under the Big Black Sun: A Personal History of LA Punk* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2017), 55.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 56-58.

⁴¹ Frankie Mastrangelo, "Violence Girl: An Interview with Alice Bag." *Make/Shift*, no. 15 (2019): 18-19, 6.

subculture for the same reason: Chicana punks used the subculture as an avenue to reveal new categories of social issues reflecting themes of education reform for Mexican American youth. With a new space to reimagine themselves, Chicana punkeras' identities and politics naturally established a different sense of social activism reflecting issues of race and gender in the East Los Angeles/ Hollywood punk scene. As most East Los Angeles and Hollywood punk bands evoked aggressive music with lyrics aimed at political issues, Chicana punkeras shifted the uniqueness of their songs to reveal commitments towards different social issues shaped by their own experiences. Cultural and gender intersectionality constructed a new lens for the punk women to tackle other social issues, including the inequality in education for Mexican Americans.

Formed in late 1978, Covarrubias' band The Brat embodied the essence of a Chicana Punkeras' social activism. Born and raised in Boyle Heights (part of East LA), the punk vocalist held a strong sense of her cultural identity. Her parents had immigrated to the US through the bracero program and as non-English speaking, Covarrubias' parents preserved a very Mexican household. Her Mexican American experience blended with punk music to reflect issues in her community. In the song "Pledge of Allegiance," she sings, "Because you cannot see it, doesn't mean it is not there. Open your eyes beyond your red scare. Their justice is blind. It refuses to see how we all suffer in this land of the free."⁴² The lyrics critique the ongoing discrimination Mexican American youth continued to face after the 1968 East LA walkouts. In efforts to demand equity in education, Chicano students organized a series of walkouts; however, the walkouts' success, as Covarrubias examines, was short-sighted.⁴³ As she sings, "Open your eyes

⁴² The Brat, "Pledge of Allegiance," recorded 1980. Produced by Fatima Records.

⁴³ Mario T. Garcia, *Blowout!: Sal Castro and the Chicano Struggle for Educational Justice* (Chapel Hill: Univ Of North Carolina Pr, 2014) 2.

beyond the Red Scare," the vocalist breaks down the global anxieties of the Red Scare as a way to distort the injustices occurring in the US, especially against Mexican American youth.⁴⁴ Aware of global events and their effects on the local, Covarrubias allows the subculture to engage beyond the punk community. Through music, she advocated for education reform while critiquing the US government, creating a network of solidarity among other non-punk participants.

The personal politics of Chicanas influenced the punk subculture to include discussions of social issues pertaining to Mexican Americans. In addition to the theme of education reform, The Bags composed "Programmed" as a critique of the school system, which "programmed" students instead of creating critical thinkers and in the process erased Mexican-American students' cultural identity. During the 1960s and 1970s, Mexican American students displayed significant disparities between white students' achievement levels. East Los Angeles schools lacked resources for students of color and denied a multicultural curriculum while permitting racist overtones. Rather than teaching critical thinking skills, students learned obedience and memorization. Due to insufficient support, Mexican American students repeated grades, and a higher proportion of Mexican American students did not complete high school, when compared with white students' graduation rates.⁴⁵ Inspired by her personal experiences and the surrounding community issues in East Los Angeles, "Programmed" exposed the "emotional dissection of formative acculturation."⁴⁶ Alicia Armendariz Velasquez describes how the teaching of obedience and memorization in school disenfranchised the Mexican American community. The school became a vessel to erase culture and assimilate Mexican American youth as expressed through the lyrics:

⁴⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁵ Gutiérrez, "Racial Politics in Los Angeles," 53.

⁴⁶ Alconada, "Punk Pioneers," 85.

I memorized what the teacher said
 No one ever asked what was in my head
 Their values and their history
 were deposited in me
 Education be damned we are being programmed!
 I shine a light that's not reflected
 'cause I have got my own perspective⁴⁷

Armendariz Velasquez opposed the flawed educational system; however, she encouraged becoming educated as a person of color. She reveals the unbalanced education structure and the institutionalized racism in that structure and uses punk as an amplifier of these silenced voices.

Although using punk as a tool to express rage, Covarrubias realized that screaming about these injustices did not suffice. Punk encompassed expression; however, the real definition of punk included taking action to create positive change. In 1980, Teresa Covarrubias became an active participant in her community. She began volunteering at Plaza de La Raza—a cultural center serving the eastside community with free education and art programming. The Plaza de La Raza served as a space to organize and speak about issues affecting the Mexican American community. Monthly, the cultural center's volunteers organized benefit events consisting of politically charged bands, artists, and poets. As an inexperienced event planner, Covarrubias initiated the "Right to Read" fundraiser event in efforts to bring awareness to the low literacy of Mexican Americans. Covarrubias strongly believed Chicanos received the "short end of the stick" in terms of education. With a lack of resources and the racial prejudices of teachers, the school for Mexican American youth resulted in early dropouts adding to the low literacy levels of the Mexican American community in East Los Angeles. The "Right to Read" fundraiser connected punk and social activism in which a Chicana punkera brought together local business owners, families, and other punk rockers (friends and bandmates of Covarrubias) from both the

⁴⁷ The Bags, "Programmed," recorded 1979. Produced by Slash Records.

East Los Angeles and Hollywood scene for an evening of solidarity, therefore expanding punk with transnational affairs.

As Chicanas expanded the periphery of punk through intersectionality to advocate for marginalized communities in the United States, Chicana punkeras' identities and politics allowed for a transnational dimension connecting to the struggles in South American countries. The Chicana identity emerged as a transnational Latinx identity, where culture became a unifying factor or a "connecting center" to other countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. As historian Lynn Hunt notes, "deterritorialization and globalization do not happen willy-nilly through the operation of invisible institutions or processes; they occur because people act and interact."⁴⁸ In other words, through punk sensibilities and cultural/gender marginalization, transnational interactions became possible and constructed an exchange of not only music but social activism operated by Chicana punks.

This meeting of the intersectional punkera identity with transnational activism had its biggest moment in the early 1980s. In 1980, a civil war between a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group called the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), and the government of El Salvador ravaged the Central American country, killing approximately 75,000 Salvadorans by the early 1990s.⁴⁹ As two percent of the population controlled 95% of El Salvador's wealth and political power, inequality had produced discontent among the working class.⁵⁰ With the government's failure to improve the living standards of the country, the lower class organized and formed FMLN. The rebel group pursued equality among social classes through communism

⁴⁸ Lynn Hunt, *Writing history in the Global Era* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 69.

⁴⁹ Consalvi Carlos Henríquez, *Broadcasting the Civil War in El Salvador: A Memoir of Guerrilla Radio* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

while seeking support from Nicaraguan, Cuban, and Soviet governments.⁵¹ As an official civil war began, the United States began to aid the Salvadoran government as a preventive measure to contain the communist views of FMLN.⁵² The United States began supplying weaponry and training Salvadorian government soldiers. On April 27, 1983, President Ronald Reagan addressed the country:

The Salvadoran government, making every effort to guarantee democracy with free labor unions, freedom of religion, and a free press is under attack by guerillas dedicated to the same philosophy that prevails in Nicaragua, Cuba, and yes, the Soviet Union. The people of El Salvador are earning their freedom, and they deserve our moral and material support to protect it.⁵³

As Reagan's speech aired throughout the United States gaining national attention, Chicana punks become aware of the civil war; however, aligned themselves with the politics of FMLN.

Chicanas faced their own injustices of race, gender, and class in the United States. The hypocrisy of “liberation and democratization” in other countries made the punkeras distrust the American government.

Still, the tensions initially between the two countries generated a global conflict where Chicana punks found themselves participating in. The United States’ intentions in the Salvadorian civil war revealed the ongoing rivalry between the Soviet Union rather than support for the working class. In hopes to support families affected by the civil war, Chicana punks began to organize and play benefit concerts. The xeroxed flyer advertising “Concert of a Revolution” encompasses the intersection of Chicana punks’ identities, politics, social activism, and their connection to global conflicts (*fig.1*). The flyer depicts the image of a Salvadorian

⁵¹ Ibid., 11.

⁵² Ibid., 10.

⁵³ Ronald Reagan, “April 27, 1983: Address on Central America,” Miller Center, May 4, 2017, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/april-27-1983-address-central-america>.

revolutionary woman covering her face with a bandana while proudly holding up her fist. Also, in the image, two men wearing bandanas standing behind her. The handwritten message on the flyer stated, "Benefit for CISPES Committee in solidarity with the people of El Salvador, \$5.00 donation."⁵⁴ Moreover, the flyer mentioned the bands performing, including The Plugz, Alice Bags Band, Phranc, and Bent. Although a simple flyer, the choice of selecting such images reflects the cultural and feminist politics of chicana punkeras. The revolutionary woman at the forefront symbolized the strength of women of color in creating positive change. It expressed solidarity with the Salvadorian working class while allowing a transnational connection through punk social activism.

In addition to the benefit concert supporting the Salvadoran guerillas, Chicana punk fashion generated a material form of solidarity. Due to The Bags breakup in 1981, Alice Armendariz Velasquez had joined the all-female band Cambridge Apostles. In Armendariz Velasquez's photograph collection contains an image of her performing at Hollywood's Club Lingerie in 1984 (*fig. 2*). At first glance, the viewer is drawn to the powerful pose Armendariz Velasquez adopts as her closed eyes and opened mouth capture the spirit of punk performance. With large shiny jewelry and heavy dark makeup, her confidence and punk attitude translate through the image. However, the importance of this particular photograph includes a smaller detail that perhaps most viewers dismissed—a small pin on Armendariz Velasquez's right shoulder displaying "FMLN" with a drawing of party leader Farabundo Martí. As scholar Marci R. McMahon notes, "self-fashioning highlights the intersections of dress with bodily performance and the possibility of these sites in the negotiation of gendered and racialized

⁵⁴ Alice Bag, "Women in LA Punk Archives," Accessed February 25, 2020. <https://alicebag.com/women-in-la-punk>.

ideologies.”⁵⁵ Armendariz Velasquez’s support of the Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group uncovers Chicana punk politics and their connection to global affairs. Although a small detail in her attire, she purposefully chose an issue to emphasize through fashion. Becoming difficult not to notice during a performance, the small ornament challenged US foreign policy, created support for FMLN, and inserted her in transnational occurrences yet, not through direct political campaigning or music but through style.

Moreover, Armendariz Velasquez’s participation in protests against U.S interventions in Central America demonstrates how Chicana punk activism created unity with Latinx cultures in other countries. On November 1st, 1986, a large protest in Downtown Los Angeles against the U.S. military intervention in Central America gathered a crowd of over 6,000 people. The *Los Angeles Times* described the protest as “the carrying of hundreds white crosses bearing the names of civilian victims of fighting in Central America, the mile-long chain of orderly protesters marched up Broadway, winding up with a three-hour rally outside Los Angeles City Hall.”⁵⁶ As participants of the protest, Armendariz Velasquez and a few classmates from Cal State Los Angeles created a large banner to hold as they marched stating, “The people of the United States join the struggle. ¡Viva el internacionalismo proletario!”⁵⁷ The banner and involvement in the protest represented the support and direct action exhibited by Chicana punks. By “joining the struggle,” Armendariz Velasquez revealed her dedication towards supporting global movements. Her intersectional identities placed the punkera as a “proletarian

⁵⁵ Marci R. McMahon, “Self-Fashioning through Glamour and Punk in East Los Angeles,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22, no. 2-3 (2012): 41.

⁵⁶ Jill Stewart, “Thousands Protest U.S. Support of the Contras” *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 1986. Accessed May 20, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-11-02-me-15852-story.html>

⁵⁷ Alice Bag, “Women in LA Punk Archives.” Alice Bag. Accessed May 20, 2020. <https://alicebag.com/women-in-la-punk>.

internationalist” where her struggles of marginalization in the United States resonated with transnational struggles of the working class in Central America. Moreover, Armendariz Velasquez’s engagement created a new sense of social activism beyond the punk scene, yet those identities reconfigured punk politics. As historian Michelle Habell-Pallan contends, “Chicanas as producers transformed punk aesthetics into sites of possibility for transnational conversations concerning violence and social injustices.”⁵⁸ The marginalization of being a woman and a person of color constructed identities new to the punk scene while permitting them to become a connecting center to magnify global events.

As Chicana punks continued to reconfigure punk politics with a more significant emphasis on global affairs, they became social activists by taking direct action and organizing benefit concerts. For example, in 1985, Mexico City experienced an 8.5 magnitude earthquake crumbling 100,000 homes, killing 5,000 people, and roughly leaving about five million residents without electricity or potable water.⁵⁹ Upon hearing the news from a family member living in Mexico City, Alicia Armendariz Velazquez organized a benefit concert in response to the destructive earthquake. Supporting the cause, poet Randall Kennedy, artist Alex Gibson, punk band Psi Com, and Armendariz Velazquez’s group Cambridge Apostles filled the event bill attracting a wave of people overflowing Hollywood’s Club Lingerie and raising enough money to support families affected by the earthquake. Chicana punkeras made events occurring in other countries (especially South American countries due to cultural connections) visible and used the visibility to take action. Composing songs about injustices blended with organizing benefit concerts, therefore fashioned a unique form of social activism and redefined the meaning of

⁵⁸ Habell-Pallan, ““Soy Punkera. ¿y Qué?”” 166.

⁵⁹ “From the Archives: 1985 Mexico City Earthquake,” Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles Times, September 19, 2017), <https://www.latimes.com/visuals/photography/la-me-fw-archives-1985-mexico-city-earthquake-20170919-story.html>)

being a punk.

As Armendariz Velazquez continued to use punk as a tool for social activism, she took her Chicana punk ideologies beyond Los Angeles when she traveled to Nicaragua to help plan the Sandinista Literacy Campaign. After graduating from Cal State LA, Armendariz Velazquez became an elementary school teacher while continuing to perform with Cambridge Apostles and organizing social justice events. However, her punk sensibilities prompted her to fight injustices at a larger scale, hence encouraging her to support other revolutionaries. Before the civil war in El Salvador, Nicaraguans had faced their own civil war initiated by the rebel group Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN).⁶⁰ By July 19, 1981, the Sandinista revolutionaries successfully overthrew the repressive Somoza dictatorship and established a provisional government based on Marxist ideology.⁶¹ Since half the population did not read or write, FSLN began a widespread literacy campaign. Through the literacy campaign, Armendariz Velazquez taught young children and adults how to read and develop critical thinking skills. Using the published entries of her diary during her time in Nicaragua, the last entry written on May 1, 1986, discloses:

While I was in Nicaragua, I questioned my ability to make the huge changes I knew needed to be made. I wanted to stop President Reagan from funding the Contras. I wanted to bring Comandante Gladys Baez to the United States so she could inspire others. I wanted to change our educational system so that it focused on critical thinking rather than simply depositing facts. All those things seemed like they were beyond my control. I suppose that it might have made sense to go back to my old ways and accept defeat, but I couldn't. I had seen David take on Goliath and I started looking for my own slingshot. Inside of me there's a revolution, there's a permanent change that won't let me fall back into the stupor. I am awake.⁶²

⁶⁰ Matilde Zimmermann, *Sandinista: Carlos Fonseca and the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004), 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶² Alice Bag, *Pipe Bomb for the Soul* (Los Angeles: Alice Bag Publishing, 2015) 355.

Armendariz Velazquez's experience in taking direct action to create positive change continued to fuel her punk ideologies to incorporate a sense of justice globally. Her experiences made transnational interactions conceivable and transformed those experiences back to the punk scene. She redefined punk as not only an outlet to express discontent but a space to organize. Her work in Nicaragua demonstrated the very light of Chicana punk ideologies, highlighting how action taken or not taken shapes the world.

Although the late 1980s witnessed a growing popularity in the post-punk subculture and a decline of punk, Armendariz Velazquez and Covarrubias stayed true to their Chicana punkera sensibilities, continuing to fashion an evolving punk identity at the intersection of gender and ethnicity, global and local. In the 1990s, Armendariz Velazquez co-created the band Cholina! with punk rock drag queen Vaginal Davis and later, recruited Teresa Covarrubias. Known as the Female Menudo (Menudo was a famous Puerto Rican boy pop band in the late 1980s), Armendariz Velazquez and Covarrubias fused punk music with traditional Mexican folk. Furthering their punk ideologies, they adopted Latinx teen personas satirizing traditional ideas of race and gender through their dress and lyrics. The band disbanded in 1994; however, both women continued to implement Chicana punk ethos in everyday life. At the age of 60, Armendariz Velazquez continues to organize and create music in Los Angeles. She spends her weekends supporting local punk bands at shows on the eastside. As an activist, she volunteers for Chicas Rockeras—a Southeast Los Angeles girls and gender expansive youth rock camp that “promotes healing, growth, and confidence for girls through music education while building self-esteem and encouraging group collaboration.”⁶³ In 2019, she created Turn it Up! to combat

⁶³ Jessica Schwartz, “Si Se Puede!: Chicas Rockeras and Punk Music Education in South East Los Angeles,” *Punk & Post Punk* 5, no. 1 (January 2016): 45.

gender parity in music, and on May 1, 2020, she released her third solo album titled *Sister Dynamite*.

In sum, the undeniable and influential presence of Chicana punks reveals a more complex story of the Los Angeles punk scene. Their perspectives offer new a lens that goes beyond an initial British subculture and, at the same time, complicates the narratives of Chicano/a history. Punk's intricacy, flexibility, and globalization constructed a multicultural phenomenon and transformed its philosophy depending on location. The interconnections and transformations in other countries and local communities reflect how outside events shaped the punk scene, as well as how punk participants reshaped outside the subculture. Chicanas in punk contributed to the visibility of women and Chicano culture through their music and social activism. Their work in the punk scene contributes to an understanding of how the intersection of race, gender, and class reconfigures subcultural movements. Chicana punkers in the 1970s and 80s operated in both local and international milieux. They used their marginalization in the dominant culture to reshape their roles in the subculture and become a connecting center, thus expanding punk periphery into local and global interactions. They paved the way for future women in punk through the adaptation of social activism as a core ideology. Punk for many Chicanas in the present day means becoming a positive change. In the end, punk is deeper than style or listening to music; it is fighting against injustices and taking direct action.

Punk Visuals:

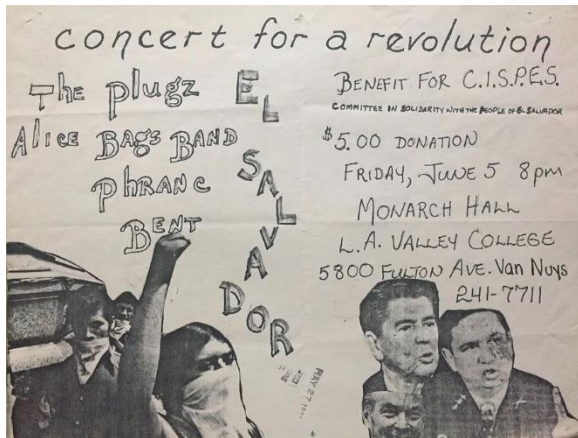


Figure 1: Flyer for "Concert for a Revolution," 1984. (Women in LA Punk Archives).



Figure 2: Alice Bag performing at Hollywood's Club Lingerie in 1984. (Women in LA Punk Archives).



Figure 3: Dolores Huerta Square unveiling on June 23, 2019. Photo taken by Tony Torres.

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