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Poststructuralist Agency in the Southern California Punk Scene

Punk is often thought of as a culture of resistance—resistance to conventional music, to conservative politics, to standards of appearance, to parental authority. Few portrayals do much to clarify what *specifically* qualifies as punk and what does not, but rather favor a general, though impassioned, description of punk as quintessentially resistant. This is appealing largely due to conflicts within the punk community about how to define its borders. Angela McRobbie, in *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* writes that this struggle is central to many youth subcultures, that “perhaps the emphasis on authenticity is a precondition for acquiring subjectivity and identity in adolescence, one of the attractions of subcultures being precisely that it offers strong subjectivity through the collective meanings that emerge from the distinctive combination of signs, symbols, objects, styles, and other ‘signifying texts.’” As punks grow past adolescence, they often lean toward more inclusive definitions. Although the struggle for authenticity within the punk scene can manifest in emotional and physical violence, I argue the attempts to push back these borders can be equally oppressive. I highlight the ways that, in the midst of this violence, women and people of color in the punk scene are exercising agency, through combining various discourses in self-determined representations.

The problem with the idea of punk as anything resistant to authority is that this illusion of inclusion is false, a problem Nikki Sullivan describes occurring with the definition of “queer” as well. She writes, “The problem, then, is that the unacknowledged meanings attached to this term and its usage do tend to privilege the values, desires, and aspirations of particular people and groups, and to overlook, or silence those of others.”

However much it is said that punk is defined by its resistance to the mainstream, even if this can include lots of subgenres, styles, and beliefs, the word “punk” still brings to mind a straight white male. While men and women of color and white women are involved in punk, they’re often viewed as exceptions, as tokens. It is telling that bands like Bikini Kill are “girl bands,” that women in otherwise male punk bands are “chick drummers” or “female vocalists,” and that Bad Brains is often described as “that black punk band” when the vast majority of bands and fans are all male and all white. Overt sexism and racism is certainly a problem in some parts of the punk scene. We should also look at violence in placing people on the margins of a community they choose to identify with, especially because that identification is so often a reaction to being on the margins of larger society.

I situate this study within the framework of a Foucauldian genealogy, because of Foucault’s belief that “focusing attention on specific situations may lead to more concrete analyses of particular struggles and thus to a better understanding of social change.” The project is also inspired by feminist theorists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty. While I cannot detail my entire methodology here, it is important to note that my focus is on Southern California women in Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Orange, and Riverside counties. Some parts of the punk scene reflect the diversity of the area, but it is not all-embracing. Jenny Moncayo, an L.A. punk and contributor to *Razorcake* magazine, talked to me about “pockets of weird racism, let alone sexism” and even seeing Nazis at punk shows. Moncayo describes the L.A. scene as “jaded,” a sentiment noted even in the early days of the scene in 1977, when Mick Farren commented, “The kids in Southern California seem to coast along on a psychodiet of quaaludes, booze, and valium. Life is

too easy to raise the kind of raging boredom that looks to anarchy as a blessed relief.”

Not everyone agrees that the punks in Southern California are jaded or detached, though.

Christina Zamora, who works with the Glasshouse and the Glasshouse Records Store in Pomona says that in Riverside, “It’s a really strong female community out there and it’s awesome.” A classmate who commented on the first draft of this paper said, “Almost every show I’ve ever been to in L.A. has been high energy and if it wasn’t it was more due to the band’s weaknesses than the crowds.”

Regardless of one’s views on the current scene, with the search authenticity comes a tendency to idealize the earlier years of one’s own involvement in a subculture. Zamora describes the current scene as “totally different” than when she was first involved in the 90’s. Julia Smut Peddler, who has been playing with the band The Smut Peddlers since 1993 says, “Now it (punk) is a lot different. It’s a lot more mainstream. It’s a lot more commercial.” Alice Bag, of The Bags, has conducted several interviews with women involved in the early Los Angeles punk scene and many of them remember the 70’s as being a time when women were treated as equals to men in punk. Jenny Lens, whose photographs of the punk scene in the late 70’s inspired Patti Smith to call her “the girl with the camera eye,” told Bag, “We decided what we wanted to do and were treated as equals to the men.” Nicole Panter, who managed The Germs, recalling women’s role in the early scene, said it was, “As effortlessly equal as that of men....the strongest, smartest, most independent women I’ve ever known were punk girls, but it wasn’t ever stated or harped on, it was just a fact of life.” However, we should be careful not to take these statements as evidence of absolute equality in the early Los Angeles scene. It is important to remain aware that these are accounts of specific women’s experiences and

understandings of the scene. For one thing, the women Bag interviews are the women who “made it,” who were successful enough in the scene that people would want to read interviews with them as opposed to the women who were restricted to the roles of groupie or girlfriend. Secondly, the statements in Bag’s interviews reflect a sense of agency, which does not necessarily translate into equality or a lack of domination. This is evidenced in the writing of Bronwyn Davies who says that subjects can “use the terms of one discourse to counteract, modify, or go beyond the other.” We’re successful if we gain “a sense of oneself as one who can go beyond the given meanings in one discourse and forge something new.” It wasn’t necessarily that women in the early L.A. scene completely escaped gender norms and chauvinism, but the women Bag interviews were forging new identities and those identities were accepted as part of a community. Their accounts reflect their ability to enact agency as Davies describes it, not the perfect and equal punk utopia many like to imagine.

Many women who discuss sexism in Southern California punk suggest they noticed it first when hardcore emerged in the late 70’s and early 80’s. Los Angeles was one of this new scene’s major centers. There is certainly something behind these sentiments. With hardcore came slam dancing and stage diving which gendered the space of the punk show. Julia Smut Peddler explains, “It can be pretty gnarly to have 225 pound guys flying past you just, you know, just getting unbalanced and trying to slam dance, much less being hostile and punching. It’s kind of...it’s not really intimidating, but it’s, you know, not for the squeamish.” It takes a simple Google search to discover the prevalence of sexual assaults and groping that women often endure if they choose to participate in mosh pits. The alienation some women in punk express feeling today emerges from more than

just the threat of assault or physical injury. The solidifying of the roles some women were able to forge in the 70's also means that playing those roles is less about exercising agency.

The sense of pioneering, of creating new possibilities for existing, isn't entirely gone from the Southern California scene, though. The tension the diversity of the area and the scene produces has led to the emergence of a new punk subgenre. Alice Bag and Lysa Flores, another Chicana musician call it "punkcheras."

At "Vexing: Female Voices From East L.A. Punk," a 2008 exhibit at the Claremont Museum of Art, they played "punked out mariachi standards." Flores told the *Los Angeles Times*, "To me, the punk rock idea was always about having this oppositional identity, which is very Chicano to me." While her statement leans toward defining punk as "quintessentially resistant," it is valuable in its tactical misrecognition of normative ideas of two discourses.

Additionally, Manic Hispanic is an L.A. punk band that "take(s) the punk songs that they love but they add a large dose of barrio humor." Punkcheras and Manic Hispanic can be seen as disidentification, a process José Esteban Muñoz describes as "to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject." The musicians are reading themselves, Latino heritage and all, into punk rock, a space that is not culturally coded to connect with this discourse. The use of humor in the process, according to Muñoz, is a "valuable pedagogical and political project."

Such strategies can be precarious. They can be counterproductive if their parody is interpreted as reinforcing stereotypes. I point this out in the spirit of Foucault, as a

reminder that “what can look like a change for the better may have undesirable consequences” and that points of resistance are local and unstable, not part of some overarching great Refusal. Despite the precariousness of these humorous disidentifications, they are indeed sites of poststructuralist agency as Davies describes. In both cases the bands take various discourses...being Chicano, being from L.A., being punks, and use them to, according to Moncayo, “show how punk is inherently considered white” and also how Chicano culture and Los Angeles have set ideas about what its young people are supposed to be like.

Music isn’t the only means of resistance Latinos have found to challenge domination in the current Southern California punk scene. Gloria Libertina, an 18-year-old Mexican American woman from Riverside also uses her Chicana identity to fight hegemonic control. She finds agency as articulated by Davies through her zine, *Radica Grita*, and her music booking company, *La Dama En Azul*. The names *Radica Grita* and *La Dama En Azul* bring together a variety of linguistic and cultural discourses while the content and medium utilize strategies from feminist politics and punk.

Christina Zamora told me, “When I book shows I kind of try to get more girl bands to come out.” Jenny Moncayo says she’s fighting through “the actual act of writing.” “I was the only girl on all fronts,” she says. When she writes reviews, she explains, she instantly brings a Latina woman’s perspective to a space that didn’t have that before. Similarly, Julia Smut Peddler is comforted by the fact that she gives it her all and refuses to “play like a girl.” “I always have the last laugh,” she says.

It is interesting that all three women, Zamora, Moncayo, and Smut Peddler, use the term “girl,” especially because the image of the “punk rock girl” is a prevalent one,

featured in many classic punk songs, an indicator of the complexities of identity and the instability of gender equity in the discourse of punk rock. Zamora, Moncayo, and Smut Peddler are resisting sexism in punk, but still rely on terms that help support it. Again, as Foucault describes, their resistance is local and unstable, and not part of a pure or grand resistance.

I would like to conclude my genealogy on a hopeful note. I have demonstrated that throughout the existence of the punk scene in Southern California, there have been many moments of violence as well as many moments of agency and resistance, none of which have been purely productive or destructive. The Introduction to Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby's "Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance" explains beautifully that Foucault's skepticism of global liberation does not lead necessarily to nihilism, but rather that there is the "potential for an ethics of activism... that fosters a mode of empowerment that is at the same time infused with an awareness of the limits to human agency." The resistance and agency exercised by the subjects of this paper can inspire us, as limited subjects, to fight against domination with the tools that are available to us— a distaste for injustice and the ability to turn the terms of discourses against one another and forge something new.

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