Black and Brown Get Down: Cultural Politics, Chicano Music, and Hip Hop in Racialized Los Angeles

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Los Angeles has long been racialized – inscribed by hierarchical racial categories supporting an oppressive social order and justified by Eurocentric supremacist ideologies – from the Spanish missions to the zoot suit riots (Omi and Winant, 1994). By the early 1950s, the city's two major racial minority groups were engaged in a culture war over its sanctioned sounds and official values, as their vibrant street styles and upstart dance music scenes became popular among white youths, and hence subversive to the segregationist status quo. This chapter sketches some of the cross-cultural currents and innovative, mestizo (mixed-race) music-making particular to Los Angeles, where original styles such as the 1940s pachuco boogie, the 1960s Chicano and surf rock, and the 1970s Laurel Canyon country rock blossomed, as did transplanted external styles. Rather than survey the city's music scenes over time, I focus on three homegrown genres – Chicano punk, LA gangsta rap, and Chicano rap – and conclude that, while the black–brown cooperative connections of the war years and the post-war period had waned by the late 1970s, each group's independent, grass-roots energy and critical, alternative aesthetic persisted into the twenty-first century through hip hop music, dance, and graffiti street art, and through Eastside rockabilly and punk rock scenes.

To 'get down' is to feel the music; respond to the party mood or spirit of the dance; have a good time; lose all pretensions; perform well; be intensely involved; do anything to the fullest (Major, 1994, p. 195). Because African Americans and Mexican Americans did not always get along, they did not always get down together, nor were their creative contributions to American pop culture consistently concocted in collaboration. Nevertheless, the two groups spearheaded – jointly, separately, and simultaneously – socially significant popular music and dance. I use the term 'cultural politics' to describe the power struggles waged via pop culture by working-class
singers, rappers, and musicians, as well as by listeners, dancers, and fans, in which underground music scene participants, rendered invisible and seemingly silent, voice an oppositional perspective, criticize the socio-economic system, and question the morality of American society. At stake is the potential transformation of their material conditions; at risk is the co-optation of subversive messages as the music and style cross over to the mainstream culture industries, and the internalization of celebrity consumerist ideals. Even angry young punk rockers become married schoolteachers, and gangsta rappers become suburban family men.

**Chicano punk rock**

In Penelope Sphères' opinion, defiant punk rock music and lifestyle became 'a survival guide' for 'a new tribe' of 'outcasts' and 'social misfits' who expressed 'anger and rebellion', who created 'a new way of thinking' based on 'honesty and integrity...as a way of being' opposed to 'corporate greed, ego-driven commerciality, and a society that did not care for its needy' (Cogan, 2008, p. vii). As the historian of East LA punk, Jimmy Alvarado, notes, Eastside punk rockers 'found common ground in a style they perceived as more liberating than other choices available to them' (2012, p. 159). Michelle Habell-Pallán suggests 'the D.I.Y. (Do-It-Yourself) sensibility at the core of punk musical subcultures' vibed with Chicana/o cultural practices, while 'punk's critique of the status quo...spoke directly to working-class East Los Angeles youth' (2005, p. 150). As George Lipsitz contends, British and New York 'punk music projected a disdain for mainstream society' that resonated with young Chicanos' grievances and 'alienations' (1994, pp. 85, 90). According to Collin Gunckel, 'beginning slightly later than the foundational New York and London scenes, a Los Angeles punk scene had taken shape by 1977, initially centered in Hollywood' (2012, p. 131).

In 1976, inspired by The Ramones, the first Chicano punk band, The Stains, from Boyle Heights, east of the LA River, switched from rock to punk. Eastside audiences did not appreciate 'their aggressive sound, confrontational nature, or flirtations with fascist imagery' (Alvarado, 2012, pp. 160–161). Nonetheless, 'their furious melding of punk and metal...and the resulting crazed fever dreams steeped in alienation, violence, and assorted psychoses influenced numerous others – including Black Flag, who once deemed The Stains “the best band in the world”' (Cabral, 2011b). After playing across the country, opening for Dead Kennedys at the Whiskey a Go Go in Hollywood, and recording their eponymous 12-Inch EP on SST Records in 1981 (released two years later), The Stains broke up. Their tight, powerful style with guitar feedback and hardcore drums can be heard on songs such as *Sick and Crazy, I'm Normal, Violent Children, and Nazis*.

In 1977, Thee Undertakers formed in East Los Angeles, influenced by The Ramones and Black Sabbath. They wore black suits and, 'as with the Stains, local crowds had no idea what to make of them'. After winning over East LA playing backyard parties and dive bars, Thee Undertakers opened for the Hollywood punk band X at the Whiskey, played throughout Los Angeles city and county, and broke up in 1982 after recording an album, which was not released for 20 years (Alvarado, 2012, pp. 162–164). In this essay, I use the gendered-masculine term 'Chicano to include both women and men (Chicanas and Chicanos), except where specified, and the umbrella term 'Chicano punk rock' to analyze all-Chicano bands, even those not self-identifying under that rubric. As the original Stains bassist Jesus Amezquita says, 'None of my songs were about being Chicano. My songs were about being human' (Alvarado, 2012, p. 165). It is also important to note non-East LA bands with one Chicano member, such as The Weirdos (Cliff Roman), Black Flag (Anthony Martinez), The Deadbeats (Scott Guerin), Catholic Discipline (Robert Lopez), and The Bags.

Alicia Armendariz Velasquez grew up in East Los Angeles, raised by Mexican immigrant parents. In 1977, after trying to start an all-women band, Alicia and her bassist friend, Patricia Rainone, formed The Bags with two male guitarists and a male drummer. Alicia sang as Alice Bag, fronting the band with an intense stage presence and 'a raw sexuality not for the fainthearted', according to a 1978 Los Angeles *Times* article that described her taking the stage and exploding 'into convulsive, unintelligible vocals' (McKenna, 1978, cited in Habell-Pallán, 2005, p. 147). Sean Carroll remembers seeing a *Punk Rock Stars* magazine photo of Alice Bag 'dressed in black lingerie. It seemed shocking at the time, but...Alice was already setting the trends that trendsetters [Cyndi Lauper and Madonna] would follow' (2003). Michelle Habell-Pallán argues that Armendariz Velasquez, who was 'often accused of being too aggressive on stage', 'rejected the equation of femininity with victimization and passivity'. In punk rock Alice found an outlet: 'All the violence that I'd stuffed down inside of me for years came screaming out...all the anger' (2005, p. 158).

In a 1978 bootleg video from Hollywood's Troubadour, the punk pioneer Alice Bag jumps, shakes, and shout-sings *Chainsaw*, radiating performative power in the public sphere. The Bags released a seven-inch record, *Survive*, on the Dangercoms label in 1978, and performed *Prowlers In the Night* and *Gluttony* in Penelope Sphères' 1981 documentary, *The Decline of Western Civilization*. Major labels, Alice says, were too 'cowardly' to sign a 'confrontational' band like The Bags (Shorthand, n.d.). Their influence 'on the West Coast hard-core punk sound' was 'profound' (Habell-Pallán, 2005, p. 157). Active until 1980, the band recorded songs such as *Survive*, with its surreal, slowly swinging intro, *We Will Bury You*, with its primal screams, *We Don't Need the English, Babylonian Gorgon, Violence Cir*H, *Car Hell*, and *Disco's Dead*, with its chorus of 'long live rock and roll'.

In 1979, The Plugz, a punk trio originally from Texas, composed of two Chicanos and an Anglo, released their debut LP, *Electrify Me*. On it, they...
recorded a fast punk rock version of 'La Bamba' that memorably changed the line 'Yo no soy marinero, soy capitán.' As Sean Carrillo recalls, 'Nothing beats the unforgettable sight of several hundred people frenetically dancing as if possessed while Tito [Larriba] insisted, "Yo no soy capitalista! Soy anarquista!"' (Carrillo, 1999, p. 43). In 1984, on the Repco Man soundtrack, The Plugs recorded three songs, including the Spanish-language Hombre Secreto (Secret Agent Man) and El Clavo y la Cruz. Such bilingual exchanges had been happening since the early years of Los Angeles punk, when rockabilly bands and roots rockers The Blasters performed with Los Lobos in Hollywood venues, where white punk audiences ended up 'slow-dancing to 'Volver, Volver' and two-stepping to 'Anselma' ' (Morris, 1997, pp. 100-101).

Beginning in March 1980, Willie Herrón and Joe 'Vex' Suquette put on a visionary series of sporadic 'Vex' shows at Self Help Graphics in Boyle Heights. After eight months, Suquette changed venues to the nearby Paramount Ballroom, where consistent weekend shows provided 'club experience' for Eastside bands, attracted white Angeleno punks, and booked outside punk bands from West Los Angeles, Orange County, San Diego, Canada, and the UK that followed 'the East L.A. groups' example', using the Vex 'as a gateway into Westside clubs previously closed to them'. Suquette moved the club two more times, until the recession forced him to put on his last show in September 1983. Jimmy Alvarado points out that an East Los Angeles scene pre-existing 'in backyards, living rooms, car shows, and rented halls' was strengthened by the Vex, which served 'as a focal point...where different factions of the city's underground music and art scenes could find each other and intermingle' (Alvarado, 2012, pp. 158, 166-170, 175). It was 'a multimedia scene with multimedia art' (Vexing, 2008).

In particular, 'along with Ruben Guevara', Los Illegals 'brought many elements of the Chicano artisitc renaissance - art, theater, and poetry - into a multimedia package' (Reyes and Waldman, 1998, p. 138). Formed in 1980 by artist, vocalist, and lyricist Willie Herrón, Los Illegals sang about deported undocumented workers and gang membership 'to present a realistic commentary on...a slice of life' that 'has been shoved into a darkened corner of the American psyche' (The Illegals, 1980). For instance, on their 1983 debut LP, Internal Exile, released by A&M Records, the song We Don't Need a Tan criticizes residential segregation, urban renewal freeway construction, and media stereotypes. Other songs address pressing social issues of life in the city from a working-class, Chicano perspective, such as The Maze, with its lines about poverty in a dreary 'promised land', Search and Seizure, Not Another Homicide, A-95, and the Spanish-language El Lay. As Willie Herrón states, 'We made our ethnicity the platform for our music' (Alvarado, 2012, p. 165).

On the other hand, Teresa Covarrubias, a third-generation Chicana, never categorized her group as 'a Chicano band', and she disagreed with the idea that 'there's one way to be Chicano' (Chicano Rock!, 2008). The Brat formed in 1977 when Covarrubias, an aspiring poet and singer from Boyle Heights, befriended Rudy Medina, a neighborhood guitarist with a rock band, at a Hollywood punk show. In 1981, the alternative LA Weekly reviewed The Brat at the Whiskey, describing them as 'a weir/c hybrid of standard Low Rider and de rigueur punk', and their set as original 'three-chord, lightning-struck hardcore punk', along with 'the delightful, almost ska-like 'Swift Moves''. With songs about 'frustration, boredom, and day-to-day teenage angst', The Brat had 'released a five song EP called Attitudes on Fatima Records' in 1980, 'produced by Tito Larriiva of the Plugs' (Gehman, 1981).

In 1982, The Brat appeared on the cover of Low Rider Magazine, and, in 1984, of the LA Weekly. Ethnomusicologist Steven Loza praises their 'diverse and highly sophisticated music', notes that brothers Rudy and Sidney Medina studied classical guitar in their youth, with Rudy eventually earning a BA in music from California State University, Los Angeles, and cites Teresa Covarrubias' lyrics to the song The Wolf, which include the couplet: 'We say this Democracy is laced with their Hypocrisy' (Loza, 1993, pp. 190, 192). Indeed, Covarrubias 'applied sarcasm, cynicism, and anger to the standard pop subjects of love, relationships, and high school' (Reyes and Waldman, 1998, pp. 140-141).

Jesus Amezquita remembers punk rock presenting 'an avenue' for women to play music and allowing 'you to be whatever you wanted to be' (Alvarado, 2012, p. 159). As Michelle Habel-Pallán writes, the Los Angeles subculture enabled Chicana punkeras 'to expose the world to their reality' (2005, pp. 153, 165). Covarrubias likes how 'oddballs' could 'express themselves' without being judged, in a spirit of 'non-pretentiousness' (Alvarado, 2012, p. 159; Habbell-Pallán, 2005, p. 160). Alicia Armentariz Velazquez likes how 'punks allowed people to just get up there...for women who felt like they weren't sure of themselves, it was very easy...because you weren't being judged' (Habell-Pallán, 2005, p. 152). To this day, Alicia tries 'to shed light on the overlooked contributions of women who played key roles in a musical movement with its own distinct sound and style which was the equal of any other punk scene' (Shorthand, n.d.).

In 1981, Gerardo Velazquez, a physics major at Cal State LA, led Nervous Gender, 'a synth punk noise band with Nazi imagery and a lot of anger'. As Sean Carrillo (2003) asks, 'Is that Chicano music?' Similarly, one might question whether using the term 'Chicano punk' subjectively connects stylistically diverse artists by race, like 'East L.A. Night' at the Roxy, but such a recovery project inserts brown punks into the history of Chicano music, and of Los Angeles underground music, from the Eastside halls, nightclubs, and backyard parties to Madame Wong's in Chinatown, the Fleetwood in the South Bay, and the Masque in Hollywood. Although The Brat never recorded a second album and A&M shelved the second Los Illegals album, the 1983 compilation LP, Los Angelinos: The Eastside Renaissance,
recorded for Ruben Guevara’s Zephyra Records, and included The Brat, The Plugz, and The Odd Squad, as well as Guevara’s band, Con Safos. As Colin Gunckel concludes, subsuming the entirety of this scene under the banner of East LA punk... fails to account for the musical and aesthetic diversity of the period’ (2012, p. 149).

For example, from a West Los Angeles barrio emerged Suicidal Tendencies, whose singer, Mike Muir, is Mexican American, as are other members. In 1985, two years after Muir founded the group in Venice, California, ‘a minority, lower-income place’, their single Institutionalized boosted their popularity, as did its music video – the first hardcore punk song in rotation on MTV – which showed street skaters and featured the band, wearing cholo-style clothes in a ragtag lowrider and on stage playing for a predominantly brown, but multicultural, mosh pit. When asked about ‘gang violence’ being ‘associated’ with Suicidal Tendencies, Muir said: ‘You see five people and they have got mohawks and leather jackets, they’re individuals. You see five people with Pendletons (flannel shirts), khakis and bandanas and they’re gang members.’ On the band’s following, Muir elaborated, at ‘our shows... you see black people’ and ‘Mexicans... it’s mostly minorities’ (Muir, 1985). Gaye Theresa Johnson argues that marginalized, working-class ‘Black and Latino punk musicians, audiences, and their productions’ articulate a ‘rejection of inequality’ and ‘a frustration with urban decay’ and ‘mainstream assimilation’ (2013, pp. 126–127). Whether considered part of a youth culture or, in Birmingham school cultural populist terms, a subculture, for punk rockers, just as for hip hop heads, the music is part of a way of life.

LA hip hop and gangsta rap

As Davey D explains, ‘hip hop is the culture from which rap emerged,’ ‘a lifestyle with its own language... dress, music and mindset that is continuously evolving’, with MCs (masters of ceremonies) who rhyme and flow on the microphone, DJs (disc jockeys) who scratch and cross-fade the records across two turntables, B-Boys and B-Girls (break dancers), graffiti writers (street artists), and their respective crews (n.d., p. 4). The term ‘hip hop’ is often used specifically for rap music, which itself sprang from dance crew battles. Created in New York City by African Americans and Puerto Ricans, hip hop culture emerged as a sociocultural movement around 1974 and developed an ‘associated musical genre in 1979’ (Schloss, 2009, p. 17).

In the early 1980s, when a New York B-Boy first brought break dancing to Los Angeles, the West Coast had already developed its own dance styles: popping (a robotic boogaloo from Fresno), locking (funk moves started in Watts during the early 1970s), and strutting (popular first among blacks and Filipinos in San Francisco, then among Samoan gangs in southern California). In 1982, the LA Breakers crew was formed, Carmelo Alvarez opened the hip hop youth center Radiotron near MacArthur Park, and the mobile DJ crew Uncle Jamm’s Army spun uptempo electro music at park parties, roller rinks, the LA Coliseum, the Sports Arena, the Convention Center, and the Pasadena Civic Auditorium. By the mid-1980s, the city’s black dance music consisted of electropop acts such as Egyptian Lover, World Class Wreckin Cru, and LA Dream Team, while the AM R&B radio station KDAY became the first in the nation to switch to a predominantly hip hop format, playing new rap music from New York and broadcasting mixes by local DJs (Chang, 2005, pp. 300–301; Cross, 1993, pp. 19–21; Davey, 1999; Everett, n.d.; L.A. Breakers, 2007).

From the 1965 Watts riot to the 1992 uprising, South Central Los Angeles suffered from postindustrial structural shifts, poverty, joblessness, and the marginalization and incarceration of young black men. According to Daniel Widener, African American working-class youth, ‘for whom dissonance is a way of life’, became ‘surplus people’ who were ‘left behind by the economic transformations of the 1970s and 1980s’ yet created defiant ‘sites of dignity and self-definition’ (2009, pp. 254, 255, 282). Their everyday existence could be called a snafu reality, in which the situation-normal-all-fouled-up has become the supposedly normative situation; the mixed-up-as-usual disorder, the socially engineered order of the day. African American Angelenos were devastated by deindustrialization, their bodies as ‘dispersible non-workers policed and warehoused in penitentiaries, where their labour was exploited, while street gangs and drug dealers fought for territorial market share of the crack economy. From this violent socio-economic crisis burst West Coast gangsta rap, which developed a unique regional identity for southern California hip hop culture in the mid-1980s. Rather than perpetuating a state of confusion, the LA gangsta MCs offered a searing, clear-eyed account of their condition, and some critiqued its causes.

In 1985, Compton rapper Toddy Tee’s underground songs Batteram and Rockman circulated as street tapes, and in 1986 Ice-T used a meter that worked for the slow and stealthy pace of LA cruisin’ on his influential song 6 ‘N The Mornin’ from his debut album, Rhyme Pays. Brian Cross calls these ‘soundtracks for urban survival’ (1993, pp. 24–27, 64). In 1987, a minor-league dope dealer-turned reluctant rapper, Easy-E (Eric Wright), started Ruthless Records by paying for studio time, taking the masters to a ‘fee-for-service pressing plant’, and selling 12-inch singles such as Boyz-N-The Hood and Dope Man, a crack dealer story, out of the trunk of his car to South Central swap meet vendors and local retailers. After Easy created a rap group named Niggaz With Attitude (NWA), these underground hits were combined on the compilation album NWA and the Posse, and Easy-E also released a solo LP, Easy-Duz-It. In 1988, Easy signed with Jerry Heller, ‘a veteran talent manager’, who secured a recording contract with fledgling Priority Records (McDermott, 2002). As a result, in September 1988 NWA released the album Straight Outta Compton, produced by DJ Yella and Dr Dre (Andre Young), with Easy-E, MC Ren, and main lyricist Ice Cube (O’Shea Jackson). The title track,
and the songs *Gangsta Gangsta* and *Fuck Tha Police* thrust the group into national notoriety, as did receiving a formal complaint from the assistant director of the FBI.

Raising the question of whether or not ‘NWA are reality rappers’, Brian Cross claims they ‘were primarily interested in selling records’ and calls the group members’ theatrical, ‘highly calculated’ narrative style ‘a marketing strategy’ that captured ‘the aggression and anger of the streets’ with ‘authenticity’ (1993, pp. 35–37). Of course, not all rap music is a form of cultural resistance, and the Los Angeles gangsta rapper persona could be ‘mostly an exaggerated defiance feigned for commercial purposes’, displaying ‘an ambiguous mock nihilism’. Ice Cube argues: ‘for white kids rap ain’t nothing but a form of entertainment, for blacks it’s a strategy on how to maneuver through life’ (Lott, 1994, pp. 245, 246, 247). Jeff Chang calls NWA’s music ‘the new Black poetry and the “new punk rock”’ (2005, p. 320).

MC Ren recalls: ‘We were going to write about the street. Cussing and holding’. Yet, Ren acknowledges, ‘It’s just an image.’ Dr Dre compares *Straight Outta Compton* to *Pulp Fiction*, saying that his songs are dark comedies. Nevertheless, these fictional songs are set within, and reflect, the very real social context of ‘an economic catastrophe’ and ‘a crack epidemic’. While being bused from South Central to a suburban San Fernando Valley high school, Ice Cube remembers, ‘the injustice of’ the stark difference between ‘those neighborhoods’ and his ‘angered’ him. As Terry McDermott contends, although ‘the group was not political in any way other than the most elementary sense’, the album’s profanity, nihilism, misogyny, violence, and ‘gleeful, celebratory hedonism’ were ‘shocking’, and its ‘scrap heap soundscape of siren, gunshots, shouts, curses and cars’ created an ‘ominous’ ‘overall effect’. The album was sold in mom-and-pop, black-owned record stores, but, beyond African American Angelenos, it soon gained a national following. Once ‘it broke within an area, it crossed over to white markets almost immediately’, and eventually, Priority Records calculated, 80 per cent of its sales ‘were in the suburbs, mainly to teenage boys’ (McDermott, 2002). In 1988, Ice-T released his second album, *Power*, and created the title track for the movie *Colors*.

Robin Kelley analyses gangsta rap as ‘a window into, and critique of, the criminalization of black youth’, which recasts ‘capitalism as gangsterism’ by ‘tracing criminal behavior and vicious individualism to mainstream American culture’. Kelley calls ‘its misogynistic narratives... offensive and chilling’, and he cites Tricia Rose’s ‘argument that misogynist lyrics in rap reflect black male fears of black women’s sexuality’ (Kelley, 1996, pp. 185, 200, 201, 219). Gangsta rap casually normalized demeaning depictions of women while deconstructing capitalism, releasing frustration and rage, and circumventing the corporate record labels and radio stations. Its conflicted cultural politics condemned oppression but advocated sexual violence against black women, countered stereotypes of passive victims but offered images of violent thugs, and challenged the hypocrisy of the system but commercialized, popularized, and marketed the critical message and aggressive posture to suburban middle America. Although popular music cannot change collective societal conditions, as a product of the elimination of living-wage urban union jobs, LA gangsta rap responded, in the realm of representation, to the net wealth, housing, and schooling gap.

In February 1990, Ice Cube, a skilled storyteller, released his solo debut album, *American’s Most Wanted*. In Jeff Chang’s assessment, Ice Cube was ‘trying to find a politics of gangsta centricism’, inspired by conscious rap and the Nation of Islam, ‘slyly commenting on gangsta chic’s move into the mainstream’, but marred by a ‘victimization of women and gays’. Gangsta rap tested the limits of artistic freedom of speech in October 1991, when Ice Cube released his follow-up album, *Death Certificate*, which became the target of a nationwide boycott amid accusations of advocating violence against Korean merchants and promoting anti-Semitism. Chang concludes: ‘No rap album had ever been as controversial’ (2005, 342–344, 347–350). In 1991, Ice-T released his fourth album, *OG Original Gangster*, on which he ‘kicked the pure facts’ to ‘tell it how it really was’, calling ‘the system an economic prison’ and arguing ‘You live here cause your parents were poor.’ He sounded a similar theme in an interview, saying ‘the hood isn’t a place you live in by choice... We’re from the earth, ya dig, not from no hood’ (Cross, 1993, pp. 187, 188). Ice-T continually calls out the criminal justice system, and in November 1991 the court sentencing in the trial of the killing of Latasha Harlins by a Korean storeowner presaged the Los Angeles riots of 29 April 1992, which were sparked by the not-guilty verdict in the Rodney King trial. Meanwhile, Ice Cube released three albums in two years, with *The Predator* in 1992 and *Lethal Injection* in 1993. Like the protagonist in the 1993 film *Menace II Society*, an MC like Ice-T or Ice Cube is ‘keenly aware of the circumstances he and those around him are forced to navigate’: hence gangsta rap’s ‘class politics’ and ‘political import’ (Widener, 2010, pp. 271, 274).

In December 1992, Dr Dre released his landmark album, *The Chronic*, which eventually went triple platinum, on his new label, Death Row Records. In a throwback to the late 1940s, ‘kids would come in and audition right off the street’, but, unlike the old independent black labels, ‘Death Row at its peak was making about $150 million a year’ as ‘a tiny label’ (Westhoff, 2012, pp. 22, 20). On *The Chronic* Dr Dre created the distinctive southern California hardcore rap sound, known as ‘G-Funk’, a blueprint for the next decade, with its samples of laid-back funk, especially from George Clinton’s Parliament, deep bass designed to be pumped loudly out of cruising cars, silky R&B vocalists, and Long Beach rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg’s melodic, sing-song delivery. As Robin Kelley argues, LA gangsta rap expressed a ‘real niggaz’ ghettocentrism in response not only to ‘the criminalization, surveillance, incarceration, and immolation of black youth in the postindustrial city’, but also to Afrocentricity (1996, p. 206). According to Jeff Chang,
'The Chronic' wanted to drive hardcore rap into the popstream ... as guiltless, gentrified gangsta ... the G thang you could buy into' by purchasing the proper brands that corresponded to the lifestyle shown in the videos for 'Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang' and 'Let Me Ride' (2005, pp. 420, 421).

Central to the look of this lifestyle were the many elements that the Crips and Bloods appropriated from Chicano gangs, particularly Chuck Taylors, khakis, Dickies, Pendletons, bandanas, baseball caps with the brim flipped straight up, hand signs, Old English tattoos, black block-letter calligraphic graffiti, and low riders. Los Angeles African American gangsta rappers like Ice Cube, Dr Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Ice-T borrowed Chicanos' cool cholo street style. Finally, as rapper 2Pac famously said, 'It wouldn't be L.A. without Mexicans/black love, brown pride.'

Chicano rap

The first Chicano rapper, Kid Frost (Arturo Molina, Jr), recorded his first song in 1981 on a label that also signed Ice-T, with whom Frost rapped at greater Eastside backyard parties and low rider car shows. Frost paid his dues 'rapping against blacks, battling against black groups' throughout metropolitan Los Angeles, then, with DJ Tony G (Gonzalez), he began sampling 'El Chicano, Santana, early 1960s Tex-Mex', while adding live Latin percussion. Kid Frost recalls that Chicanos started the 'hevy bass', 'big boom systems ... in the Bay Area', Mexicans were not 'really listening to hip hop until ... gangsta rap', and 'some of the hardcore Chicanos' associated it with blacks. To please these veteranos, Frost 'incorporated' oldies into his sound, even though, ironically, Mexican Americans' cherished oldies-but-goodies originally consisted of rhythm and blues played by African Americans. At the same time, Frost adds, 'groups like NWA came out and stole Chicano culture' with their appropriations of 'Pendletons' and low riders (Cross, 1993, pp. 190-191, 192, 193, 195).

Kid Frost's 1990 debut album, Hispanic Causing Panic, featured his breakout single, La Raza, which sampled El Chcano's hit version of African American jazz bandleader Gerald Wilson's ode to a Mexican bullfighter, Viva Tirado, and which utilized patriarchal Chicano nationalism in its lyrical testament to brown pride (Rodriguez, 2003; Warag, 2010). Low Rider magazine initially considered the song's lyrics 'totally negative stereotyping' that glorified and spread 'gang-warfare' (Savage, 1990, p. 38). In contrast, Hispanic magazine defended the rapper's 'gritty storytelling' that clothed 'a message of tolerance, hope, and common sense in the kind of macho, street-wise image his audience can relate to'. Kid Frost insists that he was showing kids 'a better way ... to make something out of their lives' by bringing 'an alternative to joining gangs', that he delivers a 'positive message' through rap, 'the voice and expression of the street' (Holst, 1993, pp. 134, 135).

In 1991, Kid Frost assembled the rap group Latin Alliance with 'rappers of Puerto Rican, Cuban and Central American descent', to show that 'Hispanic rappers' are not simply 'trying to cash in on black music'. The Latin Alliance album includes songs such as Lowrider (On the Boulevard), What Is an American?, and Latinos Unidos (United Latinos) (Santiago, 1992, p. 18). Despite the theme of different Latinos joining in solidarity, however, Frost 'tried to tell Latinos to unite', but they would not listen because the members of each group considered themselves 'superior' (Cross, 1993, pp. 194, 195). On Kid Frost's second album, East Side Story (1992), in the soulful track No More Wars he questions Chicanos killing their own race, while on Another Firme Rola (Bad Cause I'm Brown) he asks: 'Don't you want paz?' On Come Together he calls for community unity and peace, decries 'gang violence', and proposes a gang truce.

In 1991, Kid Frost's manager, Morey Alexander, who co-managed NWA and managed Afro-Cuban American rapper Mellow Man Ace, stated: 'The East Coast still sees Hispanic rap as a fluke.' Yet 'the only exception', noted a New York radio station program director, is Cypress Hill, who 'headlined Harlem's Apollo Theater'. Cypress Hill, 'whose themes appeal to black, Hispanic and working-class white audiences', decided 'shuns the label "Hispanic rap"' (Santiago, 1992, pp. 18, 20, 21). Cypress Hill is typically described as a 'Chicano rap' group, even though Sen Dog (Senen Reyes) is Afro-Cuban, B-Real (Louis Freese) is Cuban/Chicano, and DJ Muggs (Lawrence Muggerud) is Italian American. With Sen Dog and B-Real growing up as break dancers in the Southeast Los Angeles Chicano neighbourhood of Southgate, their songs utilize choico slang (and sexist and homophobic slurs), and they represent their Latino background, especially on Latin Lingo and Tres Equis from their 1991 double platinum debut album.

Their second album (1993) eventually went triple platinum, led by its smash single Insane in the Brain, which the group performed on Saturday Night Live and The Simpsons. B-Real drew upon his experiences as a former gang member and drug dealer for his street tales, which 'address issues pertinent to urban Latinas/os'. Nevertheless, Cypress Hill was accused of selling out for performing on the alternative rock tour Lollapalooza, and for 'marketing their music to white kids'. In response, B-Real stated: 'If [white people] can relate ... it's a part of their lives ... Music is for everybody, no matter what color' (McFarland, 2002, pp. 306-307). Moreover, B-Real recounted, 'Being Latino but without really exploiting that side of it, showed ... how you could have that success without being labeled as just one thing' (Lewis, 2010). As B-Real said, on one of the group's early marijuana advocacy songs, 'This ain't no exploitation'.

I agree that Chicano rap's output illustrates 'hip hop as a language of consciousness', but its cultural politics mixes enlightened message, party music, and gangsta menace (Kelly, 1993, p. 72). For example, in 1990, Lighter Shade of Brown, from Riverside, released their debut album, Brown & Proud, with its chart-topping single On a Sunday Afternoon; in 1992, their second album, Hip Hop Locos, with its single Interrogated Cause I'm Brown; and, in 1994, Layin' in the Cut. In 1992, the Chicano rapper Proper Dos dropped his debut album,
considered a “rocker” and usually left alone’ (2011a). As Jonathan Gomez (2010) observes, the greater Eastside backyard punk gigs stand for ‘use value over market value’, often serve as rent parties, and suffer from ‘pocket check’ police harassment. In 1997, the hardcore band Union 13 emerged from the backyard scene to release their debut album, East Los Presents, with defiant lyrics about society destroying lives and rejecting people. On Country Full of Lies, democracy equals hypocrisy because the US system does not respect human rights. In 1998, the original line-up of Union 13 released a second album with Epitaph, Why Are We Destroying Ourselves?


Victor Viesca argues that the 1990s Eastside musical movement represented a new Chicana/o sensibility...neither assimilationist nor separatist...creatively engaging in and adapting to the diversity of...cultural forms that make up the city’. Significantly, the community-building East LA scene ‘acknowledges and attempts to sustain a vision of gender equity and respect for different sexual orientations’, with critical participation by Chicanas (Viesca, 2004, pp. 727, 729, 730). Since the 1990s resurgence, The Stains and Thee Undertakers began playing again, while Alicia Armendariz Velasquez, Teresa Covarrubias, and Los Illegals had remained active musically. In 2013, Los Illegals performed an acoustic version of John Lennon’s Working Class Hero, and bassist Jesus Velo revealed that Mexican revolutionary anarchist Ricardo Flores Magon inspires the band as a ‘hero’. Velo stated: ‘Our definition of anarchy is...the freedom to do and choose and work and...not be oppressed by the culture of materialism’ (2013).

Southern California’s contemporary rockabilly scene similarly rejects the materialism of mainstream American culture. Chicanas and Chicanos form a passionate majority of the retro working-class scene, infusing traditional rockabilly with Latin rhythms and Spanish lyrics, while coiffed women in vintage dresses dance with gentlemanly ‘greasers’ and ‘rebels’ with
pomaded pompadours (Rebel Beat). As Nicholas Centineo's research shows, they have shaped the antecorporate scene into a uniquely 'Raza' expression via Chicano rock and street style, hence what he terms 'Razabiliy' (2013). Likewise, the Chicana/o fans of Morrissey are legion, and since 1992 Chicano Angeleno singer Jose Maldonado has been leading the cover band Sweet and Tender Hooligans, 'ultimate tribute to Morrissey and The Smiths' (www.sweetandtenderhooligans.com). These white-brown cultural conversations, incubated in the creative cooker of Los Angeles, contrast with and complement the black-brown affinities detailed in this chapter.

For example, in 1994, Eazy-E founded the rap group BrownSide 'to create a Chicano version of... N.W.A.' (www.brownplanet.com). In 1999, in response to Dr Dre producing white rapper Eminem's first album, King Lil G recorded the song Letter to Dr. Dre, in which he wonders if Dre would 'ever sign a Mexican', thereby suggesting a glaring gap in black-brown relations. In addition, unlike black gangsta rappers, Lil G, following a southern Californian Chicano tradition, created several gangsta love songs, such as Dream Girl and Crazy Love. Chicano gangsta rapper Chino Grande followed his first two albums, Hard Times in the Barrio and Gangster by Blood, with recordings as part of the rap group Charlie Row Campo, and by solo albums. Since 2003, another Chicano gangsta rapper, Mr Criminal, has annually recorded albums, such as Young, Brown, and Dangerous (2012), on which he claims that people hate to see Latinos climb the social ladder. On his 2013 song Brown Republican, Mr Criminal advocates legalizing assault rifles, raising the minimum wage, eliminating the three strikes law, opening up the US-Mexico border, and decriminalizing marijuana.

Cypress Hill kept representing on such songs as Illusions, Highlife, Locates, Low Rider, and Tequila Sunrise, with its Spanglish intro, gritis, Mexican guitar, trumpet, and percussion over a hard beat with gangster lyrics. Over the years, B-Real rapped with Psycho Realm from the Pico-Union district, and formed a rap metal band, and Sen Dog a rap rock band, but Cypress Hill has released eight studio albums, including a Spanish-language greatest hits collection, and rap and rock versions of the single Superstar, which warns about the 'price of fame' in show business. With DJ Muggs' singular stoned sound cruising smooth and strong, B-Real and Sen Dog push themselves to write 'thought-provoking' raps about 'reality that's not watered down. Nothing preachy', just 'hip-hop with substance' (Hay, 2009).

Snoop Dogg showed love for the LA èxos in his 2006 song Vato, with a B-Real voice-over to help narrate. B-Real appears in the video, along with shirtless, tattooed Chicano homeboys. As does a low rider-cruising Kid Frost, who swoops up, and thereby aids and abets a fugitive Snoop, maintaining a long tradition of black-brown cross-cultural connections. Los Angeles hip hop began with pioneering contributions from KDY DJ'S Ralph M, a Mexican American, and Tony G and Julio G, Latinos originally from the East Coast, and it continues with Salvadoran sibling Spanish-language rap duo Crooked Stilo.

In addition, Los Angeles is home to indigenous-identified Chicano rappers, such as Tolteka, who raps in English, Spanish, and Nahua, and who is committed to decolonization (Navarro, 2011). Aztlan Underground is a hard-hitting punk/metal band with conscious rap vocals (rapcore). The resultant 'musical medicine', as heard on their anthems Decolonize, My Blood Is Red, and Our Nature, is layered with the percussion, flutes, [conch shells], and rattles of indigenous Mexico (Revolution Per Minute, 2011; Viesca, 2004, p. 726). In 1997, the members of St Sun, from Coachella, wanted to 'break away from the norm' of Chicano gangsta rap by 'bringing in a positivity that comes from a negativity' (Corona, 1997, pp. 101, 115). In 1998, they released a mellow, funky bilingual rap song, Perdoname Madre, and in 2002 an indie label album, Ice In Your Veins, which blends G-Funk production sounds with cholo slang, Aztec elements, and despite their earlier declarations, gangsta lyrics about guns, gang, and drugs, salted with homophobic and sexist slang.

The city's hip hop culture produced Filipino American rappers Bambu, from Watts, and Kiwi, both former gang members, as well as Dumbfoundead, from Koreatown. Citing Robin Kelley's notion of 'polyculturalism' – 'a radical vision of integration' in which 'civil society did not need Eurocentrism or whiteness at its core to function' – Jeff Chang makes the case for a hip hop nationalism that balances 'underground and mainstream, keeping it real and making it big' (2005, pp. 421, 425). Pancho McFarland argues: 'Chicano rappers and other members of the Hip-Hop Nation are building a multiracial community based on love for one another and free expression' (2002, p. 310). Nevertheless, McFarland notes, to understand the worldview in some Chicano rap we must examine the patriarchal US context of dominance, misogyny, violence, and competition (2008, p. 7).

Gangsta rap expresses these values, and a new generation of L.A. rappers such as Kendrick Lamar and Odd Future now elaborate on N.W.A.'s legacy and artistic strategy of pairing shock value with incisive emotional truth' (Brown, 2012). In particular, the controversial, 'absurdist' African American hip hop collective Odd Future makes dark, morbid music, and front man Tyler the Creator raps slander movie murder rape lyrics (Baron, 2010; Al, 2011; Weiss, 2013). At the same time, the group's sole female member, DJ/engineer Syd the Kid, is openly queer, and in 2012 its R&B singer Frank Ocean released his Grammy-winning debut album and revealed online that his first love was a man. In response, Snoop Dogg spoke out in support of gays and lesbians, claiming that, after being 'brainwashed and trained', people are learning how to accept others 'for who they are and not bash them or hurt them because they're different' (Fekadu, 2012). Ocean's detailed, emotional coming-out statement is a bold corrective to the hate speech
that undermines gangsta rap’s analysis of oppression, even as Odd Future mainstreams misogyny and homophobia.

The Angeleno hip hop scene does include a range of gender identities, and it sustained spaces of self-determination from the ashes of the 1992 riots, as seen in the South Central Los Angeles dance styles known as Clowning and Krumping. The documentary film *Rize* (2005) chronicles how a former drug dealer became Tommy the Clown, entertaining at children’s birthday parties and establishing a hip hop dance academy to keep local teens out of gangs and in school. In war-paint makeup, over 50 competitive groups battle, the dancers in the middle of the circle wobble, shake, squat, bounce, pop, and clown-walk heel-to-toe to up tempo dance tracks with raps about going ‘nuts’ or ‘buck wild’, getting something off your chest, venting fury through dance (*Rize*).

Out of Compton’s African American churches came krumping, in which dancers execute ‘intense, aggressive footsteps, chest thumps and wild arm waves’, shaking and contorting their bodies to the rapid-fire rhythms (Ford, 2012). Krumping is ‘extreme hip-hop dancing – frenetic arm flailing and syncopated pelvic thrusts set to a hardcore beat’, comparable ‘to the cathartic release the devout find at church’; ‘krumping is like the punk rock of hip hop’ (Del Barco, 2005). As performed by Miss Prissy (Marquise Gardner), ‘one of kump’s co-founders’, and her dance company. The Underground, the ‘Compton street dance, with its signature chest pops and stomp, can appear almost violent to a first-time audience’ (Plummer, 2013). In response to neighbourhood gangs, shootings, killings, substance abuse, and incarcerated family members, krummers channel anger and negativity, then ‘release that in a positive way’ through ‘the art of dance’. In a modern manifestation of traditional West African ceremonial moves, dancers in the circle lift people on their shoulders and shove rivals, although in Los Angeles women also get in men’s faces. This tolerant, accepting community welcomes, and spotlights, all members, regardless of age, gender, sexuality, or body weight (*Rize*).

Finally, graffiti, one of the OG hip hop expressions, sank deep roots in Los Angeles. For example, in the 1960s, artist John Valadez saw East LA gang graffiti, some with ‘an artistic twist to rival subway pieces in New York. Some of the pachucos and cholos really knew how to write ... in this linear, box style’, like ‘hieroglyphics’. Refining a style that dates back to the 1930s, according to ‘L.A.’s original street artist, Chaz Bojorquez’, the city is ‘about Gothic, Old English, pointy letters, always in black’, with barrio roll call paragraphs, yet ‘influenced by Hollywood’. In the 1960s, Chicano artists ‘began to use freeway bridges, barriers and sound walls as canvases. New York had subways. L.A. had the 101, the 110 and a concrete-lined river.’ Today, ‘one of the most influential Mexican-American street artists’, Mr Cartoon, is ‘based in L.A. and best known for tattooing celebrities’. As Bojorquez says, ‘Street art is just a nice name for graffiti’ (Romero, 2012, p. 20). Indeed, black and brown graffiti writers are embroiled in a culture war battle, as ‘tagger injunctions’ create felons for life by convicting ‘graffiti vandals’ as ‘street terrorists’, and by removing legal options for them to ‘earn a living through self-expression’. In contrast, billboard advertising is considered free speech (Wilson, 2012, pp. 20, 22, 23).

Los Angeles remains very stratified, segregated by class as much as by race, and it still produces stylistic trends. We can study the origins of its musical genres without envisioning the multiracial contours of urban life as a quest for “multiculturalism”, just as we can acknowledge both the “black” and “Chicano” aesthetic as open-ended processes of cultural creation and critique without obscuring or submerging their voices and experiences “in narratives of assimilation and integration” (Alvarez and Widener, 2008, pp. 149, 151). Popular music artists express their ideas, sometimes explicitly political, always creative, and often supporting values and traditions antithetical to crass consumerism or bourgeois elitism. Whether by using the means of the culture industries or the DIY tools of new media, this assertive self-expression can raise awareness or consciousness, inspire critical thinking or community healing. The black and brown residents of Los Angeles, with no official recognition of their crucial role in the city’s hidden heritage, continue to get down, creating original music and dance styles, influenced by tradition and informed by historical memory, as part of an ongoing political struggle in the realm of popular culture.

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Notes

1. Racialization describes the social-historical process by which racial categories are created, are inhabited, and, when people of colour, along with antimask whites, challenge the racial assumptions and theories behind everyday ‘common sense’ ideology, are transformed or destroyed. Race is a powerful illusion, one which signifies supposedly innate differences through cultural representations and symbolic stereotypes, and which structures institutional inequality by reorganizing and redistributing resources.

2. ‘Yo no soy marinerio, soy capitán’ translates as ‘I am not a sailor, I am a captain.’ ‘Yo no soy capitalista, soy anarquista’ translates as ‘I am not a capitalist, I am an anarchist.’

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Ritz (2005) [DVD] Directed by David LaChapelle (Lions Gate).


‘The Illegals’ (1980, November 12) Statement Signed by the Bandmembers, Sean Carrillo Collection, Series II, Box 1, Folder 4, CEMA.


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