

“¿Soy Punkera, Y Que?”

Sexuality, Translocality, and Punk in Los Angeles and Beyond

My theory had precedence. Stay with me on this. The Clash, for instance, jazzed up their music with this reggae influence—a direct reflection of their exposure to the Caribbean diaspora and its musical expression there in London. Nothing new—the usual white man appropriation of an exotic other story—anyway, the Sex Pistols, my theory went, were going to do the same with Norteño, the ole Tex Mex. I was going on the assumption that the Pistols probably heard the conjunto on KCOR or Radio Jalapeño on the bus ride down from Austin. But the point is, it worked. Talk about your revisionist histories! Greil Marcus is gonna flip!

—Molly Vasquez, from Jim Mendiola's 1996 film, *Pretty Vacant*

When Alice, lead singer for The Bags rock group, takes the stage in torn fishnet hose and micro-mini leopard-skin tunic, she explodes into convulsive, unintelligible vocals. The effect is a raw sexuality not for the fainthearted.

—*Los Angeles Times*, 1978

The xeroxed flyer advertising *Pretty Vacant*, Jim Mendiola's 1996 independent short film, depicts the much loved figure of the Mexican *La Virgen de Guadalupe* strumming, of all things, an upside-down electric guitar à la Jimi Hendrix.¹ As a U.S.-born Chicana who, in the 1980s, was rescued from the suburbs of Los Angeles by the Ramones, X, and Dead Kennedys, I must admit that I was captivated by this image and intrigued by the film's title, an obvious reference to the British Sex Pistols. A guitar juts out from *La Guadalupe* at a right angle, transforming the familiar oval shape of *La Virgen*'s image into the shape of cross, or an intersection

Promotional flyer for Jim Mendiola's *Pretty Vacant*. (Reprinted with permission.)



of sorts. What was this flyer suggesting by juxtaposing these deeply symbolic, yet seemingly unrelated, cultural icons? How did the title relate? And why did this deliciously irreverent image prompt me to think of the critically acclaimed graphic novella series *Love and Rockets* by Los Bros. Hernandez?² And the title? *Pretty Vacant* is one of the “hit” songs of the infamous 1970s British punk band, the Sex Pistols. Again, what is this flyer suggesting? With all due respect, what and who lie at the intersection of *Guadalupe* and punk?

It turns out that the protagonist of *Pretty Vacant*, Molly Vasquez, like the fierce Latina characters of the Hernandez brothers' *Love and Rockets* graphic novella series and, most important, real-life Angelino Chicana punk musicians, lives at that particular intersection.³ The film depicts a week in the culturally hybrid “Do-It-Yourself” world of “La Molly” Vasquez, the off-beat, twenty-something, English-speaking Chicana feminist, *artista*, bisexual, *punkera* subject who lives in a working-class area

of San Antonio, Texas. Her love of the Sex Pistols leads her to the discovery of a well-kept secret that allows her, as a producer of 'zines and a beginning filmmaker, to *rewrite* rock 'n' roll history by inserting herself and Tejano culture into its narrative. All this while she prepares for a gig in her all-girl band, Aztlán-a go-go.

Pretty Vacant serves as a point of departure for my discussion of the emergence, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, of a punk “Do-It-Yourself” Chicana grass-roots feminist cultural production. This phenomenon circulated at the same time as other burgeoning Chicana activist and scholarly endeavors, as well as the East Los Angeles/Hollywood punk scenes, all of which still have not been examined in-depth. The film succeeds at what scholars of U.S. popular music have attempted—it shifts the paradigm that frames the reigning narrative of popular music produced in the United States.⁴ Disrupting the status quo narrative of popular music production (in this specific case, U.S. punk) by granting a young Latina (more specifically, a Tejana) the authority to chronicle the history of punk, the film compels scholars to acknowledge the complexity of



A still shot from *Pretty Vacant* (1996), directed by Jimmy Mendiola, of “La Molly” Vasquez (played by Mariana Vasquez). (Reprinted by permission.)

popular music and popular music studies in the United States. Ultimately, the film viscerally unsettles long-held assumptions that unconsciously erase the influence of U.S. Latinos from popular music's sonic equation (and asks what is at stake in reproducing that erasure). The film opens a discursive space for my own analysis of the production of punk music by Chicanas in East Los Angeles and Hollywood during the 1970s and 1980s, and of the music's relation to punk communities beyond the United States. In examining the cultural production of Chicana punks, the chapter also illustrates how feminism and feminist thought are articulated in different keys. Feminist thought was and is alive and well in Chicana punk aesthetics.

Las Punkeras

What is fascinating about the film *Pretty Vacant* is the overlapping of the fictional character's art practices with the underanalyzed artistic production of Chicana musicians and visual artists who shaped the Los Angeles punk sensibility. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Chicanas in local bands like The Brat (led by Teresa Covarrubias) and The Bags (fronted by Alicia Armendariz Velasquez) reconstructed the sound and subjects of British punk. These Chicana *punkeras* have a great deal to say about the artistic conditions of production, gender relations, and the punk aesthetic that emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s.⁵

Chicana/o punk, like punk everywhere, embodied a sonic response to the "excesses of seventies rock."⁶ The rock chroniclers David Reyes and Tom Waldman note that "Indulgent guitar solos, pretentious lyrics, and pompous lead singers went against everything that Chicano rock 'n' roll represented from Ritchie Valens forward."⁷ The appeal of punk to rebellious Chicana and Chicano youth makes sense for several reasons. First, the D.I.Y. (Do-It-Yourself) sensibility at the core of punk musical subcultures found resonance with the practice of *rasquache*, a Chicana/o cultural practice of "making do" with limited resources;⁸ in fact, Chicana/o youth had historically been at the forefront of formulating stylized social statements via the fashion and youth subculture, beginning with the Pachucos and continuing with Chicana Mods in the 1960s. Second, punk's critique of the status quo, of poverty, of sexuality, of class inequality, of war, spoke directly to working-class East Los Angeles youth.⁹

In fact, the philosopher Bernard Gendron suggests that punk was introduced into the lexicon of rock discourse by Dave Marsh in 1971 after reviewing a Question Mark and the Mysterians show for *Creem* magazine: Marsh called their performance "a landmark exposition of punk rock."¹⁰

Question Mark and the Mysterians, a Mexican American musical group whose members were born in Texas, grew up just outside Detroit. In 1966, the band's national hit "96 Tears" propelled Rudy Martinez, Robert Balderrama, Frank Rodriguez, Jr., Eddie Serranto, and Frank Lugo (ages 15–21) into the rock 'n' roll limelight. Robert Martinez and Larry Borjas, also in the band, were drafted into the Vietnam War before they could enjoy their success.

In his exposition of punk, the rock critic Lester Bangs called "96 Tears" "one of the greatest rock and roll songs of all time."¹¹ Gendron explains that the rock critic Greg Shaw considered Question Mark and the Mysterians, along with Count Five, the Seeds, and the Troggs, to be one of the original punk bands.¹²

What rock critics have rarely written about is the sonic connection between the famous Farfisa organ hook of "96 Tears" and Tejano conjunto bands. The critic Ed Morales explains that in the 1960s, Texas conjunto bands augmented the accordion "with the organ . . . Mexican American conjuntos used Farfisa organs that had a tinny, cheesy, sound."¹³ This sound, perfected by Question Mark and the Mysterians' Frank Rodriguez (also an accordion player) "became identified with garage rock and today has been elevated to exalted status by rockers."¹⁴

In the late 1970s, the media's obsession with British punk fueled a revision of punk's origins, and rock critics in the late 1970s recategorized Question Mark and the Mysterians as a "garage band." Gendron explains that "these former 'punks' [were] no longer punk, they were now merely influences on punk."¹⁵ Recently, Dave Marsh asked, "Could '96 Tears' be the first postmodern rock record?" Perhaps, Marsh suggests, if they had possessed art school credentials, but since the song was recorded by children of Mexican American migrant workers, "all that Rudy Martinez gets credit for is creating a 'garage band' classic."¹⁶

It would not be surprising if Chicana and Chicano youth did not know about this earlier punk history. Yet, for all its familiar feel, punk's international sensibility also appealed to Chicanas/os, despite, or perhaps because of, the city's history of physically and economically segregating Chicanos from the wealthy West Side, thought to be by Los Angeles's

dominant culture the place of important, "worldly" cultural invention.¹⁷ It goes without saying that Chicana/o punk did not exist in isolation. The Chicano music chroniclers Reyes and Waldman observe that:

Chicano punk groups were much more deeply embedded in the Hollywood rock scene than were the 1960s bands from East Los Angeles. On any given weekend in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Los Illegals, the Brat, and the Plugs would be playing somewhere in Hollywood. Before they crossed the LA River, however, they played at the Vex, an East LA club devoted to presenting punk rock bands.¹⁸

Vex emerged as a space produced by Chicano youth in East Los Angeles in order "to eliminate the barriers that inhibited Chicanos from playing in other parts of L.A., and that kept outsiders from coming to the neighborhood." Willie Herron, of Los Illegals, remembers, "We wanted to bring people from the West Side to see groups from the East Side."¹⁹ At a historical moment when the confluence of cultures began to accelerate in the wake of global demographic and economic shifts, these Chicana/o youth transformed punk into a social site where popular music, national identity, sexuality, and gender dynamics were transformed. Bands like East L.A.'s The Undertakers used a form of youth subculture that circulated globally to bring together local, if segregated, youth.

She Says

Punk allowed people to just get up there, and even if you were not feeling confident—which was not a problem I ever had—but 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. —Alicia Armendariz Velasquez, interview with author

Working-class Chicanas such as Alicia Armendariz Velasquez, Teresa Covarrubias, and Angela Vogel shaped independent, noncommercial music communities and subcultures in Los Angeles and responded to the shrinking of the public sphere and the increased privatization of daily life in contemporary U.S. culture through their musical practices. Although these women helped shape the sounds and concerns of the local independent music community, with a few notable exceptions almost no schol-

arly documentation of their participation exists. Perhaps these women do not register in nonacademic accounts because of the way they disrupt fixed, one-dimensional notions of identity.²⁰ In other words, Chicanas are not punk; women are not true musicians. Hence, fixed notions of Chicana identity framed by the dominant culture do not allow for recognition of these women in discussions of subcultural musical practices or in discussions focused on countering the shrinking of the public sphere.²¹

These women appropriated, reshaped, and critiqued imagery from unexpected sources, such as the British youth musical subculture, to invent local cultural practices that allowed them to express their realities in a public context. Chicanas as producers transformed punk and New Wave aesthetics into sites of possibility for transnational conversations concerning violence against women and the effects of the growing corporatization of public space. Given that most youth musical practices and communities are understood as male-dominated arenas, and rarely as Latino social spaces, these subcultures may seem an unlikely space for the development of a transnational conversation. Yet, it was a site of possibility for the young Chicanas who engaged these subcultures.

As transformative as this music was, however, it was certainly not without some of its own contradictions. The scholar José E. Muñoz illustrates this point in his meditation on some of the lyrics of X, one of the most critically acclaimed punk bands to come out of L.A. in the 1980s. With no small amount of unease, Muñoz relates that the title track of X's album *Los Angeles*, "narrates the story of a white female protagonist who had to leave Los Angeles because she had started to hate 'every nigger, and Jew, every Mexican who gave her a lot of shit, every homosexual, and the idle rich.'"²² Although, as a teenager, Muñoz considered X his favorite band, the lyrics like those cited leave him with "a disturbed feeling" today. I, too, remember cringing at those lyrics as a teenager, as I do now, wondering why my favorite band had to write such horrendous words, especially since, at the time, I thought, mistakenly, that the lead singer, Exene, was Mexican American. As a high school student, however, I found it less difficult to digest those lyrics as I existed year after year in a mostly white, conservative, working- to middle-class public school, in which I experienced no small amount of anti-Mexican hostility, despite that fact that I had been born in California. X was my favorite band, and I truly believed that the lead singer of the band was Mexican American because her name was Exene Cervenka (which to my English-dominant ears sounded Spanish) and because she frequently made poetic allusions

to Catholic iconography. In addition, to my young eyes, she looked like the Chicanas at the dance clubs in Hollywood, Whittier, and Long Beach that my friends and I frequented. Like them, Exene had dark hair and wore thrift-store chic and dramatic makeup. At the time I made sense of the song "Los Angeles" by imagining it was about one of my bigoted classmates. Nonetheless, this interpretation did not take away the sting I felt every time I heard the lyrics. Yet, I was able to hear beyond the sting and maintain my identification with punk primarily because, for me, as it did for Muñoz, the music functioned as "the avant-garde that I knew; it was the only cultural critique of normative aesthetics available to me."²³

Years later, I was to find that my misrecognition of Exene as Chicana was not that off base. She had hand-printed the lyrics for the liner notes for The Brat's extended-play record, or EP, *Attitudes*. X had performed at Self-Help Graphics in East L.A.²⁴ Photos had been published of Exene hanging outside the Vex, in East Los Angeles.²⁵ The band members were friends with Los Lobos, the famed East L.A. group. One could argue that Exene's fashion style had been inspired by the young women in East L.A., and vice versa. I also discovered that Exene was not Mexican American. Exene had shortened her last name from Cervenkova, a much more Slavic-sounding name. Exene has never denied her connection to East L.A., but it has yet to be fully explored. The following section describes the practices of the young Chicanas who, in part, inspired Exene.

Staging the Bands

The Los Angeles bands discussed here produced their music on independent labels that circulated through grass-roots and alternative distribution circuits. These bands had little access to major distribution networks for at least two reasons: Most major record labels at the time could not imagine the market appeal of Chicano alternative music (much less Latino rock inflected by a grass-roots feminist ideology and punk aesthetic) and the women's stated primary desire was *not* to make it within the mainstream music industry at any cost but to create a place for public self-expression.²⁶

This context, in addition to the larger social prejudices against "women in rock," helps to explain why young Chicanas' innovative use of alternative music to circulate critiques of social inequality and to express their rage against the domestic machine has often gone unrecog-



East L.A.'s favorite, The Brat. This image appeared on the cover of *Lowrider Magazine* in 1982. From left to right: Rudy Medina, Teresa Covarrubias, Lou Soto, Sid Medina. Photograph by Sean Carrillo. (Reprinted with permission).

nized: their recordings and visual images are extremely difficult to locate. This lack of distribution and exposure also occurred with other artists of the period, such as the spoken-word artist Marisela Norte, who also articulated a grass-roots critique of social inequality.²⁷ The cultural production of these young Chicanas paralleled the efforts of Chicana feminist theorists, even though their efforts rarely, if ever, intersected. As

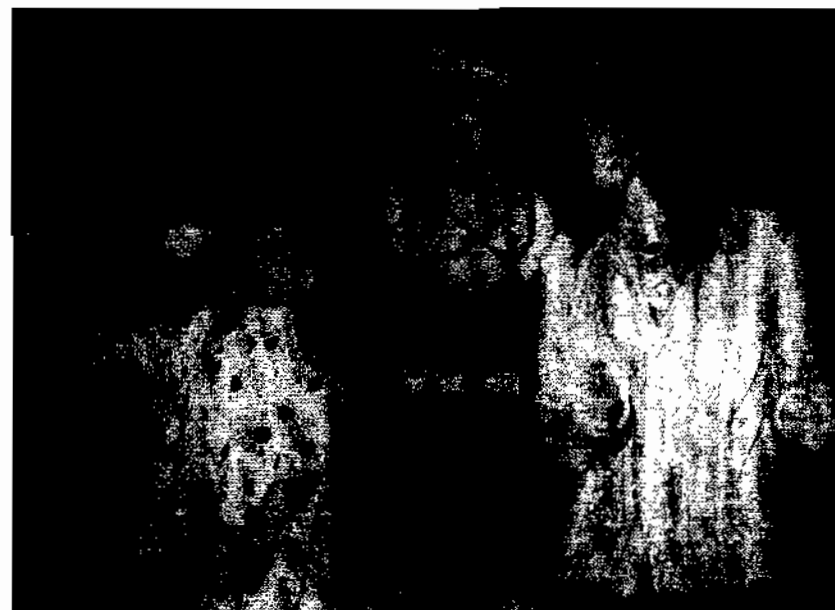
scholars of Chicana feminism wrote about multiply inflected subjectivity, the intersection of race, class, and gender, and the production of new Chicana subjects, these young women expressed these experiences in their music.²⁸

The working-class Chicanas who helped create the local sound of the Los Angeles underground punk subculture were attracted to it for various reasons, but all of them experienced or witnessed violence against Chicanas at an early age, and most had been violently sexualized. In a series of interviews I conducted with Alicia Armendariz Velasquez and Teresa Covarrubias, both asserted that the visual and sonic language of the punk subculture allowed them to express their private rage about restrictions placed on and the violence done to their own bodies and to their mothers' bodies. In addition, their narratives document the effects of the shrinking of the public sphere because of the economic privatization that plagued the 1980s and that continues to this day. In other words, theirs is a story of transnationalism told from the bottom up, in the years leading up to accords like NAFTA, from the point of view of working-class women. Though each woman's experience was different, each was attracted to the punk subculture because it was a place where she could re-imagine the world she lived in; it was a place where she could see herself as an empowered subject.

Despite the negative press the punk scene received (it was seen as extremely violent and racist), all of these women experienced the punk scene as a liberating space where the lines between gender and race were easily, if temporarily, blurred. It was a place where class differences and racial divisions were held temporarily in suspension. In fact, all the interviewees attested to the fact that, in Los Angeles, the scene was multicultural and reflected the mix of the Los Angeles population. In an era when representation of Latinas on English-language television and radio was even more rare than it is today, the Do-It-Yourself attitude and aesthetic held tremendous appeal for these artists.

In the Bag

Alicia Armendariz Velasquez (who used the stage name Alice Bag, of The Bags) is the daughter of Mexican immigrants. Growing up in East Los Angeles, she came of age in the late 1970s and "began singing professionally at the age of eight."²⁹ She, like Teresa Covarrubias, described her



In this rare photo we see, from left to right, Connie Clarksville (hairstylist to punks and scenesters), Alicia Armendariz Velasquez (a.k.a. Alice Bags), and Exene Cervenka (who was then part of X) performing in a benefit concert at The Masque, Los Angeles, February 25, 1978. This show was produced by *Slash Magazine*. Photograph by Jenny Lens. (Reprinted with permission.)

engagement with punk as a way out of an environment that she found too judgmental in terms of ethnicity and sexuality. She found no recourse in the mythic traditional Mexican family to discuss the domestic violence she witnessed as a child. Her embrace of punk culture occurred in "a period when Chicanas were questioning their traditional roles, increasing their participation within the political arena, and inscribing a budding Chicana feminist discourse and practice."³⁰ Although Armendariz Velasquez's path diverged from that of most Chicanas of the day, so profound was her influence on the L.A. punk scene that she was a featured artist in the recent photo exhibition and catalog *Forming: The Early Days of L.A. Punk*. Because The Bags "provided a blueprint for the hardcore sound popularized by Black Flag and other punk bands," the punk music chronicler David Jones considers Armendariz Velasquez the inventor of the West Coast hard-core punk sound.³¹

In 1978, Armendariz Velasquez was featured in a *Los Angeles Times* article, "Female Rockers—A New Breed."³² Armendariz Velasquez, then known as "Alice Bag," along with Diane Chai, of the Alleycats, and Exene, of X, were considered the most groundbreaking women on the punk scene because their performances demolished narrow models of "women in rock": "the wronged blues belter à la Janis Joplin or the coy sex kitten typified by Linda Ronstadt. In tune with new wave's spirit of change, women punkers are rejecting the confining stereotypes and demanding more."³³ Although no explicit mention of Alice's ethnicity was made, McKenna describes her with code words reserved for ethnic others: "Alice, an exotic beauty whose frenzied vocal seizures generate such chaos that the Bags has earned a reputation for closing clubs."³⁴ In retrospect, we note that McKenna, perhaps unknowingly, cites two Chicanas, Ronstadt and Armendariz Velasquez, as wildly divergent models of "women in rock."

Often accused of being too aggressive on stage, Armendariz Velasquez performed in pink minidresses and severe makeup. In a clip from Penelope Spheeris's 1981 documentary film, *The Decline of Western Civilization*, we witness Armendariz Velasquez exploding onto the stage and wrestling the boys who jump onstage to join her during the show. The pink of Armendariz Velasquez's dress clashed with her performance and produced a complex statement about women's realities. Armendariz Velasquez did not reject femininity per se but rejected the equation of femininity with victimization and passivity. In fact, McKenna states, "women punkers like Alice Bag and Xene project an oddly incongruous sexuality. While not exactly neuter, their shock-level redefinition of the female role will take a while to be assimilated culturally."³⁵ Yet, Armendariz Velasquez's assertion that "female performers have always tended to be more reserved but all that is changing" foresaw and provided models for performers like Courtney Love, often noted, if not entirely correctly, for what has been called her unprecedented feminine rock aesthetic.³⁶

Armendariz Velasquez also described the appeal of punk to young women in practical terms. She explains that while she detested the violence that surrounded her at home and public school, she could not help but internalize it. As lead singer of The Bags, she found an outlet: "all the violence that I'd stuffed down inside of me for years came screaming out . . . all the anger I felt towards people who had treated me like an idiot as a young girl because I was the daughter of Mexican parents and spoke broken English, all the times I'd been picked on by peers because I was over-



Alicia Armendariz Velasquez, in concert as Mothra Stewart as part of the band Stay at Home Bomb (Hollywood, 2003). Photograph by Jaime Cardenas Jr. (Reprinted with permission.)

weight and wore glasses, all the impotent rage that I had towards my father for beating my mother just exploded."³⁷ One of the best preserved and most accessible documents of Armendariz Velasquez's fearless performance as Alice Bag is The Bags's song "We Don't Need the English," on the 1979 *Yes, L.A.* recording.³⁸ With characteristic sardonic humor, Alice and the band loudly refute the notion that the only authentic punk scene was found in Great Britain. "We don't need the English, telling us what we should be / We don't need the English, with their boring songs of anarchy, telling us what to wear." The song opens by rejecting "the English, with their boring songs of anarchy," a direct reference to "Anarchy in the U.K.," by the infamous punk band the Sex Pistols. The song concludes by metaphorically barring the English from the "Canterbury," an infamous run-down apartment complex in Hollywood that served as a breeding ground for Hollywood punks.³⁹ Though Armendariz Velasquez did not write the song, the lyrics hold a different valence today when we consider that Armendariz Velasquez was bilingual in a city that often denigrated

Spanish-speaking ethnic minorities and that she has taught bilingual education for the Los Angeles Unified Public School District.

Although Armendariz Velasquez emerged as a performer in the 1970s Hollywood punk scene (unlike Covarrubias, who grew out of the East Los Angeles punk scene), she came to Chicana consciousness in the early 1990s. After performing as a Lovely El Vette for El Vez and the Memphis Mariachis, forming Cholita with Vaginal Davis, and performing as well as other L.A.-based bands, she fashioned a folk group, Las Tres, with Teresa Covarrubias and Angela Vogel, a former member of the East Los Angeles band the Odd Squad.⁴⁰ When Vogel left the band, the two remaining members formed the duo Goddess 13. In 2002, she formed Stay at Home Bomb with another East L.A. feminist rocker, Lysa Flores.⁴¹

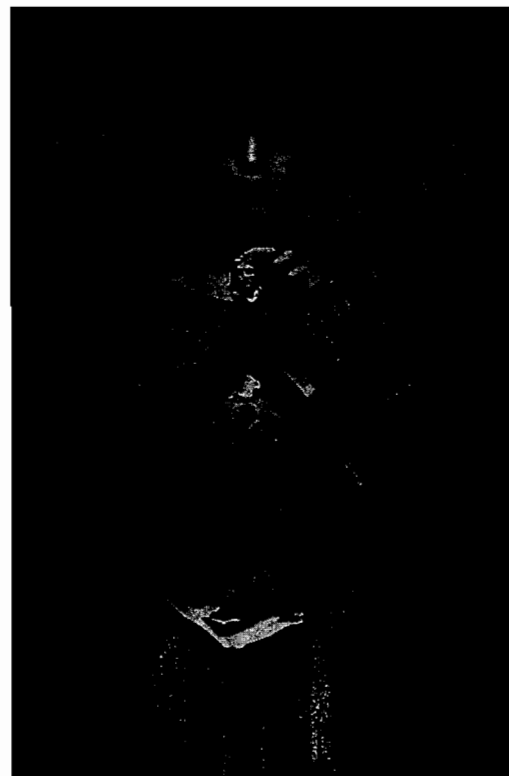
East Los Angeles's The Brat

What fascinated Teresa Covarrubias, who was born to a working-class Mexican American family, about punk musical subculture was its Do-It-Yourself attitude, what she calls the "non-pretentiousness of it."⁴²

Covarrubias discovered punk in the mid-1970s, when her older sister went on a backpack trip through Europe and began sending her punk fanzines from Germany and England. She recalls,

What really attracted me to punk, was the notion that "Gee, I could do that." 'Zines had all these paste-up things and all these crazy little articles, and these girl bands and guy bands, and it just seemed like so open. It didn't seem like . . . you had to play really well. It seemed like a "from your gut" type thing, and I just fell right into it. You know, it was really raw, and it was in your face, and I really liked that, it kind of got me going.⁴³

Inspired by this low-tech sensibility, one that she says "emerged" from the gut and seemed open to young men and women, she decided to form a New Wave band with Rudy Medina, called The Brat. The Brat is synonymous with East L.A. punk. In contrast to Armendariz Velasquez's family, which was fully supportive of her musical lifestyle, Covarrubias's family discouraged her. Although she found a place in the band to critique gender norms with song titles like "Misogyny," she found that sexism did exist in the scene, especially among her own bandmates. At times they



Teresa Covarrubias, 1981. Photo appeared on the cover of *Pro Fun* in an issue dedicated to "Journeys to Aztlán: Arts in East L.A." in June 1981. Photograph by Sean Carrillo. (Reprinted with permission.)

dismissed her creative opinions because she did not play an instrument. During those times, she explains,

Because I couldn't get what I wanted, I started acting out in really self-destructive ways . . . because I just felt like I had no say . . . even now, women don't have a lot of faith in themselves, especially if you are going outside of the norm, when you're treading new ground. Everybody's always telling you what you can't do . . . people look at you and you're brown and you're a woman, and they think, "she can't do that." It's like they immediately assume less.⁴⁴

Fortunately, visual documentation exists of Covarrubias's performances of her song "Misogyny." In 1992, the public television program *Life and Times* dedicated an entire segment, "Chicanas in Tune," to Covarrubias and Armendariz Velasquez.⁴⁵ "Misogyny" was originally written while

Covarrubias was in *The Brat*. The "Chicanas in Tune" clip captures Covarrubias's 1980 punk/New Wave mode and documents her performance as she swings to the beat in a shimmering early-1960s-style dress. Her voice is forced to compete with the guitar, but she holds the attention of her enthusiastic audience. The lyrics critique the position of women within 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 her. . .

The narrator breaks down the elements of misogyny by exposing their practice in everyday life in the following way: "you don't love her, you abuse her, you confuse her, you just use her." She critiques the strictures of matrimony that reduce women to property, to be possessed much like a wedding ring. And the narrator exhorts the listener to understand that a woman's strength lies in her mind and will and that it is a waste to value women *only* for their sexuality. Moreover, the power of the narrator's critique lies in her acknowledgment of the blatancy and frequency of women's abuse. Violence against women is so prevalent that its practices can be tracked throughout history and across geography, though its effects often go unacknowledged.

Though *The Brat* released a successful EP (extended-play recording), *Attitudes*, in 1980, they eventually broke up and morphed into Act of Faith, which released a self-titled compact disk, in 1991, and then broke up again. Covarrubias has continued to write and perform, in addition to continuing her duties as an elementary school teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Mex Goddesses

Armendariz Velasquez was part of a group of young singers who in the 1970s "blanch[ed]" at being described as women's libbers—a tame, mid-

dle-aged scene by their standards [but] . . . could accurately be described as nihilistic feminists."⁴⁶ Meanwhile, at Hollywood punk shows in the 1980s, Covarrubias encountered a "punk elite" that was "really particular about what you looked like. If you didn't look right, they could be rude. There were a couple of times that they would tell me, 'you don't belong here.'"⁴⁷ In the early 1990s, however, with Angela Vogel, first as two-thirds of Las Tres and later as Goddess 13, she forged a sound that disrupted the exclusivity of white feminism and anti-Mexican punk. This sound, Armendariz Velasquez declares, "speaks to women of color about their experiences as women."⁴⁸ "Happy Accident," by Armendariz Velasquez, typifies the ways the group highlighted violence against women in their performance. The song's narrative centers on a battered woman's response to her partner's violent abuse:

Please believe me / I didn't mean it / All I saw was / the look in his eye / and I feared for my life / once again.

I didn't know / it was coming / all I know / is he done it before / sent me crashing to the floor / but no more.

Oh and / I can't say that / Oh no, no / I regret it / 'cause after all I had tried to leave every other way / And if I had the chance / to do it all again / I don't think it / would have a different end / I'm quite happy with this accident.

I didn't know / it was loaded / Yes, I knew where he kept all his guns / and I just grabbed the one / that was closest / So, if you ask / why I'm smiling / You may think / that a prison cell's tough / but I'm much better off / than before.

Oh and / I can't say that / Oh no, no / I regret it / 'cause after all it be him or me / you'd be talking to.

Though the narrative is bleak, the mid-tempo beat and clave accent create a "Chicana trova sound."⁴⁹ The contrast between the rhythmic sound of the music and the lyrics creates a punk-like disruption. The limited options the woman possesses in response to the domestic violence that has "sent [her] crashing to the floor" end up freeing her from one situation but contain her in another. She finds that a "prison cell's tough / but I'm

much better off than before." This tragic all-too-real scenario speaks to the alarming rate of incarceration among women of color and to the quadruple bind of race, color, caste, and gender.⁵⁰

Before Las Tres was reconstituted as Goddess 13 after Vogel left, the trio recorded a live performance at the Los Angeles Theater Center in 1993 and had recorded enough material to shop a compact disk to labels. However, the recording never saw the light of day because the two remaining women could not afford to buy the master tapes from the recording engineer. The band had been in hiatus since the mid-1990s but reunited for El Vez's 2002 Quinceañera Show and for the Eastside Review, a reunion of East Los Angeles boogie and rock 'n' roll bands from the 1940s on at Los Angeles Japanese American Cultural Center, in October 2002.

Vexed

Because "the Vex became a center for artistic activity of all kinds," punk musicians began to interact with visual and performance artists.⁵¹ Teresa Covarrubias remembers that The Brat "did a show there with local artists. . . . It was through the Vex that I realized there were a lot of artists and poets in East L.A."⁵² This must have been exciting for Covarrubias, considering that she was "an aspiring poet before she formed The Brat."⁵³ Equally important for young Chicanas gathering at Vex, whatever their artistic medium, themes of sexuality, antiwar protests, and antiracism ran throughout the narratives. In fact, Reyes and Waldman claim that bands like The Brat "produced enough original, exciting material to generate interest in the band throughout the LA punk underground. It was not long before punk fans from the West Side [of Los Angeles], maybe some of those who sneered at Teresa when she traveled to their part of town, came to see the Brat perform at the Vex."⁵⁴

It can be argued that Chicana/o youth, marginalized by the West Side rock scene, enticed West Side youth, who otherwise refused to see Chicano culture as cosmopolitan or as worthy of their interest, and succeeded in creating integrated places in the most unexpected ways. As Sean Carrillo claims, "the punk scene had done the impossible. It accomplished what few cultural movements before had been able to do: it attracted all people from all over town to see Latino bands, and it brought musicians from all over the city to . . . deep in the heart of East L.A."⁵⁵

Covarrubias and Armendariz Velasquez found punk to be an alternative oppositional movement to the Chicano movement, from which they felt excluded because of their position on gender issues, but they also felt alienated from white, middle-aged feminism. For these Chicanas from East L.A., punk subculture was not the end of their identity formation, but it was a path to a new way of being in the world and a way to expose the world to their reality.

Pistols Go Chicano, Hendrix Goes Tex-Mex: Plotting New Connections

Understanding U.S. punk within a U.S. Latino context produces exciting new questions, problematics, and contradictions around analyses of popular music. Equally important, including discussions of punk culture challenges the dominant paradigm that frames Chicano studies. So far I have examined Chicana shapings in "local" punk scenes of Hollywood and East Los Angeles. Instead of trying to define "the local" scenes, as the music scholar Keith Negus has advised, this chapter has explored "how the local is given meaning in a specific circumstance." My analysis has also included discussion of gender as a circumstance that gives meaning to the local.⁵⁶

Returning to a discussion of Mendiola's *Pretty Vacant*, we can now explore punk sensibility in a different local context—that of San Antonio, Texas. For Negas, the local is "the relationship between music and place" and, I suggest, also the relationship between gender and generation.⁵⁷

Mendiola, as a writer and filmmaker obsessed with the place of Texas in the Chicano imaginary, unexpectedly utilizes the sounds of British punk to narrate a day in the life of a young Tejana drummer and aspiring filmmaker. The film turns on three narrative strands that finally intersect at the climax of the film. The first strand involves Molly's avoidance of her father and his attachment to a nostalgia for Mexico that does not incorporate her (so refreshingly different from Moctesuma Esparza and Gregory Nava's representation of the pop star Selena as a devoted daughter). This nostalgia is illustrated when Molly's dad buys her an airplane ticket for the annual family reunion in Mexico that she does not want to attend.

The second strand invokes Molly's discovery of a well-kept secret that will allow her, as a producer of 'zines and a beginning filmmaker,

to re-write rock 'n' roll history by inserting herself, and Tejano culture, into it. The third strand involves Molly's preparation for a performance of her all-girl band, Aztlán-a go-go, in which she is the drummer. Molly's father eventually catches up to her, and she ends up going to Mexico. But what she finds is not her father's version of *México viejo* but a dynamic, exciting youth culture composed of rockeros/as (young people who listen to and make rock en español) who are also concerned with social change.

Broadcast in Los Angeles on public television, in May 1998, the film successfully uses humor to deal with usually painful issues, including the problems that face daughters fighting patriarchal constraints; the frustration of having one's history erased; and the refusal to recognize the artistic and intellectual talents of racialized young women who are engaged in the struggle to create the conditions for the emergence of a world free from gendered, racialized, and economic oppression.

The film also provokes questions it does not necessarily address: What can Molly as the daughter of a Mexican maid and a working-class Tejano whose ideas are informed by the Chicano movement in its Texas manifestation and who lives at the geographic meeting place of Mexico and the United States and at the cultural intersection of Steve Jordan (known as San Antonio's "Chicano Jimi Hendrix of the accordion") and the Sex Pistols—tell us about this particular cultural moment, about new formations of politics of representation? And how does she speak to unequal economic conditions? What can Molly's character, who sees herself in both a local and an international milieu and as a gendered, racialized, and classed subject, tell us about transnational popular music and its potential for a feminist cultural politics? Gloria Anzaldúa, Norma Alarcón, and Sonia Saldívar-Hull describe a border feminist politics in which feminism "exists in a borderland not limited to geographical space" and "resides in a space not acknowledged by hegemonic culture." Border feminism illuminates the "intersections of the multiple systems of exploitation: capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy."⁵⁸

The Molly character offers us some important insights into border feminism. From Molly, we learn that disempowered youth still make their presence felt in the realm of alternative, though not always oppositional, culture. We also see that rock returns to the United States from Mexico as rock en español in the hands of Chicana/o and Mexican youth who themselves are transformed by the music. Additionally, the film makes it clear that Chicana feminism cannot be contained by nationalism and national boundaries and that all forms of resistance to the values of the

dominant culture have yet to be incorporated. Resistance still exists, not in mass movements but in local sites. In the realm of popular culture, *Pretty Vacant* illustrates that 'zines, popular music, and independent film enable conversations to occur across distant geographical locations between young people whose interests are not represented by corporate media. And, finally, the character of Molly reminds us that Chicana feminists' thinking has enabled the production of this film and helps us to locate sites of resistance to gendered norms and to the desires of the dominant culture in the most unexpected places.

Pretty Vacant takes place on the west side of San Antonio during the early 1990s. It is a setting far removed from both the time and place of the Sex Pistols' first fame in the 1970s. However, if one considers the influence of Question Mark and the Mysterians as described earlier, then perhaps punk's genealogy found its way home upon its arrival in Texas. Yet, it is Molly's investment in rewriting 1980s pop culture that drives her to revise and complicate circuits of musical diaspora (Molly literally recreates this Gilroy-style mapping in relation to Tex-Mex and its transatlantic meeting with the Sex Pistols in the film). This musical diaspora has been mapped out by the British scholar Paul Gilroy in his book *The Black Atlantic* and in Dick Hebdige's volume *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. By documenting the "Tejanoization" of the Sex Pistols' music, Molly puts theory into practice. Always subverting stereotypical expectations of what constitutes the interest of Chicanas, the most recent issue of Molly's 'zine is dedicated to punk music. In this publication, she sets out to prove a secret that will forever transform rock 'n' roll history and make "Greil Marcus flip": her favorite British punk band, the Sex Pistols, had been Chicano-fied by their visit to San Antonio. Molly believes that the Sex Pistols had heard Steve Jordan's funky conjunto, "El Kranke," and that they were going to do a cover of the song for their performance.⁵⁹ If so, they might have unknowingly reproduced the connection between conjunto and 1960s punk forged by the driving force of the Farfisa organ in "96 Tears."

Molly's current edition of *Ex-Voto* is dedicated to her two musical obsessions, Esteven Jordan (the Jimi Hendrix of the accordion) and the Sex Pistols. She is determined to prove that Chicano music influenced the Sex Pistols during their performance in San Antonio. Devoted to the band that gives her inspiration for thinking about the world in new ways and for plotting new connections, Molly does research on the legendary final performance of the Sex Pistols at a cowboy club in San Antonio called

Randy's. According to Molly, it was their last and best performance. Snooping around the backstage area of Randy's, she finds a piece of paper:

one hidden behind the stage. Get this—The Sex Pistols' play list! And even more amazing? Scribbled at the bottom?—Listen to this—"El Kranke," someone wrote "El Kranke"! one of Steve Jordon's songs! Shit, man, the Pistols were gonna end the show that night with some conjunto!⁶⁰

Inventing her alternatives around British punk is a response to her own limited options, which were circumscribed by Chicano patriarchy and U.S. racism. Her attraction to British punk is not about Great Britain but instead about her desire for an Other—she exoticizes Britain from a Tejana point of view, as a place where oppositional discourses and styles are produced, styles that she can later mine for their symbolic potential. This imaging of Great Britain is not that far off; her re-imaging is the inverse of European youth having their image of the U.S. framed by oppositional discourses articulated by some hip-hop production. Molly mentions that the Clash, an acclaimed anticapitalist punk British band popular in the 1980s, "for instance, jazzed up their music with this reggae influence. A direct reflection of their exposure to the Caribbean diaspora and its musical expression there in London."⁶¹

One way oppositional discourses emerging in the "third world" found their way to Great Britain was via the musical milieu of progressive black British immigrant and white British youth. Listening to these same imported British records, Tejana Molly tunes in to the embedded oppositional discourses layered within the music. Molly then narrates an even furthering layering of the British sound with conjunto, with its own oppositional history in Tejas. She explains: "I was going on the assumptions that the Pistols probably heard the conjunto on KCOR or Radio Jalapeño on the bus ride down from Austin. But the point is, it worked."

For Molly, her 'zine *Ex-Voto*, her band, and short films are the places where she engages what Norma Alarcón describes as the "struggle for histories actual and imaginary that give substance and provide an account of her/their position within culture and the political economy."⁶² Molly's art practices are emblematic of both Chicana feminist art practices and the theoretical writings of the 1980s. She self-publishes her 'zine "cause

no one was addressing my needs," just as Chicana feminists formed organizations like Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS) and writers and artists created venues for their own work. Molly's 'zine catalogs the influences on her protofeminist subjectivity. She is still very much in formation. She combines the cut-and-paste aesthetic of punk with Chicana *rasquache* to create a form that expresses her social location. She prints essays titled, "Never Mind Che, Here's La Molly," ironically riffing off the song "Never Mind the Bullocks, Here's the Sex Pistols," while at the same time implicating Che Guevara, or at least the memory of him, in gendered power relations and disrupting the iconic Che as the signifier of social revolution. Her publication of readers' letters responding to her 'zine articles about "Emma Temayuca, the history of retablos, Love and Rockets, María Felix movies, Dolores Huerta, Ester Hernandez, the Ramones, and Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz" speaks to the ways that the circulation of popular art forms are used to create community outside the bounds of ethnicity.

The Emergence of Chicana D.I.Y. Feminist Politics

Molly is linked to an earlier generation of Chicana politics, but the filmic representation of that connection is done in a complex, anti-essentialist manner through the composition of a scene that carefully locates Molly spatially and temporally. On her way to work at an independent record store called Hogwild, where she clerks, Molly leads us through local shots of San Antonio's Mexicano neighborhoods, the Alamo, and the city's freeways. At the record store, Molly informs us:

I was born 21 years ago on January 23rd, 1973, a Saturday, the same day Raza Unida met for their first—and only—national convention, and across the Atlantic, David Bowie released "Ziggy Stardust": both movements didn't last, a radical Chicano political party and Bowie's particular strain of androgynous rock, but both had their influences, on me, to this day.⁶³

Molly's birthday, January 23, 1973, is significant in the development of Chicana politics. In "Mujeres por La Raza Unida," Evey Chapa details the development of the Chicana caucus in relation to the January 23

national Raza Unida meeting. This caucus was formed by women who felt that more needed to be done to ensure women's participation in the party's electoral politics and positions of power. Chapa explains:

We used already the evident commitment of many *mujeres* to the Raza Unida Party, . . . to implement the strategies for the development of *Mujeres por La Raza Unida* . . . a mini-meeting was held in Cristal (Crystal City Texas) attended by those who felt that words are not enough, that action is the only possible recourse. We formulated a strategy to discuss and survey the *mujer* issue with *mujeres* themselves. We canvassed opinions throughout the state . . . for five months they planned. . . . On August 4, 1973, in San Antonio, Texas, the first Conferencia de *Mujeres por La Raza Unida* was held. It was attended by almost 200 women from 20 different counties.⁶⁴

The formation of the Chicana caucus within a larger political organization was an important move, but by the time Molly comes of age, the historical conditions that supported mass movements for social transformation and Civil Rights have changed. Yet Molly is a subject born out of the difficult struggles that did win important social advances. And that recognition allows her to narrate herself as being born of two movements, one concerned with social justice and organized around traditional male electoral politics, the other concerned with the critique of traditional masculinity located in the cultural sphere of popular music. Molly recognizes the value of both types of organizing. It is the existence and influence of these two movements, in fact, that has led Molly into the realm of cultural politics, to a place where she is now engaged in her own cultural work. She finds ammunition for imagining cultural transformation beyond the frame of cultural nationalism in the sphere of oppositional punk popular culture. In this domain, she imagines affiliation with other marginalized youth who also desire a different world. Yet, while working in the realm to which women have traditionally been relegated—that of the domain of culture reproduction—Molly does not reproduce traditional Chicano or patriarchal cultures. Nor does she produce the status quo values of the dominant culture. She creates something new (just as her flesh-and-blood analogues Covarrubias and Amendariz did), an alternative public sphere that includes her. Though corporate media chose not to give coverage to most oppositional movements during the Reagan-Bush era—

the historical moment when the globalization of capital accelerated and conservative political ideology dominated the public sphere—Molly's obsession with 1980s alternative popular culture speaks to the ways that young people fashioned an oppositional consciousness out of the limited resources available to them.

Beyond the Frame

The lens, her hands, her eye/body, the door, the house, the yard. She moves toward us, the viewers. The arrangement of elements within this frame evoke a sensation of both depth and movement. The lens of her Super-8 camera is at the front and center of the image. Behind the camera is a close-up of her face, her furrowed brow focusing. From there, hands, eye/body, door, and house recede from her camera lens until the frame is filled by the house, except for an open space to the right where the yard begins. The composition implies a double movement: We are pulled toward her center as she simultaneously moves away from the door. She is both the object and the subject of the gaze. She stands unconfined, outside the black, weathered door of the paint-chipped house behind her, outside the private domestic sphere. She has moved out into the day light, into the public sphere.

The black-and-white image just described circulates as a press photo for *Pretty Vacant*.⁶⁵ The photo functions as a visual allegory for the way Chicana feminists and artists—as women of color—have, at the turn of the century, turned a critical eye on the public sphere and, in so doing, have envisioned new subjects and subjectivities, as well as mapped out affiliations with racialized-as-nonwhite women within and across national borders.

Who is this young woman at the center of the frame?⁶⁶ What is she looking at? Who photographed the image of the woman? Where is she? When did this take place? Why is the image of this woman so provocative? As we address these deceptively simple questions, the many meanings of this image, which functions as a representation of Chicana artists, become clear.

In literal terms, the filmmaker Jimmy Mendiola physically photographed the image of "La Molly" during the filming of *Pretty Vacant*. In an abstract sense, Mendiola found inspiration for framing the image of Molly in this way from Chicana feminist writing and art practices.⁶⁷

A D.I.Y. sensibility shapes his representation of Molly as well. Mendiola, like his character La Molly, came to the practice of film making via a D.I.Y. route. Though he majored in journalism at the University of Texas, Austin, Mendiola, in true punk fashion, wrote a screenplay and began shooting the film without formal film training, but with experience in local *teatro* at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, in San Antonio. Like the best of the D.I.Y. punk bands, Mendiola made it work and earned a 1997 Rockefeller Intercultural Fellowship for his effort.

Mendiola was born in San Antonio, Texas, in 1965. His parents met in San Antonio in the early 1950s. His mother was born in a small south Texas town called Gonzales; his father is from San Antonio's west side, the Mexican American part of town. Neither of his parents went to college, despite the fact that his mother graduated second in her high school class. According to Mendiola, the expansion of the military during the cold war in the 1950s and 1960s led to the expansion of Kelly Air Force Base, in San Antonio. Civil service personnel were needed to fill jobs. For the first time in San Antonio, Mexican Americans were given the opportunity to make a decent wage with decent benefits. By the mid-1960s, a new and unprecedented and sizable middle class of Mexican Americans existed in San Antonio. Mendiola explains: "Both my parents got jobs at Kelly after graduating from high school. They were part of this generation. Our family moved to an economically better part of town when I was in second grade. My brother and I went to private Catholic Schools."⁶⁸

What is particularly compelling about *Pretty Vacant* is that it demonstrates that punk aesthetics are not in opposition to Chicano aesthetics; in fact, both share the spirit of making do and express ideas and emotions that aren't necessarily "marketable" by utilizing the practice of cutting and mixing cultural references and sounds. Mendiola explains that while he was making the film, he came to a realization:

Do-it-yourself punk rock aesthetic, as I was doing it and reading more about Chicano cultural practices, parallels the whole *rasquache* aesthetic. I was reading Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, particularly where he defines it as this populist creative strategy of making inventive use of what is available. And usually with no money and often times with no formal training. And I saw parallels between that aesthetic that informed a lot of Chicano art in the sixties and seventies with punk D.I.Y. I made this movie about punk rock and with this idea of critiquing a lot of these conventions of Chicano film, but what I ended up doing was redefining,

expanding, and critiquing punk itself because it's sort of seen as a white-boy type of musical and aesthetic. But it's not, a lot of people that I know, brown people, are into it and have been, and it's just a natural part of how we grew up.⁶⁹

Like Chicana/o art, punk made a space for the critique of social inequality and racism, but mainstream representations of punk represent punk culture as a monolithic, white-boy-only fad. In fact, punk had various and competing strains; it was not one thing. Mendiola is interested in the ways youth of color "made the punk" scene in their image and changed it themselves. Mendiola's favorite example of this making over process is *Love and Rockets*, the graphic novella series by Los Bros. Hernandez. In fact, the young Tejana actress who plays La Molly grew up loving the British Sex Pistols. For Mendiola, the most valuable aspect of "punk aesthetics and the do-it-yourself mentality is this notion of making something that you'd like to see that wasn't out there. And that's what I absolutely did."⁷⁰

Without question, the production of *Pretty Vacant* documents a break in filmic representation of Chicana subjects in films produced by Chicanos. Chicana feminist theorists have long documented and debated both the male-centeredness and patriarchal nostalgia generated by various forms of cultural production produced by Chicanos, including film, literature, *teatro*, *corridos*, and scholarship. Key films such as *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, *Zoot Suit*, *Break of Dawn*, *Born in East L.A.*, *La Bamba*, and *Mi Familia* (all which are readily available for public consumption at libraries and video stores) offer invaluable indictments of the collusion of the state's criminal justice system and capitalism and its effect of positioning Chicanos and Mexicanos as low-wage labor.⁷¹ These films, however, tend to privilege a male subject in their narratives. The exception, as the filmmaker Lourdes Portillo confirms, is Herbert Bibberman's 1954 film *Salt of the Earth*. Produced outside the studio system and banned from general distribution because of its "communist" content, the film details the development of a Mexican American woman's coming to political agency around the well-known and successful miner's strike in Silver City, New Mexico. Yet, because most film narratives that star Latinas (including recent films such as *Selena* [1997], *U-Turn* [1997], *Out of Sight* [1998], starring Jennifer Lopez, and *From Dusk to Dawn* [1996], starring Salma Hayek) leave unquestioned patriarchal social structures, *Pretty Vacant* comes as a welcome relief.

Pretty Vacant emerges from a long history of Chicana and Latina independent filmmaking practices that began in the 1970s. For instance, Sylvia Morales, Lourdes Portillo, and, more recently, Ela Troyano, Francis España, and Francis Negrone have participated in producing films or videos that privilege engaging and complex Chicana and Latina subjects.⁷² However, these women-of-color filmmakers have yet to break into Hollywood and have yet to benefit from mainstream distribution. *Pretty Vacant* follows this Chicana legacy of independent film making in both content and mode of distribution. *Pretty Vacant* begs important questions—about the relationship between the production of grass-roots Chicana feminism, Chicana feminist theory, Chicana art practices, and about film production and gender identity. This film is part of what Rosa Linda Fregoso calls a third wave of Chicano filmmaking.

The third wave, Fregoso explains,

remain(s) committed to cultural politics insofar as their works deal with the Chicana/o experience . . . and is less interested in telling it all in one film, or in a grand narrative of Chicano history . . . indeed, these new film practices subvert the univocal or bifocal character of previous formulations of cultural identity by infusing these with multiplicity and difference.⁷³

The film connects Chicana feminist theory with art through the story of a young Tejana *punkera* character who resists patriarchal control by producing art forms that allow her to enunciate her position in the struggle to imagine and create a different world. This world would be organized around just relations between men and women. It would be a place where the social construction of "race" is not used to legitimate economic injustice and where workers and artists are not subject to the policing structures of national borders. In fact, Molly's art production serves as an index of the 1980s explosion of Chicana writing and art. A useful way to interpret the film, then, is to read the figure of Molly as an allegory for the development of a Chicana feminist epistemology. The context for the Molly character was created by the efforts of all the Chicana feminists who came before her. She embodies the ideals set forth by these women. She is independent, confident in her cultural identity and sexuality, aware of existing power struggles and her place in them, and convinced of the importance of her world perspective as a young, working-class Tejana.

The still of Molly with the camera is extracted from a key sequence in the film's narrative. In that scene, Molly points the camera at her own art piece—her altar.⁷⁴ Molly's character has just given a summary of all of the self-made, low-budget *Ex-Voto* 'zine issues she has produced until that moment. She also explains why her current issue will be produced as a black-and-white Super-8 film. The sequence thus establishes Molly as a producer of various art forms and allows her to narrate how she constructed her social identity around particular forms of art and music. The sequence is also important because it explains the topic of her current 'zine issue—the Tejanization of the British Sex Pistols—and it sets up the tension between the father and the daughter figures.

The photo image visually represents both the theme of the film and the theme of Chicana feminist writings of the 1980s: the decentering of patriarchal privilege through modes of art making. Though the first image we see is that of her father, the first voice we hear is Molly's, and it is her voice that we hear throughout the film. Because her voice-over directs the narrative of the entire film, the visuals are interpreted from Molly's point of view. A focus like this, on a character's interiority, is rarely found in mainstream representations of Chicanas. It is innovative and important in that it allows the daughter to narrate the father, rather than having the father figure narrate the daughter.

Molly's father—stout, in his late forties, Chicano, working-class, arms crossed—leers into her camera as Molly's voice-over informs us, tongue-in-cheek, "This is my dad, scary, huh?" She explains that "my dad had this thing about Mexico." The mise-en-scène of several frames suggests that the father, as an allegorical figure, represents a politics emerging from a previous generation of Chicano activism: that of Chicano nationalism (inflected by San Antonio's west side). This politics employed a grand narrative of Chicano history, one that traced its origins to Mexico, and was used as a defense against the racism of the dominant U.S. culture. It is a version of nationalism that recoups the rebellious daughter figure in the grand narrative. But the daughter figure resists. That Molly's interests and search for solidarity lie somewhere beyond the grand narrative does not lessen her commitment to antiracist struggles and economic justice. She just acts on it in a different way. Molly wages her struggle on two fronts: by redefining the relationship with her dad by questioning his values (and by extension the values of a manifestation of Chicanismo formed before she was born) and by producing her 'zine, *Ex-Voto*, a do-it-yourself journal that is inspired by anything Molly can get her hands on, "including

old movimiento zines before they were called zines . . . old Caracoles are always good."⁷⁵

Mendiola's framing of the Chicana character was greatly influenced by his engagement with critiques of representation produced by women-of-color feminist theorists. The filmmaker's serious engagement marks a specific moment in the production of Chicano film history; it registers the emergence of a third generation of Chicano and Chicana film makers, a generation whose aesthetic sensibility is, in part, enabled by the feminism of women of color. When asked about his influences, Mendiola explained that the writing of Rosa Linda Fregoso, especially her book *The Bronze Screen*, was one of his key inspirations:

I just read it over and over and it influenced basic elements of the film—I was going to call the film "Un Acto," like the chapters in her book, where Fregoso conceives the notion of "actos of imaginative rediscovery. . . . I also came across a lot of Rosa Linda's early stuff that wasn't necessarily on film, and it was more on the critique of Chicano nationalism, and that spoke to me, because of my own real ambivalence about what it meant to be Chicano. People like bell hooks, I liked her film writings, her essays. Amy Tobin's film reviews in *The Village Voice*. She definitely has an outsider, a rock 'n' roll-like feminist perspective. And then Sandra Cisneros, who was almost just as important as Rosalinda. Especially Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek* and particularly the story "Bien Pretty." As far as Cisneros goes, she represented that very realistic bicultural lifestyle that I recognized in growing up in San Antonio in a way that I had never seen an artist do anywhere else.⁷⁶

The implications of Mendiola's statement that "the critique of nationalism spoke to me" are complex. The fact that Mendiola finds the critiques of Fregoso and hooks liberating points to the ways that rigid definitions of manhood and masculinity mixed with homophobia, within politicized and artistic contexts, are detrimental not only to women but also to young straight men. In fact, in general, the appeal of Chicana feminist politics and feminist discourse to Mendiola demonstrates its utility for both men and women as a resource for re-imaging and transforming gender relations. Mendiola recognizes the material reality of masculine power and male privilege that women-of-color theorists critique. Admitting to his own privilege within the patriarchal order, Mendiola explains his relation to the theory:

I identified with the critique only to a certain extent because I'm not a woman, and I definitely recognize the privilege I have, but at the same time, it's [women-of-color feminist theory] like a tool. It was a very useful and appropriate tool to dismantle what I felt were problematic notions of Chicano, Chicano nationalism, and, again, I recognize it as being a tool and not necessarily an internal personally based ideology that doesn't apply to me.⁷⁷

On the surface, it may seem problematic to interpret Molly's character as an allegory for the development of Chicana feminist epistemology—one that posits women of color as producers of knowledge—given that a man made the film. However, this interpretation actually provides an opportunity to refute the claim that Chicana feminist theory is essentialist and applicable only to women. This interpretation takes us away from a politics of representation rooted in biology. It is a theory that Mendiola, as a man, finds to be "a very useful and appropriate tool to dismantle" dysfunctional notions of masculinity. Because these writings have helped Mendiola understand the way his male privilege can disadvantage the art-making process, he attempts to prohibit this male privilege from interfering with his creative process. For instance, instead of taking sole credit for the development of the Molly character, Mendiola talks openly about the creative process between himself and the actress, Mariana Vasquez, who portrays the character. This back-and-forth process demonstrates that listening to the lessons of Chicana feminism pays off. Because the filmmaker gives agency to the fictional female character and does not silence the voices of the film's actress and editor, Christina Ibarra, the image of Chicana subjectivity that we see in this film is one that we rarely see represented in either Chicano or Hollywood film and one that possesses a strong appeal for many. Mendiola explains:

I went into the whole project with the idea of taking the notions of Chicano film, of all the usual expectations, and subverting each and every one or as many as I could. A primary one—making the main character a woman, filming it in Texas and not California, playing around with punk rock as opposed to, like, the expectations of salsa. I just wanted to subvert all those elements and still, at the same time, be part of that legacy of Chicano oppositional film making. So I knew from the beginning it would be a woman, and I had my friend, Mariana, who I was good friends with. I wanted to do something with Mariana, and so I just

wrote it specifically for her, with her in mind. Of course, I was influenced by the relationship of Maggie and Hopey from the *Love and Rockets* series, and my own personal notes. As far as writing for Mariana, it kept me from getting bogged down in my own autobiographical self-indulgence. There was a real freedom in writing for a woman, knowing that most people would not see that as me, so I didn't self-edit myself. . . . There was a real freedom in writing for a character, not a spokesperson for me. There were certain things there that women obviously weren't going to be into so—that's like the trick as a writer, to be true to a character. It didn't come down to a point of, I'm going to be treated like this woman because I'm a feminist. It was more like, there's this interesting person, who is this kind of person, what things would she be into and then trying to have everything—have that question dictate or have that answer dictate everything that I eventually gave her. . . . It was a negotiation. It was very easy because we're friends and I wrote it for her and she would read something and tell me if it didn't sound right. I think that was her way of saying, this person wouldn't say that. . . . I know none of us ever walked away dissatisfied with the compromises we made. The editor Christina told me what rang false and what rang true.⁷⁸

Equally important, the collaborative relationship emerged from the way the film was conceived and shot. Mendiola was inspired by Vasquez's real-life obsession with Sid Vicious, of the Sex Pistols, and wrote the film for her. In the 1990s, Vasquez, the daughter of immigrant parents living in a working-class part of San Antonio, attended a high school in which very few of her fellow students were Anglo. Although Mariana was a young teen when her obsession with punk began, her otherwise conservative, Mexican, Spanish-speaking parents were open-minded when it came to her new choice of music and dress. Her cousins in Laredo had introduced her to the music, and she began to spend time with other first-generation Mexican American punk fans. No fellow students said, "You can't be punk, that's not Mexican." In fact, she remembers that cultural tensions developed between Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrants and monolingual English-speaking Mexican American students around issues of language. Vasquez, who in the late 1990s began studying film at Hunter College, in New York, explains that she met Mendiola while mingling at the appetizer table at an artist's reception:

I was really obsessed with the Sex Pistols, and I was telling them about the time I had carved this "S" into my like upper thigh. I was obsessed with the movie [*Sid and Nancy*]. I put myself in that whole thing, like I was living it. Well, I'm pretty sure that a lot of the stories that I told them went in and blended into this whole character of La Molly, and he started calling *me* La Molly. During filming we never used a script. He would just say, "Look like you're doing this" and "look like you're doing that" and you know and "act like you're doing this." And I'd never done film. It was all theater work that I had done. It sounded like a lot of fun, and so we did it. We shot it throughout the course of two or three years, and you can see that in the film. You can see there're subtle differences in my dress and in my body. . . . It was just get together when we could and do it. We did the first sound in San Francisco, but a lot of the stuff that we did didn't work. I did the voice-over in one take. We didn't have a lot of time. . . . I was never able to watch what was going on and then do it because he kept changing the script. I never had access to screening the movie. . . . The voice-over that I did do was just like a rough reading of the script that he had that day. So it was a little stressful on my part. . . . I think the character is a lot of me and the way he sees me, the way he feels about me in a little package.⁷⁹

Vasquez explains how they worked together:

He would throw something out and I would say, "O.K., but what if I do it like this" and then we would just take it from there and it would work. It was very natural for me to play that character so I would just bring in myself . . . some of the words, some of the stuff that was written in the first couple of drafts, wouldn't have been true to the character. But not very much. I think it was more of him and his process of writing. We would just try out stuff, and some of it would work and some of it wouldn't. I know we worked really well together, and he was very open to my suggestions all the time! It was really good. He would guide me—there would be something that he really wanted to make a point of and then he'd tell me, "Here is where you go—I want it to be kind of like this," but that was more on the visual part but not in the—in terms of the reading, no. He was really good about that. He'd let me go, and all this stuff would come out. You know, he would ask me to put slang stuff—the way I talk—into the stuff that Molly would say.⁸⁰

Pretty Vacant was released a few months before *Selena*—the first Hollywood “hit” film to feature a Mexican American female pop star protagonist. Unlike *Selena*, with its melodramatic narrative based on Selena’s real life and tragic death, *Pretty Vacant* at least engages questions of gender representation taken up by Chicana feminist theorists.⁸¹ Like the Latina punks Hopey and Maggie, whose lesbian relationship Jaime Hernandez depicts with great sensitivity in the *Love and Rockets* series, Mendiola’s Molly represents a grass-roots feminist punk, still in formation, who draws inspiration from the signs of British punk, the *Love and Rockets* series itself, Tejano culture in general, and rock en español, to construct an “alternative” location away from patriarchal Aztlán, yet still oppositional to the racism of the dominant culture, a place from which to imagine new ways of being in the world, ways that speak to similar, but structurally different, conditions of working-class feminists, both straight and queer.

This film and the still pictured in the promotional flyer are provocative not because the young Tejana filmmaker is unique in her artistic endeavors but because they employ the numerous forms of cultural politics that were invented by Chicanas engaged in subversive art and identity formation, a perspective that has been underexamined, despite the fact that it has so much to teach us. We have still yet to understand fully how this Chicana feminism has so adeptly set the stage for future generations of artists and musicians.

What is equally fascinating is the potential for dialogue between Chicana feminist singer-songwriters in the United States and *rockeras* from Mexico, who, of course, are positioned differently by their respective nation-states in terms of racial hierarchies and class location and whose concerns are certainly not identical. In examining the flow of youth culture back and forth between Mexico and the United States, thorny and complex questions of race and class privilege emerge. Yet, as the musical culture demonstrates, the point of connection, of affiliation between the Chicanas and Mexicanas interested in transforming gender relations, stems from the shared recognition of their subordinated position within patriarchal culture. Their discursive interventions concerning gender and class relations point toward the possibility for transnational affiliation around critiques of violence against women, specifically against *mestizas* and women of color. The remarkable work of Julia Palacios and Tere Estrada on the history of women in Mexican rock points us in that direction.⁸²