LATINO PUNK MUSIC: POLITICS GOES UNDERGROUND

Abrasive rock music has rarely been considered a potent political force in the United States. Punk is no exception to this rule. As a subculture, punk has received much more attention for its hairstyles and caustic sounds than its politics. As Daniel Rosenblatt points out, punk rock "Confound[s] our conventional (western) notions of politics by [its] emphasis on matters which we consign to different domains entirely" (1). What he means is that because punk does not express its political discourse in traditional venues or traditional terms, it is discounted as apolitical or politically impotent. To wit, Hebdige argues that subcultures can do little more than provide a 'signal of Refusal,' and should be considered "just the darker side of sets of regulations" (3). Latino punks have countered these claims since the 1970s, with lyrical assertions that their political speech is an essential precursor to political change. In this paper I explore the ways in which contemporary Latino punk self-defines as political, in contrast to early punk bands who refused to be affiliated with politics. By explicitly aligning with political causes, Latino punk establishes a tension between punk's historical tendencies towards 'forgetfulness' and 'self-fulfillment,' and new political agendas that push awareness and change. I conclude by asserting that the punk movement is preoccupied with individual fulfillment at the expense of political activism, a tendency that ultimately undermines its political import.

Jose Palafox, of *Wiretap Magazine*, portrays Latino punk as a departure from the larger subcultural category of punk, which he dismisses as "fast, in-your-face music played by weird-looking white youth." Many Latino punks assert that as members of a marginalized group within the United States, politics are a necessary element of their musical expressions. Incensed lyrics demand change on behalf of Latin Americans

denied political voice. Los Crudos was one such purveyor of this politically inclined 'in-your-face music' and as a particularly popular and active group within the hardcore-punk community, Los Crudos is in many ways representative of Latino punk in the 1990s. The band began its musical efforts in Pilsen, the Chicago barrio where lead singer Martin Sorrondeguy spent his childhood. The band's messages focus on the problems effecting Latin Americans both in the United States and abroad. Sorrondeguy explains: "We wanted to communicate with other kids and with people in our neighborhood about things that were effecting us" (qtd. in Arellano and Ziegler), and they did this in Spanish. This notable aspect of the band's musical output is a defiant move in light of band members' experiences in English-only public education systems and what was largely an Engish-only musical scene. The only exception to the Spanish-only lyrics is a song ironically titled, "That's Right, We're that Spic Band," a title that brought to light the latent racist tendencies in the punk movement. Los Crudos' messages and music soon spread beyond the geographic bounds of the Pilsen barrio, with the band touring Europe, Japan, and Latin America. During their global heyday, the band received letters from Mexico and other Latin American countries, written by fans who, as Arellano and Ziegler write, "lived the lyrics Sorrondeguy wrote half a hemisphere away."

Latino punk is in many ways different from such well-known punk bands from the 1970s and 80s as the Sex Pistols, Ramones, Social Distortion and Adolescents, all of whom engaged in social critique by using shock tactics. They saw these shock tactics as the embodiment of change, an acceptable alternative to traditional political activism. Among many of these bands, aesthetics and style were the vehicles for commentary. Rosenblatt provides a cogent analysis of this politics of resistance in early punk music,

when he states that all punk bands of these decades made statements that were political, even as they claimed political apathy. Rosenblatt asserts that punk style embodies an attitude towards politics and social change. Even those so-called apolitical bands, according to Rosenblatt, "Were often at the same time calling for the elimination of everything about current society, or at the very least saying it all 'sucked'" (12). The consensus among punks seemed to be that political and social change were essential, although many asserted (or rather refused to assert) that political activity and even revolutionary political activity was a waste of time. Rosenblatt notes: for those who conceive of the world as, "a mess…the impossibility of communicating can only be overcome by a refusal to explain" (20).

Los Crudos departs from these early punk bands by privileging explicitly political rhetoric in lyrics and performances. At live shows, Sorrondeguy would often pause between songs to explain in detail (and English) the political issues ubiquitous in his lyrics. The band's drummer, Ebro, expresses frustration with audience members' restlessness and heckles during these monologues (qtd. in Bae 213):

> The worst thing about [the heckling] is that they were doing it in the name of punk rock. I would hope that people have realized that it's not about that anymore. Maybe twenty years ago when [punk] was just something for bored kids to do…but it's grown into something a lot more than that.

In fact, the political context of the early 1990s is what pushed Los Crudos to adopt an explicitly political act. Sorrondeguy explains, "What started happening politically in the United States pissed us off so much, and we were feeling so targeted and cornered as a community, that we began to write songs about it" (qtd. in Palafox). In *The Nation*,

musician and journalist Johnny Temple describes Los Crudos as the catalyst for the proliferation of Latino and Chicano punk bands in the 1990s who "raise awareness in the predominantly white, middle-class punk subculture." Alongside Los Crudos, many other Chicano and Latino bands emerged from Chicago, including Arma Contra Arma, Youth Against, and Sin Orden. Los Angeles produced such bands as Kontra Attaque and the Chicana band Subsistencia, while many others surfaced in New York and Texas (Vargas).

The 1990s were not the beginning of restrictions and legislation directed towards Latinos. Indeed, U.S. pressure on Latin American immigrants has sporadically waxed and waned since the early 1900s. However, in the 1990s, policies shifted to become increasingly hostile towards Latinos and Latin American immigrants, a trend that extends into the post-9-11 present. The U.S. Border Patrol has stepped up its attempts to 'deter' undocumented immigration. Americas Watch, a human rights group, reported in 1992 that abuses of immigrants on the border were "'appalling'" (qtd. in "Return"). A series of policy changes and enforcement operations, along with an increase in the number of Border Patrol agents, have forced immigrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border from urbanized areas to more remote mountain and desert areas. Unfortunately, these so-called open areas frequently require immigrants to negotiate dangerous terrain and brave extremes of cold and heat, resulting in increased deaths since the implementation of such initiatives as Operation Safeguard or Operation Gatekeeper.

In terms of legislative action, perhaps the most famous piece of anti-immigrant policy was California's Proposition 187 which received the support of 59 percent of the state's voters in 1994. Proposition 187 would deny education, welfare, and all non-

emergency healthcare to undocumented immigrants, and require that school, welfare, and law enforcement officials report suspected undocumented immigrants to state officials. The proposition also made the sale, distribution, and production of fraudulent documents a felony offense. Although California courts soon declared the proposition unconstitutional, there is evidence of increased discrimination against Latino minorities since its implementation and quick removal (DeLaet 106). Later acts, such as the 1996 Personal Responsibility, Work Opportunity, and Medicaid Restructuring Act prohibit both undocumented and temporary residents from receiving federal public benefits, with exceptions including only such bare essentials as emergency healthcare, and housing assistance. The Personal Responsibility Act also places restrictions on legal immigrants, denying them access to food stamps, social security benefits and even public housing and Medicaid throughout their first five years of residency (Delaet 126). Policy changes throughout the 1990s endangered immigrants at border crossings and limited the ability of many Latin Americans to access public benefits, negotiate with the INS, and work in the U.S.

For Los Crudos, the reform of these injustices could only occur as Americans became informed and took collective action. The band used lyrics to decry anti-immigrant policies and nativist sentiments. The song “Rise Up” asserts the urgency of immediate change (Los Crudos),

> You wait until the day arrives
>
> When your neighbor turns you in
>
> And your money loses all it’s value
>
> And your home becomes your prison

It'll be your own fault

These lines create a parallel between the repressive actions of the U.S. government and the crimes of military dictatorships in Latin America, suggesting only a slippery slope separates the two. The act that can prevent this descent appears to be an unambiguous political voice, as one song affirms (Los Crudos),

The laws want to get rid of us

With our mouths shut

What can we do?

Don't stay quiet—Cowards

The silence hurts us—Cowards

In speech, Los Crudos incites political action, imploring audience members to become informed and act against anti-immigrant policies. But when lyrics are often screamed or sung in a language that may or may not be intelligible to listeners, political lyrics may lose meaning. Lyrical meaning can be subsumed; where lyrics are unintelligible, they enter the flow of music and "turn into physical sound, thus joining music in the production of a kind of emotion that is, one might say, 'beyond words'" (Chow 468). A vocalist from Subsistencia, the L.A.-based Chicana punk band, describes punk as meaningful in its ability to fuse 'thought' and 'emotion' (qtd. in Palafox), "Through our music, we can express—we can scream—our thoughts and emotions of all the things that are happening in our communities." Although the music often attempts the synthesis of rationality and emotion, it ultimately produces a cathartic experience that recalls the 'apolitical' punk of the 1970s and 80s. If, as Rosenblatt asserts, early punk 'refused to explain,' then Los Crudos is not so very different in its own tendency towards

music that screams more than it speaks. Unlike traditional protest, which must enter the realm of the political and be conservative enough to endure mainstream judgments, protest in punk music is part of a space that is at once socially oblivious and personally liberating. This space provides the sublime sensation of temporarily forgetting one's place in the hierarchy of power—whether you are a classically 'bored' teenager at odds with your parents and the conservatism they represent, a working class youth with 'no future' because the future is drearily pre-determined, or a Latin American restricted by nativistic and racist ideologies. It is liberating because it infers a place for self and self expression outside of the boundaries of conventional politics, allowing participants to intuit if not engage the possibility of transcendence. This explains why, at many Los Crudos shows, the audience would become restless when Sorrondeguy would pause for a political monologue between songs. Alan O'Connor puts it simply, "They wanted to dance" (153). To listen, move, and sing with Los Crudos was to deny society as it existed in favor of the anarchic possibilities asserted by voice, guitar, bass, and drums. The more than occasional audience heckle demonstrates the tension between conventional politics and audiences' desire for something more.

If punk is a musical genre that subsumes politics within an overpowering project of emotional catharsis, then in what ways is Los Crudos' kind of political punk politically meaningful? While it is important to recognize, as Julia Kristeva suggests, music is a "system of differences that is not a system that means [*something*]," as in systems of language (309), it is also not a system that means *nothing*. Los Crudos posits members of the punk movement as the answer to the question posed by the band Flipper in the early 80s: "Who wants to talk about the government or something like that?" (qtd. in

Rosenblatt 12). Los Crudos made the punk musical experience undeniably (and for some, unbearably) political by stopping music in order to talk politics. Sorrondeguy effectively told audience members why it was they were dancing. In the process of musical expression, Los Crudos could elicit passionate responses from audience members, but often attempts at enframement were interrupted. It was as if dance itself could not be contained, and even as voices joined the chorus, politics were constantly slipping to the position of irrelevant subtext. Operating within punk, Los Crudos is at odds with a subcultural legacy that demands self-fulfillment and opposition to traditional forms of political activity. Los Crudos' first challenge is not confronting political forces as punks, but changing the terms of punk identity to make this confrontation possible. This shift in self-definition is essential to making it 'ok' for the punk movement to put criticism of immigration policies at the top of its agenda. While Los Crudos is not alone in the endeavor to politicize punk, they do represent a significant effort to improve the place of politics within the movement. For band members, this effort is both an obligation and an expression of their dedication to Latin American rights and community (Bae 218). Describing the band's search for a new drummer Sorrondeguy quipped "We don't need musicians, we need people who are into what the band is about" (qtd. in Bae 215). This request is extended to every audience and carries with it counsel for all punks to come.