EL MUNDO ZURDO 4

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EDITED BY
T. JACKIE CUEVAS,
LARISSA M. MERCADO-LÓPEZ,
AND SONIA SALDÍVAR-HULL

aunt lute books
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SKA AS A BRIDGE TO PRE-MESTIZA CONSCIOUSNESS: RHYTHMIC MOVES IN ANZALDÚA’S BORDERLAND

CRYSTAL E. SERRANO

The struggle has always been inner...played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes...before changes in society. Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads. —Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera

Before Gloria Anzaldúa’s work had reached me, I struggled as an adolescent to understand the reasons why I felt shame about my family, language, and culture. Although being of light complexion and American citizenship, I was born to Mexican immigrant parents who came here without documents. Despite being bilingual, I was placed in ESL courses for inexplicable reasons to me at the time. Schooling made me suspicious of the Spanish language, and forced me to advocate for my own education to become mainstreamed. However, to succeed in a normative environment, I realized that I would have to give up my Mexican ethnic identity, which entailed rejection of my language, and, more importantly, dismissing my parents and the culture they upheld. It was during my teenage years, and through my interaction with alternative forms and hybrid styles of music that I began to recover the cultural losses with which I had disidentified.¹ Having learned from a young age that I would have to fight for my own
educational success, it was in high school, being surrounded by young activists and musicians, that I began to theorize about the injustices in the world, that I started to use my education as a way to reconnect with my community and culture. Ska music became that bridge for me.

(UN)POPULAR CULTURE

We are ashamed that we need your good opinion, that we need your acceptance. We can no longer camouflage our needs, can no longer let defenses and fences sprout around us... To rage and look upon you with contempt is to rage and be contemptuous of ourselves... Here we are weaponless with open arms, with only our magic. Let's try it our way, the mestiza way, the Chicana way, the woman way. —Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera

While going through the process of coming to self, I did not have the language that Anzaldúa expresses; however, upon being introduced to her work, I could then make the connections to what had previously been my bridge towards consciousness. It was through mainstream American popular culture that I internalized oppression against my own people—distancing and disidentifying with them. I equated being Mexican with poverty. My father's inability to speak English and my mother's accent were limitations to our progress, and became a source of embarrassment.

Throughout elementary school I was lumped in the classroom with the "Mexican kids." I saw the way others looked at us, the way they undermined us, judged us; our fifth grade teacher saying we were dirty because we would come back sweaty and smelly after playing soccer during recess, but I knew her comment extended to external factors beyond that. Having the determination to do well academically, I knew I had to remove myself from this image, from this group, otherwise I would remain in the shadows. Therefore, when middle school began I engaged in as much mainstream American popular culture as I could because I knew that would mark me as different from the rest. "To be close to another Chicana is like looking into the mirror. We are afraid of what we'll see there. Pena. Shame. Low estimation of self" (Anzaldúa 80), and for this reason I removed myself from Chicanas/os and Mexicanas/os as much as possible.

All I wanted to do was fit in: speak English, wear designer clothes, and listen to Euro-American music, those things which my family did not have access to. I spent my entire middle school years lost in ignorance, trying to be someone I was not. Then, during early high school, we moved to an urban ethnic working-class neighborhood, forcing me to rethink and examine our lives and community much differently. It was in Carson, in the South Bay of Los Angeles, California, that I was exposed to youth of color, particularly Chicanas/os who embraced their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity. Most were members of
Punk and Ska bands or followed similar musical genres that promoted a very strong Mexican identification. It was evident in the way they spoke, how they dressed and carried themselves—it was written all over their bodies. This music consumed their lives, but it was music unlike anything I had heard before.

Prior to our move, my mother noticed my rejection of the family, and would regularly push me to listen to Spanish music. She seemed concerned that I was only consuming mainstream American English music, but her music did not speak to me. Although, I relished traditional and regional Mexican music when I was younger because that was all I was exposed to living in an immigrant household, it was not until a hybrid style of Chicana/o Latina/o Ska music that I began to make musical connections—the lyrics were in Spanish or bilingual and it spoke about those matters I had tried to distance myself from. As I began to listen to this more urban ethnic version of Punk and Ska, and attended backyard shows, a transformation began taking over my body. I did not know how to articulate it, but I was coming into consciousness.

Soon after, I returned to speaking Spanish, feeling comfort in knowing that I had not completely lost my language as I reconnected with the beauty and depth of my Mexican heritage. But this beautiful reunion did not come without pain. Angry with myself, I felt a great disappointment to have ever allowed myself to think otherwise, to have felt ashamed of being Mexican. The music helped those feelings diminish, as I began to realize there was nothing wrong in admitting that we were poor; it became a source of strength to acknowledge how much our parents and community have endured. Instead, we found pride in reclaiming our history and cultural practices in ways that the younger generation could connect with. Whereas before I resisted my parent’s music and style, we found ourselves looking to our parent’s music, finding new ways to reinvent and articulate their musical expressions in a way that spoke to us.

Embracing hybridity and rasquachismo, we created a consciousness about the environment that we were living in, forcing ourselves to find ways to be creative with the limited resources that were available to us. Not having the means to go to clubs and shows all the way in Hollywood, we found alternate ways to use the spaces we had access to. We started having backyard shows and charging a fee between $1-3, allowing us to create a music scene that was not out of our reach, promoted collective community efforts, and helped families raise funds for their needs. With a backyard, we could throw a show and raise money to cope with the financial stresses around us. Most parents embraced our efforts and accepted these shows, aside from the drinking and use of minor drugs that took place, but these spaces kept us out of trouble as we skanked the night away, rather than becoming involved with gangs—music became a healthier path to expression.
POLITICAL ORIGINS OF SKA

Focusing on racialized and criminalized experiences, Ska music is enacted as a form of protest. Among the Chicana/o Latina/o Ska subculture, the music expresses issues about education, immigration, violence, police brutality, and access, while also celebrating our cultural heritage and national pride. It often speaks about political issues affecting younger generations, their parents, and community at large, but in the style of upbeat, fast-paced rhythms.

As a Chicana, learning the history of Ska has also provided a point of connection. Ska has Jamaican origins and stems from the cultural expression and discontent of oppressed youth on the island and those that were forced to emigrate due to economic instability after Jamaica’s Independence in 1962. With political and economic origins, Ska became a medium through which they could contest the exploitation, poverty, dislocation, and racism they were experiencing, and create a call for unity and hope, as they imagined a Jamaica free from the effects of colonization and globalization. As Scott Calhoun states,

...the rise of Ska indicates when and where social, political, and economic institutions disappoint their people and push them to reinvent the process for making meaning out of life. When a group embarks on this process, it becomes even more necessary to embrace expressive, liberating forms of art for help during the struggle. In its history as a music of freedom, Ska has flowed freely to wherever people are celebrating the rhythms and sounds of hope. (Augustyn x)

And in this way, it is not surprising that Ska music has flowed and made its way to the multitude of youth around the world, becoming a transnational hybrid musical style found all over Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, and beyond—wherever violence and colonization fester. Thus, the necessity for Ska and musical expression will always be there.

Through his research on subcultures in Great Britain, Dick Hebdige relates how Reggae and Ska music were used as mediums for identity and resistance against oppressive conditions for the African/Jamaican communities. “Sound-systems,” a form of a club, sprang up all around where these immigrant communities resided:

To a community hemmed in on all sides by discrimination, hostility, suspicion and blank incomprehension, the sound-system came to represent, particularly for the young, a precious inner sanctum, uncontaminated by alien influences, a black heart beating back to Africa on a steady pulse of dub. (Hebdige 38)

For immigrant populations coming from and living in poor and working-class communities, music becomes a method around which they can express their
Crystal E. Serrano

culture, customs, language, and history when they are far away from home. The socio-political limitations placed on immigrants because of their lack of citizenship, race, and economic status inspire Ska music as a way to construct a sense of worth and identity, as well as a tool of conversation and educational strategy among those living in the native and host country.

Tracing the routes of Ska, Joseph Heathcott illuminates the fact that we must “pay close attention not only to the flows of people and ideas across borders but also to the urban spaces in which these ideas are generated, absorbed, reworked, and exported (187). He also reinforces how “the shantytowns reflected the spatial logic of colonial capitalist maldevelopment,” and it is in these spaces that “Jamaican working-class people struggled for some amount of spatial autonomy and control over their destinies,” and in this way youth subcultures forged “spaces of resistance and autonomy” (192). Ultimately, to understand Ska is to become familiar with the survival strategies of a group. It is through youth and the subcultures they form, and the ways in which they express themselves, that one can have a greater sense of their experiences, struggles, hopes, and vision for a better world. Whether singing about poverty, violence, or heartbreak, they do it with a smile on their face, hips swaying left to right, hands jerking up and down, determined to never let the music stop.

CHICANA/O CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND POLITICS: ARTICULATING A THIRD SPACE

During the 1990s when Governor Pete Wilson advocated Proposition 187, heightening the criminalization of immigrants, Los Angeles gave way to many hybrid musical styles as young Chicanas/os and Latinas/os became active in their communities and began speaking out against injustice. As part of these efforts, Chicanas/os and Latinas/os have adopted Ska and made it their own with their language and rhythms to give it a distinct style. This unique sound is attributed to the use of timbales, a horn section with trumpets, a trombone, and sometimes even a saxophone, as well as the influence of cumbia, salsa, and other styles to give it a danceable rhythm—some bands even blend punk and hardcore style with it.

Chicana/o and Latina/o artists have a long history of musical adaption and hybridity, which allows them to not only use the dominant popular culture, but to turn it on its head, transform it into something empowering for oppressed people, and give it back and challenge the dominant class with it. These musical constructions are a form of resistance, primarily because they take all the elements of which the U.S. has tried to deny to people of color, fusing them into something new that reflects their lived experiences. They contest the dominant culture, which erases our histories and identities, and challenge imposed and sugar-coated views of American life. It focuses on a lived reality—a reality that
directly challenges the notion of assimilation and Manifest Destiny—and that heals historical wounds.

For example, Leticia Higuera Arellano’s dissertation on Chicana/o and Latina/o Punk experiences discusses the creation of a Latino Punk scene in the 1990s, and what made this expression different from its White dominant counterpart. Through their unapologetic use and conscious decision to sing in Spanish, lyrics challenging imperialism and the status quo, and maintaining a community-centered focus, Latina/o Punk took on a critical and social justice emphasis based on their racialized identities and experiences. In support of this, Arellano mentions that “Making the decision to sing in Spanish in a country where segregation and discrimination was a fact of life for musicians and their loved ones was no less than solid affirmation of their identity and an act of resistance” (33). Unlike traditional (White) Punk, through which young artists sought to distance themselves from their parents, Latina/o Punk artists maintained those connections with their parents and their ethnic identities. In this case, Punk music allowed them to express their anger at the injustices confronted by their elders, as well as the exploitation, poverty, and violence surrounding them, and the colonization and criminalization of their communities both here and abroad. Martin Sorrondeguy, lead singer of the punk band Los Crudos, attests to this when he states,

For us, singing punk doesn’t mean letting go...of those ties that we have to our parents, to our families, or to where we’re from or to our language. It [doesn’t] mean breaking away from that. It means working with them to get somewhere, to get to a new level. (Sorrondeguy as cited in Okoh, as cited in Arellano 45)

With his band, Sorrondeguy was able to critique the conditions that Chicanas/os and Latinas/os face in the U.S., but through his travels in visiting and playing for youth in Latin American countries, he was better able to make connections to the transnational and global struggles of all Latinas/os.

While subcultures are rooted in resistance, they develop from youths’ rebellion against the contradictions that they witness. They try to resolve some of the issues that they experience much differently than their parents do, “even where experience was shared between parents and children this experience was likely to be differently interpreted, expressed and handled by the two groups” (Hebdige 78). In that sense, while Latina/o parents may feel that their children are straying from their culture, in reality the music that they listen to is still very much influenced by their ethnic and linguistic roots, and touches upon their shared experiences, but is expressed in a different rhythm. Therefore, while it may seem that youth are trying to remove themselves from their parents and become completely independent, their shared experiences still exist, and
subcultures become a space through which they negotiate the relationships, dualities, contradictions and multiple identities that they live.

BAILANDO CON LA MESTIZA CONSCIOUSNESS: A REFLECTIVE CONCLUSION

As a person, I, as a people, we, Chicanos, blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves. Most of this goes on unconsciously, we only know that we are hurting, we suspect that there is something wrong with us, something fundamentally "wrong."—Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera

Having access to the words of Anzaldúa much later in life, allowed me to recognize that other Chicanas/os and Latinas/os such as me were beginning to articulate a mestiza consciousness without even realizing it. Despite not possessing a decolonizing language and the theories that provide a frame of reference, we were able to understand ourselves as third space dwellers through a racialized and hybrid musical style that facilitated analyzing and understanding the world around us. For many of us, our consciousness began with a musical style that silences and negates race, class, and gender, creating the need for our own spaces, a third space where we can articulate a different experience, a different history, a different movimiento.

Once I had begun the process of conocimiento, I started reflecting and realizing how wounded some of the people I grew up with were. Two of my best friends from elementary through high school were Vietnamese and Filipino, and they also came from immigrant households. All of our parents migrated from their respective countries, and we each knew how to speak our native language. Despite the richness that we carried within us, we expressed a discontent toward anything having to do with our ethnic identity. Even though we would never be able to fit the White standards of beauty, we still upheld them and valued them; wanting to be like and dress like White girls, obsessing over White boys from Torrance and Redondo Beach, and adorning our folders with collages of boy bands.

Although I lost touch with these women over the years, I often think about the wounds that we carried as children and the depth of the pain that we inflicted on ourselves each day, some more than others. None of us ever felt comfortable in our own bodies. Anzaldúa’s words resonate about the discomfort when she illustrates that, “In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we’ve made some kind of evolutionary step forward” (103). The pressures of society and popular culture pushed us away from that which gave us meaning and completion, to the point that we were dismembered, perdidas. We were trying to affix pieces that did not belong, pieces that were foreign to our bodies, and were only making us sick.

Chicana/o Latina/o Ska music became a medium through which I could sing and dance the pain away. The image of young brown bodies everywhere,
fists in the air, expelling all their energy and rage, has done wonders for my soul, and continues to make my heart dance to this day. “Estan bailando como indios,” my mother-in-law exclaimed when she saw young kids skanking in her backyard. And I thought, yes, yes they are. They are returning, making themselves whole again.

When I read Anzaldúa’s work, it is like having an intimate conversation. Her words allow me to reflect on the ways I have resisted and challenged White supremacist and heteropatriarchal systems of oppression from a very young age—perdida a veces, but still rebelling against and navigating some type of inequality. In my process of conocimiento, I fell ill and was damaged along the way. I became lost at times, confused, taking the wrong turn. It was through rejecting the desconocimientos about who I am in relationship to self and others that I realized my family and community have always had what I needed for my recovery. Once I began this process of knowing myself in relationship to others, I realized the tools to my liberation were there all along; I was just too blind to see it then.
ENDNOTES

1 Disidentification is a term coined by José Muñoz, defined as "the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). In this case, my engagement with Ska allowed me to work with pre-existing racial-ethnic identities, while at the same time resisting and recreating our own understanding based on our experiences. We were not only challenging American normative standards as people of color, but also Mexican and Latina/o normative practices through this subculture which became a third space for many Mexican and Latina/o youth.

2 Disidentification in this sense meant a rejection of my racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity. As a person of color, it became difficult to identify with my ethnic identity because it did not readily fit into American normativity. Thus, even disengaging becomes part of the disidentification process.

3 It is important to acknowledge that the term skank has been commonly used as a derogatory term to describe a "promiscuous" female. But within Ska and Reggae, the term has been adapted to describe the style of dancing that is done to the music. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as: a rhythmic dance performed by swinging the arms while bending the knees especially to reggae or ska.

WORKS CITED


