

If La Llorona Was a Punk Rocker: Detonguing The Off-Key Caos and Screams of Alice Bag

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Gender, Identity



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For full intro and part one of the series click [here](#). For part two, click [here](#). For part three click [here](#). For part four click [here](#).

Our Punk Sound series implicitly argues that sound studies methodologies are better suited to understanding how punk works sonically than existing journalistic and academic conversations about musical genre, chord progressions, and/or genealogies of bands. Alexandra Vasquez’s sound-oriented work on Cuban music, for example, in *Listening in Detail* (2014) opens up necessary conversations about the “flashes, moments, sounds” in music that bear its meanings and its colonial, raced, classed, and gendered histories in material ways people can hear and feel. While retaining the specificity of Vasquez’s argument and the specific sonic archive bringing it forth, we too insist on “an ethical and intellectual obligation to the question: what do the musicians *sound like*” (12) and how do folks identifying with and through these musical sounds hear them?

In this series, we invite you to amplify varied historicized “details” of punk sound—its chunk-chunk-chunk skapunk riffs, screams, growls, group chants, driving rhythms, honking saxophones—hearing/feeling/touching these sounds in richly varied locations, times, places, and perspectives: as a pulsing bead of condensation dripping down the wall of **The Smell in Downtown LA (#savethesnell)**, a drummer making her own time on tour, a drunk sitting too near the amp at a backyard party, a queer teenager in their bedroom being yelled at to “turn it down” and “act like a lady[or a man]”. . .and on and on. In today’s essay Marlen Rios-Hernandez discusses how all the politics of punk sound, queer chicana identity, and feminism can be found in the scream.

SOUND!

NO, SOUND!

—Aaron SO! (Sounding Out!) + Jenny SO! (Sounding Out!)

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Mexican cultural theorist [Carlos Monsiváis](#) looked at various aspects of Mexican youth subcultures in the early 80s and revealed how youth relied on “caos” or chaos as a way to attain pleasure within disruption, spontaneity, and noise (68-79). How does the scream emerge through caos as a instrument of resistance? Alongside scholars like Fred Moten, I argue that the scream ruptures caos and allows us to glimpse the pleasure of resistance. In Alice Bag’s scream we find this medley of pleasure, interruption, and spontaneity. [Bag explains](#), “once the Bags hit the stage and the music started, ego checked out and id took over, channeling my libido, my inner rage, whatever... I was free to be myself with no holds barred. It was the ultimate freedom” (221). These elements epitomize what I consider a queer Chicana feminist exorcism of tonality.

As explained in Bag’s [memoir](#), particular to punk, there is a general reliance on informal/ community-based ear training where musicians teach each other (183). European traditions of musical analysis both negate the horizontal learning central to punk while also normalizing the historical colonial presence within the Borderlands. In order to reveal how Bag’s scream exorcises these Eurocentric traditions, I consider her performance of “Violence Girl” at the Whiskey (1978), footage of “Gluttony” from *The Decline of Western Civilization Part 1* (1981), and a brief clip of The Bags’ “Survive” in *What We Do is Secret* (2007). Because of how the scream disrupts formal analysis, there is an urgency to understand how it works against the grain.



<https://youtu.be/OpezYTEc5B8>

In the face of Chicana women being [politically silenced](#) by the [Chicano Movement](#) and [Women’s Movements](#) during the late 70s and 80s, it was important for Chicanas to speak up for increased autonomy and access to space. Thus, Alice Bag’s caos is informed by an intersectional ethic of Chicana feminism. At the time queer Chicanas were largely absent from Chicano nationalist organizing. Between the Chicano Movement and unruly Chicana punks, the screaming voice became a multi-layered instrument of protest and empowerment necessary to invert normative gender and sexual politics within punk, the Chicano movement, and second wave feminism. The ability of the Chicana scream to contest oppression is not new. Such a lineage can be drawn from La Llorona—the villanized folkloric mother that drowns her children and haunts Mexico’s shores by wailing in the night.

Drawing on [Latinx scholarship](#) and a sonic reimagining of La Llorona's wailing (as a feminist cry and public display against patriarchy), this post reimagines Alice's scream as simultaneously resistance and pleasure. This aligns with Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of *deslengualidad*. Suturing Anzaldúa's concept of [deslengualidad](#) (detonguing)—which I define as Chicanas speaking with an orphan tongue—with caos shows how Chicanas can claim visibility through the scream. *Deslengualidad* and caos account for colonial interventions within the Chican@ identity, they demand the preservation and celebration of the mestiza language and help to provide visibility to Chican@ art.

Though the voice has been rendered repeatedly as a gendered instrument, usually legible via lyrics, and always harmonic, some examples tell us otherwise. For example, Alice's scream is interrupted by her microphone malfunctioning in her performance of "Violence Girl" at the Whiskey (1978). This multi-layered recording with its already grainy inaudible features, helps us to understand the scream as a stand alone act of caos. Although the scream is interrupted by multiple forms of dissonance, it also persists as a public gesture of empowerment. The quality of the recording is poor and in it Alice experiences technical issues on stage. These distortions lead Alice to artfully perform a sonic *deslengualidad* by making use of silence, inaudible screaming, and the body. She continues to move, interrupt, and most importantly still is accompanied by stable beat of the Bags despite singing without a microphone. Yet, in the absence of aurally decipherable lyrics (like the absence of a singular Chicana language) a lyrical analysis here wouldn't serve any other purpose than to organize that which is on its own refuses order—her voice.



<https://youtu.be/rPHqpiWE0CE>

The seminal footage of "Gluttony" in *The Decline of Western Civilization Part 1* (1981), features an *aural* scream. It helps us think about how the Chicana scream goes beyond mere aurality. [Michelle Habell-Pallán's notion of "el grito,"](#)—the shout—relates to Alice's shriek in "Gluttony."

Both punctuate emotional drama and harken back to Ranchera music. I suggest, however, that Bag's shriek in "Gluttony" also signifies a growing concern with the homogeneity of white suburban beach punks who had infiltrated the scene. In her memoir Bag shares, "as I looked out into the audience, I could see that the once quirky men and women artists who prized originality

above all else were being replaced by a belligerent, male dominated mob...playing for a belligerent group of individuals can be quite satisfying. What I didn't like was the sameness" (308). Pushing back against the scene's homogeneity, Bag does not end "Gluttony with a full closed cadence. Rather, she ends abruptly, leaving the listener with a sense of incompleteness.

The combination of repeated interruptions throughout "Gluttony" and the inability to conclude pushes the listener to a place of discomfort, where they are left yearning for some kind of ending. The musicologist [Susan McClary argues that the absent cadences in *Carmen*](#) signify how the cadence represents a return to normality and a satisfying feeling of closure. By withholding a full cadence in "Gluttony" and using her "grito" to celebrate difference, Bag enacts caos by rejecting the emerging uniformity of the scene. Much like Bag's performance of "Violence Girl" at The Whiskey, the scream is less about being musical and ordered but instead a gesture to making do with what one has, a similar manifestation of *deslengualidad*.

The brief sound clip of the Bags' "Survive" in *What We Do is Secret* (2007) illustrates how Alice's scream offers a genealogy of caos via her disruption of the story of L.A. punk. The Bag's "Survive" for the duration of a few seconds plays in the background during a scene in which fans are getting ready to watch The Germs perform at The Masque. In this clip, Alice's voice isn't immediate because of how it resonates within the background music. Hence, her voice refuses containment by emanating from the periphery. Alice's voice emerges as *delengualidad* within the film precisely because women are written out of the story of L.A. punk. They are depicted as secondary players in the film. [Fred Moten's *In The Break*](#) reminds us that the site "where shriek turns speech turns song-- remote from the impossible comfort of origin-- lies the trace of our descent." Within the shriek also lies our resistance tactics as Chicanas. The map of our survival through loudness-- though heavily stereotyped-- is a testament to the unwavering and inherited *conocimiento* that [silence has never protected us](#). It is the task of women of color to [interrupt, archive, and preserve their roles in the L.A. scene](#).



Screenshot from Alice Bag Band's video "Gluttony." Image used for purposes of critique.

Within Bag's screaming from the Whiskey performance, *Decline*, to *What We Do is Secret* are snapshots or sonic/visual testimonios of queer Chicana women during the early 80s. These sonic snapshots/testimonios speak to the severely gendered and racialized repression of queer Chicana youth while still reconfiguring what empowerment looked like in the aftermath of the major socio-political movements of the 60s and 70s. In a casual conversation with Alice in a panel I guest moderated, she mentioned that watching "Gluttony" today was irksome to her because she was off-key. Perhaps, being off-key is one way that Chicana feminisms audibly reject neoliberal (and gendered) state repression. When we are surrounded by noise, we must remain enveloped in its infinite shape and simply listen. In noise we can resist, interrupt, and move away from orthodoxy and order. In today's political climate, we need this framework now more than ever.

The return to Alice's voice in this current moment is no coincidence. In preparation for this piece, I reflected on my brother's deployment to Iraq during George W. Bush's term. I was in community college taking a music appreciation course and I was searching for a paper topic that would be palatable to me as both a newly politicized queer Chicana and a former regular in the South Gate punk scene. It was through an interview with Teresa Covarrubias of *The Brat* and Alice Bag in an issue of Los Angeles Magazine that I heard Alice's scream for the first time. It was the description of these women's careers that led me to look up Chicana punk and come across the Whiskey performance of "Violence Girl." To this day, [Alice's voice](#) reminds us that if "Alice Bag was born from chaos" (310) then the Chicana punk voice remains a testament to punk's resilience in the face of political uncertainty.

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Featured image “Alice Bag Performing at Club Lingerie with the Cambridge Apostles” ([CC BY 2.0](#))

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Marlen Ríos-Hernández is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California, Riverside. Her current research revolves around queer Chicana/Mexicana punks in Mexico and Los Angeles from 1977-early 2000s respectively. Her dissertation aims to theorize and argue how Alice Bag, an innovator of the 1970s Los Angeles punk scene alongside other Mexicana punks, utilized noise to correlate the systemic disenfranchisement of womxn of color with the desire for transformational change integral to the survival of Mexicanas and first generation Chicana womxn especially during the Reagan and Bush Administrations. Via Ethnic Studies as her area of study along with her humanities and arts training as a Musicologist, Marlen investigates the relationship between unruly Chicana/Mexicana performing bodies and bisexuality, swapmeets, police brutality, photography, and film as instruments of noise-making.

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