

“Oh how so East L.A.”: The Sound of 80s Flashbacks in Chicana Literature

Wanda Alarcon

Blog post published September 10, 2017 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/h2bmg-asm55>

Abstract

For the full intro to the forum by Michelle Habell-Pallan, [click here](#). For the first installment by Yessica Garcia Hernandez [click here](#). For the second post by Susana Sepulveda [click here](#).

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Chicana Soundscapes Forum, Dance/Movement



Recommended citation

Alarcon, W. (2017, September 10). “Oh how so East L.A.”: The Sound of 80s Flashbacks in Chicana Literature. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/h2bmg-asm55>

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The forum’s inspiring research by scholars/practioners Wanda Alarcón, Yessica Garcia Hernandez, Marlen Rios-Hernandez, Susana Sepulveda, and Iris C. Viveros Avendaño, understands music in its local, translocal and transnational context; and insists upon open new scholarly imaginaries. . .

Current times require us to bridge intersectional, decolonial, and gender analysis. Music, and our relationship to it, has much to reveal about how power operates within a context of inequality. And it will teach us how to get through this moment. **—MHP**

—

A new generation of Chicana authors are writing about the 1980s. An ‘80s kid myself, I recognize the decade’s telling details—the styles and fashions, the cityscapes and geo-politics, and especially the sounds and the music. Reading Chicana literature through the soundscape of the 80s is exciting to me as a listener and it reveals how listening becomes a critical tool for remembering. Through the literary soundscapes created by a new generation of Chicana authors such as [Estella Gonzalez](#), [Verónica Reyes](#), and [Raquel Gutiérrez](#), the 1980s becomes an important site for hearing new Chicana voices, stories, histories, representations, in particular of Chicana lesbians.

Reading across Gonzalez’s short story, “Chola Salvation,” Reyes’s [Chopper! Chopper! Poetry from Bordered Lives](#); and Gutiérrez’s play, [“The Barber of East L.A.”](#), this post activates the concept of the “flashback” to frame the 1980s as a musical decade important for exploring Chicana cultural imaginaries beyond its ten years. In Gonzalez’s “Chola Salvation,” for example, Frida Kahlo and La Virgen de Guadalupe appear dressed as East Los cholas speaking Pachuca caló and dispensing valuable advice to a teen girl in danger. The language of taboo and criminality is transformed in their speech and a new decolonial feminist poetics can be heard. In Reyes’s *Chopper! Chopper!*, Chicana lesbians – malfloras, marimachas, jotas, y butch dykes – strut down Whittier Boulevard, fight for their barrio, take over open mic night and incite a joyous “Panocha Power” riot, and make out at the movies with their femme girlfriends. Gutiérrez’s “Barber of East L.A.” recovers forgotten butch Chicana histories in the epic tale of a character called Chonch Fonseca, inspired by [Nancy Valverde](#), the original barber of East Los Angeles. A carefully curated soundtrack amplifies her particular form of butch masculinity. These decolonial feminist ‘80s narratives signal a break from 1960s and ‘70s representations of Chicanas/os and introduce new aesthetics and Chicana/x poetics for reading and hearing Chicanas in literature, putting East L.A. on the literary map.



East LA Valley, 2010, by Flickr User James (CC BY 2.0)

Gonzalez, Reyes, and Gutiérrez’s work also use innovative sonic methods to demonstrate themes of feminist of color coalition and solidarity and represent major characters whose desires and actions transgress normative gender and sexuality. All three contain so many mentions of music that operate beyond established notions of intertextuality, referencing oldies, boleros, and alternative 80s music as a soundtrack that actually transform these works into unexpected sonic archives. Through the 80s soundscapes that music activates, these authors’ work shifts established historical contexts for reading and listening: there was a time before punk, and after punk, and this temporality *sounds* in Chicana literature.



*Alice Bag in The Decline
of Western Civilization
(1981). Still by Jennifer
Stoevers*

If the classic documentary film *The Decline of Western Civilization* by Penelope Spheeris was meant to give coverage to the Los Angeles neglected by mainstream music journalists, it also performs an important omission that leaves Chicano viewers searching for a mere glimpse of “a few brown Mexican faces,” as Reyes writes in her poem “Torcidaness.” Among the bands featured—most male fronted—the film captures an electric performance by Chicana punk singer Alice Bag, née Alicia Armendariz. In contrast to the other musicians in jeans, bare torsos, and, combat boots, Bag is visually stunning and glamorous. She dressed in a fitted pink dress reminiscent of the 1940s pachuca style; she wears white pointed toe pumps, her hair is short and dark, her eye and lip makeup is strong and impeccable. In the four brief minutes the band is on camera Bag sings in a commandingly deep voice, slowly growling out the words to the song “Gluttony” and before the tempo picks up speed, she lets out a long visceral yell on the “y” that is high pitched, powerful, and thoroughly punk. It’s a superb performance, yet Bag is not interviewed in this film.

Reyes’s poem draws attention to that omission as the narrator searches for a mere glimpse of “a few brown Mexican faces.” This speaks to the longing and the difficulty for Chicanas to see themselves reflected in the very same spaces that offer the possibility of belonging. Over thirty years since the film, Bag is now experiencing a surge in her career and has sparked renewed interest in histories of Chicanas in punk. She has written two books including the memoir: *Violence Girl: From East L.A. Rage to L.A. Stage – A Chicana Punk Story* (2011) and is sought out for speaking engagements on university campuses. Bag is able to tell her story now through writing, something a film dedicated to documenting punk music was not able to do. In retrospect, thirty-five years later, Bag’s current visibility emphasizes the further marginalization of Chicanas in punk the film produces by silencing her speaking voice against the audible power of her singing voice. Recovering Chicana histories in music may not happen through film, I propose that it is happening in the soundscapes of new Chicana literature. Importantly, new characters emerge and representations that are minor, marginalized, or non-existent in the dominant literary landscape of Aztlán are rendered legibly and audibly.



Barber of East LA-era Butchlális de Panochtítlan, (l-r) Claudia Rodriguez, Mari Garcia, Raquel Gutiérrez, Image by Hector Silva

Theorizing the flashback in Chicana literature raises new questions about temporality that invite and innovate ways to trace the social through aesthetics, politics, music, sound, place and memory. Is flashback 80s night at the local dance club or 80s hour on the radio always retrospective? Also, who do we envision in the sonic and cultural imaginary of “the 80s”? As a dominant population in Los Angeles and California, it is outrageous to presume that Chicanas/os or Mexican-Americans were not a significant part of alternative music scenes in Los Angeles. This post turns up the volume on the ’80s soundscapes of Chicana literature via Verónica Reyes’s poem “Torcidaness: Tortillas and Me,” to argue that one cannot nostalgically remember the 80s in a flashback radio hour or 80s night at the club *and* forget East L.A.

“Torcidaness” (Twistedness) speaks in an intimate voice homegirl-to-homegirl: “Tú sabes, homes how it is in—el barrio.” Through this address the narrator describes the sense of knowing herself as different and “a little off to the side on the edge” much like a hand formed tortilla. In the opening stanza, Reyes introduces the metaphor for queerness that runs through the poem in the image of the homemade corn tortilla, “crooked, lopsided and torcida.” Part of Reyes’s queer aesthetics prefers a slightly imperfect shape to her metaphorical tortillas rather than one perfectly “round and curved like a pelota.” As a tongue-in-cheek stand-in for Mexicanness, the narrator privileges the homemade quality of “torcidaness” versus a perfect uniformity to her queerness.



homemade corn tortillas, image by flickr user hnau, (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Importantly, the narrator locates her queer story that begins in childhood as “a little chamaca” in the Mexican barrios of East Los Angeles. “Torcidaness” names the cross streets to an old corner store hangout and brings East L.A. more into relief:

*Back then on Sydney Drive and Floral in Belvedere District
Oscar’s store at the esquina near the alley was the place to be
We’d hang out and play: Centipede Asteroids Pac Man
or Ms. Pac Man (Oh yeah, like she really needed a man)
and even Galaga... Can you hear it? Tu, tu, tu... (very Mexican ?que no?)
Tú, tú, tú (Can you hear Eydie Gorme? Oh how so East L.A.) Tú, tú, tú...
Coming at you ... faster faster—Oh, shit. Blast! You’re dead (22).*

This aurally rich stanza rings with the names of classic video games of the early 1980s. Reyes reminds us that video games are not strictly visual, they’re characterized by distinct noises, quirky blips and beeps, and catchy “chiptunes,” electronic synthesizer songs recorded on 8-bit sound chips. The speaker riffs off the playful noises in the space game Galaga, asking the reader to remember it through sound: “Can you hear it?” Capturing the shooting sounds of the game in the percussive phrase, “tú, tú, tú” prompts a bilingual homophonic listening that translates “tú” into “you.” The phrase is only a brief quote, a sample you could say, and the poem seems to argue that you’d have to be a homegirl to know where it comes from. The full verse of its source goes like this: “Me importas tú, y tú, y tú / y solamente tú / Me importas tú, y tú, y tú / y nadie mas que tú”

as sung by the American singer Eydie Gorme with the Trio Los Panchos in their 1964 recording of “Piel Canela.”



<https://youtu.be/Dxl4MGRwjWo>

To some extent the poem is not overly concerned with offering full translations, linguistic or cultural, but the reader is invited to corporeally join in the game of “Name That Tune.” The assumption is that Gorme’s Spanish language recordings of boleros with Los Panchos are important to many U.S. Mexicans and they remain meaningful across generations. And importantly, this “flashback” moment is not an anachronistic reference, rather it says something about the enduring status of boleros and the musical knowledge expected of a homegirl. Reyes’s temporal juxtaposition of the electronic sounds of the video game with the Spanish language sounds of a classic Mexican love song—and their easy, everyday coexistence in a Chicana’s soundscape—is part of what the narrator means by, “Oh how so East L.A.”

As a map, this poem locates the ’80s in part through plentiful references to the new electronic toys that became immensely popular in the US, yet Reyes does not fetishize the technology nor does she abstract Mexican experiences from these innovations as the American popular imaginary does all too often. Rather, she situates the experience of playing these new toys in a corner neighborhood store among other Mexican kids. The deft English-Spanish code switching audible in lines such as, “Oscar’s store at the esquina near the alley was the place to be,” is also part of the poem’s grammatically resistant bilingual soundscape. In these ways the poem makes claims about belonging and puts pressure on how we remember. There is danger in remembering only the game as a nostalgic collective memory and not the gamers themselves.



Galaga High Scores, image by Jenny Stoevers

As a soundtrack, Reyes’s poem remembers the 80s through extensive references to the alternative rock music and androgynous and flamboyant artists of the MTV generation. This musical lineage becomes the soundtrack to the queer story in the poem. Through the music, the narrator produces a temporally complex “flashback” where queer connections, generational turf marking, and Mexicanness all come together.

No more pinball shit for us. That was 1970-something mierda

We were the generation of Atari—the beginning of digital games (22)

[. . .]

This was Siouxsie and the Banshees’ era with deep black mascara

The gothic singer who hung out with Robert Smith and Morrissey

The Smiths who dominated airwaves of Mexican Impala cars (23)

In these lines the narrator shows no nostalgia for the 1970s and boasts intense pride for all things new ushered in with the new decade. She brags about a new generation defined by new cultural icons like video games and synthesizer driven music. And while this music’s sound discernibly breaks from the 70s, its alternative sensibility isn’t just about sound, it’s about a look where “deep black mascara” and dark “goth” aesthetics – for girls and boys – are all the rage and help fans find each other. Simply dropping a band’s or artist’s name like “Siouxsie” or “Morrissey” or quoting

part of a song conjures entire musical genres, bringing into relief a new kind of gender ambiguity and queer visibility that flourished in the 1980s. The poem is dotted with names like Boy George, Cyndi Lauper, Wham!, Elvis Costello, X, Pretenders, all musicians one might hear now during a “flashback 80s” radio hour radio or club theme night.



Sandy and Siouxsie, 2007, [Shizu Saldamando](#), Los Angeles. Courtesy of the artist. See Shizu's work through January 8, 2018 at the Pacific Standard Time show "[My Barrio: Emigdio Vasquez and Chicana/o Identity in Orange County](#)" at Chapman University.

The complex sense of time-space of the “flashback” as a theoretical concept is part of what links seemingly discrete flashback events: club nights, radio hours, musical intertexts. What is new about the “flashback” in this context is the unexpected site (literature) and literature’s unexpected Chicana subjects who frame readers’ listenings. Reyes’s poem represents and reminds me that the reason I go to dance clubs has always been for the love of music, *all* music, a feeling shared passionately among my stylish and musically eclectic friends (read more in my SO! post “[New Wave Saved My Life.](#)”). The last 80s night I went to was earlier this summer at Club Elysium in Austin, Texas, with my partner Cindy and our friend Max, who says he loves it because everyone there is his age – and for the love of new wave and fashion! The DJ played requests all night which made some of the transitions unexpected. But there we were, three Chicanos, less than ten years apart in age, enjoying a soundscape any 80s kid – from SoCal or Texas – would be proud of. When I got home I added four new songs we heard and danced to that night to my oldest Spotify list titled, “Before I Forget the 80s.” Although the purpose of this list is to stretch my memory of

the music as a living pulsing archive, it also recovers the memory of this great night out with friends that extends beyond the physical dance floor.

I

Spotify Playlist for “Torcidaness” by Wanda Alarcon

Yet, in “Torcidaness,” remembering this music is mediated by the Chicana lesbian storyteller’s perspective who keenly tunes into these sounds and signs of alternative music and gender from East Los Angeles. The line, “The Smiths who dominated airwaves of Mexican Impala cars,” has implications that she was not alone in these queer listenings, as Reyes casually juxtaposes the image of lowrider car culture associated with Chicano hypermasculinity with the ambiguous sexuality of the Manchester based band’s enigmatic singer, Morrissey. Morrissey and lead guitarist Johnny Marr captivated generations of music listeners with their bold guitar driven sound, infectious melodies, and neo-Wildean homoerotic lyrics in the albums *The Smiths* (1983), *Meat is Murder* (1985), and *The Queen is Dead* (1986).



<https://youtu.be/cJRP3LRcUFg>

Recalling the song, “This Charming Man” against the poem’s reference to an Impala lowrider complicates how I hear the lyric: “Why pamper life’s complexities when the leather runs smooth on the passenger seat?” In a flash(back), the gap between the UK and East L.A. is somehow bridged in this queer musical mediation echoing what [Karen Tongson](#) calls “remote intimacies across time.” Although the poem reads like a celebration, there is a critique here in lines such as these. Chicanos and people of color are never at the forefront of who is imagined to be “alternative” in histories of alternative rock music. A vexing exception can be found in the Morrissey fandom. [Mozlandia](#), [Melissa Mora Hidalgo’s study in “transcultural fandom”](#) is partly a response to troubling misrepresentations of Chicano fans of Morrissey. In the important work of Chicana representation where audibility is as needed as visibility, this poem not only remembers but it documents queer Chicana/o presence in these alternative 80s music scenes.



“Embrace Series: Morrissey Night” by Shizu Saldamando, LA 2009, Ballpoint pen on fabric, 72 x 120 inches. Image courtesy of the artist. See Shizu’s work at the [LA Japanese American National Museum’s Transpacific Borderlands show](#) through 25 February 2018.

By poem’s end, “torcidaness,” a Spanglish term, comes to mean lesbian, working class, and Chicana of the eighties generation all at once. Tuning into the poem’s soundscape enables the possibility of hearing all of these queer meanings simultaneously as well as the possibility of hearing Aztlán, vis-a-vis Eydie Gorme, in a video game. In these ways, Verónica Reyes’s sonically rich poem renders East Los Angeles and the 1980s as an important nexus for recovering Chicana histories and Chicana lesbian representation.

Ultimately “Torcidaness and Me” captures the joy and the struggle of queer Chicana belonging in this new narrative of what [Cherrie Moraga calls, “Queer Aztlán.”](#) Reyes writes, “Yep, this was the eighties and I was learning my crookedness.” At the same time, the compatibility of the term “queer” to tell Chicana stories is challenged by the presence of alternative ways to indicate ambiguity of gender and sexuality. In this poem, “crookedness,” “torcidaness,” “my torcida days to

come,” and “marimacha” all convey “queerness” in forms more audible and meaningful to a homegirl from East L.A. If there is a sound to gender—to marimachas, malfloras, jotás, butches/femmes, what does using the word “queer” do to how we hear them? Some meanings are lost in translation, yet I don’t believe that translation should always be the goal.

Theorizing the concept of the flashback in the soundscapes of this generation of Chicana authors rejects the abstract and diffuse notion of 80s themed events deployed in mainstream American culture and resists the erasure of Chicanos and Latinos in the ways we remember this important musical decade. The stakes involved in representing and remembering such histories are high. Yet Chicana histories, experiences, sexualities, subjectivities, intimacies, language, style, desires cannot be understood without a deep recognition of Chicana lesbians and butch/femme as subjects of literature and the communities we live in. As part of a decolonial feminist listening praxis, the flashback becomes an important tool linking listening with remembering as more diverse Chicana worlds emerge.

Featured Image: Shizu Saldamando’s Pee Chee LA 2004, courtesy of the artist. See Shizu’s work at the LA Pacific Standard Time Show [Día de los Muertos: A Cultural Legacy, Past, Present & Future](#) at Self Help Graphics opening September 17th, 2018.

Wanda Alarcón is a lecturer in the Department of Feminist Studies at UC Santa Cruz. She is a recipient of the Carlos E. Castañeda Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin (2016 –2017). She received her Ph.D. in Ethnic Studies with a Designated Emphasis in Women, Gender, and Sexuality from UC Berkeley in 2016, and earned an M.A. in English & American Literature from Binghamton University. Her research interests lie at the intersections of decolonial feminism, sound studies, popular music, eighties studies, and Chicana/o and Latinx cultural studies. Her interdisciplinary research theorizes “listening” as a decolonial feminist praxis with which to remember alternate histories of Chicana/o belonging within and out of national limits. In particular, her research argues that queer Chicana/x and Latina/x sonics become more audible in the soundscapes of Greater Mexico. At home Wanda plays piano almost every day, tinkers with bass guitar, and enjoys singing in her car. She listens to *The Style Council* and *The Libertines* in equal measure and is active on Spotify where she makes playlists for work, play, and sharing with friends.



REWIND! . . . If you liked this post, you may also dig:

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