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## Feel Like a Gringo: Transnational Consciousness in Los Angeles Punk Rock Songs

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**Abstract:** The essay analyzes four songs from the catalogue of the Los Angeles punk rock scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is argued that the songs, written in response to the reality of the life in Los Angeles and in the Mexican-American borderlands, are expressive of transnational consciousness. Interpreted in this way, the songs are revealed as embodying the processes of distancing and then readjusting of oneself in relation to the dominant narrative of the US Nation and hence embody the idea of cosmopolitanization. The first two songs are by Chicano artists and express transnational anxieties as they are experienced by the artists and their communities within the U.S. The other two songs were selected because they record tiny personal impressions by white artists who, once they cross the border into Mexico, are faced with a nexus of transnational processes, which confront their certainties and affect their consciousness. The analysis makes use of the theory of affects (Tomkins), the theory of cosmopolitanism (Beck), as well as a selection of historical analyses and personal accounts by the artists.

**Keywords:** Chicano, Los Angeles, punk rock, Minutemen, The Bags, Los Illegals, cosmopolitanization, gringo, borderlands

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This paper focuses on transnational themes expressed in selected songs by Los Angeles' punk rock bands of the late 1970s and early 1980s. I understand transnationalism as primarily, after Steven Vertovec, a "type of consciousness" (5) marked by "multiple identifications" and "decentered attachments" (6), although other meanings of the term—"social morphology" (4) or the types of systems and structures which provoke, sustain, or are destructive of transnationality; "cultural reproduction" or the processes of "cultural interpenetration and blending" (7); capital flows; and "site[s] of political engagement" (10)—are also factored in. Drawing on artists' own statements, cultural analyses, and the theories of Silvan S. Tomkins and Ulrich Beck, I argue that these songs, each in its unique way, explore personal affects (anger, depression, shame-humiliation) and simultaneously express transnational and/or cosmopolitan sentiments, becoming utopian spaces of cosmopolitanization. I aim to argue that the punk rock artists studied here, not unlike ethnic diasporas, formed an informal yet exemplary community of the transnational moment and that they can be considered the pioneers of what Beck calls the "cosmopolitan outlook" (*Cosmopolitan* 2). I first discuss two songs by Chicano/a punk rock bands The Bags

and Los Illegals. If these two examples can be considered as expressive of migrant or diaspora transnationalism, the examples I discuss in the last part of the essay—two songs by Minutemen—reveal a rarely-discussed aspect of transnationalism as an affective force that can momentarily engulf and transform those whose national or axiological identity had hitherto been taken for granted. In the paper, I quote extensively from an interview I conducted with Mike Watt, bass player and founding member of Minutemen, in Kraków on 22 October 2016, during a European tour of *Il Sogno del Marinaio*, an experimental rock band Watt formed with two Italian musicians in 2008.

Rather than generalizing that punk rock is a cultural form reflective of transnationalism, I suggest that it was the specific environment of Southern California and the Mexico-U.S. borderlands that contributed to the rise of a radical transcultural sensibility to which punk rock offered an apt, marked-with-urgency conduit. Music and lyrics by select representatives of the first wave of the Los Angeles punk rock scene, or of Watt affectionately calls “the Movement” (Watt), creatively negotiated the tensions palpable in the region.

These tensions are the result of, on the one hand, the region’s proximity to the national border, its large Spanish-speaking population, as well as, its enduring lure for immigrants from all over the world and, on the other, the state’s cultural apparatus’ generation of simulacra which sustain a myth of “So-Cal’s” cultural and ethnic homogeneity. This myth can be traced back to what Carey McWilliams terms the “Fantasy heritage” (35) or Mike Davis calls “ersatz history” (30)—a vision of the region’s past invented during the Booster Era (1885-1925) and historically responsible for the rise of such ideas as “Los Angeles as ‘new Rome’” (27) or “Los Angeles as the utopia of Aryan supremacism” (30). As Davis argues, the myth has “not only sublimated contemporary class struggle, but also censored, and repressed from view, the actual plight of Alta California’s descendants” (27) or, as McWilliams put it more precisely in 1949, it has “perniciously beclouded relations between Anglos and Hispanos in the borderlands,” and put a “veil of fantasy” over “the reality of cultural fusion” (47). This has not only resulted in depriving “the Mexicans of their heritage” by excising them from the regional symbolic—an excrescence on the state’s body—but has also helped to “keep them in their place,” that is, as McWilliams observes, the fantasy has had “a functional, not an ornamental arrangement” (39). Simply put, the dominant version of the region’s past has rendered the majority of non-white Californians, especially the Spanish-speaking Mechicanos indigenous to the Southwest, an invisible second-class minority, as well as provided ideological support for unequal distribution of economic and cultural opportunities, creation of segregated neighborhoods and racial discrimination.

The Los Angeles punk rock Movement—the audiences, bands, concert venues, and “punk-inhabited apartments” (Bag 233)—provided the young participants from all backgrounds with a platform to unceremoniously break with conventions (generic, racial, ethnic, linguistic, gender, sexual, fashion, class, and residential), to

cooperate across what had formerly been thought of as unbreachable turfs or limits of identification and to assert a cacophonous independence from the hitherto status quo, including the normativity of the Nation.

### **But First, What Is Punk Rock?**

Very broadly, punk rock is a transnational phenomenon which arose in the mid-1970s on both sides of the Atlantic in response to social and cultural transformations affecting the West. One of the most important factors which triggered this aesthetic and cultural revolution in strictly musical terms was a reaction to what Watt terms the epoch of rock concerts being turned into “Nurnberg rallies” (Watt). Watt’s metaphor ingeniously describes not only the 1970s mainstream rock music’s ability to produce a rapport of the masses but also, perhaps inadvertently, its propensity to homogenize and distill rock’s historically plural, contingent and racially-impure roots and to sublimate the genre—especially since the British Invasion (from The Beatles and The Rolling Stones to Led Zeppelin, Yes, King Crimson and others)—as essentially a white youth art-form, image driven, increasingly over-sophisticated, and controlled by big music business. Such rock would serve as one instrument sustaining what Ulrich Beck has termed as “methodological nationalism” (Rooted 17) or the nation-state logic based on censure and limit.

Punk, by contrast, was an “intentionally and aggressively amateur” (Goldberg 181), Do It Yourself (DIY) aesthetic propelled by egalitarian, pluriversal, and radically democratic ethos. Punk rockers demanded stripping popular music of its unnecessary, artsy pretense or, as Rose Lee Goldberg puts it, “stagnation and academicism associated with... establishment” (181) as well as of its purely commodified function in the entertainment industry. Punk rock was about audience members taking to the stage, ceasing the means of cultural production (not only guitars, drums and mikes but also fashion, poetry, art, film, etc.) and “never repeat[ing] the glaring abuses of an earlier rock aristocracy” (Reynolds 5). Punk rock was also, as Simon Reynolds says, a “theatre of rage, disgust and nihilism” (4), an aesthetic “characterized by torn trousers, wild uncombed hair and ornaments of safety-pins, razor blades and tattoos” (Goldberg 182) suggestive of profound generational disillusion and angst. The Movement held that, in Reynolds’ words, “the only authority is the self” (22). The goal was to find one’s unique voice and radically, sometimes violently or self-destructively, express it against the straightjacket of social and aesthetic norms, conventions, and limits. Punk rock stood as an “in your face” and “out loud” challenge to the hegemonic axiology of propriety, generic purity but also to the hippie culture which, by glorifying indulgence in drugs and free love, anesthetized rock’s original prophetic promise. Punk rock was about feeling *it* again, that is it was about the three R’s of rejecting, rebelling, and regenerating. For the above reasons, the phenomenon of punk aesthetic can be compared to earlier avant-garde movements like Dada, the Futurists, and the Beats.

In the American context, it can also be said that punk or at least the punk I am interested in here, reinvigorated the ideals of the Popular Front of the 1930s. “The Popular Front,” Michael Denning reminds us, “was an insurgent social movement forged around anti-fascism, anti-lynching, and the militant industrial unionism” (61). Many American punk bands also considered themselves as part of an insurgent and egalitarian movement founded on class consciousness and the ideals of the anti-fascist, anti-racist and anti-capitalist people’s art which would blare out frustrations of the subaltern. Most American youths of the first wave of punk were born in the late 1950s and grew up in a peculiar era of social unrest (Civil Rights, Free Speech, the Vietnam War), race riots, and burning cities. While the National Guard contained unrest around the nation and the Cold War unfolded, TV and popular entertainment provided social and moral sedatives. Until the late 1970s, schools carried out safety drills which programmed children and adolescents to live in a state of constant subliminal anxiety over the imminent nuclear annihilation (Watt). The drill served as one more cognitive artifact which rationalized, the anti-war movement notwithstanding, the massive expansion of both overt and covert American military interventionism around the globe. Watt thus describes the atmosphere of growing up in the nuclear era:

They used to test the nuclear war warning sirens on the last Friday of every month.... But whenever that would happen we would think what does that mean?... I always had a fear in my mind of, you know, the big war coming.... *So this thing always weighed on me.* And this thing in class, hide under the tables.... A lot of the Minutemen stuff, like the whole name of our first record, *Paranoid Time* [1980], is us just kinda freaking out. (Watt; my emphasis)

The 1970s and 80s brought new anxieties and fears. Cuts in social spending, the collapse of industries and the War on Drugs undermined, if not destroyed, the social fabric of many vulnerable communities, provoking mass insecurity. Schools, TV, the mass media, and arena rock trained American youths in the hegemonic narratives and afforded a seduction of, if only temporary, oblivion, but there was also an ever-present irritant which “weighed” on and uneased perhaps the most, if on a subconscious level, those most sensitive members of the society: the youth. In response, some youngsters turned to street and gang violence or indulged in substance abuse. Others turned to punk rock, for punk—fast, loud, and adrenaline-driven—was in its ends not unlike the Viennese “actionism” of the previous decade which performer Otto Mühl defined as “not only a form of art, but above all an existential attitude” (qtd. in Goldberg 164). Like actionism, punk offered a purifying, ritual-like medium through which one—as a performer or as a participant—could channel and release those unresolved tensions and ideally, by so doing, acquire as if a new set of eyes or cognitive skills which could enable a distancing from official narratives and values underpinning the social relations. In other words, punk both afforded and was

expressive of a shift in consciousness, and it is in this sense that, especially in its early phase, it was a movement for a non-conformist, anti-elitist social transformation, and personal *as well as* collective empowerment. Had he been alive, Woody Guthrie, the bard of the Popular Front, would no doubt have played punk. If Guthrie's guitar sported the slogan "This Machine Kills Fascists," songs by, for example, the racially-mixed Dead Kennedys from San Francisco, proclaimed similar discontent—their "Nazi Punks Fuck Off," "California Über Alles," "Holiday in Cambodia," and "Kill the Poor" became instant classics of radical social critique. Minutemen's song "Bob Dylan Wrote Propaganda Songs" helps explain this genealogy for, if Dylan was a descendant of Guthrie, Watt considers himself a descendant of Dylan. On the cover of their compilation *Ballot Result* (1986), Watt wrote of the song: "the title is an affirmation of my view of my tunes at that time. I was worried that my tunes might be narrow, then I turned to my *proxy-dad*, *Bobby Dylan* and felt better about it right away, of course I meant propaganda in the passionate sense" (my emphasis).

### The Bags

A band that, as Watt recalls, "empowered" him and his friend D. Boon to join the Movement was The Bags. Watt says: "That was the first punk band we saw. And I look at D. Boon and the first thing out of my mouth was 'We can do this'" (Watt). The Bags was not a typical punk rock band. Formed in 1977 in East L.A., a predominantly Mechicano community, the group was fronted by two women: vocalist Alice Bag, aka Alicia Armendariz, and bass player Pat Bag, aka Patricia Morrison. In the context of what is usually described as a male-dominated punk rock scene and Latino culture, the band's multiethnic line-up and the lead role of two females illustrate the ethnic and gender parity encouraged and embodied by the L.A. punk rock scene. A website operated by the Smithsonian Institution and dedicated to preserving the legacy of Latinos/as in U.S. popular culture describes Armendariz as follows: "Her furious screams would define the aggressive vocal style of the time.... her voice created a thick dissonant texture—a trademark of the early punk sound that echoed L.A. tension" ("East L.A. Punk"). The tension that the authors of this note have in mind is that between at least two separate, although not impermeable, zones Los Angeles has been historically divided into: the predominantly white Hollywood and West Los Angeles separated by the Los Angeles River and multiple freeways from East L.A. As a lyricist, Alice Bag brought those tensions front and center, often referencing her own experiences. As an example, consider her song "We Don't Need the English": "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 we should wear."

Bag, not unlike Thomas Jefferson two hundred years before her, declares independence from the English. Instead of the king, it is the British punk music—"songs of anarchy" alludes to Sex Pistols' song "Anarchy in the U.K."—and fashion imports that she severs ties with. The severance could be interpreted in terms of what

Harold Bloom calls “the anxiety of influence” or “the anguish of contamination” (xi) by a stronger precursor against which she attempts to rebel. In Bloom’s theory of poetry, such acts of rebellion by a poetic child against a powerful forebear ultimately lead to the defeat of the newcomer and a reassertion of the master’s influence. José E. Limón, however, questions Bloom’s claims as “ahistorical and asocial” (138). In his study of the oral poetic tradition of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, Limón advocates that in studies of intertextual or dialogic relations, we should inquire about “sociohistorical contexts and constraints” and argues that “a particular poem may be read simultaneously as a manifestation of the ‘anxiety of influence’ *and* the effects of social change” (138). He concludes: “a history of literary relations cannot ignore their obvious immersion in social process” (140).

What social context should we factor in so that we do not reduce Bag’s song to a repressed, inadvertent homage to Sex Pistols? I believe that Bag’s Mechicano, bicultural and transnational background, as well as the reality of growing up in the borderlands, is the key. Born in L.A. to Mexican immigrant parents, she would, she confesses in her memoir *Violence Girl* (2011), visit Ciudad Juarez in Mexico “every summer” (34). Her first language was Spanish as her “father, being a proud Mexicano, banned the speaking of English in our home” (42). Although this ensured that, as Bag says, “I would always maintain a firm grasp on my mother tongue,” it also created some “major challenges... on the English-speaking front” (42). As a consequence, her English-language acquisition was slow. Like millions of Mexican-American youths before and after her, she found the American educational system hostile to Spanish speakers. Bag recalls that her second-grade English teacher, Miss Gibbons, “would go on to punish me for not learning English quickly enough” (38). Miss Gibbons treated her and other children “who weren’t fluent English speakers” with disdain, “like idiots, talked down to us and gave us easy work” (38). If she caught them speaking Spanish, she would punish them by “[keeping] us in from recess” (38). Thus, Bag learnt early on about the unequal relations between the two distinct languages and cultures in her own hometown. Faced with what Ulrich Beck in another context refers to as “exclusive differentiation” (*Cosmopolitan* 5), she was forced to daily relativize her Mexican identity vis-à-vis the expectations of assimilation to the dominant American culture. At the same time, the “[s]ummers in Juarez really cemented [her] pride in [her] Mexican heritage” (Bag 36) and taught her to relativize the American mainstream. In both countries, she was simultaneously from “here and there” or as the Mexican saying goes “*ni de aqui, ni de alla* [neither from here nor from there],” a positionality characteristic of transnational or, in Vertovec’s words, “‘diaspora consciousness’ marked by dual or multiple identifications” (6).

Bag also realized that in the real America, a state founded on racism, she could never fit the essentialist national paradigm, for she was not only internally bicultural but also visibly different—brown. An incident from 1978 can illustrate this. During a day trip to Mexico, one of Bag’s friends purchased a bag of heroin and decided to smuggle it back to the U.S. At the Tijuana/San Diego checkpoint punk’s

“merry pranksters” declared their nationality: “We’re US citizens.” The officer “looked at me. ‘Where are you from?’ he asked. ‘Los Angeles,’ I replied.... ‘What part?’ He was still staring at me suspiciously. ‘East L.A.’ I answered. It started to dawn on me that he was more concerned about illegal immigrants than illegal narcotics” (300).

It was the world of sound and music that provided Bag with a model for the negotiation of the diasporic experience, linguistic alienation, and racial and ethnic oppression. At home, her mother listened to *novelas* and Mexican radio dramas. Her dad loved *ranchera* music by the likes of Pedro Infante, Lucha Villa, and others. Her sister was ten years older and adored “Motown and the Beatles” (Bag 42). As a teenager, she would collect “the back catalogs of Elton John and David Bowie” and Queen, intrigued by their music and gender-bending flamboyance. She also “loaded up on the Kinks, Dave Clark Five, Aretha Franklin and Koko Taylor” (104), New York Dolls, Kiss, Camel, and many more. In other words, despite the constraints she encountered in the outside world, the music she listened to provided her with a model of “imaginary coherence” (Hall qtd. in Vertovec 6) with which to reconcile the seemingly incompatible differences and malleable identities. Her diasporic experience, educational and cultural alienation, and musical inspirations all contributed to Armendariz becoming an expert in infinite translations and infinitesimal border crossings. As if by default then, she developed a hybrid, plural, fluid, multi-local consciousness producing, what Vertovec calls “a multiplicity of histories, ‘communities’ and selves—a refusal of fixity often serving as a valuable resource for resisting repressive local and global situations” (7), and which therefore can be termed as transnational and cosmopolitan.

Southern California’s myth of Anglo monoculturalism and its divisive character, as well as, on the other hand, the paradigm of “the multiple, fluid formation of identity through contact, motion, diaspora and hybridity” (Campbell and Kean 18) constitute then the context which is, I want to argue, more important in interpreting the words of the song than those overt allusions to English punk. The latter serve only to wittily conceal a much more immediate albeit uncanny social protest. They are expressive not so much of an anxiety of influence of the British master-code but of a rebellion against the socio-cultural status-quo back home. Bag performs a dialog not with art but with life.

Following Tomkins’ assertion that “toxic scenes... demand antitoxic scripts, in which fire is fought with fire” (857), Bag’s song can be interpreted as an expression of the affect of anger directed at the reality of life in LA, as well as an anthem of cultural sovereignty pronounced in spite of the unilateral enunciation of the gringo world, be it the one from across the Atlantic, that located west of the Los Angeles River or that represented by the violence of Miss Gibbons’s classes or the border officer’s gaze. The song offers an outsider-insider view which operates by angrily (guitar noise, Bag’s scream and legendary frown) asserting the right to rebel against the dominant culture. Tomkins explains that “antitoxic anger scripts” are “anger-reparative” or “anger-remedial” for they “are intended to punish and defeat adversaries” in order “to make

the world better” (873). Bag’s song seems to be just that, an anger-remedial script offered in the hope of “repair or remediation of the damages or limitations of [her and her community’s] life space” (Tomkins 857). Thus “We Don’t Need the English” translates into: “We are at home here,” “We belong here,” and “We demand respect”—an insolent jab at the foundations of the bounded Nation and its myth of origin.

Crucially, the song is articulated in English and in a quintessential riff-driven punk idiom, thus suggesting that the rebellion depends for its efficacy not on outright negation—that would be impossible and counterproductive—but, rather, on strategic appropriation and distancing. José Esteban Muñoz calls this kind of aesthetic strategy “disidentification” or “a performative mode of tactical recognition” (97) of the dominant code which it uses “as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (31).

### Los Illegals

Another band from the vibrant East L.A. scene was Los Illegals, formed in 1979 and fronted by vocalist and world-class Chicano visual artist/muralist Willie Herón. The title of their first album, *Internal Exile* (1983), encapsulates their transnational, hemispheric, *otro lado* [from the other side] perspective on Los Angeles. On the one hand, it names the existential condition of otherness many Mexican-Americans feel in their own homeland and hometown, as it points not only to the social and economic oppression of the “outcasts” from American “cultural insiderdom” (Campbell and Kean 17) but also indicates that the consequences of this oppression are epistemic estrangement and psychological alienation. On the other hand, it also suggests that the founding paradigms of the American Nation hinge upon a Freudian-type of repression of its Others, the abject millions pushed to the Nation’s dark subconscious. The band’s very name is bilingual and translates as “The Illegals.” It references one group, the undocumented immigrants, who have been subject to expurgation from the Nation’s conscience and consciousness by a dehumanizing rhetorical device of “illegal aliens.” They live, however, in the Nation’s underbelly. The band and its oeuvre attack the moral bankruptcy of the nation-state that produces and rejects them.

Claiming “prestige from below” (Lipsitz 16) and proudly naming themselves as Illegals, the group inverted the top-down hierarchy of the Nation, which builds its power upon claims to a bounded and secure national territory and requires the legality of residence confirmed by proper papers, that is, by the authority of literacy. The name expresses the group’s ethos, which embraces and valorizes illegitimacy. Their work, “tight, well-crafted sound that was more new wave than punk” (Doe 94) with vernacular lyrics in Spanish, English, and Spanglish, proclaims the primacy of oral forms of cultural expression and transmission.

Los Illegals’ song “El Lay” may serve as an example of their strategies of defamiliarizing the cohesion of the national narrative. The title is a play on the words L.A. and the Spanish for “law” in which, in the words of José David Saldívar, they

expose “the moral hypocrisy of Los Angeles” (288) by screaming about the ongoing economic exploitation of Mexican immigrants and their deportations by the *migra* despite them being productive and tax-paying (“*pagamos impuestos*”) members of the society and despite the state’s need for migrant workers. Saldívar calls the song a “transnational anthem,” in which “Los Illegals represent Los Angeles as it actually is for the millions of *indocumentados/as* and unhomely” (286):

*Parado en la esquina  
Sin rumbo sin fin  
Estoy in El Lay,  
No tengo donde ir  
Un hombre se acercó,  
Mi nombre preguntó  
Al no saber su lengua,  
Con el me llevó  
Esto es el precio  
Que pagamos  
Cuando llegamos  
A este lado?  
Jalamos y pagamos impuestos  
Migra llega y nos da unos fregasos  
El Lay, L. A.  
En un camión,  
Sin vuelta me pusieron  
Por lavar platos en El Lay me deportaban  
Mirar por el cristal,  
Sentí pertenecer  
Un millón ilegales, no podemos fallar  
Esto es el precio  
Que pagamos  
Cuando llegamos  
A este lado?  
Y porque no—podemos quedar  
Que Gronk, no borro la frontera?  
El Lay, L. A.  
Manos fijadas,  
Al fin en la frontera  
Lo dije que quería,  
Mejorar la vida  
Familia sin futuro, falta de respeto  
Adonde fue,  
La libertad y justicia?*

[Standing on the corner / Got nowhere to go / I'm here in El Lay,  
 Got no place to stay / A man came up to me / And he asked me my  
 name / Couldn't speak his language so he took me away / Is this the  
 price / You have to pay / When you come / To the USA? / We come  
 to work, we pay our taxes / Migra comes and they kick us on our  
 asses / El Lay L. A. / He threw me on the bus / That headed one  
 way / I was being deported, for washing dishes in El Lay / Looking  
 out the window, / I felt I belonged / A million illegals, we can't all  
 be wrong / Is this the price / You have to pay / When you came / To  
 the USA / I don't know why, we cannot stay / Didn't Gronk erase  
 the border yesterday? / We ended at the border, / Hands above my  
 head / I told him all I wanted, / Was a chance to get ahead / No fu-  
 ture for my family, can't even get respect / What happened to the  
 liberty / And the justice that we get?] (qtd. and trans. Saldívar 286-287)

Herón's and visual artist/performer Gronk's lyrics delivered over a wall of "over-amplified electric guitars and dizzying Afro-Cuban drumming" (Saldívar 288) record a story which has been continually recapitulated in consecutive generations—most recently in the vicious demonization and deportations of Mexican migrants in the Trump era—and which is a quintessential story of transnationalism, diaspora, belonging, and exile, of a dream offered and continually deferred. It is a story of immoral injustice. Narrating the border between the two nations—located not out there on the periphery but right here, on the streets of Los Angeles—the song highlights the crisis of contradiction at the heart of America: its lofty national ideology colliding against its insatiable appetite, which calls for and consumes the Other as raw material upon which the Nation's prosperity is built. *El ley* or the law of L.A. is thus the law of a gringo monster for which the values of liberty and justice are, at least as seen from below or a street corner, hollow signifiers. And the reaction of the Lyrical I "looking out the window" is one of incomprehension. The feeling of belonging clashes with the reality of deportation resulting in the protagonist's apathy, exhaustion, paralysis, moral confusion, humiliation ("no respect"), and therefore depression if by "depression" is meant, as Tomkins says, "a syndrome of shame and distress, which also reduces the general amplification of impulses" (355). This state of consciousness can also be described as Fredric Jameson's "death of the subject" (20).

If the Lyrical I of "El Lay" is the victim of the Nation's movement, which not only rejects the "illegal," foreign body but also tramples upon its humanity, the band's politics underscored ethnic pride, as well as their cross-cultural identity. This can be illustrated by the nomination of the "pachuco punk" they coined for their music and which reflects their bicultural sensibility and underscores the pride they took in the tradition of Mexican Los Angeles which the pachuco subculture of the 1930s and 1940s came to be synonymous with. In the era of what McWilliams calls the "iron curtain" (239) of racist prohibitions in Los Angeles, pachucos' over-the-top, flamboyant attires known as zoot suits or drapes were an eye-sore for the mainstream.

Zoot suits were part of the black fashion aesthetic as examples of Cab Calloway or Malcolm X illustrate. Therefore, the drapes symbolized also a type of cross-ethnic affinity exploding the dogmas of racial purity of the dominant culture. The pachucos' street presence brought to a halt the codes of propriety of the white settler society. Moral pundits detested them. Newspapers "seized upon the zoot suit as a 'badge of crime'" (McWilliams 243) creating a moral panic which culminated in the infamous Zoot Suit Riots of July 1943. Unapologetically the Other, pachucos were ideal icons not only for Chicano/a punk rockers.<sup>1</sup> Poet José Montoya, a veteran of the 1960s Chicano Movement, calls pachucos reverently: "Chicano freedom fighters ahead of their time" (135). To claim that legacy in the punk era was to celebrate a historical presence of a different nation within the Nation, it was to celebrate hybridity, and prestige from below. And, because, as McWilliams notes, "nothing makes for cohesiveness more effectively than a commonly shared hostility" (241) the adoption of the pachuco as an emblem of cultural pride signaled an acknowledgement and denouncement of historical and ongoing discrimination against the *Mexicano* community.

Other monikers Los Illegals used to describe their music with—"mariachi punk, heavy mambo, psycho cha cha, techno-flamenco, and flamenco metal" (Guerrero)—also reflected this type of consciousness which underscores a coexistence of difference within one body. And this type of bifocality was reflected not only in the group's nomenclature or musical textures but also in their activism. Wanting "to bring people from the West Side to see groups from the East Side" ("East L.A. Punk") Herón co-founded a weekly punk club called Vex in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of East L.A. The club featured Chicano/a punk rock outfits (The Brat, The Undertakers, the Odd Squad) alongside Westside bands like X and The Blasters (Guerrero). It became a venue where punks from different parts of the city came to dialog and cross-pollinate. As a result, the Westside was Mexicanized or subjected to "*pachucada*," while Eastside bands found opportunity to play in Hollywood and beyond. All in all, Los Illegals were programmatically differential and, in this sense, also transnational or cosmopolitan.

### Minutemen

Of course, Los Angeles is about much more than a binary split into East and West, and so was its punk rock scene. For example, Black Flag, pioneers of hardcore punk, were based in Hermosa Beach, the South Bay region of the greater metropolitan Los Angeles. And from another southern town, the port of San Pedro, came Minutemen.

San Pedro is a racially and ethnically mixed working class town. Watt says: "our community's got a lot of Latin, it's got a lot of Italians, got Slavs, when we were

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1 Perhaps the most outstanding homage to the pachuco culture is Luis Valdez's play *Zoot Suit* which premiered at Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum in 1978. Valdez moved the play to Broadway in 1979 and, in 1981, directed its film adaptation. The play was successfully revived under Valdez's direction in the spring of 2017 at the Mark Taper Forum.

an immigrant town. The whole tuna industry, chicken of the sea. That comes out of Pedro.” It was there that Minutemen, a power trio of guitar, bass, and drums was formed in 1980. They recorded four albums and eight EPs released on Black Flag’s SST label. They immediately gained popularity and were about to break into the mainstream when, in December 1985, guitarist/singer Dennes D. Boon died in a car crash. If their career was short-lived, their impact was lasting—the band’s influence is detectable in the work of, for example, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Jane’s Addiction, and others.

Propelled by one of So-Cal’s funkier drummers, George Hurley, they played high energy genre-bending material mixing hardcore punk with funk, jazz, psychedelic, experimental, and acoustic rock. Their motto was “We jam econo.” Their songs offered more for less—rarely longer than two minutes, they were packed with changes of tempo and rhythm, surprising melodic and chord progressions. From the English band Wire they took a liking to abstract, unorthodox, open-ended forms. As Watt explains: “band like Wire, you don’t have to have verse, chorus, verse, chorus, you just put it the way you want it!” For Minutemen, punk was synonymous with liberation of the self and nullification of borders: “Band like the Pop Group. If you like Captain Beefheart, if you like Funkadelic, put them in the same band. That’s what the Movement showed us. Movement was never [about] style of music.... Some skater made a sticker, and that was a quote from D. Boon, ‘Punk is whatever we made it to be.’” Motivated by a working class populist ethos, they made *it* first and foremost radically egalitarian in their sound or, as Watt says, Minutemen was “democracy in action” (*We Jam Econo*). Motown’s soul and funk productions inspired them to set each instrumentalist sonically apart. D. Boon enhanced treble on his guitar (making it sound almost country-like) in order to “leave room” (Watt) for Watt’s dense, distorted, virtuoso bass lines and Hurley’s powerful beats on raucous drums and sparkling cymbals. “[T]hat’s why D. Boon said the politics was in The Minutemen,” says Watt. In other words, their music thrived on contradictions continuously coming into contact. In this sense, the band’s sound reflected a radical idealism, an openness to a pluriversum of ideas from around the world. It represented a utopian space which can be interpreted as transnational and transcultural. In his post-Minutemen work, Watt has continued this legacy by engaging in collaborative and often transnational projects.<sup>2</sup>

If their music-making was idealistic and idiosyncratic, so was their approach to writing lyrics. On the one hand, heeding D. Boon’s suggestion that “[w]hatever we play just let them know it’s the Minutemen” (Watt), the lyricists Watt and Boon were bent on capturing the state of their personal consciousness. The lyrics were to capture,

2 Watt has collaborated, for example, with Italian musicians Andrea Belfi (drums) and Stefano Pilia (guitar) in the already-mentioned *Il Sogno del Marinaio*. *Brother’s Sister’s Daughter* is a project of Watt, Nels Cline (Wilco), and two Japanese musicians Araki Yūko, and Shimzu Hirotaka. *CUZ* is Watt’s collaborative project with Brighton-based Sam Dook.

what Boon called “thinking out loud” (Watt) and bring to the fore a ground-level local point of view. This was best done, as many Watt’s lyrics illustrate, by lyrical snapshots, free-association, imagist haikus, “[a]lmost cinema, movies. I am doing scenes. So little drama, little scene, little piece of Pedro, me and D. Boon... so we try to bring real personal things” (Watt). Parallel to this theme of auto-mythologization, many of Minutemen’s songs evince a political consciousness and concern with the world at large. It is here that that context of transnationalism comes into play, particularly in their critique of U.S. global military interventionism and, more specifically, its meddling in Latin America. Watt recalls: “D. Boon belonged to an organization called CISPES, Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. He took me to a meeting once. I think I asked some embarrassing question, like ‘Are we getting any guns?’” They understood not only the explicit rationale behind American policies—“the whole idea [of American interventionism]... goes back to our second [fifth] president, who says, ‘This is our backyard.’ James Monroe, little guy, Tommy Jefferson’s friend” (Watt)—but also were aware of the discursively-maintained hegemonic consensus around these issues: “this whole idea... you’re being taught stuff in school and they are not just things to answer on tests.” Watt highlights here the existence of cognitive presumptions which, buttressed by racism and derogatory prejudices, generate fantasies of U.S. normative grandeur or exceptionality against the backdrop of Latin American “indolence.” In the interview, Watt illustrates this by bringing up Mexico’s real name: “It’s just like ours... the United States of Mexico.... It’s the same fucking name but nobody calls it that. Why?” Watt finds in this a concise illustration of America’s normative programming of disdain for members of the hemispheric family which, fundamentally, serves to repress the dark side of the U.S. It is—to quote D. Boon’s song “Price of Paradise” featured on their last album *Three Way Tie (For Last)* (1985)—“a paradise... stained with blood,” where war is a financial investment and “young men die for greed.” Aiming to counter this logic, Watt recalls, the band felt a “kinship with Latin America” and planned to organize the “*real* American tour—North, Central, South.... that was a huge dream for us.”

Songs “I Felt like a Gringo” by Watt from the *Buzz or Howl under the Influence of Heat* (SST 1983) and “Corona” by D. Boon from *Double Nickels on the Dime* (SST 1984) were inspired by the band’s day trip to Mexico made on 4 July 1982. Both songs ingeniously correlate a personal self-examination, a transnational political critique, and the examination of the psyche of the Nation. In “I Felt like a Gringo” Watt says:

Got a ton of white boy guilt, that’s my problem,  
 Obstacle of joy, one reason to use some drugs.  
 Slept on a Mexican beach slept in trash—American trash  
 Thinking too much can ruin a good time.

I asked a Mexican who ran a bar for Americans  
 ‘Who won’ I said ‘The election?’  
 He laughed, I felt like a gringo,

They played a song and they had some fun with us

Why can't you buy a good time? Why are there soldiers in the street?

Why'd I spend the fourth in someone else's country?

The Lyrical I, a young American man on a hedonistic trip across the border, suddenly realizes the work of “things not just to answer on tests,” those tacit mental habits that should ensure “a good time” and a clear conscience. Somehow yet, the “white boy guilt” begins to weigh on him like a “ton”: finding himself in “someone else’s country” and allowed a glance at the United States from the other side, he realizes his undeserved privileges. He feels like a gringo. Following Silvan S. Tomkins’ assertion that “guilt is another form of the affect of shame-humiliation” (361), it can be said that, for Watt, to feel like a “gringo” is to experience self-conscious shame and humiliation. This is akin to self-alienation, that moment when one finds out prose, not poetry, is one’s tongue. This shame-humiliation arises as a result of what Watt witnesses abroad—American trash on a Mexican beach, Mexican elections controlled by “soldiers on the street,” a sarcastic laughter of a Mexican man—which momentarily alienates him from his own American identity built on hegemonic consumer certainties. To them, Watt realizes, he is morally complicit. Hence his loss of agency and subjectivity, and his communion with the Other: “*They* played a song and *they* had some fun with us” (my emphasis).

On U.S. Independence Day, he escapes the rituals of gregarious patriotism, its metaphorical and literal fireworks. Abroad, the contrast is striking and Watt is brought to a halt. Noticing soldiers actively manipulating the election process by giving out bread on the street, Watt recalls, forced him to put in parenthesis the idea of democracy encapsulated in the Declaration of Independence not only in Mexico but also in the U.S. Estranged from himself, he comes to an understanding that his recreation at a Mexican resort comes at a cost of unequal relations between the two countries. The image of American “trash on the beach” signifies not only the American transnational corporations’ stranglehold over Mexico’s economy and Mexico’s role as a waste dump for the U.S. It is also an ingenious metaphor for hemispheric (if not global), geographic and environmental relatedness. In other words, it conjures an imaginary horizon of transnational flows of economic resources and practices, as well as of natural phenomena; currency rates *and* ocean currents; the “global fluids” (Beck, “Rooted Cosmopolitanism” 21).

The song is also an indictment of tourism’s complicity in sustaining America’s tendency to privilege consumerism and tourist escapism mechanisms of moral evasion or ethical anesthesia. It indicates the toll the myth of a “good time” takes—a profound sense of alienation from both the hemispheric neighbors and the putative, taken for granted moral order back home. This is an important message to repeat today because, by focusing on illegal immigration, current debates about the border and the border wall represent cross-border human flow and the filtering

function of the border as almost exclusively unilateral South-to-North process.

In place of a resolution, the song ends in a series of rhetorical questions. They stand for the aporia Americans encounter when instead of the exotic/erotic promise of the South, encapsulated equally by Tijuana brothels and Herb Alpert's Mariachi Brass Band, the borderlands experience brings to the fore problems which precipitate the affective surge of guilt and loss of agency. Tompkins claims that "the nature of the experience of shame guarantees a perpetual sensitivity to any violation of the dignity of man" (358). In other words, following the loss of self, the narrator of the song is speaking to us already morally transformed, pluralized; something of *them* has remained and will live on in him. Thus, the moment of the guilt tsunami is a direct signal of contingency and plurality. It puts into question the "either/or" linearity and insularity as principles upon which the violence of exclusive differentiation upholds physical and mental borders.

"The border stands waiting for us to cross, or to detain us, but we are not supposed to live there," says Roger Barta (11). Yet this is precisely where Watt is now, a *gringo*, a resident of the borderlands. If "[t]he border is a line that demands straightforward behavior" (Barta 11), Watt now knows his strategy to become and remain whole must be both ingeniously "tangential" (Barta 11) and ethically activist. For him, it is a strategy of disidentification which calls for bartender's irony, a good song and a dose of ambivalence or that which Roger Barta calls "cleverly evading or escaping trouble confronted not head on but at an angle" (11).

A similar split in the consciousness—a sense of guilt stemming from a borderlands recreation and an ethical turn after a revelatory halt—can be identified in D. Boon's "Corona." "Corona" is a popular Mexican beer brand that stands here as a symbol of cheap ("five-cent deposit") entertainment Americans seek across the border:

The people will survive  
In their environment  
The dirt, scarcity, and the  
Emptiness of our south  
The injustice of our greed  
The practice we inherit  
The dirt, scarcity and the  
Emptiness of our south  
There on the beach  
I could see it in her eyes  
I only had a Corona  
Five cent deposit

The song begins almost as an anthem. D. Boon sings his heart out about the resilience of the "people." He is singing about the "in-their-environment" people. This is then a declaration of independence from coloniality, expressed in solidarity with the Indigenous people of Mexico and, by extension, of all of the Western hemisphere. The

South he witnesses, its “dirt, scarcity and emptiness,” is the proverbial Valley of Ashes of the U.S. It is a site that provokes self-examination. He realizes the interdependence and the entanglements between different parts of the continent. This provokes a self-indictment: it is “*our* greed,” passed down among *us* for generations that has produced this. In other words, the song records a surge of shame-humiliation over a collective moral guilt incurred by the U.S., the Nation, for its relationship with its southern neighbor, *our* junk yard.

In the second stanza, the repetition of “dirt, scarcity and emptiness of our south” reflected in the woman’s eyes suggests that it is not a Mexican but the speaker’s own, American, guilt he now sees. In this sense, he has been transformed and transnationalized if, as Beck holds, “[t]ransnationality refers to a revolution in loyalties” (“Rooted Cosmopolitanism” 19). “There on the beach” the experience is recorded as it unfolds. Tomkins teaches us that shame is communicated by the face, “[w]hen one hangs one’s head or drops one’s eyelids or averts one’s gaze” (360). When D. Boon reverts to his “only” Corona and engages in banality of the “deposit,” he is seeking such flight from shame. Tomkins says the act of looking in “the eyes of the other” (360) is directly connected with the taboo of shame. When we are put to shame, we turn our eyes away communicating and in doing so compounding shame: “both the face and the self unwittingly become more visible, to the self and others” (360). It is in this sense that “self-consciousness and shame are tightly linked” (360). D. Boon’s lines give poetic body to Tomkins’s model and embellish it as a moral transformation.

What is interesting about “Corona” is that in its few lines it is able to go from a political anthem into a deeply personal confession of self-defeat and back into a reassertion of resilience. If Watt retains in his song strategic “tangentiality,” D. Boon’s chorus (“the people will survive”) has a more direct activist appeal of “ethical glocalism” (Beck, “Rooted Cosmopolitanism” 27). The difference is in spirit not in substance, for both now have developed what Beck calls “a perpetual sensitivity to any violation of the dignity of man,” and have replaced the “either/or” logic of the “methodological nationalism” and “state-centered perspective” with “a multinational ‘this as well as that’” (“Rooted Cosmopolitanism” 17-19).

To conclude, each of the songs discussed here offers a distancing from the hegemonic Anglo-American (gringo) national ideology, epistemology, axiology, and historical imagination by focusing and bringing to the fore the experiential dimension of a specific place: the contact zone of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands. At the border, the methodological nationalism grinds to a halt as do the governing paradigms by which the mainstream American discourse and capital envision the U.S. in relation to its Others, either at home in “El Lay” or on the other side of the fence. It is the mainstream narrative in its ordered “either/or” linearity that is being othered here. All the songs examined above are anthems of independence from such a narrative of the Nation; if the Nation is understood, as Beck teaches us, to deny the otherness of the Other, then these songs can be taken to encapsulate “cosmopolitanism [which] is a recognition of the otherness of the Other” (“Rooted Cosmopolitanism” 26).

The Bags's song affirms the Other's agentive independence from the master-code by rehearsing the antitoxic anger script; Los Illegals renounce the gringo Nation's immoral work of exploitation/humiliation and stand in solidarity with the victims of transnational depression; Minutemen's songs record these transformative moments when the Lyrical I slips into the Other's shoes or, by the ladder of shame, ascends into a higher form of consciousness when the self disintegrates and one begins to perceive the universal humanity and our (unequal) relatedness. Beck proposes the term "cosmopolitanization" to describe "the interrelation between de- and re-nationalization, de- and re-ethicization, de- and re-localization" (*Cosmopolitan* 94). It seems to me that the songs discussed above constitute *par-excellence* spaces of cosmopolitanization because they are concerned with distancing oneself (or being distanced by forces beyond one's control) from the Nation and readjusting one's loyalties and moral compass anew.

In the case of Minutemen's songs, we can call this process of disintegration and refashioned readjustment to the Nation as the affect of a *gringo*. To be "gringoized" this way is to step onto the arena of disidentification, ambivalence, to practice "double consciousness," to experience the Jamesonian "death of the subject." It is to share in the condition hitherto reserved for the Nation's Other. These songs teach us how to approach such moments with dignity and honesty, so that they are turned into salutary or remedial instances of moral regeneration.

Beck says that cosmopolitanism "has become the defining feature of... the era of reflexive modernity, in which national borders and differences are dissolving." This is why, he adds, "a world that has become cosmopolitan urgently demands a new standpoint, the cosmopolitan outlook, from which we can grasp the social and political realities in which we live and act" (*Cosmopolitan* 2). It seems to me—and the punk rock songs studied here confirm this—that the reality of the market, political, ethical, and socio-cultural interdependence and its resultant possibilities defined by Beck as cosmopolitanism had already been palpable in places like Southern California and the Mexican-U.S. borderlands some forty years ago. It is in this sense that Los Angeles punk rock artists discussed above, as well as a number of other groups from the region, should be classified as belonging to "the exemplary communities of the transnational moment," a term I adopt here after Kachig Tölölyan, who proposed it to refer to ethnic diasporas (qtd. in Vertovec 4).<sup>3</sup> These artists were the early prophets and practitioners of cosmopolitanization and their words and music can be termed the soundtrack of "the cosmopolitan outlook," which holds, to use Beck's words, "the latent potential to break out of the self-centered narcissism of the national outlook and the dull incomprehension with which it infects thought and action, and thereby enlighten human beings concerning the real, internal cosmopolitanization of their lifeworlds and institutions" (*Cosmopolitan* 2).

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3 Other Southern California bands which can be included under this category are The Plugz, The Zeros, The Brat, and, the most famous, Los Lobos.

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