Work that Hoe: Tilling the Soil of Punk Feminism

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In this brief essay, Alice Bag presents the politics at stake within contemporary histories and writings on punk. For Bag, punk continues to inform countercultural productions and protest movements aimed at societal change such as the ongoing events at Tahrir Square. She argues for a feminist notion of punk that understands social change as a continuum; just as something came before punk which created the social context for it to occur (and provided meaning for punk) so too did something follow. This form of punk challenges dominant conceptions of the scene as white, heteronormative, and/or male-driven. Focusing primarily on the early days of the Masque, a small punk rock venue in central Hollywood, Bag remembers the diverse range of misfits that constituted the early L.A. punk community.

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Much of punk history and criticism has been written by people who weren’t there at the time. As an author, archivist, and the former lead singer of the Bags, one of Los Angeles’s earliest punk bands, I am in a unique position to describe punk as I lived it (and still do) as well as provide a forum for others who were there to share their stories and perspectives. I firmly believe that artists should document their own scenes and movements because history has a curious way of focusing itself through the biased lens of the dominant culture.

Until the turn of the millennium, one could easily have been forgiven for thinking that punk was largely a white, male, musical style which had its roots in either (a) disaffected but intelligent musicians in New York City or (b) disaffected, bored, and unemployed working-class youths in England. As the post-millennial generation took a look back at the last significant countercultural movement of the twentieth century, they discovered that there was much more to the story and that the reports of punk’s demise were premature.

Punk attitude continues to inform counterculture, protest movements, and popular actions aimed at societal change. Punk is not dead, but neither is it to be found in the local mall’s “alternative” clothing store. Punk is alive and well in Tahrir Square, in the planned actions and protests of antiwar organizations, in local organic farming co-ops who demand the right to take back control of their food supply, in the anarchic ideals of hacktivists who target corrupt governments and corporations.

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© 2012 Women & Performance Project Inc.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2012.721079
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under the flag of Anonymous. As we examine the antecedents of punk and specifically punk feminism, I’d like to make the point that all social change is a continuum; just as something came before punk which created the social context for it to occur (and provided meaning for punk) so too did something follow (Figure 1).

In the process of writing my memoirs, I discovered that I was able to situate my participation in the birth of the West Coast punk scene within a much broader historical context, one that was not at all obvious to me at the time. What started out as a series of autobiographical blog entries ended up telling the story of several social
movements that personally affected me: the Chicano movement, feminism, gay rights. My particular form of punk expression was also deeply affected by my childhood. I was born in East L.A., the daughter of Mexican immigrants and I entered the U.S. educational system as a non-English-speaking student.

The English immersion program that was thrust upon me denied the value of my Spanish oral language and I was reprimanded for using it. My name was changed to Alice by teachers who were unable to pronounce Alicia. My first few years of elementary school felt like a negation of who I had been for the first five years of my life. The main purpose was to roll me up like a misshapen clay sculpture and reshape me into the appropriate model of what an American student should be. I was being colonized within my own country but I was too young to realize it. It wouldn’t be until several years later when I saw a guy wearing a patch on his jeans with a brown fist encircled by the words “we are not a minority, we are a chosen few” that I started to suspect I was not part of mainstream America.

Around this time the Chicano Moratorium was held a short distance from my house. It was a march meant to protest the disproportionate numbers of Mexican-American soldiers dying in the Vietnam War. The deadly outcome of this event led to my identification as “other” and also made me acutely aware that this “other” was perceived as undesirable and had powerful and dangerous enemies. But other forces much closer to home had an even greater impact on me.

My father was a hurricane of a man whose forceful personality and abusive outbursts held my mother, my sister, and me captive. The relationships within my family and in particular the violence which my father inflicted upon my mother left a visceral impression of the unequal power between the sexes. I longed for a confrontation of equals and if my mother could not or would not stand up to my father, I knew that one day I would. Upon this fertile ground would fall the seeds of feminism, which the women’s movement of the 1960s was disseminating.

In junior high school, we girls had to wear dresses and hose regardless of the weather. It seems like such a small example of inequality but the older girls at our school circulated petitions and organized protests until this rule was changed. I remember the day it was announced over the loud speakers that girls would be allowed to wear pants: it was a small but meaningful victory. You could hear the cheering and whooping throughout the halls, the joyful sounds of young girls’ first taste of self-determination.

A few years later Billy Jean King would challenge a loud, chauvinistic braggart named Bobby Riggs to a tennis match that would bring national attention to women’s sports and to women’s issues. I discovered the word feminism about this time and immediately claimed the title.

Around the same time, I began to affiliate with friends who I later realized were gay or lesbian. In the early 1970s, being gay was much less accepted than it is today, so most of my friends were in various stages of coming out of the closet. I hadn’t identified myself as bisexual at that time, but witnessing the discrimination my friends had to deal with made me sympathetic to the struggle for gay rights and queer identification. Like Latinos and women, this group was seen as “other.” By the middle of the 1970s, many of those individuals who had been identified as
“different” or “other” were floating around in a vacuum, awaiting the spark that would ignite the next Big Bang. That spark was punk rock (Figure 2).

The early L.A. punk scene was made up of a broad range of individuals with a variety of motives for being involved. Early punks were rich, poor, gay, straight, male, and female, with a good sampling of L.A.’s ethnic diversity: Latinos, blacks, and Asians were all involved along with whites in the early days of the Masque. The earliest participants and movers behind the scene were united only in the sense of having been identified as “outcasts,” either by society or by themselves. We were different, proudly different, and wanted to express our creativity through our art, our music, our fashion, our way of life. Early punk was as much a rejection of the status quo as it was the product of the rejects of the status quo.

Together we were a band of misfits, creators of the space and the discourse that would sustain L.A.’s original punk scene. There was no white, male hierarchy in the
early scene and punk had not yet become associated with angry white boys. Instead, the women I interviewed for my archives repeatedly come back to the idea that early punk was a time and place where gender roles were discarded, where women were free to do as they pleased because no one had time to worry about what they should or should not be doing.

Similarly, it is my experience that race and class distinctions were, for the most part, suspended during the brief period that marked the birth of the West Coast
punk scene. Punk encouraged the discarding of old roles and old identities. With the widespread adoption of punk names like Kickboy Face, Tomata du Plenty, Darby Crash, or Alice Bag, ethnic identification relied solely on visual cues, but even visual cues to ethnic or sexual identity were blurred by our extreme hairstyles, make-up, and clothing. Thus, early punk participants forced a confrontation with stereotyped notions of identity and confounded expectations by offering a wholly unique and unexpected alternative view.

The punk revolution of the mid-1970s was the next logical step in a series of social upheavals and progressive movements, including gay rights and women’s rights. Early punk participants, disenfranchised by the status quo, grew tired of knocking politely at the doors of the establishment and decided to simply kick them down. The kinetic energy behind that kick flowed directly from antecedent movements. And just as energy can neither be created nor destroyed but merely change in form, the impetus behind the punk movement continues to inspire many of the revolutionary social and political movements of today. The creation and establishment of a new punk paradigm can only be properly understood in historical context with the social movements that led up to it and surrounded the punk revolution (Figure 3).

Notes on contributor
Alice Bag, Alicia Velasquez, stands as one of the few female pioneers of the early L.A. punk scene. Known as the riveting singer of the infamous L.A. punk rock band The Bags, Bag’s work landed her in Marc Spitz’ famous oral history of Los Angeles’ early punk scene, *We Got the Neutron Bomb*, and a cameo in Penelope Spheeris’ documentary, *Decline of Western Civilization*. At the same time, she is also known for her involvement in the concept band, ¡Cholita! with drag superstar, Vaginal Creme Davis and as a member of the feminist punk band, Castration Squad. She recently published a book of her memoirs, *Violence Girl – From East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage, a Chicana Punk Story* (Feral House, 2011), which is reviewed in this issue. You can visit Bag’s own archives of Women In L.A. Punk and numerous interviews she has compiled at www.alicebag.com/womeninlapunk.