
“(WHO DISCOVERED) AMERICA”: OZOMATLI AND THE MESTIZ@ RHETORIC OF HIP HOP

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This article examines the rhetoric of Mexican-American hip hop through the analysis of the music by the multicultural hip hop fusion band, Ozomatli, from Los Angeles. The objective is to examine how Ozomatli performs linguistic, epistemic, and musical-rhetorical border crossing that provokes cultural and social consciousness. As a cross-cultural site of analysis, Ozomatli embodies cultural mestizaje, mestiza consciousness, and mestiz@ rhetoric that illuminates social justice issues beneath surface-level beats and rhythms. Appointed cultural ambassadors by the U.S. government, Ozomatli navigates dominant systems of power while performing music that contests hegemony. Their mestiz@ hip hop draws from diverse musical traditions like banda, cumbia, merengue, ranchera and others while addressing transnational social justice issues of immigration, inequality, and revolution.

Introduction

The rhetoric of Mexican-American hip hop blurs the boundaries between Mexican and U.S. traditions and requires historical context for mestiz@ knowledge created in transnational spaces. Sharing a border, culture, and people, the traditions found in these Mexican-American hip hop productions created in one location can often be traced to—or in the very least are echoed in—the other. Mestiz@ theorist and rhetorician, Gloria Anzaldúa, conceptualized generative paradigms for cross-cultural meaning-making in her primarily English-language text *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), while employing both Nahuatl and Spanish languages. Anzaldúa’s work reminds readers that rhetorical productions in the U.S.-borderlands come as a

result of cultural *mestizaje*, and these productions come from traditions of both colonialism and resistance. To represent the borderlands, Mexican-American hip hop must represent the *barrio* and speak the “truth” to transnational issues of social justice that affect the migration of bodies, knowledge, and culture through the Americas (Viesca 2000; Kun 2004; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxqIROnk7WY>; McFarland 2008). In the larger discussion of Latin American hip hop, identifying Ozomatli as anything other than hip hop would enact erasure of the diverse Latin@ and non-Latin@ traditions that the group blends, blurs, and samples. From the context of the U.S., the category of hip hop provides both a taxonomy and signifier for the music industry and audiences who might confuse *merengue* for salsa, and conflate *cumbia* with *banda*, or mislabel and dismiss the L.A. group as “World Music.”

Formed in early 1990s Los Angeles, a multi-racial hip hop fusion group changed its name to Ozomatli—a Nahuatl word for the Aztec sun’s symbol of the monkey—from its original name, Todos Somos Marcos. More of a trickster, the name Ozomatli remains explicitly connected to culture and Chican@ nationalist rhetoric while acknowledging the indigenous Aztec roots of the Mexican and Mexican-American heritage. At the same time, the name Ozomatli is much more subversive in its representation of progressive politics that inform the development of critical consciousness and their evolving integration of musical genres that challenge traditional notions of authenticity and oppositional social justice politics. Ozomatli’s complex musical tapestry employs a distinctly hip hop methodology of appropriation, borrowing, blending, and sampling of traditions, influences, and rhythms. Additionally, the presence of non-traditional hip hop vocals in Ozomatli’s catalogue could be compared to the diversity of lyricism demonstrated by hip hop artists like Mos Def, whose vocals lean towards the melodic, most notably when performing as Yasiin Bey in songs like “No Hay Nada Mas” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xUB0bVfoWY>). While Ozomatli’s dance-friendly sound could draw negative comparisons from hip hop aficionados to fellow L.A. group, The Black Eyed Peas, the musical make up and lyrical content of Ozomatli more accurately parallels The Roots because of the integration of diverse musical traditions and live musical accompaniment that both groups employ and perform. The music of Ozomatli incorporates “[p]olyrhythms, syncopation, and prominent heavy bass lines [that] provide the African diasporic structure for

mariachi horns, Latin piano riffs, and Latin jazz melodies” (McFarland 181) while engaging with issues like immigration, race, class, and sexuality. This piece examines how the Mexican-American hip hop of Ozomatli embodies and performs linguistic, epistemic, and musical-rhetorical border crossing that provokes cultural and social consciousness. Ozomatli demonstrates a cross-cultural site of analysis that embodies cultural *mestizaje*, a mestiza consciousness, and *mestiz@* rhetoric that illuminates social justice issues beneath surface-level beats and rhythms.

The progressive social justice agenda of Ozomatli expressed in their bilingual lyrics with politically-informed messages echoes the opposition found in Public Enemy, whose Black national consciousness challenge hegemonic systems of white power; however, Ozomatli’s mainstream acceptance demonstrates that their complicity with political power is more subversive than it appears. Addressing political issues such as immigration, Ozomatli’s bilingual code-switching and code-meshing reflect a Mexican-American and Chican@ experience in Los Angeles that transgresses zones of cross-cultural contact. Originating in post-Rodney King riots Los Angeles, Ozomatli possesses a social justice ethos and produces—over the course of their almost twenty year career—upbeat songs that win Grammy awards and earn honors such as being named U.S. cultural ambassadors. At the same time, their music spreads messages of peace, resistance, and critical action that complicate their mainstream image as a neutral “celebration” of neoliberal multiculturalism.

Their multicultural mash-up of musical styles represents the intersections of emotionally-powerful rhetorical appeals to pathos while maintaining their credibility and ethos for integrating musical traditions of Los Angeles that reflect the experiences of that cultural space and beyond. In a National Public Radio interview with Ozomatli, saxophonist Ulises Bella describes the band’s sound and its inherent connection to the streets of Los Angeles:¹

[Y]ou drive down Sunset Boulevard and turn off your stereo and roll down your windows, and all the music that comes out of each and every different car, whether it’s salsa, *cumbia*, *merengue* or hip-hop, funk or whatever, it’s that crazy blend that’s going on between that cacophony of sounds is Ozomatli. (Ydstie)

Bella's description of the band is almost poetic in how he identifies the mixture of aesthetic influences. Still, these aesthetic choices are not without their ideological motivations. In the same interview, Ozomatli percussionist, Jiro Yamaguchi, points out that the group's political stances were endemic to the band's identity:

Our roots came from a community center where there was a stand-in and a sit-in ... And like for the first year, we did nothing but benefits behind different causes from, you know, the Zapatista movement to women's issues. And so we've always done that, and it's actually how we started. (Ydstie)

Ozomatli's political roots should come as no surprise given the social unrest of the Rodney King riots around the time of the band's formation in the very same city. Also, Ozomatli was additionally influenced by the oppositional consciousness exhibited by hip hop groups such as N.W.A and Public Enemy who preceded Ozomatli in Los Angeles and in the politically-oriented sub-genre of consciousness-raising—conscious—hip hop, respectively. The ethos of N.W.A's "Fuck tha Police" and Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," which address issues such as racial profiling, police brutality, and resistance to hegemony, can be heard and felt in Ozomatli's "Coming War" and "Embrace the Chaos." Though both songs are discussed in greater detail later, it is worth noting that these songs similarly renounce the criminalization of African Americans and Latin@s, and advocate for revolution in rhetorical calls to action. Not only have both "Fuck tha Police" and "Fight the Power" served as anthems against social inequality, but both songs also demonstrate a level of what I later define as subversive complicity through their achievement of mainstream success, despite their anti-establishment credibility. Because of Ozomatli's political roots, their cross-cultural aesthetic can be seen as a reification of their conscious ideology that "provides the subject with standards for making ethical and aesthetic decisions" (Berlin 479). Their ideology promotes messages of resistance and social justice that are represented by the integration of community and cultural influences.

Musical Roots

In this section, some of the diverse musical genres and roots that affect Mexican-American hip hop are identified. U.S. scholar Victor Hugo Viesca's work (2000; 2004) provides

insights into the socio-political context influencing Ozomatli and their emergence from Los Angeles where multiple cultural factors contributed to their musical inspiration. Despite the fact that the first productions of Mexican-American hip hop in the 1980s can be located in cultural centers such as Los Angeles or New York, the roots of Mexican-American hip hop and its relationship with political opposition go much deeper historically. In the PBS series², *Black in Latin America* (2011), Henry Louis Gates Jr. points out that the African roots in Mexican culture stretch back to the late 1600s. Gates notes that the hundreds of thousands of slaves entering through the port of Veracruz surpassed the number entering the U.S. As an example of the mixing of cultures, the dance and music of *fandango* demonstrates a cultural production with Spanish, indigenous, and African traditions. The description of the guitar-like instruments played in a percussive manner, almost *against* one another, mirrors not only the lyrical battles between hip hop MCs, but also the mixing of turntables that mix beats while scratching against the rhythms of songs to create whole new sounds.

Victor Viesca pays particular attention to the meshing of cultural traditions in Los Angeles, acknowledging the blending of traditional musical practices with genres predating hip hop. In “The Battle of Los Angeles,” Viesca discusses the integration of *son jarocho* as it relates to the Chican@ movement:

This turn toward traditional musical practices is similar to the experience of East L.A. band Los Lobos, who first used the *son jarocho* and other traditional Mexican music styles in their own Latin-rock fusions in the late 1970s. Their adaptation of traditional Mexican elements highlighted the impact of the Chicano movement in East Los Angeles just prior to their emergence. (725)

Echoes of the civil rights movement for Chican@s can be heard in the music of Ozomatli and others who continue to integrate traditional musical elements into their sound. The fusions of musical styles come as a result of living within Mexican-American culture and mainstream U.S. culture wherein the resistance to the mainstream gives birth to a distinctly mestiz@ sound.

With regard to Mexican-American culture in L.A., no other hip hop artist represented the explicit connection more than (Kid) Frost and his Chican@ anthem “La Raza.” The use of “*raza*” in (Kid) Frost’s song can be traced to José Vasconcelos’s (1948) canonical text *La Raza*

Cósmica, which was metaphorical in its utopian view of a cosmic race that was strengthened by its *mestizaje*. However, critics such as Viesca argue that (Kid) Frost and other Chican@ rappers remained susceptible to displaying sexist attitudes because “traditional notions of Mexican culture such as *la familia* or *carnalismo* (brotherhood) may reproduce within in it notions of the Chicana/o community as exclusively or predominantly masculine” (“The Battle of Los Angeles” 729). Despite the fact that (Kid) Frost’s “La Raza” came out it in 1990, the rhetorical topoi, or common themes, in hip hop still include sexism and homophobia, which are outdated compared with contemporary, inclusive manifestations of Chican@ social movements.

Similar to Ozomatli, the hardcore/hip hop L.A. group, Aztlán Underground, performs musical *mestizaje*. Viesca explains that Aztlán Underground possesses musical characteristics “layered with the percussion, flutes, and rattles of indigenous Mexico” (726). While Los Angeles bands such as Aztlán Underground integrate traditional genres of indigenous Mexico, Ozomatli’s aesthetic mirrors similar changes in Chican@ culture. Viesca further elaborates on the metonymy that Ozomatli provides for the shifting culture, social dynamics, and identity:

The music of Ozomatli reveals much about an important moment in the changing nature of Chicano culture while providing a window as well into the cultural and social dynamics of contemporary Los Angeles as a whole. The spatial context of Ozomatli’s emergence and their links to past musical movements helps historicize these changes and clarifies their impact on Chicano/a identity in turn-of-the-century Los Angeles. (“Straight Out of the Barrio” 445)

Although Viesca identifies Los Angeles as the primary locale for Ozomatli’s metonymy and representation of cultural *mestizaje*, similar emergences of subversive rap-rock can be identified in Mexico during the mid-90s. For example, the multi-genre group Molotov began playing their satirical blend of rap-rock that embodied a bawdy proletariat, or *naco*-like, sensibility in contrast to the established *rock en español* group, Maná. Naming their first album *¿Dónde Jugarán Las Niñas?* (1997), Molotov made light of Maná’s self-serious multi-platinum album title, *¿Dónde Jugarán Los Niños?* (1992). The subversive ethos that Ozomatli embodies in the U.S. could also be seen in Molotov’s tongue-in-cheek cultural criticism of what was perceived as Maná’s bourgeois, neoliberal social commentary. Poignantly, this particular

relationship between an established *rock en español* band and a then-emerging rap-rock group is salient to social criticism of economic disparity in Mexico and the U.S.

In the U.S., economic factors such as unemployment affecting people of color in Los Angeles contributed to the rise of themes of disenfranchisement in hip hop. The large population of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in L.A. listened to “‘*narco-corridos*’ of the Mexican *banda* music scene” that paralleled the gangsta rap of the era, which also glorified criminal participation in the drug trade (Viesca, “The Battle for Los Angeles” 723). *Banda* continued to serve as a musical genre of resistance becoming “more and more the music of Mexicans in the U.S., a music that refused to choose between assimilation and ethnic isolation” (Kun 749). Confronting the expectations of audiences accustomed to *narco* themes, more contemporary Mexican-American rappers such as Texas-native, Chingo Bling (Pedro Herrera III), appropriate a *norteco*, Tex-Mex style of dress, address immigration, and jokingly allude to drug-themed subject matter. On his *The Tamale Kingpin* (2004), Bling parodies the drug trade by describing the production and sale of tamales from his family’s trucks in much the same way that drugs are packaged and sold, additionally courting controversy about immigration with *They Can’t Deport Us All* (2007). While hip hop and *banda* have similar trajectories in L.A. and the greater Southwest, the integration of both styles by Ozomatli would once again represent both the block and the *barrio*.

For consumers of Latin@ culture, attention to transnational issues affecting both sides of the border between the U.S. and Latin America is becoming more important and, in many instances, expected. Producers of Latin@ popular culture who do not take this into consideration make themselves less relevant to socially-conscious audiences who desire cultural productions that reflect the culture, struggle, and resistance that they experience. To address the social justice issues of immigration, citizenship, sexuality, and governmental critique, this article examines selected lyrics from songs by Ozomatli that incorporate multiple musical traditions. The socioeconomic and political climates of Los Angeles in the 1990s contribute to how Ozomatli serves as a locus of enunciation that embodies a particular social epistemic. This article suggests that the rhetoric and ethos in Mexican-American hip hop originating from Los Angeles blends social consciousness and cultural awareness while

demonstrating how particular sites of analysis exemplify subversive complicity rooted in the mestiz@ rhetorical tradition. While the issue of authenticity will be revisited later, the intersecting discussions of hip hop and mestiz@ rhetoric demonstrate how Ozomatli serves as a site of analysis that embodies a differential consciousness infused with a social justice and community-oriented ethos.

Worldwide Mestiz@ Hip Hop

This section traces the lines of demarcation addressed by hip hop and mestiz@ scholars who discuss the nature of hip hop, notions of authenticity, and contact zones. Ozomatli contests and crosses these carefully articulated boundaries. Like the trickster monkey on the Aztec Calendar, Ozomatli represents numerous identities as a part of the culture of hip hop for the *bigger than hip hop* message of transnational social justice. Regarding transnational social justice, this article looks at the attention that Ozomatli draws to issues of immigration and inequality in and outside the U.S. Successfully navigating the workings of the hegemonic apparatus of the federal government that implements policies affecting immigration and systemic inequality, Ozomatli effects change by flipping the script with how they represent the U.S., though particularly when performing music that is critical of the U.S. to a worldwide audience.

In the hip hop genre, the question of authenticity (Neal 2004) continues to resurface with regard to “being real” and “*the real*.” The real is interconnected to the notion of “representing” a community, and by this rationale, “a Hip hop artist (be it graffiti writer, break boy/girl, deejay, or emcee), gives ‘authentic’ voice to the attitude, style, and collective identity of his or her hood and peoples” (Campbell 23). With regard to Mexican-American hip hop, the rhetoric is further complicated by the complexities of Mexican-American identity in the U.S. In McFarland’s “Chicano Hip-Hop as Interethnic Contact Zone,” he argues against simplistic paradigms of authenticity that frame hip hop as either purely “authentic” or stolen from black culture:

When attempting to understand nonblack participation in the culture, scholars have relied on notions of appropriation or exploitation of black culture ... [Contact zone]

framework rejects purist, essentialist understandings of expressive culture and instead sees culture as a wide-open field in which no single group can claim ownership. (174)

In line with *mestiz@* rhetoric, Ozomatli can *both* authentically “represent” Los Angeles *and* appropriate traditions from multiple cultures. This might have to do with their multicultural line up, though as it was explained above, the essentialist understandings of hip hop fail to take into consideration hundreds of years of cross-cultural interaction.

Hip hop music as a site of analysis for *mestiz@* rhetoric and rhetorical traditions from the U.S.-Mexico borderlands serves as an important locus of enunciation because hip hop encompasses diverse cultures and ideologies. In *Composition and Cornel West: Notes Toward a Deep Democracy* (2008), Keith Gilyard problematizes the characterization of hip hop as a coordinated movement. Gilyard explains, “Hip-hop is not a movement; it is a racial, ethnic, class, gender, age, and ideological constellation. This kaleidoscopic set of demographics precludes a political formation tied strictly to cultural taste that could be called anything as focused as a movement” (96). Because of the diversity of experiences encompassed by hip hop, *mestiz@* consciousness and rhetoric provide apt concepts for analyzing the spectrum of issues, arguments, ideologies, and cultures as part of the kaleidoscope of perspectives represented. McFarland describes the racial framework in the U.S. as one where people of color “interact with, borrow from, and create culture with one another in interethnic contact zones. Rap music and hip-hop culture are such zones.” (173)

Perhaps one of the most telling accomplishments of Ozomatli’s career is how the fusion of hip hop, folk music traditions, soul, and funk creates a contact zone with audiences from other cultures. Originally naming themselves Todos Somos Marcos in honor of EZLN’s Subcomandante Marcos,³ the group became more acceptable for mainstream audiences by renaming themselves with the less politically-overt Ozomatli. They became so socially acceptable that while George W. Bush was serving his second term in office, Ozomatli was asked by the United States government to serve as cultural ambassadors. The *Los Angeles Times* describes Ozomatli’s work abroad:

Since 2007, Ozomatli ... has been jetting to such countries as Myanmar, Vietnam, Jordan and Nepal to play free public concerts, host workshops, jam with local musicians and

convey goodwill in places where Westerners are rarely seen and not always welcome ... Ozomatli's U.S. government sponsors enlisted the group to perform as part of a long-standing cultural diplomacy program that was developed during the Cold War to win hearts and minds abroad for the American way of life. During that period, a number of mainly African American jazzmen, including Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie and Quincy Jones, were recruited by Uncle Sam to be the artistic face of America, touring many communist and developing countries. (Johnson)

While Ozomatli may have been chosen as cultural ambassadors due to their multiracial line-up and multicultural sound, the government most likely did not pay attention to the band's support of activism and social change. Still, compared to the band's first name, Ozomatli semiotically and linguistically represents less of an overtly oppositional message. However, the band's lyrics, political work, and mainstream acceptance demonstrate a consciousness that navigates and opposes dominant ideologies while transgressing static contact zones.

As cultural ambassadors, Ozomatli performed subversive complicity—working within the Bush-era governmental system to spread peaceful, community-oriented messages. Serving as representatives of a multicultural collaboration, Ozomatli traveled to Asia, Africa, South America, the Middle East, and India, while at the same time playing music that reflected social action, revolution, and racial and sexual equality. The band's work shows the need for what Chela Sandoval describes as an oppositional consciousness that “migrates between contending ideological systems” (30). In *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000), Sandoval explains that “[d]ifferential oppositional social movement and consciousness represent constructivist functions that perceive power as their world space, and identity as the monadic unit of power via subjectivity capable of negotiating and transforming power's configurations” (179). Ozomatli's role as cultural ambassadors reflects a differential consciousness, the performance of which is identified in this text as subversive complicity. To an audience like the Bush administration, Ozomatli's incorporation of *banda*, *cumbia*, and *merengue* appeals to neoliberal celebrations of diversity, thereby facilitating Ozomatli's appearance as complicit ambassadors; however, the danceable beats and rhythms mask the political messages transmitted in lyrics that contest governmental authority. In the song included into the title of this article, “(Who

Discovered) America?,” the U.S. is personified through the metaphor of the female lover “America,” who hypnotizes would-be suitors into becoming slaves or human sacrifices in the service of her endeavors. As an acknowledgement of the U.S.’s globalizing efforts, the song concludes with the warning, “She’ll stop at nothing to get what she wants.” From outer appearances, the group appears to conform to the role of U.S. cultural ambassadors as they continue to transmit their messages of revolution against the status quo.

The dance-friendly sounds of Ozomatli make their music translatable to non-English and non-Spanish-speaking transnational audiences. In addition to Grammys, the band also received the honor of being asked to write the song “Can’t Stop the Blue” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CY_5BKSRhU) for the Los Angeles Dodgers in 2008. “Can’t Stop the Blue” serves as yet another example of how the group has been accepted by mainstream power structures because of their performance of differential consciousness that has been termed subversive complicity (Medina 2013) as an extension of Sandoval’s notion. Ozomatli’s ability to work within dominant ideological structures while remaining critical of the very same structures in their music operationalizes Sandoval’s differential consciousness. Before analyzing the mestiz@ rhetoric demonstrated by musical selections of Ozomatli, the following section reviews the cultural influences on Mexican-American hip hop as well as the oppositional consciousness originating from these rhetorical productions.

Hip Hop and Linguistic Mestizaje

With regard to rhetoric and hip hop, language provides one of the most salient connections for how scholars of hip hop engage with Mexican-American rhetorical traditions. In Kermit Campbell’s *Gettin’ Our Groove On: Rhetoric, Language, and Literacy For the Hip Hop Generation* (2005), chapter two is introduced with a well-known quote from Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) about the connection between identity and language. The quote begins, “So, if you want to hurt me, talk badly about my language...” (Anzaldúa qtd. in Campbell ix). It is worth noting that both rhetorical scholars who address hip hop and scholars of the Mexican-American rhetorical tradition draw inspiration from Anzaldúa while focusing on the issue of language. For Latin@s in the U.S., the ability to speak Spanish and fluency in

Spanish share similarities with the controversial issue of authenticity in hip hop. In both cases, authenticity is often defined and recognized as a function of systems of power that serve to subjugate those not in positions of power (Bhabha 1994). In addressing language, Anzaldúa challenges colonial power by bridging indigenous, Spanish, and Anglo cultures through her new mestiza consciousness that conceptualizes the crossing between ideological borders.

In her analysis of German hip hop, *Hip Hop Literacies* (2006), Elaine Richardson addresses the linguistic variation of code-switching that mestiz@ rhetorician Anzaldúa and Ozomatli employ in their writing. Code-switching has been identified and described as going between two or more languages in the same utterance (Gumperz 1970); however, what is noteworthy of Richardson's work with code-switching is the relative absence of discussion of English-Spanish code-switching. Richardson's mention of Spanish is limited to noting that hip hop borrows from different languages including Spanish: "AAL [African American Language] speakers largely provide the language of Hiphop, with some words donated from Spanish, Caribbean Englishes, and graffiti vocabulary" (25). Perhaps more revealing of code-switching in Mexican-American hip hop is Josh Kun's (2004) examination of Spanglish in hip hop. Kun arrives at a more definitive assertion about the cultural asset of code-switching in Mexican-American hip hop: "Spanglish fluency is not a mark of being lost between languages, but precisely the opposite, of being a master of both" (752).

Anzaldúa's new mestiza consciousness has served as a theoretical framework that has opened spaces in the U.S.-Mexico and Mexican-American rhetorical tradition, in addition to numerous other traditions. In *Mestiz@ Scripts, Digital Migrations and the Territories of Writing* (2008), Damián Baca explains the impact of Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness on cultural intersections: "By perpetually transitioning between worldviews (cultural, economic, spiritual, gendered, and erotic), mestiza consciousness offers the possibility of 'thinking and writing from' the intersection of Mesoamerican and Western perspectives, where their collective expressions merge" (5). The hip hop written by a group like Ozomatli demonstrates mestiza consciousness through their Mesoamerican name, their navigation between worldviews, and their community-action ethos. While Ozomatli transitions among cultural traditions, incorporating

banda with DJs mixing hip hop rhymes and beats, they call for attention to, and action against, systems of oppression that affect their transnational audiences.

Theoretical Framework

Ozomatli incorporates rap and hip hop verse and rhymes and beats as a part of their diverse musical traditions (Viesca 2000) that are intertextual, transgressive, and socially-conscious. Mestiz@ rhetoric provides a framework for interpreting Ozomatli's brand of Mexican-American hip hop as a multicultural identity with (re)mixed English, Spanish, and Nahuatl roots that can be fragmented and contradictory. In a description of Ozomatli that also describes mestiza consciousness, Viesca explains that "They dissolve the binary oppositions between folk and commercial culture, between social movement culture and popular culture, between assimilation and ethnic nationalism" ("Straight Out of the Barrio" 446). Embodying mestiz@ rhetoric, Ozomatli perform and represent their heritage as cultural ambassadors and community activists while resisting clichéd assumptions about machismo and masculinity. For example, in "Gay Vatos in Love," Ozomatli references culturally relevant icons such as Luis Miguel and Morrissey who complicate hetero-normative definitions of masculinity through lyrics that transmit an empowering message of love for an LGBT community that has been critical of rappers like Eminem for use of homophobic slurs. By performing "Gay Vatos in Love" without elements of camp or irony, Ozomatli navigates the rigid binaries of sexuality with a mestiz@ consciousness, thereby breaking from the construction of heterosexual masculinity through the opposition to and subordination of homosexuality.

Because of the symbiotic relationship between Chican@ West Coast low-rider culture and African-American hip hop culture in Los Angeles, Keith Gilyard is correct in complicating the reduction of hip hop to a monolithic movement. Ozomatli's music symbolizes a particular version of mestiz@ hip hop characterized by their confluence and mixing of language, culture, and politics. The analysis of Ozomatli's lyrics follows Walter D. Mignolo's (1995) advocacy to "open up the possibilities of diverse and legitimate theoretical loci of enunciation" (ix). Ozomatli serves as a "locus of enunciation" and as a salient site of analysis from which the rhetoric of the

Americas can be interpreted through generative hermeneutics that read cultural productions as symbolic and telling of the knowledge of a place, and the historical trajectory of that space.

As noted above, the diverse Latin@ musical traditions of *fandango*, *son jarocho*, *banda*, *merengue*, and *cumbia*, by which Ozomatli are influenced, traverse the Americas, bringing with them pre-Columbian and Afro-Caribbean rhetoric embedded and embodied in these cultural practices. One explicit example of the rhetorical symbolism of pre-Columbian epistemology is the layers of embedded meaning signified by the Aztec trope of the Ozomatli monkey. Salient to this discussion are the rhetorical strategies of subversive complicity that can be identified by the playful associations with the God of Dance, in addition to allusions to the trickster trope found in Native American narratives and epistemology. As the band's symbol, the Aztec monkey demonstrates how pre-Columbian visual rhetoric continues to express symbolic messages of dance, celebration, and mischievous resistance. In much the same manner as the resistance of the indigenous in the Americas had to be hidden or mixed in with the Catholic symbolism after the Conquest (Balsera 2005), Ozomatli continues to perform music that generates resistant rhetorical productions from cultural *mestizaje*.

Ozomatli's music works to effect change on a transnational level by performing the "dropping of knowledge," or educational quality, that is an aspect of hip hop's greater cultural significance. And while Walter Mignolo advocates for the co-evaluation of literacy practices in spaces not always regarded as legitimate, James Berlin's notion of the "social epistemic" reaffirms the study of a rhetorical tradition's connection to the place and space where the knowledge is created:

This means that in studying rhetoric—the ways discourse is generated—we are studying the ways in which knowledge comes into existence. Knowledge, after all, is an historically bound social fabrication rather than an eternal and in-variable phenomenon located in some uncomplicated repository—in the material object or in the subject or in the social realm. (489)

Knowledge is a product of social interactions with language. Though Ozomatli's confluence of cultural traditions has been tied to Los Angeles as the site of enunciation for the social justice messages they promulgate, the knowledge they spread has a transnational effect. As a result of

their subversive complicity, they have been sanctioned to perform in transnational loci of enunciation where the multicultural social epistemic of mestiz@ Los Angeles spreads.

Analysis

By engaging with women's and LGBTQ issues, addressing immigrant rights, critiquing governmental control, and promoting social action, Ozomatli challenges neoliberal and neoconservative expectations in the U.S. Concurrently, the group employs familiar musical traditions such as *banda*, *cumbia*, *merengue*, and *ranchera* to Latin@ audiences who can relate to the subversive lyrics because of the socio-political context of L.A. and the tradition of protest in Latin American music (Garsd 2011 and 2012).⁴ An analysis of some of the group's catalogue reveals how the interplay between musical traditions and social justice advocacy demonstrates mestiz@ rhetoric. The mestiz@ blend of hip hop, *banda*, *cumbia*, and *merengue* sounds can be heard in songs with political messages like "Cumbia de los Muertos," "Coming War," "Embrace the Chaos," "(Who Discovered) America," and "Gay Vatos in Love." These songs accurately portray the diverse sounds and socially-conscious ethos of Ozomatli; additionally, the transnational contexts in which they perform these songs provide another layer of meaning to their calls for equality and social change.

In "Cumbia de los Muertos," (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKCOvXDgST8>) Ozomatli performs subversive complicity by using the Spanish verses to discuss the dead in the Mexican tradition of Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), and challenge hip hop conventions about violence. "Cumbia de los Muertos" describes the living dancing with those family members who have died while criticizing the violence in the community. When the rapping verses come in, the subject of death focuses on raising social awareness by criticizing premature, wrongful deaths: "Giving shouts to these victims of wrongful death / Now, soon as we're rid of society's small terrors / The sooner these teenagers don't have to be pallbearers / And carry their pals nearer to graves premature the cure." Given Ozomatli's formation in Los Angeles and the fact that the theme of violence serves as a topos in hip hop, the group's criticism of youth violence differs from how *narco-corridos* and gangsta rap aggrandize the topos in epideictic rhetoric. Instead of glorifying death as a tragic and praiseworthy end for

people engaging in street life, “Cumbia de los Muertos” problematizes this topos as a necessary reality by introducing beliefs held in the Mexican-American community about interacting with spirits and their memory. Though mainstream audiences might not relate to the Día de los Muertos beliefs, Ozomatli expresses these ideas in Spanish for audiences who are already familiar with them: “Cierta gente sólo puede ver / espíritus bailando entre la gente. / Si pueden verlos bailando mis hermanos / serán bendecidos entre los cielos / Mira cómo baila mi mamá. / Bailando con mi hermano del pasado / sus espíritus se juntan bailando.” Code-switching to Spanish, Ozomatli makes their message more clearly to “*cierta gente*,” or their intended audience while making their culturally-relevant subject matter less accessible to unfamiliar audiences. Lourdes Torres (2007) explains the complexity of the strategy of code-switching and the variety of access it facilitates, making use of “strategies they [writers in Spanish and English] use lend themselves to multiple readings and differing levels of accessibility” (76). They simultaneously condemn youth violence while providing lyrics that comfort those affected by these premature deaths.

What might be considered the most overtly oppositional track from *Ozomatli* (1998) is “Coming War,” a more straight-forward hip hop song with horns reminiscent of 60’s conscious funk and R&B roots. Accusing the government of inciting revolution by blaming African Americans and Latin@s for societal problems, the lyrics say, “We got guns and drug trafficking / Government will be backing / And blaming Latin and African brothers for dirty work done / The shit they do not only hurts young / But it’s provoking revolutionary circum-/stances.” “Coming War” alludes to a potential race war developing due to social and racial tensions created by the government’s economic neglect and as a result of the police (over)enforcement in Los Angeles that disproportionately targets young people of color. The song warns of the tensions that resulted in both the 1965 Watts riots and the 1992 L.A. riots. Ozomatli challenges the tendency of politicians to lay blame on working-class people of color who have no voice: “At the very moment when political and economic leaders scapegoated multilingual ‘mongrel’ communities and cultures, music groups associated with the East L.A. scene challenged the cultural and political pre-tensions of white / Anglo culture” (Viesca, “The Battle of Los Angeles” 735). Viesca’s use of “mongrel” demonstrates how mestiz@ rhetoric embodies Ozomatli’s positive

production of hip hop despite the negative depictions of multiculturalism by racist ultraconservatives that are more concerned with the policing than the educating of these marginalized communities.

The title-track of *Embrace the Chaos* (2001) includes verses with rapper Common (Sense), a figure serving as a metonymy for conscious hip hop—the subgenre of hip hop that deals with political and social issues—that address violence against women while returning to the theme of revolution. From “Embrace the Chaos,” “The way a man beat his woman, feeling that he love her / The way five children get killed by their mother / Parts of the universe still to discover / The real uncover fake whether love or hate / For revolution, chaos we embrace.” As a message of consciousness-raising, the song addresses the conflation of love and violence against women, thereby drawing the attention of audiences to social problems like inequality and socially constructed “fake” conventions about love. The return to revolution as a response to hypocrisy mirrors Chela Sandoval’s articulation of love as a “set of practices and procedures” (140) that works as a part of differential consciousness to challenge dominant ideologies. In keeping with Ozomatli’s message of social justice in “Embrace the Chaos,” Sandoval reminds readers that the revolutionary figure of Che Guevara framed his motivation for revolution as an act of love: “[t]he true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love” (qtd. in Sandoval 139). Ozomatli invokes revolution out of love and as a call for social action against acts of violence toward women and children.

In “(Who Discovered) America?” from *Street Signs* (2004), Ozomatli provides a salient example of subversive complicity. Predominantly in English, the surface story of the song deals with a man in love with a woman. The man has to cross a sea to be with her, which refers to the parenthetical “(Who Discovered)” in the title reminding audiences that the track is more than a superficial love song. Towards the end of the piece, the singer whispers “There was more to my queen than first met the eye / She had a chain of lovers who died her slaves / With a notion of blood for every drop that she gave.” Because this verse comes as a whisper, the audience can choose to ignore or draw in closer to hear this verse. The song addresses the allure of the United States while pointing out the physical toll that the country demands of its inhabitants, whether or not they choose to pay attention to their history of slavery and the current

exploitation of immigrant inhabitants. Considering the United States from a transnational view, Craig Werner asserts that, “America gives her suitors whatever they desire—silver, sex, gold—and all she asks in return is your soul ... Reducing those who fall under her spell to slaves, America demands ‘oceans of blood for every drop she gave’” (348). On the local level, Josh Kun focuses on the parenthetical “(Who Discovered)” in addressing the political context of California and how Mexican Americans in California continue to be framed as minorities despite their majority status. Kun explains that “[t]his rhetorical deportation of California Mexicans was, to say the least, a bold move ... to have a ‘majority minority,’ with whites occupying a minority position for the first time since the nineteenth century” (741). The dismissal of Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants from California prompts Ozomatli to ask how it is that white European-American history continues to celebrate the “discovery of America” despite the fact that this historical narrative omits the subjugation of the indigenous natives and mestiz@s. Additionally, the repetition of the chant-like chorus of “Ah, America /Ah, eh, ah” appeals to the nationalist ideology of U.S. audiences who willingly ignore the bloodshed that began at the country’s “discovery” and has continued exploiting transnational workforces as in the *maquiladoras* on the U.S.-Mexico border (Wright 2006). The un-enunciated chorus of “Ah, eh, ah” following the soulful crooning of “America” draws attention to what is unmentionable in association with the “beauty” of America, as well as the vocal opposition that dares not explicitly enunciate criticism for fear of reprisal. The parenthetical “(Who Discovered)” serves as a subversive reminder of this glaring historical omission within a song than can be reductively misunderstood as an uncritically patriotic anthem about the U.S.

In “Gay Vatos in Love,” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9KjGXtPRfk>) Ozomatli’s performance of mestiz@ rhetoric and a mestiza consciousness can explicitly be seen in challenges to heteronormativity. In mestiza consciousness, the rigid constructions of gender and sexuality no longer adhere to strict societal norms. Ozomatli refers to musicians like Morrissey and Juan Gabriel in “Gay Vatos in Love” because they hold relevance to Mexican-American culture as subversive social assumptions of masculinity. Ozomatli sings, “Gaby and Mando walking through the park / Looking for love in protection of the dark / Club Cobra, a temple in the night / The more I hear of Morrissey, the more I feel alright / (Chorus) Gay Vatos

in Love... / Juan Gabriel says, 'Amor es Amor.'" The inclusion of Morrissey plays with the cliché of "all Mexicans love Morrissey." However, Morrissey symbolizes an artist who deals with issues of rejection and alienation. The allusions to Morrissey and Juan Gabriel refer to artists whose sexuality remains intentionally ambiguous, though publically called into question. Additionally, the song title of Juan Gabriel's "Amor es Amor" relates to the theme of sexual equality while implying that love between queer people is the same as love between straight people. When the couple Gaby and Mando seeks "love in protection of the dark," the "protection" is from homophobic community members. In the section of *Borderlands/La Frontera* entitled "Fear of Going Home: Homophobia," Gloria Anzaldúa explains that "[f]or the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality" (41). Ozomatli contests clichéd notions about Chican@ machismo by singing a love song for the homosexual members of the community who do not have their romantic relationship represented equally in mainstream cultural productions. In doing so, Ozomatli breaks from the masculinity of the Chicano nationalist movement. Instead, they engage with issues of sexuality in songs like "Gay Vatos in Love" that seek to normalize what has been made "Other" by misogynist hetero-normative paradigms.

Conclusion

Like the contested border that separates the U.S. and Mexico, Mexican-American hip hop draws inspiration, rhythms, and beats from the Afro-Caribbean area, South and Central America, South Central and East Los Angeles, *conjunto* border *corridos*, and indigenous traditions and practices that embody borderlands and mestiz@ rhetoric. As an oeuvre, Ozomatli's catalogue maintains upbeat, dance-friendly rhythms that complicitly provide a background anthem representing Los Angeles, yet the lyrics call into question not only governmental practices, but also mainstream assumptions about hip hop. Ozomatli produces hip hop for conscious consumers who recognize how their cultural relevance represent the mestiz@ rhetoric that resists hegemony while navigating the apparatuses that regulate society. Ozomatli successfully performed songs of revolution while serving as ambassadors of the Bush-

era government that forwarded an agenda of the military industrial complex. Ozomatli also released award-winning music during a period when the music industry became increasingly precarious with the shift from compact discs to mp3s and pirated music. Because both politics and media influence social constructions of identity and culture through policy and products, Ozomatli's touring and musical productions serve as manifestations of their ability to survive oppressive ideological systems of government and capitalism. Damián Baca reminds us that "[m]estiz@ cultures have continually adapted to new social realities while at the same time retaining roots in older Mesoamerican civilizations. Mestiz@ rhetorics, then, are discursive manifestations of continuity and adaptation that comprise this survival" (4). Hip hop artists, as rhetorical producers of culture, change and evolve as a part of the process of coming into a consciousness that thinks globally, yet raps locally.

The polyrhythmic drums break the beats of *banda* and bounce to the accordion of *conjunto* while social constructions of class, sexuality, and citizenship are called into question through the rhyming in time to the Afro-Cuban clave. For those who ask what is happening in hip hop, they need only roll down their windows and listen to the news coming to them from the loudspeakers cranking out tunes from a *quinceañera* or from the corner hip hop battle where the next Plato jots down the rhymes from the *barrio* Socrates who squashes sophistic MCs. In the U.S., Latin@ consumers exist in both the worlds of their culture and Anglo culture. Ozomatli materializes the feelings of these *gente* and transmit their messages through the discursive critiques of government, police, and policy. In a NPR interview, one of Ozomatli's founding members and saxophonist, Uli Bella, attests to the necessity of evolving as artists: "we're always evolving and we've always seen each album as like almost a different chapter in this—[the] big book of what Ozomatli is" (Ydstie). If Ozomatli is not a book, then they are the newswire reminding consumers that their responsibility is to dance, think, and act.

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Notes

¹ The transcript and interview can be found at National Public Radio, NPR.org: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10268539>.

² The full episode is available on PBS.org: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/black-in-latin-america/featured/full-episode-mexico-peru/227/>.

³ “Ozomatli, who originally called themselves ‘Todos Somos Marcos (We are all Marcos)’ in honor of the *subcommandante* (sic) and spokesman of the EZLN, have played at several concerts to raise funds for the movement in Chiapas” (Viesca “The Battle of Los Angeles 731).

⁴ To hear “El Pueblo Unido: More Latin American Protest Song,” visit <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/05/162384391/el-pueblo-unido-more-latin-american-protest-songs>.