

THE SPITBOY RULE

Tales of a Xicana in a
Female Punk Band



MICHELLE CRUZ GONZALES



Preface by
MIMI THI NGUYEN

Foreword by
MARTÍN SORRONDEGUY

Race, Class, and Spitboy



My Grandma Delia hadn't been expecting us, so her short hair was a troll doll mess, she didn't have her eyebrows drawn on, and she wasn't wearing any lipstick. But I figured she'd be home, being as it was a Sunday evening and she was seventy-five.

"Mi'ja!" She looked confused and surprised when she opened the door and saw me there with the other Spitwomen all in mostly black, dirty jean shorts over leggings, boots or heavy Doc Marten shoes, tattoos, and faded tank tops.

Spitboy had been playing a series of shows in the LA area, including a big festival in Long Beach, and we were on our way back to the Bay Area. I couldn't drive past my Grandma Delia's East LA freeway exit without stopping, and I wanted the Spitwomen to meet her. A tough old broad, she speaks with an accent, speaks and cusses in both English

and Spanish, and was born and raised in the United States after her parents came from Mexico during the revolution in 1918. In her own proud-to-be-American, culturally Mexican, don't-tell-me-what-to-do-I-can-make-up-my-own-mind way, she was and is a feminist too.

I gave her a big hug in the doorway and explained that we had been playing music in the area and that we were on our way home. Her house was just off the freeway in Lincoln Heights. As we turned onto Workman Street, I had pointed out General Hospital where I was born and explained that this was East LA, the place my family is from.

"Do you want me to make you something to eat?"

"No, Grandma, we can't stay long. I just wanted you to meet everyone."

"Come in, come in." She opened the door wider so we could all pass by. "Where are my manners?"

The Spitwomen lingered on the porch behind me, uncharacteristically quiet, even Adrienne, who always smiled and introduced herself to everyone anywhere we went. Once we made our way inside the house and once someone shut the heavy metal screen door behind her, Karin scanned the room. The way her eyes fell over every item made me aware of just how many knickknacks, photographs, and wall hangings lined the small combined living room/dining room, including the one that said, "Home is where you can scratch where it itches." Adrienne stood in faux-leather pants with her hands clasped in front of her, and Paula smiled politely.

"Grandma, this is Karin." I pointed at Karin. "She plays guitar in the band. This is Adrienne; she sings, and Paula plays bass."

"Hello, please sit down," Grandma said, for all three of them had filed around behind the coffee table in front of the couch.

I could tell that Grandma Delia didn't know what else to say.

They sat down on the couch; Karin on one edge, her head near the macramé plant hanger with the peace lily spilling out of it. She had the same expression on her face during a discussion that we had a couple of different times driving to shows. It was a discussion about my family, or really just a series of questions.

"You and your brother and your sister all have different fathers?"

"Yes, we each have a different father," I'd say, not sure why the question, one that she had asked me before, made me uncomfortable. Karin, Paula, and Adrienne's parents were all still married, maybe not all happily, but Karin's parents were actually very nice and not dysfunctional at all, the kind of family that owned an Audi and a commuter car, had straight teeth, and didn't lose their tempers.

"So each of you has a different last name?" She furrowed her brow.

Feeling like I should defend my mom, I'd explain how she got pregnant with me in high school but left my dad when I was eight months old because he abused her.

This was something I figured that she'd understand since we had written a song about domestic violence.

"She got together with my brother's dad who helped her leave my dad, but they never married and were only together for a couple of years. Later, my mom married my sister's dad and had my sister."

Since we didn't think marriage was cool at all, I added that my mom was no longer married to my sister's dad, or anyone else, that she had sworn off marriage forever.

I followed Grandma, who wore what she called a pair of joggers and a faded cat sweatshirt, to the kitchen, so we could chat a minute and because no one else seemed to have anything to say. When it was warm she always wore a housedress.

"How are you, Grandma?" I asked once we were in the kitchen.

"I'm fine; you know, getting older every day." She ran her finger through her hair and smiled. Her nails looked freshly manicured, oval-shaped and bright red.

She handed me two glasses filled with water so I could help her carry them, one of narrow ribbed glass and the other of tin, the kind from the seventies, each in the set painted a different color and designed to keep your Kool-Aid really cold.

The Spitwomen were still sitting quietly when my grandma and I got back into the front room and handed each a glass of water. Karin was still looking around the room with her nose in the air; Paula, who

always wore her short hair in a ponytail, looked as if she was trying to think of something to say; Adrienne was sitting with her hands folded in her faux-leather lap.

"Sit down, mi'ja," Grandma motioned to her chair, beside which sat her basket of embroidery projects. I could see that she was working on a design of a Mexican woman carrying a jug of water on her shoulder.

I sat down, and each of the Spitwomen took a sip of her water and set her glass down on the coffee table without saying a word. They were never this quiet, ever. I didn't know what to do. Grandma read my anxiety and tried to fill the awkward silence herself.

"You girls must be tired, driving all that way."

They all nodded.

"You see that picture there," she said, pointing to a black metal shelf by the door, "That's Michelle's mom and dad when they were in high school."

I winced when she called me Michelle because they never called me that; they only ever called me Todd.

"They were at a dance. Your mom looks so pretty, don't you think so, mi'ja?"

I always thought she looked much older than sixteen or seventeen, with her hair in a sort of a ratted, late-sixties, beehive bun. And my dad, short, dark skinned, with thick black hair; I looked like him with my hair cropped close to my head the way I was wearing it then, in a sort of Mia Farrow *Rosemary's Baby* haircut.

I nodded at my grandma and smiled, but I felt sad. I didn't know what to say now either and that just made it worse.

Stopping had not been a good idea at all. We should have stayed on I-5. I should not have suggested that we veer off into the second-largest Mexican city in the world. I had made everyone uncomfortable, and now I was outside of my body, seeing my adored Grandma and her shabby East LA home, which I had always found tidy and comforting, her knickknacks, which they probably called tchotchkes, and all her family photos of Mexicans, and now myself through different eyes, and I didn't like it one bit.

When we left LA, we didn't talk a lot in the van on the long drive over the Grapevine on I-5. There was plenty to say, but I would have had to find the words and the courage to say what was on my mind. I didn't have it, nor would I for a long time, but it would fester inside me like an angry tumor that would grow and grow until I couldn't pretend it wasn't there anymore.