

# “Community College is the Punk Rock of Higher Ed”: Michelle Cruz Gonzales<sup>1</sup>

Interview by Gregory Zobel, Western Oregon University

## Introduction: Or, Why Interview Instead of Analysis?

Academia, composition in particular, is overwhelmingly white. Plenty of scholarship reviews, discusses, and analyzes the situation—and yet diversifying the field and removing structurally racist hurdles is slow. Analysis, critique, and discourse may appear acceptable, but in terms of intellectual work that fosters action to break down structurally racist walls, we need to more consistently apply diverse tactics in scholarship and publication. European-Americans need to step aside, admit our failure to bring equity, and look to oppressed and radical communities for leadership. One path is learning from educators of color and oppressed communities about their practices and pedagogies. An interview offers an opportunity to understand an educator more on their own terms while making the interviewer’s frames or bias explicit. Interviews offer a chance to better

understand how other educators work, and they can provide professional development. Equally important, interviews can fuel anti-racist, anti-authoritarian, and anti-colonialist work and understanding within as well as beyond academia and the classroom. Equity for everyone. Finally, by interviewing in and using accessible language, educators can try to avoid the classist and exclusionary mistake of engaging in elitist, self-referential, and non-applicable academispeak.

## Brief Biography

Michelle Cruz Gonzales’ public and professional life intersects in, but is not limited to, the realms of being Xicana, punk rock, and an educator. As she makes clear in her interview, her personal and professional identities are largely defined by being a Xicana practitioner of Orwell’s anti-authoritarian cultural and writing practices. Author of *The Spitboy Rule*, Gonzales agreed to share her time to talk about teaching and working as an anti-

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<sup>1</sup> All images used with permission from the interviewee.

authoritarian and punk rocker in education.

**How did you get into teaching writing? Was it something you wanted to do, do you really like writing, or...?**

As soon as I went back to school full-time in 1998, at the age of 28, I knew that I wanted to teach writing. I had been a preschool teacher all during the 90's while playing drums in a punk band, and I focused a lot on early literacy. Being one of the primary lyricists for Spitboy cemented my view of myself as a writer, and so when I finally was able to go to school full-time, and had transferred to a four-year college, I had a professor, who helped me see that I what I should really be teaching was college English. So, I both love to write and teaching writing, and maybe more importantly critical thinking and argumentation.

**What courses are you teaching? From what I could find, you teach composition courses as well as creative writing. Are these the standard college comp courses, basic writing, or...?**

At the community college where I teach, we are all generalists. We, when we hire, don't care much at all if people have PhDs or if they've published a bunch of books. What we care about is teaching practice and pedagogy. The standard English courses at CCs are basic skills course (remedial), college comp, and critical thinking. The last two are required to transfer to a four-year and can be taught using literature or nonfiction. I generally

teach English 4, which is the lit version, and my course is a dystopian themed



Figure 1: A sketch of Gonzales in her role as a drummer.

course. I have become a specialist, of sorts, in this area, but I also teach basic skills and creative writing courses. I really enjoy teaching all the levels, but if I had to pick a favorite, it would be the critical thinking course, as it's closest to what I did in a punk band.

**Which part of teaching writing do you find most politically charged? What's most empowering for your students?**

For me, the most politically charged part of teaching is the fact that I am a Xicana English instructor. I have had several students directly and indirectly challenge my authority because I am a short, small-framed, relatively dark-skinned woman. Being a person of color in a power of authority can create all sorts of tricky dynamics, many that I learned

quickly to deal with thanks to my training as a preschool teacher. I teach in Livermore, CA, a part of the Bay Area that is not as liberal as Oakland, where I live; it's a place where people often feel particularly self-conscious choosing to teach works that focus on people of their own or similar background, but I've never let that stop me from doing it. Race and class are academic topics, topics that students need to learn to discuss intelligently and politely, which brings me to the most empowering thing for my students and that is helping them learn to do that, even if that means starting with the basics like race/ethnic nomenclature. When it comes to teaching critical thinking, I don't hide my own views because it seems very disingenuous, and really there's no such thing as being totally unbiased. I work very hard to preface my own beliefs, versus fact, with the phrase "this is my personal opinion."

**Is teaching an extension of your politics? How do you see them as being connected?**

Yes, totally, but my primary aim is NOT to encourage students to think the way I do—sure it's great when they do, but my primary concern when teaching writing or critical thinking is clarity of ideas and soundness of logic. I have read several essays that I disagreed with, essay that were terribly convincing and that got As. I always tell students who write these essays that their essay didn't change my mind, but that it was convincing and that it did alter the way I see this issue

somewhat when it's warranted. Expecting students to think like you, even if you're convinced you're right, is a particular kind of tyranny and abuse of power that I totally disagree with. I am definitely a disciple of Orwell.

**In your experience as a working educator, where do you find authoritarian controls to be the most problematic?**

Well, I think I've hinted at some of these types of authoritarian control in the previous question. You always hear students complain about the prof who they believe graded them down for their beliefs. Some teachers do this, though I haven't seen it too much. However, it's also true that some students misunderstand all the areas in which they are being graded and that being graded down for faulty logic is not the same as being graded down for their ideas. A good instructor will do everything they can to make sure that students understand the difference. Another way to answer your question would have me focus on the teacher persona. Many instructors go wrong by adopting a persona that is authoritarian in order to maintain control over their classroom. Some do this because they don't know any other way to teach; some do it because they are actually afraid of young people, and others do it because they can't resist asserting their authority over others. I believe that instructors ought to work on dropping the persona and just be authentic. Students will warm up to you and trust you faster—they will also feel safer, which is,

according to brain science, necessary for learning.

degrees, started at a CC. While I don't teach primarily in these programs, I have



Figure 2: Gonzales answers interview questions.

### **How do your politics impact your pedagogy? Your assignment creation and curriculum?**

Maybe my ethnic identity impacts my pedagogy more than my politics though the two are certainly related. I teach in the Puente program, which is a transfer-focused program, open to all students, but that targets Latinx or other students of color, and I am on the council of elders for the Umoja (Black recruiting) learning community. The state of CA allocates Equity and basic skills funding for the purposes of working toward the elimination of disproportionate impact of any group of students, and like many CC campuses, Las Positas College faculty are hard at work creating programs whose pedagogies and curriculum both attract and focus on the development of black and brown students in academia, as the majority of black and brown students with

always taught ethnic literature or literature by women in my courses, as I have long realized the importance of not relegating texts by women or people of color to the last week of the semester, like I saw done when I was in college—“alternate” texts as an afterthought.

### **What do you like most about teaching this age or students?**

I just really like young people. I came up in punk, a young person's subculture, filled with angst and questioning authority, and thankfully, I never outgrew it. It also probably helps me heal those places in me where my needs weren't met as young person—being able to be there for others at this wonderfully important stage in their human development. Community college is the punk rock of higher ed too—it's the place where societies “misfits” go to get an education,

those who maybe aren't yet ready for college-level math or English and need a refresher course, those who don't fit the go-to-HS-know-what-you-want-to-be-and-go-straight-to-college mold, those who want to explore. I've actually written a long form essay on this topic for *Maximum RockandRoll*.

### **How do you reconcile anti-authoritarian beliefs with the authoritarian position of teacher or educator?**

I think I sort of covered this above, but there a few additionally important things that I do that I could list here:

- I literally write in every syllabus that students should question authority, starting with mine.
- I work very hard to be prepared, organized, and engaging. Students know the difference, and they will “behave” better when their instructor has earned their respect, when their instructor is not just phoning it in, or hasn't bothered to prepare because they believe students are not smart enough to notice.
- I facilitate Socratic type discussion, discussions designed for students to discuss with on another their views, ideas, and responses to a text, and not simply answer questions that I know the answer to.
- And I, genuinely, like young people and I know I can learn as much from their ideas as they can learn from my “expertise.”

### **You mentioned that you taught Kindergarten at one point. What did you take away from teaching kids that age? Did that impact you and your politics in any way?**

I actually taught pre-school, which is definitely similar to Kindergarten, though not in the public school system, which I'd never survive or thrive in. I actually wrote the Spitboy song “What Are Little Girls Made of?” while working as a preschool teacher. I combined my feminist views with gender role awareness that is taught in early childhood education courses. In these courses, one learns a lot about the different stages in child development and there are sections in ECD text books dedicated to discussing gender roles, not so unlike what we all learned in my fave kid's album *Free to Be You and Me*.

Here are the lyrics to the Spitboy song—they are simple but loaded with implication:

#### **“What Are Little Girls Made Of?”**

*Baby boy, precious baby boy  
The world wants you  
I am what's left over*

*Baby boy, precious baby boy  
Blue signifies your strength  
And my weakness*

*I am your second-class citizen*

*I am pink—I am weak  
I am red—I am a whore*

*Swaddled in red like a target  
I am your sacrifice*

Many preschool teachers are also aware of different learning style, personality

**working in punk from discussions about punk as a genre, culture or**



Figure 3: Gonzales was a drummer, singer, and lyricist for Spitboy; her music centers/ed social justice for marginalized populations.

types, and body positive ideas, so many of these ideas dovetail with socio-political issues; one that comes to mind is the focus of pre-school teachers to help children learn body boundaries. To teach children not to feel they need to accept touch from anyone, even adults, and to help parents unlearn ideas about “manners” when it comes to this issue, as a way to help them protect their children from unwanted touch, personal space intrusions, and worse.

**You recently presented on punk rock and Orwell at a conference in LA. How do you differentiate your personal experiences of being and**

**field? Do you think it’s necessary to differentiate? Do you feel like you have to depersonalize your experiences and understanding?**

I gave this talk at the Curating Resistance: Punk as Archival Method conference and my talk was called “Orwell’s Influence on Punk and How He and Joe Strummer are Almost the Same Guy and Why We Need Them Both Now More than Ever.” My particular academic interests that are rooted in punk rock are usually at, or about, the intersections of the music and literature, usually dystopian literature in which I have come to specialize. Giving this talk was a little bit of a stretch for me to pull off for two reasons, the first being that I never have as



much time to prepare as I'd like, being so busy with teaching, writing, and parenting, but also because I wasn't speaking about myself, which I have been

Figure 4: Gonzales signs a copy of her book, *The Spitboy Rule*, while sitting among friends, including legendary Chicana punk musician, Alice Bag (aka Alicia Armendariz, right).

doing a lot of lately. I rather like being an expert on things outside of my own experience (and not just talking about myself all the time). I like it simply because I value a variety of intellectual ideas, but I will admit that I also like it because I do have a good deal of anxiety about being smart. I want people to know I am smart and/or not just a one-trick pony, and I know this anxiety stems from many of the ways I was treated growing up due to my ethnic and economic background and the stereotypes about Mexicans/Xicanx people that prevent many from seeing us for who really are. I value the personal, and I am aware that many do not, so there's a conundrum there.

### What have you learned from mentoring students?

Mentoring students, like teaching is service work, and one thing I've learned from doing that work is that I would not be happy without it. I also just like being around and learning from young people, always having the opportunity to stay hip to youth culture, slang, ideas, and where we're headed. Whenever I go to an event where I'm punk rock "famous," I am always relieved when headed home to cook dinner for my family and teach the next day—those things, my family and my students are an important grounding force in my life.

**That's a great statement, "Community college is the punk rock of higher ed," and I completely agree from my own experiences. Could you elaborate a bit more?**

My main thesis for this assertion is the idea that CC is like punk because just like you don't need to know how to play an instrument to be in a punk band, you don't need to be good, yet, at English and Math to go to a CC because, like punk, CCs are open access institutions, and filled with misfits, all the people in society who didn't go the traditional route either because they weren't ready or couldn't afford to.

[...]

**And now the questions that have to be asked: What are you reading now? Who do you listen to?**

I am reading *The Clash Take on the World: Transnational Perspectives on The Only Band that Matters*, edited by Samuel Cohen and James Peacock, *Swastika Night* by Katharine Burdekin, and *Who Fears Death* by Nnedi Okorafor.

I am always listening to The Clash, but I am currently also listening to Mexican garage punk band, Les Butcherettes, Cholo Goth group Prayers, and a lot of jazz via my son who is a jazz pianist. Recently, we've been listening to a lot of Dexter Gordon.



Gregory Zobel (gz) is an Associate Professor of Educational Technology in Western Oregon University's College of Education. He is interested in accessibility, open source, radical pedagogies, punk rock, #edtech, and prison abolition. His approach is based on the understanding that technology should serve and liberate society rather than subjugate individuals through convenience and amusement.