



Chuco punk: Sonic insurgency in El Paso, by Tara López

Austin, University of Texas Press, 2024

Kim Kattari

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BOOK REVIEW

Chuco punk: Sonic insurgency in El Paso, by Tara López, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2024

The cover of *Chuco Punk: Sonic Insurgency in El Paso* features a photo from legendary punk fanzine *Maximum RockNRoll* of Jenny Cisneros, lead singer of El Paso punk band Sbitch, yelling into a microphone. Her image immediately signals that this is not your typical book about punk. While punk scholarship has historically focused on its white, male participants, ethnic studies professor Tara López centers the experiences and contributions of women, queer, and Latinx punks. *Chuco Punk* documents how “punx of color, and Chicax/Latinx punx in particular, were not just asking for a seat at the table. They built the damn table, too” (pp. 136–137).

At just 169 pages long (including the notes and index), *Chuco Punk* is an accessible and reader-friendly account of the Latinx participants who fostered and sustained the punk community in El Paso from the late 1970s to the early 2000s. Drawing on more than 70 oral histories she collected between 2019 and 2023, López weaves a detailed history that pays homage to the punx who creatively transformed spaces and places in El Paso to foster community, make music, and comment on racist policies. She situates their “unwillingness to be whitewashed” (p. 140) within the broader context of El Paso’s history of cultural insurgency, demonstrating that the city has historically served as a site for subversive expressive practices. For instance, she points out that El Paso’s nickname “Chuco” was derived from the Spanish word for “crooked” or “illegal.” Pachucos appropriated and reinterpreted the word and its reputation, using zoot-suit fashion and songs like Don Tosti’s “Pachuco Boogie” to signify a proud and resistant expression of Mexican American pride. In Chapter One, López shows how pachuco songs and *corridos* (folk ballads) reflected experiences of racism and defined El Paso as “a site of cultural resistance that would feed into the reservoir of punk ingenuity by the end of the 1970s” (p. 12).

In Chapter Two, López praises the contributions of the first wave of Chuco punk promoters, bookers, and bands from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. The author interprets the community’s ingenuity in repurposing urban landscapes as an act of resistance and creative agency. Readers learn, for example, of how punx ran electrical cords across the dry riverbed of the Rio Grande to supply power for shows in Juárez and how promoter Bobbie Welsh organized shows for the community on a pig farm on the east side of El Paso.

López draws a connection between the punk rock DIY (do-it-yourself) ethos and Latinx traditions of *rascuache*, which scholar Michele Habell-Pallán describes as “making do with limited resources” (p. 63). Chapter Three continues to trace Chuco inventiveness through the 1990s, the second wave of Chuco punk. Again, readers are gifted vivid portraits of the record producers, fanzine creators, bands, and fans who “remade and defied social, cultural, and geographic boundaries and borders in a frenzied pursuit to satiate their appetite for music and connection” (p. 64). López situates the second wave within the context of the implementation of NAFTA in 1994, documenting the ways in which punx responded to the closure of factories, the increasing militarization of the border, and the passing of Proposition 187 in California. Particularly insightful is the analysis of Revolución X’s “Corrido de Pete Wilson y la 187,” a song that reflects punk critiques of policies that denied services to undocumented immigrants. López shows how El Paso punx voiced their rage, raised funds for people who lost their jobs, and expressed international solidarity with the emerging Zapatista movement, all through *rascuache* resourcefulness.

Many readers may be familiar with At the Drive-In (ATDI), a band that originated within the El Paso punk scene. Chapter Four explores the late 1990s and early 2000s, when ATDI and other bands garnered national and international attention. Within the context of an

amplified drug war along the border and a corresponding rise in the number of missing and murdered women, Chuco punx applied their *rascuache* ethos to organize benefit concerts and bring awareness to the femicide crisis.

López draws the threads together in the conclusion to reiterate that, “from the rise of *pachuquismo* to ATDI’s *Relationship of Command*, Chuco has been the wellspring of cultural innovation and cultural resistance” (p. 140). Having grounded the work in oral history, the author gives voice to the punx who might otherwise be forgotten. The beauty of *Chuco Punk* lies in making visible the meaningful contributions of specific Latinx punx, particularly women, who turned urban spaces into venues where marginalized youth could express their identities and voice their frustration with the racist tensions and policies that were exacerbated by the consequences of NAFTA. López has written a love letter to the people who, through hard work, commitment, and enthusiasm, built and fostered a DIY scene that engaged with domestic and international politics to help members of the broader Mexican and Mexican American community.

López is a skilled storyteller and world-builder. Many academic studies of popular music treat subcultures as homogeneous groups at the mercy of hegemonic forces or the culture industry. A welcome departure from such scholarship, *Chuco Punk* provides readers with the names and faces of real people who made a difference in their local community. Readers are transported directly into the urban spaces of the Chuco punk scene: the backyards, the Rio Grande riverbed, the high school gyms, and the car repair shop that became a punk venue called The Rugburn. We meet the individuals who made food for the house parties, organized benefit shows, booked bands, performed in backyards, and were harassed by the police for making noise (both sonically and through their protests). Accordingly, this book would make a valuable addition to the libraries of those who want to know how individuals shape their urban environment and respond to local, national, and global politics in concrete ways. This will also serve as an approachable text for undergraduate classes in ethnic studies, with its passionate portrayal of the ways in which Latinx youth creatively adapted limited resources to support each other while voicing their concerns about social, political, and economic issues impacting their community.

That said, professors seeking to use this text in their courses may want to be aware that this is not a theoretically dense analysis. I was surprised, for instance, that a literature review and chapter breakdown were not included in the brief introduction. On the other hand, the approachable style may itself be indicative of López’s own academic insurgency. Dismantling the traditional expectations of academic writing is an appropriate way to represent the voices of the marginalized youth who took matters into their own hands to meet the needs of their community. López brings their voices directly to us through a deeply researched oral history of the El Paso punk scene so that we do not forget how social and musical movements are always the work of the people with their boots on the ground.

Kim Kattari
Texas A&M University
 kkattari@tamu.edu

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