Wright on Gonzalez, 'Chican@ Artivistas: Music, Community, and Transborder Tactics in East Los Angeles'

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Chicana Artivistas in East Los Angeles

This compact, powerful book could only have been written by Martha Gonzalez. In *Chican@ Artivistas: Music, Community, and Transborder Tactics in East Los Angeles*, the Chicana/o and Latina/o studies scholar and longtime member of the rock band Quetzal takes an autoethnographic approach to studying social movements and the social relations of music practice. The author delves deeply into events and movement developments before layering on “a theoretical matrix reading of the moment” (p. 3). She summons a litany of voices from postcolonial, Black feminist, Chicana, and performance theories to converse with and construct her analysis. Gonzalez’s method of interacting with scholars in various fields is one of complementarity—to build on their contributions and think with them. This approach contributes to the coherence of the book’s overall argument and goals. A range of scholars, leftists, and community organizers will benefit from Gonzalez’s illumination of anticapitalist political pathways and transnational movements in the Americas since the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Mexico.

Gonzalez captures important fleeting moments and adds to the mosaic of histories of Chicano movements and culture in Southern California. Drawing on a lifetime of experiences in music and creative expression, she recounts and theorizes “music moments” and activity in movement trenches (p. 1). Gonzalez and other Chican@ “artivistas” (activist artists) created and engaged in participatory and community-building projects with a dialogic praxis that challenged neoliberalism’s logic and values in the belly of the beast in the United States. The first half of *Chican@ Artivistas* shows how spaces in “Eastlos” (Chicana/o East Los Angeles) facilitated radical movements and an explosion of politicized art and music during the 1990s and early 2000s. The second half of the book follows Gonzalez and Chican@ artivistas to Chiapas, Veracruz, and Seattle for translocal instances of solidarity and dialogue informed by Zapatismo and the convivencia inherent to the fandango jarocho (participatory music and dance from Veracruz). Convivencia—a mindful presence and engagement with others—became central to Gonzalez’s many projects and “an invaluable code of ethics in artivista philosophy” (p. 3). Both aesthetic and epistemology for the author, convivencia counters the neoliberal logic of isolation.
This study tracks an individual and community history and a series of ongoing creative and organizing processes. Gonzalez effectively addresses identity formation and subjectivities while thoroughly engaging with structures of political economy. Skillfully weaving together conceptual, ethnographic, and personal/reflective threads throughout, she offers lessons in resisting the logics and structures of capitalism and neoliberal rule via this examination of the East Los Angeles-based Chican@ artivista movement since the 1990s. Historians attempting to reconstruct and narrate that time and place will reference this book extensively for its coverage of key developments in independent, genre-defying music and the Left in the Americas during the last three decades.

The book proceeds mostly chronologically while focusing individual chapters on particular themes and processes. Chapter 1 delves into Gonzalez’s childhood and her relationship to music in those early years. It centers the intensely personal story of her father and his relationship to music that heavily impacted her and other family members. Of interest to Mexicanists and students of Greater Mexico, the opening chapter touches on sociocultural constructions of Indigenous and mestizo identities, mediated in part by the Época de Oro (golden age) in Mexican cinema and the transborder resonance for Mexican immigrants and Chican@s. That cultural milieu shaped the outlook of Gonzalez’s father, who migrated to Los Angeles from Guadalajara in the early 1960s. His commercialized, professionalized vision of music practice is one that Gonzalez came to understand but work against in her own praxis as an artist. Instead, she conceptualizes music as “a participatory community practice” (p. 34).

Chapter 2 introduces the pivotal urban spaces that shaped movements and framed people’s daily experiences. This period in Los Angeles and cities across the Americas was characterized by “shrinking public outlets,” as Michelle Habell-Pallán puts it (cited on p. 30).[1] During the early 1990s, Troy Café on the edge of Little Tokyo became the first in a series of vital places to meet and convivir. In the case of Troy Café, the venue facilitated connections to an earlier generation of Chicano artists, musicians, and intellectuals. The Chicano artist collective, Asco, from the late 1970s and 1980s represented an important antecedent to the more recent artivista movement.[2] Quetzal debuts at this point in Gonzalez’s narrative—the band and her partner and constant collaborator Quetzal Flores. A pivotal component in the book’s overarching argument is the author’s exploration of the body’s relationship to capital. She makes historical and analytical connections to the US legacy of slavery and how “all bodies must offer something for sale in our hypercapitalist society” (p. 31). The chapter subtitle—“resistance to capital market systems and the mind/body split”—pinpoints a core concern of the book. Gonzalez scrutinizes social relations within music, markets, states, and other institutions.

Chapter 3 is just six pages in length but carries significant weight. By the mid-1990s, the Regeneración warehouse in the Highland Park area of northeast Los Angeles became the central movement gathering space. The warehouse venue was a place of “introspection, dialogue, and critique” (p. 40). Centro Regeneración, named for the early 1900s newspaper of exiled Mexican radicals the Flores Magón brothers, served as base of operations for the Popular Resource Center (PRC), a nonprofit community organization. The Centro’s founders included local artists Rudy “Rude” Ramírez and Zach de la Rocha—the latter of Rage Against the Machine fame. The National Commission for Democracy in Mexico (NCDM) began a political study group with Flores and an intergenerational cadre of activists, but it did not integrate art and music as many in the younger generation of Chican@s hoped. That new base of activists established an artist collective and held
their first event in 1999 at Centro Regeneración, a participatory, installation-art show with provocative and radical messages. They followed that successful debut with “Caught Between a Whore and an Angel,” an event led by Chicana artists. These two ostensibly art-based gatherings touched off intensive community organizing.

Chapter 4 looks at how critical Indigenous pedagogy informed the Big Frente Zapatista as the movement branched out beyond California in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Gonzalez explores the translocal, neo-Zapatismo, and global communities of struggle while tracing the movement through this phase. The upshot of the chapter lies in her innovative conceptual constellation of relationality, Zapatista philosophy, and Chican@ artivista praxis.

The chapter opens with an anecdote and analysis of the 2018 Regeneración-themed exhibition at the Vincent Price Art Museum in Los Angeles, which narrated and connected the regional histories of the Flores Magón brothers, Asco and the 1970s and 1980s, and the latest movements based in the Popular Resource Center/Centro Regeneración. Gonzalez curated a panel in the exhibition but left dissatisfied because of its overemphasis on individuals and simplification of the most recent history of the movement. Her book addresses those shortcomings, especially in this chapter. She also challenges museums generally, based on this recent attempt in Los Angeles to represent the Chican@ artivista movement. “What happens when you have never remained still enough to be captured? Perhaps your work may be illegible to institutions such as museums precisely because it is not based on product or artifact” (p. 44).

From 1996 forward, Quetzal played gigs in support of social justice causes and movements, often without compensation. Networks of Chican@ artivistas soon formed, composed of like-minded music groups (Ozomatli, Aztlan Underground, and others), poets, graffiti artists, painters, muralists, filmmakers, and theater groups. Parallel to developments in Los Angeles, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) launched an Indigenous-led rebellion in the Mexican state of Chiapas, beginning in 1994. Gonzalez describes it as the “first postmodern revolution,” one that aimed not to take over state power but to be in solidarity and dialogue with oppressed communities around the globe, proposing that a new world was possible, and modeling new forms of resistance (p. 46). The Zapatistas promoted a discursive shift, using tactics of poetic prose, and covered their faces with masks. In Los Angeles, the Big Frente Zapatista was created as the organizing body for the First Cultural Gathering for Humanity and Against Neoliberalismo in 1997, which convened in the Zapatista community of Oventic in Chiapas. The 1997 Zapatista cultural convention proved transformative and became a touchpoint for Gonzalez individually and Chican@ artivistas collectively.

Chapter 5 covers the “fandango sin fronteras” (fandango without borders) movement Gonzalez and other Chican@ artivistas have participated in for nearly two decades now, in close collaboration with fandango jarocho communities and practitioners in Veracruz, Mexico. Fandango practice relies heavily on convivencia in the music-making process. Fandango has no audience per se; all attendees are participants. The convivencia inherent to the genre and the transgenerational aspects of fandango gatherings captured the Chican@s imagination. The 2003 Encuentro Chicano Jarocho in Xalapa, Veracruz, cemented the Chicano-Jarocho collaboration. Since then, an informal network of fandango communities extended across California and such cities as Seattle, Chicago, and Washington DC. Gonzalez notes the scholarly literature on the translocal fandango movement. Her primary intervention is showing how convivencia enabled critical consciousness in US-Mexican
fandango communities.

Chapter 6 is an extended treatment of convivencia in Gonzalez’s and the artivista movement’s trajectory since roughly the mid-2000s. Two translocal projects crystallized efforts to put the ethics of convivencia into practice. Gonzalez and other Chicana artistas collaborated with Mexican women in Veracruz on Entre Mujeres, a women’s music collaborative. The group drew inspiration from Chicana experiences with collective songwriting at the 1997 cultural convention with the Zapatistas. The author examines Entre Mujeres’s sustained attempt at processes of collective songwriting and the resultant “sung theories” (p. 103). Chapter 6 then turns to the still thriving Seattle Fandango Project, which Gonzalez and Flores helped establish in 2008, and outlines the ripple effects in the years since. Fandango community members in the US and Mexico, Gonzalez included, serve as guardians of that praxis of convivencia and collective knowledge production in music-making.

Gonzalez theorizes collective songwriting in chapter 6, describing the method as grounded in epistemologies of “convivencia, testimonio, trust, healing, and knowledge production.” Musical compositions created in the process then function as “accessible archives” (p. 94). A crucial byproduct of engaging in this artistic praxis, Gonzalez posits, is that its participatory nature facilitates community organizing. Participants are spurred to collective action on pressing social and political issues because convivencia “instigates critical consciousness” (p. 93).

The book’s conclusion begins with Gonzalez recounting the experience of reading Emma Pérez’s The Decolonial Imaginary (1999) and other Chicana feminist texts in graduate school. Grappling with those ideas inspired the title track on Quetzal’s 2011 album, Imaginaries, which won the band a Grammy award in 2013. Gonzalez’s ambivalence about being crowned a success in that industry setting was matched by the group’s determination to leverage the moment to further strengthen support for causes and communities to which they were dedicated. The conclusion also features a concise recap of the book’s key points and a brief, incisive discussion on defining and assessing the value of social movements. The author provides succinct profiles of several Chican@ artistas and their trajectories in recent years, before concluding with a call to action in the form of a convivencia-based community praxis that aims to build a better world.

The uniqueness of Chican@ Artivistas begins with its conceptualization as an autoethnographic study by a Chicana academic who is also a renowned musician and longtime activist. But this book stands out in various ways. The text is carefully crafted with a scriptural economy few academics achieve, while not sacrificing rigor and complexity. Gonzalez is strategic in prose and presentation, disruptive of received narratives, and transgressive of disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, she uncovers a remarkable assortment of concepts and questions for further development by scholars in various disciplines and fields. And the book includes a one-page discography, in addition to the bibliography. Perhaps most striking are the citational practices and space given within the text to other people’s—academics, musicians, artists, community members—ideas and intellectual contributions. For instance, Gonzalez devotes five pages to a profile of Mexican musician Silvia Santos and examination of the Entre Mujeres song “Sobreviviendo” (Surviving), which Santos played a key role in composing. What are the implications of this methodology for scholars whose institutional structures often prioritize individualism and gatekeeping in relation to knowledge production? It is a refreshing challenge to the neoliberal system and aligns with alternative visions rooted in community-based cultural praxis.
As a historian, I find it helpful to consider Alan Eladio Gómez’s *The Revolutionary Imaginations of Greater Mexico* (2016) alongside Gonzalez’s *Chican@ Artivistas*. Gómez examines the Chicana/o movement of the 1970s, international solidarity, and Latin American social movements. His chapters on the *nuevo teatro popular* (new popular theater) movement include historical connections worthy of further investigation and discussion of the longer-term trends in the “hemispheric” fight against “cultural imperialism.”[3]

This work will be widely read in Chicanx/Latinx studies, feminist studies, and music theory circles. It is of particular interest to students of recent music history, Zapatista studies scholars, and those researching neoliberalism and active resistance to it into the twenty-first century.

Notes


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