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Rock Archivo de LÁ

Mapping Transnational Latinx Music Scenes

Jorge Nicolás Leal

This essay presents an overview of the ad hoc archival practices of Rock Archivo de LÁ, an online archive of rock Angelino memorabilia, and explores its applications for the study of public history. I discuss how the materials in the archive reveal the spatial understanding and place-making practices of their creators, Latin American immigrants and US-born Latinxs, through which they assert their belonging in Southern California and beyond.

Opening Shoeboxes and Finding Our Histories Within

In the spring of 2017 I was gathering material for my dissertation on the music cultures that have evolved around rock en español in Southern California. My primary sources were oral histories and the flyers, posters, photos, concert tickets, and other music-related ephemera that I had collected during my late teens and early twenties, when I attended scores of rock Angelino shows. Rock Angelino, which emerged in the 1980s, is decisively rooted in Southern California, but it was inspired by rock en español, which had become popular in Latinx communities throughout the United States. Rock Angelino is distinct by being created and listened within a multi-lingual metropolis, where English is the language of power and predominant culture, most importantly Rock Angelino bands incorporated their experiences as immigrants to the U.S. in their lyrics and iconography, making a decisively Los Angeles rooted music.

As I met other participants in the rock Angelino scene and conducted the oral histories for my dissertation research, these rock Angelino fans began sharing their own collections with me (fig. 1). I was amazed to see



Figure 1. Recently shared materials for the Rock Archivo de LÁ by a collector. This box includes: 1990s event flyers, photographs, and numerous issues of magazines and fanzines, among them *Al Borde*, *La Banda Elástica*, and *Frontera*. Photo courtesy of Jorge N. Leal/Rock Archivo L.A.

that some of the materials were more than thirty years old. These flyers, photos, posters, tickets, magazines, and zines held significant sentimental and testimonial value, but they were unsure about what to do with their collections, aside from keeping them inside shoeboxes and storing them in closets or garages. Together we pondered ways to share these materials. Most important to me was finding a way to share the histories that the collections contain.

I started an Instagram account with a simple and descriptive name: Rock Archivo de LÁ (Los Ángeles). Initially this was an effort to document the memorabilia that I had collected for my PhD research. Although

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I had experience accessing and analyzing primary sources at institutional archives, I certainly did not think of myself as an archivist. Nonetheless, I wanted to apply some of the best public history practices to my archive, so that the ephemera could be seen by audiences beyond my academic circle. This set of images expanded to include the materials that were shared by other rock Angelino participants. Over the years more materials were collected and more people began interacting with them through Rock Archivo de LÁ. Besides scene participants and fellow academics in Southern California, Latinx audiences throughout the United States and Latin America began following the Instagram posts. As I progressed in my academic career, I focused more on how Latinxs' participation in music and musical events in Southern California have been mapped onto the geography of Los Angeles.¹

This essay presents an overview of the ad hoc archival practices of Rock Archivo de LÁ and explores its applications for the study of public history. I discuss how event flyers, zines, music videos, and song lyrics display the spatial understanding of Latin American immigrants and US-born Latinxs and how the creation of these materials is a place-making practice through which they assert their belonging in Southern California and beyond. I also summarize the historical context in which most Rock Archivo de LÁ materials were created and describe the public history methodology of the archive and how it has evolved. I consider how these primary sources can contribute to analyses of Latinx cultural expression, particularly to making spatial arguments at different scales, be it at neighborhood, regional, or hemispheric levels.

Created in Southern California in the late twentieth century, the materials in Rock Archivo de LÁ offer an essential window on the transnational cultural expression of Latin American immigrants and second- and later-generation US-born Latinxs, an area that is still much understudied. Researchers and educators can use Rock Archivo de LÁ to expand their knowledge of cultural expression that circulates beyond state and national borders and how mapping can make visible the solidarity between US-born Latinxs and Latin American immigrants of different nationalities.

The Rock Angelino Historic Context

When the rock Angelino scene emerged in the 1980s, the white population of Los Angeles County was decreasing as a nonwhite majority emerged, with Latinx being the largest nonwhite ethnic group

(Noe-Bustamante, Lopez, and Krogstad 2020). The rise of Latinx residents in LA County was due to a confluence of factors that included an increase in the birthrate for US-born Latinxs and immigration from Mexico and Central America that was generated by the implementation of neoliberal policies and proxy conflicts derived from the Cold War. In the case of Mexico, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) transformed the country's economy and made daily lives economically precarious for many Mexicans. In Central America, brutal civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala and armed conflicts in other parts of the region led to a surge in migration.

The 1990s were also a period of heightened racial tension in Los Angeles, with ongoing episodes of police brutality. In 1992 the beating of an unarmed Black man, Rodney King, by police officers triggered one of the most destructive social eruptions in American history (Itagaki 2016, 110–11). Heightened racial tensions, coupled with an economic depression, resulted in a relentless social and political backlash against immigrants from Latin America. Proposition 187, an electoral initiative embraced and championed by the governor, Pete Wilson, sought to deny any public services to undocumented immigrants. The proposition was approved by voters in 1994, and it would have affected thousands of people had it not been struck down. This initiative, in conjunction with other so-called “racial propositions,” as Daniel HoSang (2010) defines them, aimed to maintain white political power over growing nonwhite populations (2). It was in this social, economic, and political moment that Latinx youths who embraced rock Angelino claimed themselves to be part of Southern California. Through cultural expression and place making, they pushed against the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the era while advocating for equality and social justice in the United States and Latin America.

During the 1990s and 2000s youth cultures developed hybrid identities that were akin to identities adopted in earlier periods: flappers, zoot suiters, and razabillies. These groups have been examined by scholars working in the field of Mexican American history, such as Vicki Ruiz (1998), Luis Alvarez (2008), and Nicholas Centino (2021). The materials in *Rock Archivo de LÁ*, along with my research, present fresh insights into how the waves of migration from large cities in Mexico and new migratory streams from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and other Central and South American nations have fed the development of pan-Latinx identities. During the last third of the twentieth century, Los Angeles became

an even more significant node within the expanding circulation of popular culture that connected Los Angeles with Mexico City, Buenos Aires, and other metropolises in the Western Hemisphere. Thus, Latinx youth, whether immigrants or US-born, became increasingly caught up with Latin American music, literature, and film, creating transnational networks to share their own cultural productions (Leal 2022). Studying the production and consumption of Latinx music provides new insights into how Latinxs employed their cultural expressions to make spatial claims of belonging and equality in Southern California at a time of increasing anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies.

The Evolution of Rock Archivo de LÁ

Rock Archivo de LÁ began as an effort to share images, then evolved into a more formalized, yet still ad hoc, archival project. Employing social media platforms to increase access to the archive has expanded the possibilities for sharing the histories of marginalized communities with multiple audiences that are yet to be fully represented in academic archives.

Through Rock Archivo de LÁ posts, primarily on Instagram, I share kernels of history drawn from the archive's collections. They enable a more nuanced examination of Latinx histories in Southern California that can, in turn, be disseminated to a wide audience. In broad terms, Rock Archivo de LÁ has two parts. One comprises the images (jpgs, pdfs, videos) that have been shared by rock Angelino participants, their associates, and even younger family members, through either Instagram, email, or file sharing. This content is stored on the Rock Archivo de LÁ website, which holds more than 1,500 archived Instagram posts. The other part comprises physical materials provided by rock Angelino participants to be digitized, organized, and preserved physically as well as digitally. The physical collection contains photos, event flyers, posters, ticket stubs, letters, zines, videos, and other items. In aggregate, Rock Archivo de LÁ now includes over five thousand unique physical objects.

Today Rock Archivo de LÁ is a comprehensive digital public history project, one inspired by existing community-based archives such as the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). SAADA counters the neglect and erasure of South Asian history in US institutional archives by collecting and sharing online archives.² As SAADA co-founder Michelle Caswell points out, “community-based digitization practices create transnational sites where memory is shared, contested, and reconstructed on

a global scale” (Caswell 2014, 51). In addition, the publication of posts follows the crowdsourced collection efforts of Guadalupe Rosales and her Instagram accounts “Veteranas and Rucas” and “Map Pointz.” Elizabeth Ferrer (2021) argues that the photographic Latinx memories shared in “Veteranas and Rucas” can be understood as a democratic form of expression and a tool for self-historicization and self-affirmation (198–99). Rock Archivo de LÁ joins these efforts of reimagining an archive as an open, collective, and constantly evolving source that allows us to write ourselves into the established histories of places and peoples. Employing social media platforms as archival extensions expands the possibilities for sharing the histories of marginalized communities.

Rock Archivo de LÁ continues to be a personal archiving effort. It is organized by myself and is separate from my professional affiliation, although I have benefited from indirect institutional support to hire students at the University of California, Riverside as research assistants. However, the scope of the collection in terms of size and the time it might take to process the collection to make it publicly accessible are among the outstanding matters to resolve before incorporating the collection into an institutional archive. I hope to establish a relationship with different institutions in the United States and Mexico in the near future. This would allow for digital copies of the materials to be created and for Rock Archivo LÁ materials to have multiple homes.

Mapping Latinx Presence, One *Tocada* Flyer at a Time

The materials in Rock Archivo de LÁ reveal the extensive cultural, oppositional, and artistic expressions of immigrants and US-born Latinxs in the near past. Furthermore, they are evidence of proto-SIGuache practices, as seen in the maps that appear in concert flyers for rock Angelino music events. These creative geographies allow us to trace the spatial presence of Latinxs within Los Angeles, past and present. The production and distribution of the ubiquitous flyers or leaflets that advertise music events, or *tocadas*, by rock Angelino bands and event producers are examples of “mapping from below,” which Latinxs have used in the near past and the present to establish themselves as part of Los Angeles. Hundreds of these flyers are part of the Rock Archivo de LÁ collection.

The flyers were often created to advertise events in “ephemeral forums,” which were improvised venues—backyards, empty storefronts, and other spaces—located throughout Southern California (Leal 2021, 9). In

an era before everyday people could access geographic information systems (GIS) on their phones, the flyers commonly included maps that provided potential *tocada* attendees with directions to the event. These were often simple maps with lines that represented major streets and a marker for the site's location. Some flyers featured elaborate cartographic renderings of the site and the surrounding neighborhood. A flyer for a 1993 event titled "Club Nostalgia" is one example of the latter (fig. 2). It features a prominent "peace and love" symbol, which has long been associated with America's rock and roll culture. The symbol is composed of different Mesoamerican motifs, thus representing the fusion of American rock and roll with Latin American rock en español. A drawing of North and South America within the symbol asserts the presence of "Rock 'n' Español" throughout the continent. Most interesting is the map of Chinatown. Within the street grid is the stylized facade of Hong Kong Low, the site where the event was held. Hong Kong Low was a restaurant during the day, but on weekend nights, its upper floor served as a music venue for genres considered outside of the mainstream. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the site was known as

**TODOS LOS VIERNES
DESCUENTO ANTES
DE LAS 9:30 P.M.**

CLUB NOSTALGIA
LO MEJOR DE ROCK EN ESPAÑOL

ROCK: ARGENTINO, CHILENO
ESPAÑOL, ALTERNATIVO, y
K-ROQ. TECHNO (only if requested)

BANDA de ROCK
"EN VIVO"

For Info:
(310) 355-4450

HONG KONG LOW
943 N. Broadway
Los Angeles, Chinatown

Map labels: HARBOR FREEWAY, PASADENA FREEWAY, ADOBE ST, VALE ST, N HILL ST, HOLLYWOOD FREEWAY, SUNSET BLVD, OMO ST, ALPINE ST, COLLEGE STREET, N BROADWAY, 943 N. BROADWAY, SPRING ST, N MAIN ST.

NO AGE LIMITED FULL BAR W.I.D. (repeated twice)

Figure 2. Flyer for a Rock Angelino night held at the Hong Kong Low in Los Angeles's Chinatown. Undated, early 1990s. Author unknown. Photo courtesy of Jorge N. Leal/Rock Archivo de L.Á.

the Hong Kong Cafe, it was at the epicenter of Los Angeles's punk rock scene (Lewis 1988).

In the early 1990s through the summer of 1994, shortly before it closed, Hong Kong Low served as the venue for weekly rock Angelino shows. These events had the same outsider status as the early punk rock shows. Like rock en español, rock Angelino was considered out of the mainstream because it was sung in Spanish and performed by Latinxs. Rock Angelino events were created and attended by Latinx youth, whose presence was not usually accepted in Hollywood music venues at this time. Hong Kong Low, located in a Chinese American neighborhood, was a welcoming site. Ethnic neighborhoods are often considered foreign spaces within the American metropolis. As Natalia Molina (2006) states, Chinese Americans, much like Latinxs, have been racialized and defined as perpetual outsiders in Los Angeles (and in American society more broadly), even though both groups have had a long presence in the city.

Chinatown is located north of Downtown Los Angeles and close to Los Angeles Plaza. The plaza is the site of the city's founding, and it is an area popular with Latinx families. Our Lady Queen of Angels, or "La Placita," which sits across the street, is one of the region's most popular Catholic churches. In the 1990s public buses, part of Los Angeles's public transportation system, passed through Chinatown while connecting Latinx neighborhoods with downtown. Latinx Angelenos probably knew where Chinatown was located, but for young Latin American immigrants, attending the shows at Hong Kong Low may have been their first experience of exploring a distinctly ethnic enclave for their leisure—that is, beyond work-related travel. The Club Nostalgia flyer suggests that rock Angelino fans became familiar with and adapted to multicultural and multiethnic neighborhood of Chinatown (Leal 2021, 14).

By creating visual accounts of Latinx spaces, Latinx immigrants and US-born Latinxs continue a long tradition of crafting maps of their environment that describe the social topography while defining and expanding the boundaries of their communities (fig. 3). Latinxs assert themselves and their presence as a visible and dynamic part of American urban spaces through cartographical means (Leal 2021, 7). In an initial viewing, this type of map might be seen as being created merely to orient the prospective *tocada* participant by offering the precise location of an event. A more detailed examination of the materials in Rock Archivo de LÁ, however, shows that the maps include detailed spatial and temporal representations of this historical period in Southern California that chart the expanding

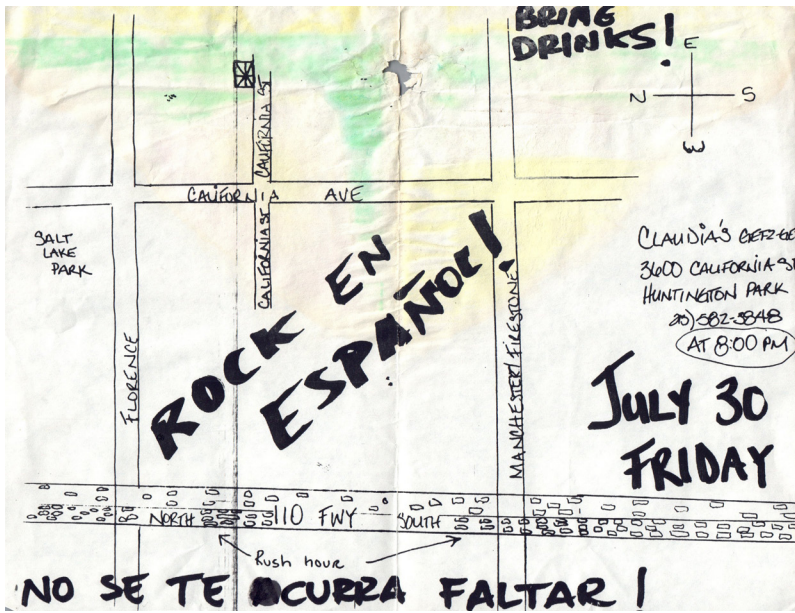


Figure 3. Map for a “rock en español” backyard party at a home in Huntington Park, CA. July 1993. Author unknown. Photo courtesy of Jorge N. Leal/Rock Archivo de L.A.

geographical Latinx presence in the region’s urban space in the 1990s and 2000s. Furthermore, these maps provide geographical markers of Latinxs’ interactions with other racialized communities as they negotiated their understanding of and presence in an increasingly multiethnic, multicultural Los Angeles (15–16).

Teaching Latinx History with Rock Archivo de LÁ

Rock Archivo de LÁ materials have been used as teaching materials in undergraduate courses and lesson plans. In the spring of 2020, maps printed on the flyers, articles printed in rock Angelino zines, and songs written by rock Angelino bands provided primary sources for a research course titled “From Instagram to Digital Music Archive: Popular Music and Public Memory in Latinx Los Angeles.” This class was offered by the Music Department at Occidental College in Los Angeles.³ The undergraduate course was taught by ethnomusicologist Shanna Lorenz and digital humanities project designer Craig Dietrich. In her lectures Lorenz first provided a historical overview of the period in which rock Angelino bands were

active. Based on her own expertise in the music of the Americas, she connected rock Angelino to the larger music landscape in Latin America. During the class students discussed the importance of rock Angelino songs in the sociopolitical context of the Americas generally and US Latinx communities specifically. Drawing from her ongoing research on the Latinx ska scene in Southern California, Lorenz stressed the importance of Rock Archivo de LÁ for the identification of DIY venues that hosted rock Angelino shows and for analyzing their significance as “cultural hubs” created by enterprising “promoters” in which bands and fans ingeniously mobilized events throughout urban spaces to claim space for Latinx music scenes (Skarchive LA, n.d.).

During the course the students learned to create a MySQL (structure query language) database, which they used to manage the information contained in Rock Archivo de LÁ Instagram posts. Students first determined the number of times that bands, music subgenres, and show locations occur within the posts and identified a research topic. Students continued to explore the Rock Archivo de LÁ posts, looking for connections that supported their research topic. For the many students who were non-Latinx, the course provided an in-depth education on Latinx neighborhoods in addition to offering information about Latinx music and landmark music venues in Los Angeles.

For their final projects, the students created their own websites. They included a short essay that discussed their historical research as well as key information from Rock Archivo de LÁ posts. Among the Los Angeles venues and neighborhoods the students chose to research were the Hollywood Palladium and the Roxy Theater. These two venues, which were the first mainstream venues to feature rock en español, began booking these bands in the second half of the 1990s. For Latinx artists, performing in these spaces demonstrated their metropolitan presence in de facto white spaces. Students also created projects on venues such as Fais Do Do, a jazz club in the LA neighborhood of Jefferson Park. This is a historically Black neighborhood that by the 1990s was seeing an influx of Latinx residents. The rock Angelino events at Fais Do Do attest to this demographic change and how this venue became a space for Latinx as well as Black audiences.

Other students delved into the history of venues in contemporary Latinx communities, such as the Allen Theater in the city of South Gate. This city in the Southeast region of Los Angeles County was a working-class white suburb for much of the twentieth century. In the 1970s, as auto

factories moved out of the area, most white residents also moved out. By the 1990s the city's population was primarily Latinx. The Allen Theater opened as a movie theater in 1924 and closed in the 1990s. It was renovated and reopened as an all-ages music venue in 2003 and continued to host shows until 2006, catering primarily to Latinx youth from the surrounding area. It became the epicenter of the rock Angelino and ska-core scenes during the years that it functioned as a concert venue. These student projects researched the spatial presence of Latinx music in Los Angeles by identifying the sites in which rock Angelino shows occurred and placing them within the historical and social context of the neighborhood. Rock Archivo de LÁ offered students a novel way to better understand the widespread geographical Latinx presence in Los Angeles.⁴

More recently, Rock Archivo de LÁ materials have been incorporated into the lessons created for “Spanglish and Bilingualism in Latinx Studies: A Major, a Minor, and a National Curriculum,” which is supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The project, which I lead alongside my colleagues, Claudia Holguín Mendoza and Julie Weise, is an open-access bilingual (English and Spanish) and Spanglish curriculum created to infuse bilingualism into the coursework for students majoring and minoring in Latinx and Latin American studies at the University of California, Riverside. One of the lessons serves as an example of the project's goals. “Van Nuys (Es Very Nice): Change over Time in Latinx Los Ángeles” uses the music video and song lyrics of the song “Van Nuys (Es Very Nice),” released by Los Abandoned in 2003. The lyrics are in Spanglish, and the band and the song have been discussed several times in Rock Archivo de LÁ posts. This lesson provides students with the structural and racial context of white flight and the emerging Latinx population in Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley from the 1960s to the 1990s. Students examine how the lyrics and the scenes in the video of people and businesses on Van Nuys Boulevard reflect the demographic change from a largely white to a primarily Latinx area. Students are presented with a historical account and images that show events on the boulevard in different eras: a Ku Klux Klan rally in 1965; the majority-white populace before the 1980s; rallies protesting the election of Donald Trump in 2016. These images demonstrate the significant demographic, political, and spatial transformation of the thoroughfare and the San Fernando Valley.

Among the learning outcomes for this lesson are for students to identify the social meaning and historical changes that are expressed in cultural products such as music, songs, and videos and to describe the connections

between cultural products and their historical context. The lesson plan is freely available for educators to incorporate into their classes, and it can be modified for different learning levels.⁵ Students use Rock Archivo de LÁ materials as they engage in a high-level analysis of Spanish and Spanglish primary sources while identifying not only the historical conditions that have created Los Angeles Latinx neighborhoods but also how they are represented in popular culture.

The Importance of Mapping from Below

The maps printed in rock Angelino flyers present us with cartographical renderings created by young Latinxs. As primary sources, they compel us to broaden our analytical frame of reference to consider their creators as dexterous cartographers who deployed their topographical understanding to make themselves present within the metropolitan space of Southern California. The flyers, and the songs and zines as well, affirm the ingenuity of their creators and push against their designation as marginalized subjects with limited agency. In creating and circulating their own forms of cultural expression, Latinxs articulated place-making practices that created the Latinx Southern California of today.

The materials in Rock Archivo de LÁ also document an anti-immigrant era in California. The state's policies have been transformed in recent decades and are now more inclusive of immigrants. This is a product of the participation of Latinxs and other communities of color in the social and political life of the state. Recently, however, laws that have negative effects for immigrants have been ratified in other states and at the federal level. Given these developments, the creativity and defiance demonstrated by Southern California Latinxs offer important lessons. The 1990s could have been a period of retrenchment for Latinxs, but young Latinxs who were part of the rock Angelino scene refused to live in the shadows. Through their cultural output, they made themselves visible spatially and asserted their belonging *aquí* (in California) and *allá* (Latin America) through their expressive culture.

Notes

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1. The complete title of the project is Rock Archivo de LÁ to denote the Spanish and Spanglish importance of language in this music genre. For readability on the web and social media, the shorter title, Rock Archivo LA, is used. To explore Rock Archivo de LÁ, visit <https://rockarchivo.com>.

2. Librarian Samip Mallick and archivist-scholar Michelle Caswell co-founded the South Asian American Digital Archive. The SAADA is an online independent repository that documents and provides access to the diverse stories of South Asian Americans.

3. The class website can be viewed here: <http://music285.craigdietrich.com>.

4. The websites created by the students in the course can be viewed here: <http://music285.craigdietrich.com>.

5. These bilingual history lesson plans are accessible through the UC Riverside Pedagogías Críticas website: <https://pedagogiascriticas.ucr.edu/materiales-lessons-plan/>.

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