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Razabilly: Transforming Sights, Sounds, and History in the Los Angeles Latina/o Rockabilly Scene

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could attract at a time when we are learning more about the border's different dimensions of violence almost every day.

Volker Janssen

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Nicholas F. Centino. *Razabilly: Transforming Sights, Sounds, and History in the Los Angeles Latina/o Rockabilly Scene*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021. 224 pp. Paperback \$29.95.

In this concise history of Los Angeles's Rockabilly scene, Nicholas Centino examines a critical period in the remaking of the city, the near-present, as he delves into the first decades of the twenty-first century. In this critical era, Latinas/os became close to half of the population of Los Angeles County. However, their presence continued to be marginalized socially and demonized politically, and their economic and educational progress in "de/postindustrial" Los Angeles was impaired by entrenched systemic racism.

In four chapters, Centino presents the Rockabilly scene as an international phenomenon and examines how it took root in 2000s Latina/o Los Angeles. A revival genre, Rockabilly combines elements of Black R&B and white country music from the 1950s. By the late 1990s, the genre had gained strong acceptance and popularity in Greater Los Angeles, where Chicanas/os and Latinas/os became the driving force of the Rockabilly scene as performers, event organizers, and participants.

Centino employs carefully thought-out ethnographic approaches to examine the experiences of Latina/o Rockabilly participants and performers amid the backdrop of the cultural and political impact of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which led to the seemingly perpetual war on terror, as well as the hopeful period that the presidency of Barack Obama represented. The brief optimism around the 2008 election was immediately followed by the devastating Great Recession, which bookended the decade and brought severe economic hardships for Latinas/os in Southern California.

For those unacquainted with L.A. music scenes and cultures, Rockabilly is often understood as intrinsically tied to white male musicians and to audiences who yearned for nostalgic, mid-twentieth-century sounds and fashions emanating from a time of racial segregation—and thus may seem inherently contradictory to the lived experiences of most Latinas/os and the social and political environments that would welcome them. The genre's roots, after all, lie in an era before the major victories of the civil rights, women's, and queer liberation movements. Nevertheless, while there were only a few Latina/o rock and roll performers in the 1950s, with the advent of Rockabilly as a revival genre in the 2000s, predominantly Latina/o Los Angeles became its global capital, with ethnic

Mexicans and people of Central American descent being its primary producers and consumers.

Centino demonstrates how the predominantly Latina/o crowds that congregate to hear and embody 1950s rock and rhythm and blues played live by Latina/o musicians have appropriated and reimagined the genre, resulting in a racialization of the social spaces and practices within this scene: what Centino calls “Razabilly,” defined as a set of cultural practices that encompass and transform elements of Rockabilly aesthetics like clothing, hair, makeup, tattoos, and sites where the music is performed and experienced. L.A. Latinas/os have infused Rockabilly with a strong and distinctly working-class Latina/o sensibility that draws from a rich archive of Chicana/o and Latina/o experiences and cultural memories, including pachuco fashion, lowrider car culture, and film fashion from the mid-twentieth-century era of Mexico’s golden age of cinema. This cultural infusion has given birth to Razabilly, an enhanced Rockabilly scene in which Latinas/os have instilled new life into the genre and attracted growing audiences.

Centino profiles and examines the careers and cultural production of remarkable Rockabilly performers of Latina/o descent—musicians such as Omar Romero, Luis Arriaga, and Vicky Tayofa, among others, whose fame has expanded from the confines of Los Angeles to other U.S. and European Rockabilly scenes. Moreover, while studies of music scenes tend to center primarily on performers, Centino expands the scope of who is considered a participant in a music scene. For instance, he discusses the pivotal role of early social media in connecting Razabilly enthusiasts and fostering community in user-created internet forums such as the “Razabilly” forum. In addition, he includes fashion designers and clothing-store owners such as David Contreras, Esther “Cherry” Vasquez, and Isaiah Villareal. He examines how they have succeeded by transforming Rockabilly clothing fashions into “embodied units of historical memory” with the “potential to evoke histories of resistance kept alive in the cultural memories of Chicanas/os and Latinas/os in Los Angeles” (83).

The emergence of Razabilly took place during a period of renewed efforts to exclude Latinas/os from the American body politic. As Centino argues, “Chicanas/os and Latinas/os remade the 1950s in their own image and affirmed their rightful place in history at the same time that nativist and anti-Latina/o measures . . . sought to rob them of their humanity” (5). In his assessment, the Razabilly participants co-opted, subverted, and enhanced the existing Rockabilly aesthetics not to “fit in” or to assimilate into a mythic American past, but to create practices of cultural, economic, and psychological survival. Razabilly aesthetics and practices, he argues, are bold assertions in which participants demand and enact their agency over leisure activities and sites, thereby asserting their rights to a good, dignified life (68).

Centino incorporates a vast array of sources to study the 2000s Razability scene, including interviews, flyers, handbills, photos, and conversations originally posted on now extinct internet and social media platforms such as user-based forums, Myspace, and early Facebook groups. In addition, he examines rich cultural sites such as songs, music videos, documentaries, clothes, and accessories as worn and collected by Razabilly

participants. He thus invites scholars to expand our definitions of archival sources to include materials and cultural expressions produced and archived by everyday people. The book presents a few minor inaccuracies when discussing historical events. For instance, the massive marches advocating immigrants' rights that congregated over a million people in downtown Los Angeles (the largest protest in the city's history) occurred in the spring of 2006, not 2005 as stated in the book (7). Yet these are minor errors.

Centino also offers several valuable contributions to the study of music scenes and cultures, particularly those of marginalized and racialized communities. In the terminology section, he provides clear, well-discussed, and practical definitions of much-debated identity terms such as *Chicana/o*, *Latina/o*, and *Latinx* and explains how he employs these terms in historical and contemporary contexts. Furthermore, his succinct but compelling definition of *Raza* as an encompassing and commonly used term by and for Chicanas/os and Latinas/os counters claims that it is Mexican-centric.

Razabilly is a noteworthy study among newer interdisciplinary works on the making and remaking of Los Angeles. It dexterously examines how Chicanas/os and Latinas/os within this music scene experienced, survived, and even thrived during the convoluted 2000s. In the process, *Razabilly* participants offered their cultural practices as part of the U.S. historical experience and claimed their dignity through their fashion and dance moves. In addition, participants demonstrated their ingenuity and resourcefulness to survive during precarious economic times. Most significantly, Centino shows how during a time when the threats to disempower and demonize them increased, Chicanas/os and Latinas/os drew from their collective cultural memories to assert their rights to space and place in Los Angeles—for their own leisure, for a good time, and to seek a better life.

Jorge N. Leal

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Christian S. Harrison. *All the Water the Law Allows: Las Vegas and Colorado River Politics*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021. 268 pp. ePub \$29.95.

As the water level in Lake Mead continues its steady decline, images of the fountains at the Bellagio Resort are regularly mobilized to critique the hubristic and profligate water practices of Las Vegas, a city whose growth is often seen as untethered from the environmental realities of increasing water scarcity in the Colorado River Basin. Christian S. Harrison's new book, *All the Water the Law Allows: Las Vegas and Colorado River Politics*, argues against this conventional narrative of exploitation in favor of a more nuanced understanding of the fabled desert metropolis and its relationship to water. Harrison