

Mundos de Mujeres  
Women's Worlds 2008

## La Igualdad no es una Utopía

Nuevas Fronteras: Avances y Desafíos  
Conferencias plenarias

## Equality is not a Utopia

New Frontiers: Challenges and Changes  
Plenary lectures



mundos de mujeres  
women's worlds 08



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*WOMEN'S WORLDS 2008*

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*Woman in the Zoot Suit: Mexican-American Women, Nationalisms, Citizenship.*<sup>159</sup> Unlike many other studies of pachucos and pachucas, my project treats the visual as a primary category of analysis. In addition, it examines the figures of the pachuca and pachuco via the prism not only of race, class, and gender, but sexuality as well. I argue that the zoot suit as worn by both Mexican-American men and women in Los Angeles during World War II was deemed un-American because it was rendered a non-white, working-class, and queer signifier.

By the late 1960s, *el pachuco* had emerged as an icon of resistance in much Chicano cultural production. Prior to the Chicano movement, this figure did not play an especially prominent role in literature, theater, scholarship, art, music, or film by Mexican-Americans. When *el pachuco* did appear, he tended to be treated with disdain or pity. For example, in Mario Suárez's 1947 short story «Kid Zopilote,» the pachuco is a fool. And the pachucos who appear briefly in José Antonio Villareal's 1959 novel *Pocho* are «defeated» victims who merely make a «show of resistance.»<sup>160</sup> In contrast, ten years after the publication of *Pocho el pachuco* would be lionized as a «resistance fighter» and «Minuteman of *machismo*.»<sup>161</sup> In 1970, the *Los Angeles Times* columnist Rubén Salazar lauded him as a «rebel» and «folk hero.»<sup>162</sup> And on the eve of the 1978 premier of *Zoot Suit*, the playwright and director Luis Valdez credited *el pachuco* with giving «impetus to the Chicano Movement of the 1960s.»<sup>163</sup>

Because their flashy ensembles flew in the face of wartime rationing regulations and sober middle-class aesthetics, Mexican-American zooters of the early 1940s appeared to repudiate American patriotism and conventional—specifically, heteronormative and bourgeois—masculinities, Anglo-American and Mexican alike. For this reason, a later generation looked to *el pachuco* as the avatar of an oppositional, rather than assimilationist, Chicano cultural identity. Movement-era writers and artists stressed that the zoot suit was more than a simple sartorial fad. Instead, they argued that the zoot suit functioned as a sign of difference and defiance, hence the violence to which its wearers were subjected during the Zoot Suit Riots.

Within Chicano cultural production, images of *el pachuco* abound. He has been the subject of films, works of visual art, academic treatises, poems, and at least one Broadway musical. For the remainder of this brief paper, I'll focus on two photographs of Mexican-American zooters to highlight the complicated economy of gender, sexuality, and style articulated by the wartime zoot suit, a complexity that has been obfuscated by many movement-era representations of the figure of the pachuco. One of these photos is very familiar to students of Chicano history; the other has received little, if any, attention. By comparing these two images, I endeavor to expose the ways nations—statist and insurgent alike—produce and, at the same time, disavow racial, class, gender, and sexual differences. Here, «nation» refers to both the United States during the Second World War and the unofficial cultural imaginary as delineated by the doctrine of Chicano cultural nationalism. As the literary critic Anne McClintock warns, «all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous.»<sup>164</sup> This paper elucidates the violent means by which they are engendered—in other words, by which they are fabricated and gendered—via *la pachuca*.

<sup>159</sup> Ramírez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit* (2009).

<sup>160</sup> Villareal, *Pocho*, 151.

<sup>161</sup> Steiner, *La Raza*, 234.

<sup>162</sup> Rubén Salazar, «Pachuco Folk Heroes—They Were First to Be Different», *Los Angeles Times*, Part II, 7, July 7, 1970.

<sup>163</sup> Luis Valdez, «Once Again, Meet the Zoot Suiters.» *Los Angeles Times*, Part V, 3, August 13, 1978.

<sup>164</sup> McClintock, «Family Feuds» 61.

## QUEERING THE ZOOT SUIT

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On June 11, 1943, in the midst of the Zoot Suit Riots, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that three «female zoot suit gangsterettes» attacked Betty Morgan, a lone white woman, in downtown Los Angeles. Miss Morgan recounted that her assailants wore the «dark skirts and the long identifying coats of the zooters.»<sup>157</sup> They tackled her, slashed her face and arms with a knife or razor, then disappeared into the night.

A «zooter» was a person who wore a zoot suit. For young women in Los Angeles during the Second World War, the ensemble usually consisted of a short, pleated skirt, a cardigan sweater or a long, so-called finger-tip coat, and platform heels or *huarache* sandals. Other hallmarks of the zoot look included a high bouffant (sometimes lightened with peroxide), dark lipstick, thin, arched eyebrows, and large earrings. Male zooters typically wore the «finger-tip» coat, billowing trousers that tapered at the ankle, a long watch chain, and a pair of thick-soled shoes. Some styled their hair in a pompadour on top and a ducktail in back, while others sported a broad-brimmed hat.

The zoot look was popular among working-class youths of various races and ethnicities in cities across the United States, but it came to be associated with Mexican-American youths known as *pachucas* and *pachucos* in Los Angeles in the early 1940s. Pachucas and pachucos were reputed to form gangs and to take part in criminal activities, particularly drug trafficking, peddling, and consumption. Even though Mexican-American youth gangs had existed in Los Angeles as early as the 1920s, the exigencies of war brought renewed attention to Mexican-American adolescents.

With their distinctive clothing, hairstyles, and makeup, pachucas participated in a spectacular—that is, visible and public—subculture.<sup>158</sup> Their visibility and conspicuous occupation of public space are underscored in the *Times* story about the assault on Betty Morgan: the newspaper reported that the victim «observed» her attackers on a city street. Yet, she and by extension, the paper's readers, not only saw, but interpreted them—in particular, their attire—Their «dark skirts» and «long identifying coats» were more than mere articles of clothing; they carried complex and profound meanings in the context of World War II and, later, the Chicano movement, a flourishing of political, artistic, and intellectual activity among people of Mexican descent in the United States in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

To better understand the significance of the zoot suit during these two periods, I approach the Mexican-American zoot subculture as a visual culture in my forthcoming book *The*

<sup>157</sup> «Clashes Few as Zoot War Dies Down,» *Los Angeles Times*, Part I, 1 and B, June 11, 1943.

<sup>158</sup> I take the concept of the «spectacular subculture» from Hebdige's *Subculture* (1989).

During the Zoot Suit Riots, which occurred from around June 3 to 13, 1943, white servicemen clashed with people of color in the streets of Los Angeles. They targeted Mexican Americans wearing zoot suits in particular. In some instances, they stopped and boarded streetcars, burst into businesses and private homes, and set upon people of color regardless of their attire. When they apprehended zooters, they frequently cut their hair, «unpanted» (disrobed) them, and destroyed their distinctive clothing.

In an infamous photo taken during the riots, we see two defrocked Mexican-American youths.<sup>165</sup> One, his chest and legs bare, sits on the sidewalk. The other lies beside him on his back. The supine youth still wears a shirt, pants, and shoes, but his clothing is disheveled.

Because of images like this, several scholars have argued that servicemen symbolically castrated pachucos when they beat them, cut their relatively long hair, and stripped them during the Zoot Suit Riots. For example, according to the historian Mauricio Mazón, the riots enabled servicemen to reenact their own experiences in basic training, which he describes as «a symbolically castrating experience, a death initiation rite.»<sup>166</sup> During basic training, recruits «were hauled into depersonalized lines[,] swiftly given a haircut, 'unpanted', and put into the drab nondescript garb of the recruit's uniform.»<sup>167</sup> Mazón offers a persuasive argument, one that I wish to build upon. However, I contend that the focus on castration reproduces a simple gendered formulation, one that positions *el pachuco* as essentially (or originally) masculine. In addition to feminizing pachucos, the rampaging servicemen simultaneously and paradoxically Americanized and masculinized what many perceived as the unpatriotic and effete pachuco.

With their flamboyant zoot suits and coiffures, pachucos were perceived as both un-American and unmanly in wartime Los Angeles. Even though *el tacuche* (as the ensemble was known) accentuated the male physique with its broad shoulders and cinched waist, it was still denigrated as feminine. For instance, one contemporary observer likened the knee-length coat to «a girl's skirt,» while another compared the pants (which were snug around the waist and hips) to «sister's pre-war girdle.» Yet a third noted that the male zooter's ensemble emphasized a «girlfish waist.»<sup>168</sup> According to the psychiatrist Ralph S. Banay, the zoot suit was «evidence of an adolescent neurosis» and a «chaotic» and «ill-defined» sexuality. In comparing the pachuco to the white sailor, he observed that the former concealed his masculinity with long, curly hair, a long coat, and a pair of baggy pants that «completely hid... the genital characteristics.» The latter, on the other hand, «emphasized if not delineated his masculine development» with «his short blouse and tight-fitting trousers.» «There should be little wonderment that in Los Angeles the two extremes led to violent clash,» he concluded.<sup>169</sup> Long after the Zoot Suit Riots, *el pachuco* would continue to be described as feminine and would be pathologized as «sexual[ly] pervers[e]» and «queer.»<sup>170</sup>

<sup>165</sup> «Zoot Suit Riots,» June 20, 1943. AP/Wide World Photos.

<sup>166</sup> Mazón, *The Zoot-Suit Riots*, 87.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> Banay, «A Psychiatrist Looks at the Zoot Suit,» 84; Walton, *Thread of Victory*, 129; Walter Davenport, «Swing It, Swing Shift!» *Colliers*, 26, August 22, 1942, 24.

<sup>169</sup> Banay, «A Psychiatrist Looks at the Zoot Suit,» 81 and 84.

<sup>170</sup> Braddy, «The Pachucos and Their Argot,» 258. In the years immediately preceding the Zoot Suit and Harlem Riots of 1943, black and brown zooters wore clothes, accessories, and colors that bore a resemblance to what the historian George Chauncey calls «distinctively homosexual attire,» such as «tight-cuffed trousers,» «half-length flaring top-coats,» and «excessively bright feathers in their hat-bands.» See Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 52-53.

Pachucos were also maligned as effeminate because they, like women, participated in consumer culture, which historically has been gendered feminine.<sup>171</sup> Banay fretted that zoot-clad boys paid far too much attention to their clothes and hair than to sports or their studies. And like women, these young men were looked at, as the title of his 1944 article, «A Psychiatrist Looks at the Zoot Suit,» makes clear.

This photograph captures *el pachuco* as object of spectacle. A crowd of curious and concerned onlookers, most of whom appear Mexican, and two police officers loom above the two young men. Some of the bystanders look down at them and others stare directly at the camera. In contrast, the boys avert their gaze. As if ashamed, the seated one looks to the ground and his companion turns his face away from the camera and, by extension, from us viewers. If, as the film critic Laura Mulvey argues in her landmark essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), men are actors who look and women are objects who are looked at, then the humiliated and exposed zooters in this photograph are feminized as spectacle. Their passivity and objectification are further underscored by their lack of control in this scene. While they may have welcomed attention when they set out in their zoot suits, in this instance they do not appear to be willing accomplices in their exhibition.

For many Americans during World War II, the clean-cut white serviceman and *el pachuco* represented polar opposites. The former symbolized more than a gender norm; he represented the apotheosis of American masculinity. The latter was his antithesis. Indeed, *el pachuco* was deemed unmanly precisely because he was deemed un-American. According to his critics, he was a «gamun dandy» who spent his time primping, hanging out, goofing off, and causing trouble, rather than doing his part for the war by fighting the enemy, cutting back or working an honest job.<sup>172</sup> By shearing their hair and tearing off their zoot suits, the rioting servicemen destroyed signs of a competing and non-normative masculinity, of homosexuality, and by extension, of un-Americanism. They highlighted the connection between cultural assimilation and heteronormativity as they expedited and intensified these violent social processes on the streets of Los Angeles.

While the Mexican-American male zooter was pathologized as effeminate, his female counterpart was demonized as masculine in World War II-era Los Angeles. With the Sleepy Lagoon incident of August 1-2, 1942, pachucas' attire, hair, and makeup, their use of unconventional slang, their putatively innate propensity for violence and crime, their suspected association with gangs, and their alleged sexual promiscuity were regarded by law enforcement, the dominant press, academics, and, in some instances, their own parents as indicators of their rejection of a socially sanctioned—namely, middle-class and Mexican-immigrant—femininity.<sup>173</sup> And by appearing to betray gender norms during wartime, pachucas, many of whom were the bilingual and bicultural children of immigrants, seemed to betray nation as well. Thus, in addition to being perceived as morally and sexually loose, these young women were demonized as un—or even anti—American.

When worn by a Mexican-American woman during World War II, the zoot suit became all the more transgressive. Photographs from the early 1940s offer evidence that they wore finger-tip coats and «Punjab» pants. In one, dated August 9, 1942, a police officer leads three

<sup>171</sup> Regarding the gendering of consumer culture, see Enstad, *Ladies of Labor: Girls of Adventure*, 4-5.

<sup>172</sup> «Zoot Suiters Learn Lesson in Fights With Servicemen,» Part 1, 1, *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 1943.

<sup>173</sup> The Sleepy Lagoon incident took place in Los Angeles and involved an alleged gang fight and murder that catapulted *la pachuca* and *el pachuco* into the national and international media spotlight, rendering these figures objects of scrutiny and concern for civic leaders, social scientists, and law enforcement officers.

young women, alleged members of the pachuca gang the Black Widows, into a car.<sup>174</sup> The girls are dressed remarkably alike: each wears a white shirt, dark, billowing trousers, and flat sandals. All have long hair; one has teased hers into an especially high bouffant. As they file into the car, only one of the young women looks directly at the camera. She is not smiling. Instead, she almost appears to be scowling. In the background, curious onlookers, some of whom appear distraught, watch the girls from a distance. Others look to a second police officer at the photo's far-right edge. Half his body is cropped off, but the baton he brandishes is visible.

The women in this photo do not appear entirely masculine, especially by early twentieth-century standards. However, if we bear in mind the zoot suit's meanings during the early 1940s, a moment in which women challenged traditional gender roles and the threat of the masculine woman (the so-called «Amazon») loomed large in public discourse, then these women are not entirely feminine. First, they are on what appears to be a dark city street, the putative domain of men and masculinity, and, secondly, all wear baggy trousers, a sign of juvenile delinquency. Although there is evidence that some young Mexican-American women found pants «very fashionable and chic» (*à la* Greta Garbo or Katharine Hepburn) during World War II, many of the older, Mexican-immigrant women who joined them in the workplace «never really adjusted to wearing what they considered to be men's clothing.»<sup>175</sup>

Even during the Second World War—indeed, not until much later in the twentieth century—pants were not entirely acceptable for either *doñas* (respected older women) or «young ladies» (respectable young women). This is apparent in a photograph of a group of Mexican-American girls published shortly after the Zoot Suit Riots by the *Eastside Journal*.<sup>176</sup> As I have noted elsewhere, the self-described «young ladies» gathered for this photograph to stress that they were patriotic and decent.<sup>177</sup> All but one display the accoutrements of feminine decency: pretty dresses, ribbons, and high heels.

In contrast, the three alleged gang members wear men's shirts and ballooning trousers, signs not only of working-class masculinity, but criminality as well. They were photographed during a crackdown on Mexican-American youth gangs by Los Angeles law enforcement agencies in the days immediately following the Sleepy Lagoon incident. Even without the complete *tacuche*, their suspected criminality is accentuated by the fact that they are being led into a police car. Further, women who cross-dressed in public or who failed to wear at least three articles of women's clothing could be arrested for «male impersonation» during the 1940s and 1950s. In short, in the dominant Anglo-American and Mexican-American cultures of the period, the zoot suit signified illicit activity and street-smarts, neither of which was (or is) connected to normative and middle-class femininity. By wearing clothes that signaled gender and sexual transgression, these women betrayed gender norms and, in doing so, they betrayed nation.

To sum up, in wartime Los Angeles, pachucas and pachucos represented an unsettling gender paradox: the former were simultaneously regarded as excessively and inadequately feminine, while the latter were masculinized, emasculated, or homoeroticized by their critics, Anglo-American, Mexican, and Mexican-American alike. Together, pachucas and pachucos

<sup>174</sup> «Suspected members of the pachuca gang, the Black Widows, being taken into police custody.» *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1942. Photo by Jack A. Herod.

<sup>175</sup> Santillán, «Rosita the Riveter» 127.

<sup>176</sup> «Mexican-American Girls Meet in Protest.» *Eastside Journal*, June 16, 1943: 5.

<sup>177</sup> See Ramírez (2002).

queered not only dominant American culture, but respectable (that is, middle-class and heteronormative) Mexican-American culture as well. The outfit they shared—a coat and a pair of trousers—destabilized race, class, and gender categories. Zoot suits on Mexican bodies provoked myriad unsettling questions, such as Who is an American, who is a man, and who is a lady? Ultimately, Chicano cultural nationalists would «un-queer» the Mexican-American zoot subculture and re-gender *el pachuco* as masculine. He would be recuperated as an icon of machismo, resistance, and style in much cultural production of the Chicano movement. *El pachuca*, in contrast, would remain inappropriately feminine and inappropriate by virtue of being masculine.

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