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Review of The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory by Catherine S. Ramírez

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In her new book, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory*, Catherine Ramírez undertakes a “self-conscious recovery project” that demonstrates the invaluable scholarly contributions that can come from reinterpreting the past (xv). She draws from a wide array of cultural artifacts as well as primary and secondary data to describe the experience of pachucas, women Zoot-Suiters from the 1940s–1950s, and reconstruct them as both historical and iconic figures in Mexican American history. Dr Ramírez mines her interviews with elderly pachucas, court transcripts, newspaper clippings and historical accounts. In addition, well aware of “the power of literary and artistic works – culture, in other words – not only to reflect but to produce history, narrative, and meaning,” she also examines Chicano cultural productions, such as Luis Valdez’s play and film, *Zoot Suit*, and Judith Baca’s multimedia artwork, *Las Tres Marías*, to show how the pachuca went from being depicted as a marginal historical figure to one recognized for her sociocultural contributions (xv). The impressive manner in which she integrates postcolonial, feminist and queer theory into her analyses of texts and data throughout the book highlights Dr Ramírez’s insightful understanding of how feminists ultimately reinterpreted pachucas in their literary and artistic works, as well as the cultural and sociohistorical forces with which pachucas had to contend.

Dr Ramírez shows how pachucas were maligned for not abiding by the social expectations of both the broader US society and of their Mexican American communities. In the English-language press, they were mostly criticized for their masculine attire and deemed unpatriotic, unlike the “feminine patriot,” who represented femininity, domesticity and innocence during the time of war. Similarly, Spanish-language newspapers accused pachucas of being *malinches* – female traitors to their people – for threatening the gender order of heteropatriarchal Mexican families. Dr Ramírez argues, rather convincingly, that as a result of the treachery attributed to pachucas for embodying
the resistance of pachucos, and thus not abiding by the norms of sexuality, gender and Chicano nationalism, they were subsequently ignored or erased from the Chicano narratives of pachuquismo that surfaced during the Chicano movement. Consequently, within the cultural production of the Chicano movement, pachucas never acquired the iconic status of their male counterparts, the pachucos, who were lauded for their opposition to US nationalism and white supremacy.

The personal narratives of the women that Dr Ramírez interviewed are quite intriguing. These women provide compelling evidence of the extent to which pachucas were socially marginalized by Mexican American adults, as well as by white society. They recall their parents warning them against adopting the aesthetics and demeanor associated with pachucas, who were branded lesbians or held up as epitomes of the whore in the virgin-whore dichotomy for challenging the notion of domesticity and traditional gender roles. Such was the stigma associated with pachucas, that nearly half a century later the interviewees were reluctant to identify with pachucas or to even acknowledge that they understood caló, pachuco slang, let alone that they used it during their youths.

Dr Ramírez’s book is indeed, as she intended it to be, “an intervention;” one that gives pachucas the opportunity to use their own voices to claim their rightful place in Mexican American history (xviii). In the book we read that Mexican American young women, both pachucas and non-pachucas, took it upon themselves to write letters contesting the stereotypical representations of Mexican American young women in newspaper articles about pachucas, who were depicted as violent and sexually promiscuous. What is more, we also learn from the transcripts of the Sleepy Lagoon trial, People v. Zammora, that the pachucas used both silence and the “language and speech” of pachuquismo, which social norms deemed unladylike, as forms of resistance (83). With their resistance, pachucas, in effect, challenged US society in much the same way as their male counterparts.

Perhaps the most arresting part of this book is the thorough treatment that Dr Ramírez gives to the iconic pachuca’s exclusion from the Chicano movement’s familia de la raza. Here, she persuasively maintains that, like other nationalisms, Chicano nationalism was rooted in the notion of heteropatriarchal family, to which the (butch lesbian) pachuca was an affront. However, as Dr Ramírez explains, the representations of la pachuca found in feminists works of the Chicano movement era, such as that of Cherrie Moraga and Judith Baca, not only challenge the centrality of el pachuco, but also imagine the possibility of alternative, inclusive forms of nation, family and community.

Latino Studies readers who have followed the rise of US nationalism that has come with the so-called war on terror will likely read the Epilogue with great interest. In it, Dr Ramírez focuses on the pachucas’ successors, “the Latina GI, a figure relatively new to the American cultural landscape,” in order to discuss “the violence of inclusion in the nation and empire” (xviii). Interestingly, such inclusion stands in sharp contrast to the experience of pachucas, who were forcibly excluded from two nations – the United States and Aztlán.

The Woman in the Zoot Suit is a welcomed addition to the academic literature. It will undoubtedly influence future scholarship on Mexican American history, pachucas, pachuquismo, Chicano nationalism, linguistics and feminist Chicana artists and writers. In addition, this relatively brief book provides an excellent example of an imaginative, interdisciplinary methodology that students and scholars in the humanities and social sciences
may want to emulate when examining the multifaceted lives and historical experiences of Latino/a, or any other peoples. Furthermore, as this reviewer has found in his course on US youth cultures, Catherine Ramírez’s work can be exceedingly useful in courses that examine gender from sociocultural and sociohistorical perspectives.

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