

BOOK REVIEWS

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

(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. 229 pp. Paper, \$22.95.)

Reviewed by María Angela Díaz

According to historian Catherine S. Ramírez, women are conspicuously absent from the story of the World War II era, the zoot suit, and the creation of Chicano cultural nationalism. In *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory*, Ramírez admirably sets out to correct this problem through her discussion of *pachucas* and their involvement in zoot-suit culture as well as the 1942 Sleepy Lagoon case and the Zoot-Suit Riots. While recent studies such as Luis Alvarez's *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance During World War II* address the suit's importance to Mexican Americans and other ethnic and racial groups, Ramírez creatively links the zoot-suit culture of the 1940s with the Chicana/o artists of later decades to reveal how these artists redefined the pachuco and the zoot suit, making both icons of Chicano/a culture. She demonstrates that women were not simply hangers-on, but were integral to the formation of this culture, and that Chicana feminists used the memory of the pachuca in poetry and art to create their own version of Chicano/a nationalism that did not cast them as strange or beyond the scope of proper Chicano/a gender roles.

The first of the book's two sections focuses on the World War II era and American nationalism, while the second emphasizes the movement-era development of Chicano/a nationalism. Four chapters examine pachucas' involvement in the construction of zoot-suit culture and Mexican American households; the larger social structures that shaped the portrayal of pachucas and their actions; their part in the riots and the Sleepy Lagoon case; the reinterpretation of the pachuco by Chicano nationalist artists; and finally, the connections among pachu-

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cas, Chicana feminism, and Latina GIs fighting in Iraq. Thus, while pachucas may have been erased from the story of the zoot suit, they nonetheless produced a legacy of powerful Mexican American women. This structure allows the reader to see clearly the cultural connections between the 1940s and the Chicano/a movement of the 1960s and 1970s that Ramírez intends to make.

Ramírez deftly uses a twofold argument and an interdisciplinary approach to accomplish her main goal. First, she argues that pachucas have been “invisible in most narrations of twentieth-century Mexican American history” (xiv). (In the 1940s, the term *pachuco* or *pachuca* referred to young, usually working-class men and women of Mexican descent, who were often the children of immigrants.) Second, Ramírez claims that the figure of *la pachuca* teaches us about nationalism, the nature of citizenship, and the complexities of gendered cultural resistance against oppression. She analyzes a variety of source material—including oral histories with former female zoot suiters, court transcripts, cartoons, plays, poetry, and fiction—to probe the stereotype of pachucas/os as being involved in crime and gangs and to understand more fully the place of the pachuca as icon and person in American and Chicano/a culture.

Ramírez uses photographs to reveal the complex “style politics” of the gendered zoot suit, which was an expression of difference using style of dress. A popular style of clothing for young working-class men, the zoot suit consisted of a broad-brimmed hat, a long “fingertip” jacket, and trousers that tapered at the ankles. As Ramírez points out, women adapted the flashy suit for themselves. While some women wore the same type of suit as male zooters, most female zoot suiters paired the characteristic long coat with short skirts, and wore huarache sandals or chunky “zombie” slippers. Many literary works, such as Luis Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* and poetry by raulsalinas, either helped to erase the importance of the pachuca or attempted to put her back into the story of Chicano nationalism.

Ramírez reveals that during the 1940s, pachucas challenged Anglo and Mexican American depictions of them as “unladylike” sexual pawns. Pachucas ran afoul of American nationalism by wearing zoot-suit apparel in public during a time when Americans perceived conformity to social norms as patriotic. Ramírez notes that pachucas represented an aberrant femininity that challenged the established role of women during World War II. Along with their feminized male counterparts, they embodied a threat to American nationalism and traditional gender roles. But when newspapers denigrated them, many female zoot suiters protested their treatment. A few of the women that Ramírez interviewed denied having been pachucas, but inevitably wound up expressing sympathy for the pachucas, who were depicted negatively in news coverage of the riots. This helps reveal the complex nature of zoot-suit culture, and the fact that not all zooters were pachucos/as.

Despite distancing themselves from the unfavorable stereotype of pachucas, zoot-suit women remained proud of their choices to participate in the lifestyle. During the Chicano movement, Ramírez notes, the figure of *la pachuca* was excluded from Chicano cultural nationalism because of her supposed masculinity and possible homosexuality. This figure challenged the patriarchal image of the Chicano family, which was at the center of the Chicano/a nationalist movement. Ramírez thus uncovers a point of commonality between American and Chicano nationalism and demonstrates the complex ways that these nationalist identities overlap and are informed by one another.

Ramírez's approach makes the book an interesting teaching tool. For instructors, it points the way toward poets, activists, social critics, artists, and writers who use the Zoot-Suit Riots, the suit itself, pachucas, and pachucos to produce a distinct Chicana/o culture. This cultural production can also be used in conjunction with the art and literature that Ramírez studies to provide students with background for a discussion on the gendered experiences of Mexican American men and women. Ramírez uses a fair amount of theoretical jargon, which might be difficult for high school students or younger undergraduates to understand. In such instances, I recommend using the book to further inform the instructor's lessons and assigning particular chapters for students to read.

While Ramírez clearly demonstrates that many female zoot suiters were, in fact, hardworking and law-abiding citizens enjoying a developing youth culture, a more thorough analysis of violence and the role it played in the lives of pachucas and pachucos would have strengthened her argument. She maintains that many zoot suiters were not necessarily gang members, but the violent lifestyle ascribed to the zoot suiter, the supposedly gang-affiliated teenagers known as *cholos/as* who came about in later decades, and the barrios in which they lived are unavoidable aspects of any discussion involving the zoot suit. How did violence, either real or imagined, help to shape Anglo-American nationalist and Chicano nationalist discourse on pachucas/os and zoot suits? How is this violence gendered? Exploring such questions would have helped better connect the many ways that American nationalism and Chicano/a nationalism marginalized and erased pachucas from both American and Mexican American culture.

Despite this small oversight, Ramírez has produced an excellent study that makes us rethink the place of women in some of the most important events in American and Mexican American history. Her creative use of source material demonstrates the many ways that artists and individuals fought to remember and, later, redefine pachucas/os and the zoot suit.