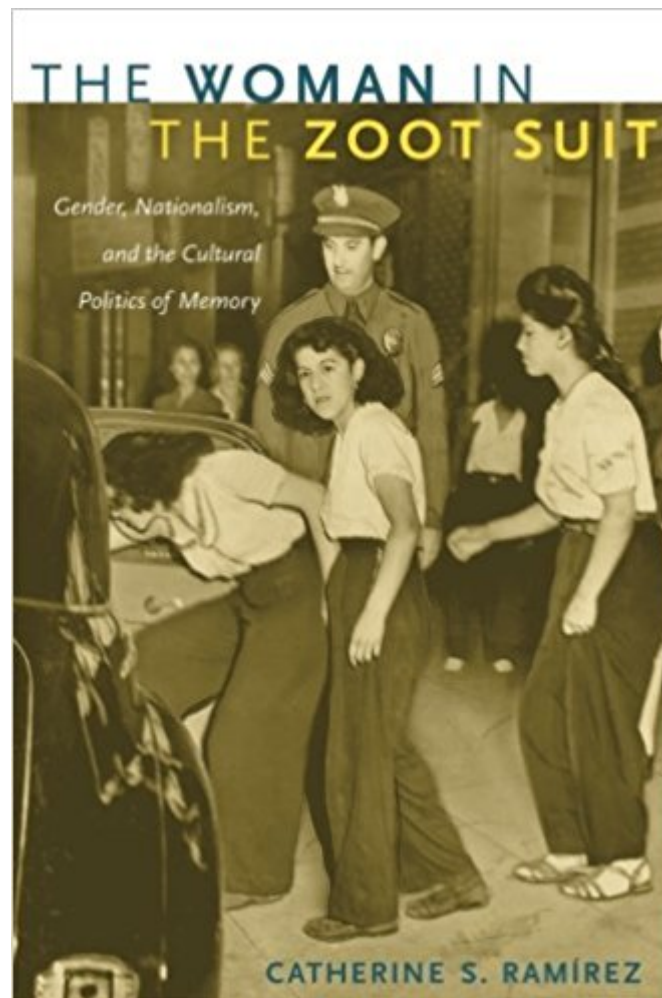




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The Woman In The Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, And The Cultural Politics Of Memory



Synopsis

The Mexican American woman zoot suiter, or pachuca, often wore a V-neck sweater or a long, broad-shouldered coat, a knee-length pleated skirt, fishnet stockings or bobby socks, platform heels or saddle shoes, dark lipstick, and a bouffant. Or she donned the same style of zoot suit that her male counterparts wore. With their striking attire, pachucos and pachucas represented a new generation of Mexican American youth, which arrived on the public scene in the 1940s. Yet while pachucos have often been the subject of literature, visual art, and scholarship, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit* is the first book focused on pachucas. Two events in wartime Los Angeles thrust young Mexican American zoot suiters into the media spotlight. In the Sleepy Lagoon incident, a man was murdered during a mass brawl in August 1942. Twenty-two young men, all but one of Mexican descent, were tried and convicted of the crime. In the Zoot Suit Riots of June 1943, white servicemen attacked young zoot suiters, particularly Mexican Americans, throughout Los Angeles. The Chicano movement of the 1960s–1980s cast these events as key moments in the political awakening of Mexican Americans and pachucos as exemplars of Chicano identity, resistance, and style. While pachucas and other Mexican American women figured in the two incidents, they were barely acknowledged in later Chicano movement narratives. Catherine S. Ramirez draws on interviews she conducted with Mexican American women who came of age in Los Angeles in the late 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s as she recovers the neglected stories of pachucas. Investigating their relative absence in scholarly and artistic works, she argues that both wartime U.S. culture and the Chicano movement rejected pachucas because they threatened traditional gender roles. Ramirez reveals how pachucas challenged dominant notions of Mexican American and Chicano identity, how feminists have reinterpreted la pachuca, and how attention to an overlooked figure can disclose much about history making, nationalism, and resistant identities.

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Duke University Press Books; 1st Edition edition (January 16, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0822343037

ISBN-13: 978-0822343035

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.6 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 2 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #185,891 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #119 in [Books > Politics &](#)

[Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Ideologies & Doctrines > Nationalism](#) #158

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Customer Reviews

This engrossing, unexpectedly timely study of the politics of cultural nationalism resurrects the hidden history of la pachuca, the female counterpart to the 1940s pachuco, the zoot suit-wearing Mexican-American hipster made notorious by two consecutive wartime flashpoints: 1942's Sleepy Lagoon case and 1943's Zoot Suit Riots. Ramfrez (Through an East-West Gaze) builds on the best recent scholarship to argue that la pachuca's sexually charged and gender-ambiguous presence in WWII-era Los Angeles made her so fraught a figure of resistance to both dominant and ethnic norms of feminine behavior that she was difficult to incorporate in narratives shaping Latino identity. A generation later, a nascent Chicano movement re-appropriated the pejorative archetype of el pachuco as a symbol of rebellious pride but continued to vilify or ignore the female zoot-suiter. Reflecting, the author contends, the entrenched patriarchal and traditional gender norms in Chicano and U.S. nationalism at large. A vital addition for those interested in American ethnic and cultural studies as well as studies of sexuality and visual culture, this book speaks forcefully to current Obama-era and post-Prop 8 debates over race, ethnicity, sexuality, patriotism and citizenship. (Feb.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"Ramfrez's book restores pachucas to history and also provides astute analysis of the role of cultural production in emerging political formations. It is an excellent accomplishment and a superb model of truly interdisciplinary history." - Nan Enstad, *American Historical Review* "[A] serious must-read for United States cultural historians" - one of my favorites from last year. - Tenured Radical blog "This unique, important book comes out swinging and packs a punch. In pithy prose Ramfrez reassesses pachucas' everyday, working-class female zoot suiters, and la pachuca's iconographic, symbolic figure. . . . With an ear for language and an eye for fashion, the author validates the legacy of once vilified women who shook up the status quo with panache, impudence, insolence, insouciance, and insubordination." - Anthony Macfias, *American*

Studies

“In her engaging and insightful book, Catherine Ramfrez provides the first comprehensive, full-length study of the Mexican American woman zoot suiter or pachuca. . . . Overall, Ramfrez provides a masterful reading of cultural texts and their representations of pachucas. . . . Provocative and important, Ramfrez adds a highly notable contribution to race, gender, and ethnic studies scholarship.” - Elizabeth R. Escobedo, *Western Historical Quarterly*

“Ramfrez presents the unique history of the Mexican American Pachuca, whose situation takes into account the religious, gender, and non-U.S.-born ramifications that they inherited. Not only did they have to fight against the politics of a racist, sexist society alongside the Pachucos, but they also had to fight the misogynistic politics of their brethren from within. Ramfrez presents a well documented and informative work on the Pachuca, thus helping to bring us out of our culturally-induced slumber.” - Olupero R. Aiyenimelo, *Feminist Review* blog

“It’s a compelling look at the politics of style and the resistance enacted when young women of color refused to be invisible to mainstream culture.” - Erica Lies, *Bitch Magazine*

“In this engaging and perceptive book, Catherine S. Ramfrez locates Mexican American women zoot suiters (pachucas) in wartime zoot-suit culture and the cultural politics of Chicano nationalism. This original study provides a new cultural lens for envisioning the network of social relationships, identifications, and symbolic investments gathered around the historical figure of the pachuca.”

• Rosa-Linda Fregoso, author of *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands*

“Powerful and innovative, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit* will serve as a foundational text for future studies on culture, race, gender, and sexuality. Catherine S. Ramfrez expertly reveals the complexities of pachuca identity, the extent of Mexican American women zoot suiters’ representation in and engagement with popular culture and mainstream media, and, ultimately, the ways that these young women disrupted dominant notions of U.S., Mexican American, and Chicana/o identity, nationalism, and family.”

• Luis Alvarez, author of *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II*

“[A] complicated and important text. . . . *The Woman In the Zoot Suit* adds to Duke University’s excellent collection of studies on clothing, identity, racism, sexuality, and women’s history. As Catherine Ramirez reminds us, history is intervention. History has the power to marginalize communities - or to define them in new ways.” (Barbara Kantz *Canadian Journal of History*)

“*The Woman in the Zoot Suit* is rife with teaching moments. Ramfrez kicks off the book with challenging questions about evidence and the very notion of history. She inspires a rethinking of lost stories, and how we recover them. And she leaves her audience reconsidering of the role of memory in the evolution of history, of

identity, and of our own self-perceptions as readers of, and actors in, history. (Linda L. Ivey The History Teacher) “By carefully studying the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation, Ramfrez is able to critically consider the implications of the relationship between family and the nation, as these are maintained and challenged through dominant reproductions and nondominant resistances. . . . Ramfrez’s text is . . . broadly accessible and suitable for graduates and undergraduates. (Adela C. Licona Feminist Formations) “Ramfrez brings together a wide range of sources and methodological approaches to recover the images, voices, and silences of the much maligned and misunderstood pachucas. More importantly, she illuminates the larger meaning and significance of the pachucas’ dress, language, and self-censorship. In so doing, she provides a model of what it means to work in multiple disciplines to create a narrative that does justice to her subjects. The book contains never-before published photos and is written in an easy-to-read style with minimal jargon. For these reasons, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit* will appeal to a wide audience, including scholars, feminists, students of the Chicano and Chicana movement, and the general public. (Miroslava Chavez-Garcia Women’s Review of Books) “This engrossing, unexpectedly timely study of the politics of cultural nationalism resurrects the hidden history of la pachuca. . . . A vital addition for those interested in American ethnic and cultural studies as well as studies of sexuality and visual culture, this book speaks forcefully to current Obama-era and post-Prop 8 debates over race, ethnicity, sexuality, patriotism and citizenship. (Publishers Weekly) “In her engaging and insightful book, Catherine Ramfrez provides the first comprehensive, full-length study of the Mexican American woman zoot suiter or pachuca. . . . Overall, Ramfrez provides a masterful reading of cultural texts and their representations of pachucas. . . . Provocative and important, Ramfrez adds a highly notable contribution to race, gender, and ethnic studies scholarship. (Elizabeth R. Escobedo Western Historical Quarterly) “It’s a compelling look at the politics of style and the resistance enacted when young women of color refused to be invisible to mainstream culture. (Erica Lies Bitch Magazine) “Ramfrez’s book restores pachucas to history and also provides astute analysis of the role of cultural production in emerging political formations. It is an excellent accomplishment and a superb model of truly interdisciplinary history. (Nan Enstad American Historical Review) “This unique, important book comes out swinging and packs a punch. In pithy prose Ramfrez reassesses pachucas’ everyday, working-class female zoot suiters, and la pachuca—iconographic, symbolic figure. . . . With an ear for language and an eye for fashion, the author validates the legacy of once vilified women who shook up the

status quo with panache, impudence, insolence, insouciance, and insubordination. – (Anthony Macías as American Studies)

must read for any chicanos out there

This book is a historical work which covers the topic of Women and Zoot Suits from World War II to the Chicano Movement. Ramirez emphasizes the participation of women in zoot suit culture during WWII making use of the few sources that exist, including some important ones that have been neglected by other academics on the subject. Throughout the book, Ramirez employs feminist analysis, which had not been utilized to understand the female participants of zoot suit culture to this extent. Feminist analysis was popular among scholars and artists during the late 1970s and 1980s to interpret the sources from the Chicano Movement which either neglected or caricatured the female counterparts of pachucos. In this sense, Ramirez first summarizes feminist interpretations of sources from the Chicano Movement and then adds her own additional level of analysis. Overall, this is an excellent monograph which should be read by all students of Mexican American History, World War II History, and 20th century U.S. History.

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