

Routledge Research in Gender and Society

MEXICAN AMERICAN WOMEN, DRESS, AND GENDER

PACHUCAS, CHICANAS, CHOLAS

Amaia Ibarraran-Bigalondo



Mexican American Women, Dress, and Gender

Mexican American women have endured several layers of discrimination deriving from a strong patriarchal tradition and a difficult socioeconomic and cultural situation within the US ethnic and class organization. However, there have been groups of women who have defied their fates at different times and in diverse forms.

Mexican American Women, Dress, and Gender observes how *Pachucas*, *Chicanas*, and *Cholas* have used their body image (dress, hairstyle, and body language) as a political tool of deviation; and intends to measure the degree of intentionality in said oppositional stance. For this purpose and, claiming the sociological power of photographs as a representation of precise sociohistorical moments, this work analyzes several photographs of women of said groups with the aim of proving the relevance of “other” body images in expressing gender and ethnic identification, or disidentification from the mainstream norm.

Proposing a diachronic, comparative approach to young Mexican American women, this monograph will appeal to students and researchers interested in Chicano History, Race and Ethnic Studies, American History, Feminism, and Gender Studies.

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To My Magnificent Eight
They Know



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Acknowledgments

This work arose as a mixture of an academic and a personal drive. An academic one, because that is what I am now. A personal one, because the need to connect the personal to the academic has always been there, in me. This is, thus, a personal work, which could never have been accomplished without the help and support of many. First, without the love and support of my family, of Malen and Nora, who have always enjoyed coming to the other side of the world with me, where ama goes to University every morning. Of Diego, who has always understood me, and supported me unconditionally, in his way. Of Felipe and Karnele, my parents, who have made an effort as big as mine throughout all these years, understanding and respecting my difference during my young, loco years, and today, accompanying me to the other side of the world, physically, him, and emotionally and spiritually, her. Of Irantzu and Awa, who are always with me, here and there, in our side of the world, and in the other, too. Of Josu, for being who he is. Difference makes you the best, my dearest bro. I love you all dearly. Of María Herrera-Sobek, a source of inspiration, academic and personal. I owe you a lot, María. Of Francisco Lomelí, who has always been ready to help and welcome me. Thank you both, very sincerely. Of my beloved friends, Esti and Yolanda, I could not live without our daily conversations and confessions, you are the best friends and colleagues one could ever have. Of all my friends at the UPV/EHU (David, thank you for taking me out for coffee, always), and those outside University. I am who I am thanks to you, too. Of the happiest, most energetic person and friend, Virginia. You saved this project. It will happen next time. Of all those friends who were happy to know it was happening. You are all important to me. Of all those who wanted but could not help, Beni, David, Senen. What great artists you are. Of all the institutions that supported me in this way: USAC, MINECO (project code: FF12014-52738-P), of the REWEST team (Grupo Consolidado IT1206-16) (thank you Angel for following me; thanks, David, for making this up). Of those who, without knowing me, tried to help: special thanks to Catherine Ramírez, Simon Elliot, Diego Vigil, Devra Weber, Luis C. Garza, and many others. I wish there were more people like you. And why not, of those who did not want to help.

Thank you all. Next time it will all be different.

A note to the reader

I started writing this book out of curiosity and as a personal drive. My career as an academic started as long as 20 years ago. Or maybe more. Maybe my career as an academic started when I first took an American Literature class with my much-admired lecturer then, and friend and colleague later, Vickie Olsen. I was young and looked ‘different’ then. And I knew it, and I liked it and I probably consciously looked for it. It was the end of the Eighties and the Basque Country, where I was born and raised, was a sociologically, culturally and politically intense place. Too intense, probably, but that was what it was. In that intense sociocultural and political situation, young people rebelled. Some became fiercely nationalistic, others complied to the norm and some (including myself) were fascinated by a powerful alternative, pseudo-anarchist movement, where angry punk music, occupied and self-managed cultural spaces (*Gaztetxes* – young people’s homes, in Basque) seemed a useful and creative way out from an aggressive Basque nationalism and an harsh state machine. But I was always ‘in between’: rebellious and alternative as I looked, I never left what was considered ‘the right path’ in the Nineties. And in an unplanned and probably too-easy way, I became an active part of academia. I got a job at the University of the Basque Country after I obtained my Ph.D. degree with a doctoral thesis on Feminist Chicana Literature. Everything was fascinating to me. I was fascinated by those emerging voices who were different, who described and praised difference and yet were constructive and (r)evolutionary. But even within academia, I felt different, and I liked being different. I probably wanted to be different. And, once inside, I very much wanted to contribute to the creation of a different academic world, where lecturers and academics looked at ‘the real world,’ with its ‘real issues.’ Teaching literature seemed a great way to produce some impact, to provoke a little change, at least in those who read with me.

Years have passed and I still feel I do not totally fit. I still believe the gap between the theoretical world and the practical one does not need to be an untrespassable border. And I still believe in change, revolutions and . . . why not . . . in the power of youth as a catalyst of change. I am very probably very much part of the system, but I still feel an attraction for difference, youth expression and the power of diversity. And for subcultures, and for women within subcultures. And for the claim of a female voice and agency within subcultures.

This is why the following work is not a purely academic work. It is a subjective personal vision of somebody who once looked different and wanted to express change, and disconformity (why not), but also creativity and the hope for a better future, as well as individual (female) agency through her attire, through her group affiliation, and in sum, through her body. Her body and looks as lived experience, as a “concrete lived entity” (De Clerq 4). It is the subjective personal vision of a once ‘street girl’ who has read widely about the way other ‘street girls’ (*Chicanas, Pachucas and Cholas*) have been represented. It is the subjective personal view of an academic who wanted to look at the way other ‘street girls’ represent and present their bodies and selves as “concrete and lived” bodies.

In sum, this is not a book that intends to draw any feminist theoretical conclusion(s), nor does it start from any concrete theoretical background or wants to adhere its findings to any theoretical trend. This is not a deep ethnographic or sociological research work that aims to reach categorizing or labeling conclusions on any issue regarding ‘the *Pachuca/Chicana/Chola* experience.’ This book is not based on the compilation of scientific data, but on a few representations of different women (whom I deeply respect), found openly and freely in diverse sources, which have helped me identify myself with the represented ones and thus draw some observations on the signification of their representations.

This book is, in sum, the result of my still (I think) revolutionary spirit, of my deep belief that women and girls still need to be different and break rules, that the fight is not over and that difference is political. Because, borrowing Angharad Valdivia and Rhiannon Bettivia’s words, “the intellectual is the personal is the political” (24). Because lived lives are political and one’s position in life, towards life and towards oneself and others is always political. And needs to seek for change and (r)evolution.



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Introduction

An image is worth a thousand words.

Personal image is a mark of personal identity. Gender is a mark of personal identity. According to this simple, yet intricate formula, personal image and gender are related. Gender, already proved as a social construction, undoubtedly marks the social identity of an individual. Women, or women who “become women” (De Beauvoir 330) through the influx of the society they live in and its regulating norms and cultural values, are thus expected to adopt a particular attitude, demeanor and image, which directly links them to the category of women as individuals and as a homogeneous group. And so are men. The roles of men and women throughout the different periods and spans of time of Western civilization have varied and adapted to the times. In all cases, these have always been conditioned by diverse nonpersonal, but social and cultural norms. Among these, the influence of religion (Christianity, in particular) as a set system of beliefs and social and moral conduct has clearly established said roles and particularly those of women, whose lives, destinies and even ways of acting, behaving and showing themselves in public have been clearly defined by such religious practices and beliefs. Morality, decency and the overall ethical position of women have, in most cases, been imposed upon them by said set of social and cultural norms of conduct. Among these, the way a woman should look has been of uttermost relevance to measure her adaptability or disconformity to the norm, and thus her morals and respectability.

In this context, and leaving aside the particular cultural and social norms related to womanhood, femininity and female behavior, women, since time immemorial, have been required to dress and act ‘as women’ and in a ‘womanly fashion.’ The first written words on female appearance are found in the Bible, where dress is portrayed as a punishment for the loss of paradise and the revelation of a world marked by sin and salvation/condemnation.

When the woman saw that the tree produced good food, was attractive in appearance, and was desirable for making one wise, she took some of its fruit