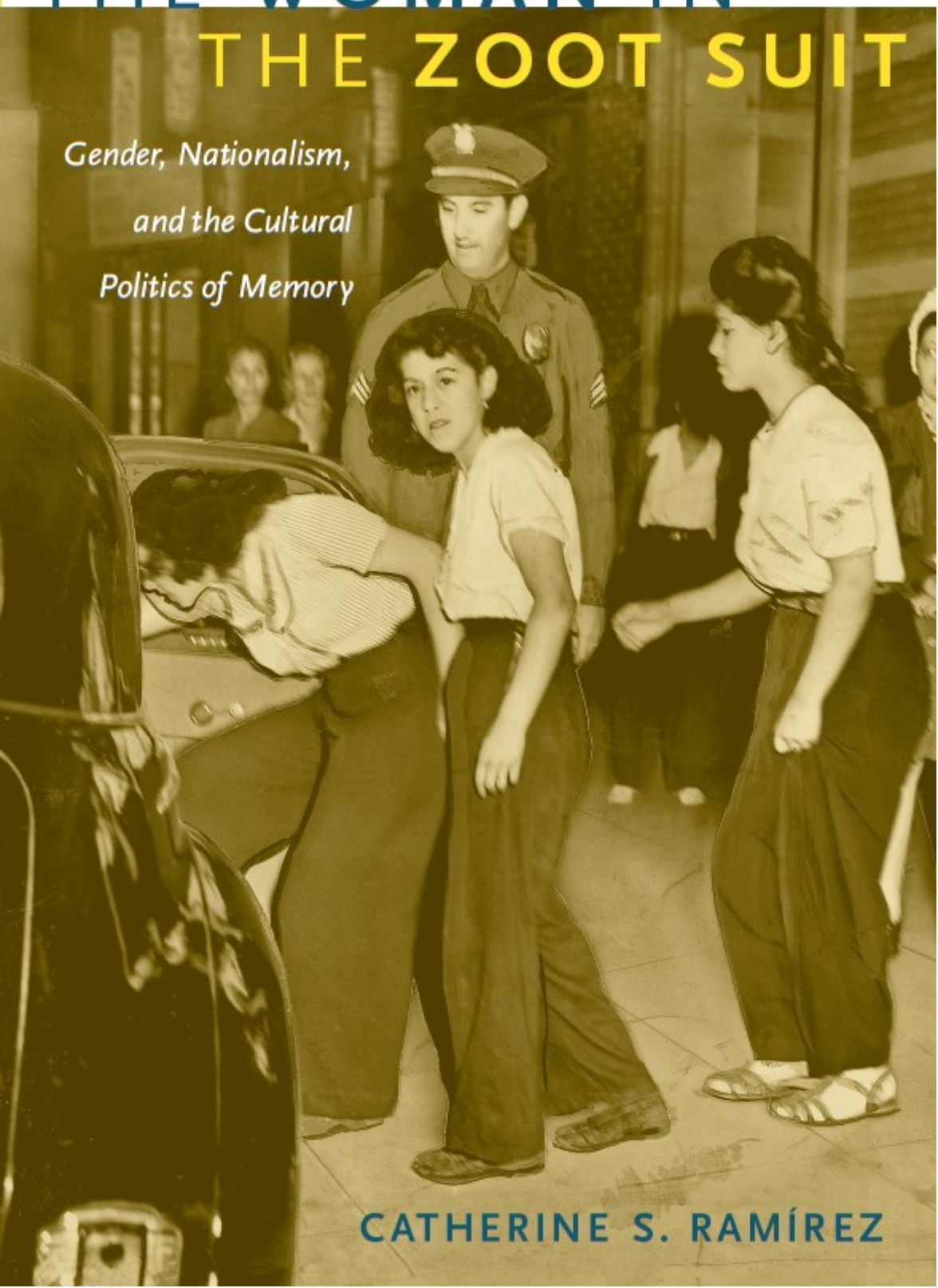
THE WOMAN IN THE ZOOT SUIT

Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory



CATHERINE S. RAMÍREZ

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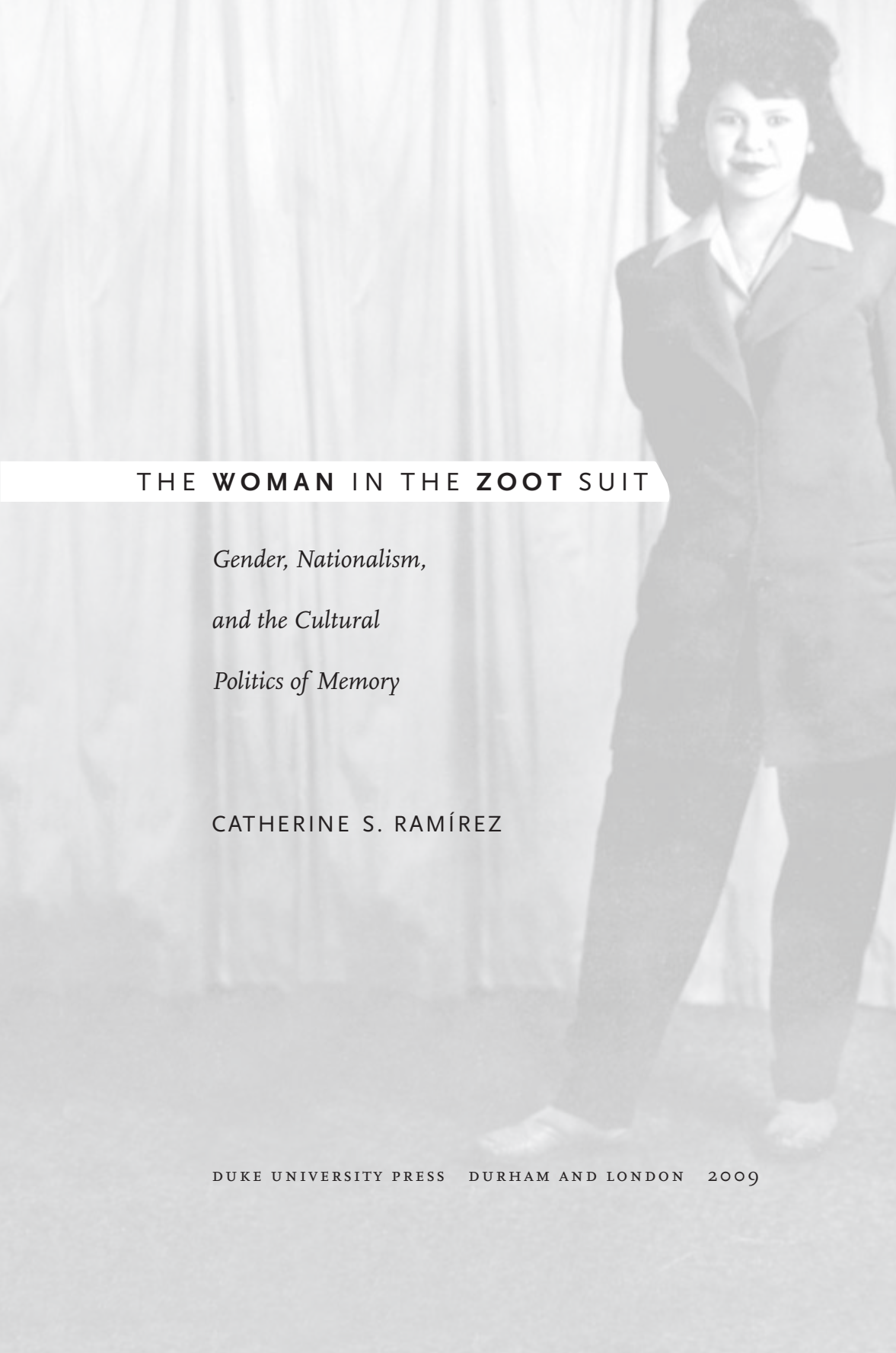

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Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory

CATHERINE S. RAMÍREZ

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For my parents,

Vince and Edna Ramírez

And for my children,

Carmen and Omar Ramírez y Porter

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PREFACE

Pero lo más sura was
that in all their
SOCIOLOGICAL
ANTHROPOLOGICAL
PSYCHOLOGICAL
& HISTORICAL
heaps & piles of bogus bullshit,
our sister—La Pachuca—of the
equal sufrimientos;
aquella carnalita que también
who also bore the brunt
de toda la carilla
remained in their textbooks
ANONYMOUS.[1]

In his poem "Homenaje al Pachuco (Mirrored Reflections)" (1973), raúlsalinas, one of the more prolific and well-known pachuco poets of the Chicano movement, pays homage to *el pachuco*, the zoot-clad, Mexican American homeboy of the 1940s and 1950s.[2] He also acknowledges this figure's female counterpart, *la pachuca*, and laments her erasure from official accounts of the Mexican American zoot subculture and infamous Zoot Suit Riots.

Although there were few reported serious injuries and property damage was minimal relative to other major twentieth-century civil disturbances, the Zoot Suit Riots represent a critical violent episode in Mexican American and U.S. history. During the riots, white servicemen, some of whom were accompanied by civilians, attacked "zooters," youths wearing zoot suits. In particular, they targeted zoot-clad Mexican Americans. For at least ten days in June of 1943, servicemen from across Southern California and some

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1. A young couple sporting the zoot look, 1944. *Lowrider* magazine, copyright 1978–79. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF MCMULLEN ARGUS PUBLISHING, INC., COPYRIGHT 1978, 1979, 2007.

from as far away as Las Vegas poured into Los Angeles and roamed the streets of downtown, Chinatown, Chavez Ravine, East Los Angeles, and Watts in search of their prey. 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 sheared their hair and stripped them of their distinctive clothing.

Even though the zoot suit was popular among working-class youths of various races and ethnicities in cities across the United States during the early 1940s, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit* focuses on Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, site of not only the Zoot Suit Riots but the Sleepy Lagoon incident as well. Like the riots, the so-called "zoot suit" murder case, as the Sleepy Lagoon incident was also known, drew attention to Mexican Americans' clothing, hair, and makeup.[3] In brief, both events expressed

2. Young Mexican American women on a street in San Fernando, 1943. Note the high pompadour, V-neck sweater, and bobby socks—all characteristics of the wartime zoot look in Los Angeles—on the woman on the far left. SHADES OF L.A. COLLECTION, LOS ANGELES PUBLIC LIBRARY.

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3. Hallmarks of pachuca style: up-do, plucked brows, and dark lips, 1941. *Lowrider* magazine, copyright 1978–79. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF MCMULLEN ARGUS PUBLISHING, INC., COPYRIGHT 1978, 1979, 2007.

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4. A Mexican American youth modeling *el tacuche*, 1942. *Lowrider* magazine, copyright 1978–79. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF MCMULLEN ARGUS PUBLISHING, INC., COPYRIGHT 1978, 1979, 2007.

5. A Mexican American man strikes a pose in a zoot suit, 1942. SHADES OF L.A. COLLECTION, LOS ANGELES PUBLIC LIBRARY.

anxiety over Mexican Americans' bodies and their place in a rapidly changing social order.

For young Mexican American women in wartime Los Angeles, the zoot look generally consisted of a cardigan or V-neck sweater and a long, broad-shouldered "finger-tip" coat; a knee-length (and therefore relatively short) pleated skirt; fishnet stockings or bobby socks; and platform heels, saddle shoes, or *huarache* sandals. Many also wore dark lipstick and used foam inserts called "rats" to lift their hair into a high bouffant. For extra panache, some lightened their hair with peroxide, sported tattoos, or wore the masculine version of the zoot suit. Also known as "drapes" or *el tacuche*, this outfit consisted of the "finger-tip" coat, which sometimes extended to the knee, and a pair of billowing "Punjab" pants that tapered at the ankle. Some Mexican American male zooters added a long watch chain and hat (called a *tando*) to the ensemble, but many abandoned the latter in favor of combing

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6. A young Mexican American man sporting a pompadour. *Lowrider* magazine, copyright 1978–79. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF MCMULLEN ARGUS PUBLISHING, INC., COPYRIGHT 1978, 1979, 2007.

their relatively long hair into a pompadour on top and what was known as an "Argentine ducktail" or "duck's ass" ("D. A.") in back. *Calcos* or thick-soled shoes often punctuated the look.[4]

Mexican American women who wore zoot suits during World War II were known as "*pachucas,*" "*chukas,*" "pachuco women," "women zoot suiters," "lady zoot suiters," "zooter girls," "zoot suit gangsterettes," "*zooterinas,*" "*cholitas,*" "slick chicks," and "*malinches.*" Their male counterparts were sometimes called "*pachucos*" or "*chukos,*" among other labels. Simply put, pachucas and pachucos were Mexican Americans who produced and took part in *pachuquismo,* a youth subculture whose most salient identifying feature was the zoot suit during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Many were working-class and second-generation Americans whose parents had emigrated from Mexico to urban centers in California and the Southwest, including Los Angeles and El Paso, the latter of which is often looked to as the birthplace of *pachuquismo.* Many were bilingual and some spoke a

distinct vernacular known as *caló* or pachuco slang. Some were also members of youth gangs.

In World War II–era Los Angeles, the zoot suit and its wearer had multiple meanings. For some, the look symbolized youthful insouciance and nothing more. But for many others, it signified rebellion, difference, and even un-Americanism—hence the violence to which its wearers were subjected during the Zoot Suit Riots. With the Chicano movement of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, a number of Chicana and Chicano writers and artists—among them, raúlsalinas—began to ascribe new significance to the zoot suit, *el pachuco*, the Zoot Suit Riots, and the Sleepy Lagoon incident and trial. "Homenaje al Pachuco," for example, invokes the Zoot Suit Riots, during which Mexican Americans confronted physical violence, as represented by a blow to the face ("*la carilla*"). At the same time, this poem points to the discursive forms of violence to which pachucas and pachucos have been subjected by the state and its apparatuses, including academia, the dominant press, and judicial and penal institutions.[5]

Yet, where *el pachuco* was made the object of courtroom testimonies and academic treatises from the 1940s on, *la pachuca* has been ignored. By and large, pachucas are absent in much Chicano cultural production, such as film, literature, scholarship, theater, and visual art. Indeed, when I began this study as a graduate student in the late 1990s, more than one faculty mentor discouraged me from focusing on women zooters because they were convinced that they simply did not exist. Thus, in addition to being omitted from "their textbooks," *la pachuca* has been excluded from most Chicano accounts of what is generally deemed a watershed moment in Mexican American history. Like *el pachuco*'s distortion in scholarly "heaps & piles of bogus bullshit," pachucas' absence in narratives of Mexican American history, cultural identity, and community constitutes epistemic violence.

In this book, I recenter pachucas as agents and *la pachuca* as icon. I show the ways in which both have been excluded from or included in World War II–era conceptions of the American homefront, the Chicano movement's *familia de la raza* (family of the race), and a late-twentieth-century coalition of Chicana feminists. My main argument is twofold. First, I maintain that pachucas have been invisible in most narrations of twentieth-century Mexican American history. Then, as I locate *la pachuca* in a historical and cultural landscape, as defined in great part by literature and visual art, I

demonstrate that this seemingly unimportant and often overlooked figure has much to teach us about nationalisms, about citizenship, and about resistant cultural, gender, and sexual identities and their contradictions. Yet, more than simply inserting pachucas into narratives of nation and cultural identity, this book asks what their absence reveals about nationalisms and the ways in which Chicano history and resistance have been conceived of and represented. Ultimately, it shows how their inclusion shifts our understanding of these narratives by exposing new social relationships and subjects.

An interdisciplinary endeavor, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit* excavates pachucas' agency and perspectives and, at the same time, explores the discursive ways in which these young women have been enabled and disabled as historical actors. As I place the archival document, such as a trial transcript or newspaper article from the early 1940s, in dialogue with a visual or literary text—for example, a painting or poem from the 1970s—I hope to underscore the value and limitations of both artifacts to scholars who study the past, be they historians or critics. While I do not care to privilege one type of method or source over another, I wish to throw into question what counts as history, historiography, and evidence. I reject the concept of the *definitive* history for its arrogant attempt to monologize. Although I value other scholarly and personal accounts about pachucas, pachucos, the zoot subculture, the Sleepy Lagoon incident, the Zoot Suit Riots, the World War II period, and the Chicano movement, I also wish to dialogize these stories. And I acknowledge the power of literary and artistic works—culture, in other words—not only to reflect but to produce history, narrative, and meaning.

This book is not only about the past, but about interpretations of it. A self-conscious recovery project, it excavates the overlooked participation of young Mexican American women in events deemed significant to twentieth-century Mexican American history and culture and, at the same time, attempts to make sense of these events, their actors, and the meanings ascribed to them by a later generation of Chicana and Chicano cultural workers. Its scope encompasses World War II, the instant when the figures of the pachuca and pachuco were catapulted into an imagined national community, and the Chicano movement, a period spanning approximately

three decades when these figures took on new significance in Chicano cultural production. I link these moments because both were characterized in great part by heightened nationalist consciousness, either statist or insurgent.[6] The former saw widespread patriotism, if not jingoism, and an imperative for racial-ethnic minorities, including Mexican Americans, to assimilate or be assimilated as either loyal citizens or dangerous aliens. During the latter, cultural nationalist dissidence and militancy loomed large.

The Woman in the Zoot Suit is divided into two main sections. The first focuses on American national identity during World War II, while the second emphasizes movement-era Chicano cultural nationalism. Rather than championing one nationalism over another, this dual perspective offers a critique of both. By juxtaposing official and unofficial nationalisms, I not only show what they share in common; I also decenter them. In other words, I use one nationalism to relativize and to shed light on another.

In the introductory chapter, "A Genealogy of *Vendidas*," I present *la pachuca* and *el pachuco* as archetypes or icons and briefly describe the events that first brought them notoriety: the Sleepy Lagoon incident and the Zoot Suit Riots. Then I outline the book's historical span and introduce the theoretical concepts that undergird it, including *malinchismo*, nationalism, and citizenship. I argue that these concepts inform and have been informed by narrow definitions of home and family.

Home and family are the subject of chapter 1, "Domesticating the Pachuca." This chapter draws from archival sources and oral history for evidence of the participation of Mexican American girls and women in the Sleepy Lagoon incident and trial, Zoot Suit Riots, and wartime zoot subculture. Additionally, it begins to explore the myriad meanings that Mexican American women have ascribed to *la pachuca* and *el pachuco* and the events with which these figures have been associated. Yet, as it renarrates the familiar tales of Sleepy Lagoon and the Zoot Suit Riots, it removes Mexican American women, particularly pachucas, from the margins of Chicano historiography and foregrounds their redefinitions of contested cultural categories, such as "American," "lady," and "pachuca."

While chapter 1 emphasizes Mexican American women's agency, chapter 2, "Black Skirts, Dark Slacks, and Brown Knees: Pachuca Style and Spectacle during World War II," takes a closer look at the World War II–era social structures that helped to produce and to shape their actions. In this chapter, I scrutinize the iconic or discursive pachuca as produced by

newspaper articles and academic treatises. Treating the zoot suit as a text, image, representation, and social relationship, I posit that this ensemble was construed as a sign of an aberrant femininity, competing masculinity, and homosexuality during the Second World War.[7] As a non-white, working-class, and queer signifier, it was perceived as un-American.

With its emphasis on both social structures and signs, chapter 2 serves as a bridge between the first and second halves of this book. Chapters 3 and 4 offer close readings of representations of *la pachuca* in a variety of texts and contexts. In chapter 3, "Saying Nothin': Pachucas and the Languages of Resistance," I study women speakers of pachuco slang. Moving from the visual to the oral, I examine the relationship of resistance to gender and style, specifically coolness. In order to better understand the linguistic varieties of pachucos and pachucas in the 1940s and the ways their utterances were recuperated by a later generation of Chicana and Chicano cultural workers, I draw upon an eclectic array of sources, including a poem, short story, *corrido* (ballad), trial transcript, and play. I contend that, while male speakers of pachuco slang have been upheld as icons of resistance and cultural affirmation, female, Mexican American speakers have been mocked, punished, or silenced for failing to reproduce the ideal subjects of U.S. nationalism, of an oppositional Chicano cultural identity, and of normative femininity.

Then, in chapter 4, "*La Pachuca* and the Excesses of Family and Nation," I study representations of *la pachuca* in works from the Chicano movement by the visual artist Judith F. Baca, the poet Inés Hernández, and the poet and playwright Cherríe Moraga. I locate these works against the backdrop of the Chicano movement and Chicano cultural nationalism. Paying close attention to their portrayals of relationships between women and their depictions of female masculinity, I probe the ways they express, distort, and exceed the cultural nationalist concept of *la familia de raza* and imagine new subjects and communities.

Last, in the epilogue, "Homegirls Then and Now, from the Home Front to the Frontline," I briefly discuss more recent representations of *la pachuca*'s successor: the war on terror's Latina GI. This project was nearly derailed by the events of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath, including the attack on and ongoing occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq by the United States. Why write about pachucas in the midst of war? I asked myself. What can a book about coats, skirts, trousers, pompadours, and

lipstick tell us about the contested meanings of citizenship and the fragility of civil rights in and beyond the United States after 9/11?

In fact, the figure of the pachuca shows us that the World War II period and the post-9/11 moment share more than a few things in common. As a *New York Times* fashion critic recently quipped, "In a crisis, fashion produces a crisis of its own."[8] Since 9/11, the *hijab*, the head covering worn by some Muslim women, has taken on new significance, especially in Western Europe. For some, it is a symbol of piety, pride, or defiance; for others, it signifies fundamentalism and the oppression of Muslim women. In either case, the *hijab*, like the zoot suit before it, is a mark of difference. More than a simple "bit of cloth," it functions as both a metaphor and metonym as it prompts complex questions concerning citizenship, difference, and the particular roles racialized women play in (dis)articulating the two.[9]

Because of its focus on the war on terror and Latina servicewomen, the epilogue may at first appear incongruous in relation to the rest of this book. However, it strives to bring the seemingly distant and disparate into greater proximity by highlighting what they share in common. It also shows how the moment in which I have written *The Woman in the Zoot Suit* (the early twenty-first century) differs from the moments that I study (the World War II period and the Chicano movement of the late 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s). By carefully examining the figure of the pachuca, the previous chapters stress the ways nations have violently excluded Mexican American women. The epilogue, in contrast, looks at the violence of *inclusion* in the nation and empire by focusing on the Latina GI, a figure relatively new to the American cultural landscape. Moreover, it seeks to acknowledge some of the women who are currently making history with the hope that they, like raúlsalinas's pachuca, are not rendered anonymous or forgotten altogether.

The seeds for this project are numerous. I have been inspired not only by raúlsalinas's "Homenaje al Pachuco" but by Luis Valdez's play and film *Zoot Suit* and Judith F. Baca's multimedia triptych *Las Tres Marías* (1976). Like these works, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit* is an intervention. By presenting an alternative interpretation of events and their actors, it offers a new, albeit familiar, story, one that I hope will prompt us to rethink older narratives.

7. Judith F. Baca, *Las Tres Marías*, 1976. Copyright SPARC, www.sparcmurals.org.

I first encountered *Las Tres Marías* when I attended the retrospective "Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1990. This important work features a pachuca from the 1950s and a chola from the 1970s.[10] As I stood before it for the first time, *la pachuca*'s absence in Chicano cultural production became visible to me. I am a native of Southern California's predominately Asian and Hispanic San Gabriel Valley, and although I was born long after the era of the zoot suit—the 1940s and 1950s—I grew up with women who resembled those in Baca's triptych. My father, who was born in 1924 and raised in East Los Angeles, familiarized me with *la pachuca* when I was a teenager in the 1980s. He likened my friends and me to the formidable girls of his youth as he complained about our tall, teased hair, thick eyeliner, dark lipstick, and oversized earrings. On Friday and Saturday nights, a friend sometimes joined me at my house or, more often than not, I went to her house, where we consulted each other about what to wear and how to wear it, swapped

clothes and accessories, and helped each other with our hair and makeup before heading to a house party, school dance, *quinceañera*, or nightclub, like the Quiet Cannon, Marilyn's Backstreet, or Florentine Gardens. On more than one occasion, my parents and I argued over my appearance. Invariably, my father called out to me, "*Esa*, you look like a pachuca!" and grumbled that I reminded him of the girls he used to fear when he was growing up in East L.A. Indeed, the tough, urban pachuca of the 1940s was very present during my suburban, Reagan-era adolescence; I grew up surrounded not only by her ghost but by her late-twentieth-century heirs as well: cholas and cha-chas.[11] Yet, as a college student in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I found that there was a discrepancy between the historical actors I had encountered while growing up in Southern California and the subject of the narratives I was reading in school. *Las Tres Marías* prompted me to ask why pachucas were virtually invisible, while representations of *el pachuco* abounded in Chicano cultural production, from scholarly articles and books to the pages of *Lowrider* magazine.

I also credit many of the girls with whom I attended high school for inspiring this project. During the week, my classmates and I wore a drab uniform that consisted of a pleated, plaid skirt, white oxford shirt, cardigan sweater and/or vest, and a pair of anachronistic black-and-white saddle shoes that—no matter the size—made everyone's feet look abnormally large. School rules banned earrings bigger than a quarter and skirt hems more than two inches above the knee. On weekends, however, my friends and I happily petrified our hair with Aqua Net, darkened our lips with Wet 'n' Wild, and sported fluorescent lace and black spandex, often while listening to a mix tape with Debbie Deb's cha-cha anthem "Look Out Weekend." Meanwhile, many of the young men with whom we associated aspired to look "GQ"—an adjective taken from the title of the men's fashion magazine—by slicking their hair back and donning suits they had purchased at the Montebello Town Center. Like the pachucas of the 1940s and 1950s, many of the young women with whom I grew up negotiated rigid and oppressive conceptions of feminine decency as they cultivated a distinctive style, one that sought to infuse beauty, dignity, and more than a little glamour into their working- and lower-middle-class lives. I did not have the ability to articulate this when I was a teenager, but I was keenly aware of the difference—racial, class, and sexual—their look made. This book is also for them.

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This project has numerous inspirations and supporters and an equal number of debts. As an English major at the University of California, Berkeley, I took a circuitous path to Chicano studies and entered this scholarly field via African American and postcolonial studies. I'm grateful to my undergraduate faculty mentors, Professors Alfred Arteaga, Barbara Christian, and David Lloyd, for sparking my interest in Chicana feminism, literature, and history and encouraging me to pursue a career in academia. As a graduate student in ethnic studies at UC Berkeley, I benefited from the support of Professors Norma Alarcón, Judith Butler, Waldo Martin, Michael Rogin, Mary Ryan, and José David Saldívar. Berkeley is a big school, but the wonderful friends I made there made it more intimate and exciting. I thank Rob Avila, Mary Pat Brady, Glenda Carpio, Christina Civantos, Davina Chen, David Eng, Jill Gurvey, Eungie Joo, Josh Kun, David Hernández, Ellie Hernández, Amy Lonetree, Donna Murch, Rhacel Parreñas, Charlie Sciammas, Sarita See, Caroline Streeter, and Matt Wray for their encouragement, advice, and invaluable companionship. And I thank Rosa Johnson and Barbara Quan for steering me through Berkeley's bureaucratic maze.

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For their powerful visions and stimulating works of art, I thank Judith Baca, Barbara Carrasco, and Carmen Lomas Garza. I appreciate the support they've shown me by permitting me to reproduce their works here.

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A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

As I move between discussions of the World War II period, the Chicano movement, and the post-9/11 era, I try to use terms appropriate to each period. For example, when discussing the early 1940s, I generally refer to people of Mexican descent in the United States as Mexican Americans, rather than as Chicanas or Chicanos, politically charged labels that gained currency with the Chicano movement. I use "Hispanic," "Latina," and "Latino" as umbrella terms when referring to people, including Mexicans, Chicanas, and Chicanos, with roots (however distant) in the Spanish-speaking world or Latin America. Likewise, as I discuss the pachuca as historical actor (women who called themselves pachucas or who took part in the Mexican American zoot subculture) and the discursive pachuca (the pachuca of public discourse), I often denote the latter by referring to it as a "figure" or—taking my cue from raúlsalinas—as *la pachuca*. Even though I maintain that agency is always mediated and, thus, it is often difficult for scholars who study the past to distinguish the historical actor from the icon or representation, I make this thorny distinction for clarity.

Finally, while I use "pachuca" somewhat gingerly throughout this book, I also use it very liberally. As I show in the following chapters, "pachuca" is a multifaceted label, one that was more often than not pejorative. I believe that for this reason, the Mexican American women I interviewed as part of this study were reluctant to call themselves pachucas, even though some wore zoot suits, "rats," and dark lipstick, spoke pachuco slang, enjoyed listening and dancing to jazz, and associated with other zoot-clad Mexican American youths during the early 1940s. I do not mean any disrespect when I refer to these women as pachucas. Instead, I wish to reclaim and complicate this label via their recollections