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Rosa Linda Fregoso

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## The representation of cultural identity in *Zoot Suit* (1981)

ROSA LINDA FREGOSO

*University of California, Davis*

It is hardly surprising that when the host of a popular game-show asked a contestant, “they have a lot of these in East L.A.” the contestant correctly responded: “gangs.”<sup>1</sup> In commercial popular culture, Chicano barrios are rarely depicted as normal communities but as sites of youth violence. Dating to the 1960s, claims about “gang incidents as a major social problem” have consistently prevailed in media coverage and the social science literature.<sup>2</sup>

As part of the official race-relations narrative in the United States, Chicanos and Chicanas become visible in public discourse as “social problems.” From *greasers* to *bandidos* to *gangs*,<sup>3</sup> the dominant culture characterizes Chicanos and Chicanas as “culturally deficient,” “inherently violent,” and “socially and morally pathological.” Indeed, the “game-show” example cited above illustrates the extent to which the dominant codes of valorization have been normalized in public discourse. The positioning of Chicanas and Chicanos in dominant imagery as “gang members” is neither a recent phenomenon nor one that has disappeared altogether.<sup>4</sup> It also corresponds to the more general representation of non-“Westerners” as the negative manifestations of the “Western” subject.<sup>5</sup> Since the nineteenth century, negative representations have burdened the population of Mexican origin. For this very reason, Chicanos and Chicanas have relentlessly contested the reigning tendency to represent them as “the Other” within the hegemonic discourses of U.S. popular culture. They have indeed refashioned alternative national/cultural identities that deconstructed the explicitly racist discourse of U.S. culture. In so doing, Chicanos and Chicanas share a common history with other marginalized and subordinated groups. Writing about the deconstructive project of black peoples across the diaspora, Stuart Hall notes:

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The ways we have been positioned and subject-ed in the dominant regimes of representation were a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization, precisely because they were not superficial. They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as “Other.”<sup>6</sup>

It is this dehumanizing violence of colonial, imperial, and racist discourses that fundamentally fuels an oppositional cultural/national identity.

The first fictional drama to represent the “gang” problem from the historical perspective of Chicano subjects is Luis Valdez’s feature-length film, *Zoot Suit* (1981). Challenging dominant culture’s depictions, Valdez deconstructs racist images of Chicano youth as “gangs” or social problems, depicting the male-members of the 38th Street Club as victims of racist institutions. In this respect, Valdez’s intervention comprises a part of the broader cultural project of Chicano nationalism. *Zoot Suit*’s male subjects are in fact reversals of dominant depictions of Chicano masculinity. Particularly pertinent for our discussion of the male subjects in Chicano discourse is the scholarly discourse on masculinities. A cursory view of critical reflections on the problem of masculine identity in modern thought allows us to grasp the full impact of experiencing oneself as the “Other.”

### **The dominant paradigm**

Critical discussions of masculinity have contributed to our appreciation of the historicity of sexual identities.<sup>7</sup> Foucault’s work on the history of sexuality, for example, destabilizes notions that attribute a sexual essence to the human subject. In his view, sexuality is a purely semiotic process whose meaning derives from broader power relations within society. As Foucault has shown, sexuality is a historical construct, and its various expressive forms such as “masculinity” and “femininity” likewise are culturally determined.<sup>8</sup>

Bob Connell’s treatment of the theme of masculinities shows the extent to which the expressive forms of gender (masculinity and femininity) regulating the substantive category of the modern subject (biological sex) acquire hegemony in different historical moments. Definitions of masculinity or manliness, therefore, depend on historically determined power configurations. As Connell’s critical genealogy of masculinities shows, hegemonic masculinity, namely the dominant attributes that

constitute the subject “man” of the dominant class and race in the “Western” context, is far from stable. For the past two hundred years, the “culturally exalted form of masculinity”<sup>9</sup> shows itself to be rather a “history of displacement, splitting, and remaking of this cultural form.”<sup>10</sup> The dominant attributes constituting the male-subject of the dominant white race re-emerge in other forms of masculinities. Their refashioning or remaking into contemporary variations of hegemonic masculinities are evident in present-day representations such as the militaristic individualism of Sylvester Stallone, Clint Eastwood, and Arnold Schwarzenegger; in the masculinity linked to technocratic rationality as that of the recent Persian Gulf War; or in terms of the frontier masculinity of the sort found in the Western film genre but also in Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* (1990). However, the mobilization of various forms of masculinities underscores the extent to which multiple, often contradictory, masculine identities are available to white Euro-Americans. As part of a heterogeneous body of masculine identities, each may be positively or negatively valorized, depending on the social and cultural power relations, as either “hegemonic” or “subordinated” masculinities.<sup>11</sup> Together, they comprise the multiplicity of masculine identities available to racially dominant groups in the “Western” context. Contrary to the historically variable and shifting range of hegemonic masculinities, the representation of the masculine identity of racially subordinated groups stands out for its monologic and homogeneous economy, resting virtually on the negative side of the masculine equation, particularly in the case of Latinos.<sup>12</sup>

If we trace the lineage for Chicanos, we can locate their “negative” masculinity as dating back four centuries to a European context. Northern Europe’s re-construction of the more Latinized (and darker) southern part of the continent, particularly the inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula, dates to the Colonial Wars between the Empires of England and Spain for establishing dominance in the New World.<sup>13</sup> The linear trajectory of the formulation goes along these lines: from *Conquistadores* (“extremely violent” and unruly) to *Indians* (“blood-thirsty” Aztecs) to their twentieth-century variations in popular culture as *Greasers* (violent revolutionaries a la Pancho Villa), *Latin Lovers* (sexually virile) and *Gangs* (a fusion of all of the above attributes). The negative positioning of Chicanos and more broadly of Latino culture as the negative manifestation of hegemonic masculinity is clearly evident in the re-placement of the term sexism with the Spanish word, *machismo*<sup>14</sup> in common English-usage. A term that no longer requires translation, *machismo* symbolically conflates Latinos as the model-

subjects for the pathological transgressions of hegemonic masculine identities. From very early in the history of Chicano Studies, Chicano and Chicana researchers contested the tacit racism built in to the dominant paradigm on Chicanos, especially the myth of “exaggerated machismo and excessive patriarchy in Chicano Families”<sup>15</sup> Maxine Baca-Zinn, for instance, refutes the “one-dimensional model of Chicano masculinity,” countering that the myth of machismo is perfectly compatible with the “social deficit model” about Chicano culture.<sup>16</sup>

### **The cultural nationalist response**

During the 1960s, within artistic practices such as poetry, mural painting, and film, Chicano and Chicana cultural workers experimented with alternative Chicano subject-identities. Within the Chicano movement, cultural nationalism produced new Chicano subjects, reversing their previously negative position in dominant discourse. Cultural nationalists reclaimed as the revolutionary role models for the new Chicano identity precisely those subjects previously devalorized in relation to U.S. dominant culture.

The first national Chicano youth conference, the Denver Youth Conference of 1969, exemplifies the imaginary and symbolic strategy of inversion. The Conference was significant because its participants included student activists, ex-convicts, and street youth in discussions of grass-roots politics and nationalist ideology. Participants made an explicit effort to reverse the negative subject-position of Chicanos within dominant discourse. In Carlos Muñoz’s words:

Conference speakers proposed that henceforth most crimes committed by Mexican Americans were to be interpreted as “revolutionary acts.” The language and dress of the street youth, the *vatos locos*, would be emulated. *Carnalismo* (the brotherhood code of the Mexican American youth gangs) would mold the lives of the students and become a central concept in this proposed nationalist ideology. From the ranks of this new breed of youth would come the poets, the writers and the artists necessary for forging the new Chicano identity. This new identity would reflect a total rejection of *gabacho* culture – the culture of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant.<sup>17</sup>

In poetry, mural paintings, and theater, Chicano movement cultural workers systematically figured the *pachuco* (urban street youth) the *pinto* (ex-convict), and the Aztec warrior as the new Chicano subjects of the counterdiscourse of Chicano liberation. In summary, cultural

workers affirmed repressed identities, located in working class and non-European origins.<sup>18</sup>

The social and political context of the Chicano movement opened up a discursive space for the formulation of alternative representations of Chicano/a cultural identity. Cultural workers nurtured by the political activism of the Chicano Movement rejected the assimilationist thrust of previous generations of Mexican Americans. Rather than conforming Chicano/a identity to the melting-pot ideology, Chicano movement intellectuals affirmed precisely the identity that the dominant order had positioned as the “Other.” They elevated as positive the identity of those subject-ed by the dominant culture and Mexican American middle-class intellectuals to the realm of the “inferior,” namely the *pintos* (ex-convicts), the *pachucos* (street-youth), and the (mostly Ateco) warriors of indigenous peoples. In summary, Chicano Movement cultural workers affirmed the identities derived from histories, partially in working-class forms and practices, but also in a non-European legacy of the Mexican people. However, these new identities were problematically predicted on the politics of simple reversal. The new Chicano subject of cultural nationalism was primarily cast into a highly schematic binary relation, Anglo versus Chicanos (or “bad” versus “good”). Yet, the major ambivalence of the cultural project of nationalism centered on its systematic elision of women as subjects of cultural discourse. In this respect, *Zoot Suit* represents a major treatise on masculine notions of cultural identity within the representational discourse of Chicano nationalism.

### **Cultural identity and representation**

In a recent article, Stuart Hall emphasizes that cultural identity is “always constituted within, not outside, representation.”<sup>19</sup> Hall thereby underscores the productive rather than the simply reflective nature of cinematic representation. As Hall adds, film is a “form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects and thereby enable us to discover who we are.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, apart from re-appraising the reflection model of film, Hall’s notion of cultural identity and the role of representation in its reproduction challenge certain positivist assumptions about the very nature of identity.

Hall’s work forms part of a larger philosophical project, namely, a relentless critique of what Godzich terms “the Parmenidian principle of

the identity of thought and being.”<sup>21</sup> This long-standing principle of Western thought posits a homology between the subject who speaks (thought) and the subject spoken of (being). In this view, identity, as Judith Butler explains, is considered to be self-identical, “persisting through time as the same, unified, and internally coherent.”<sup>22</sup> The tendency has been to conceptualize identity (Chicano, Chicana, masculine, feminine) as a “true essence,” as a self-identical relation between the speaking-subject and its object-self. In an effort to move beyond positivist and essentialist accounts of identity, it is crucial to examine the two historical forms of cultural identity informing the cultural politics of subaltern groups.

The first form derives from the Parmenidian principle cited above, that is, from a political model of subjectivity grounded in a notion of a fixed-self or essence. In this formulation, cultural identity represents an authentic essence, located in a core subject, namely, an identity of unity and coherence. According to this account, the “real” self, as Trinh T. Min-ha explains, “remains hidden to one’s consciousness.” The emergence of the authentic core “requires the elimination of all that is considered foreign or not true to the self, that is to say, not I, the other.”<sup>23</sup> As Hall indicates, “the rediscovery of cultural identity in this view depends on the unearthing of that which the colonial experience buried and overlaid, bringing to the light the hidden continuities it [hegemonic powers] suppressed.”<sup>24</sup> In Hall’s estimation, this notion of cultural identity is grounded in an archeology, for the rediscovery of an “authentic” core self is predicated on the search for the “fixed *origin*” of cultural identity, an origin predating colonization and subjugation.

An alternative formulation of cultural identity departs from the recognition that the self is in fact a “subject in process, never arrested within a fixed identity.”<sup>25</sup> Often, identity is rather a mask for the self. As Avery Gordon explains it, “Our sense of ourselves and the sense we can make of others derives from this fundamental misrecognition of a masking for a singular identical self.”<sup>26</sup> In contrast, an alternative explication of cultural identity privileges the concepts of *becoming*, rather than of being, of *process* as opposed to structure, and of *production* instead of rediscovery of archeology. At the same time, the importance of Hall’s theoretical insights centers on his recognition that this second notion of cultural identity “qualifies even though it does not replace the first.”<sup>27</sup> Cultural identity is a “strategic position” that, while not displacing, does necessarily complicate those notions positing identity as a “fixed essence” existing “unchanged, outside history and culture.”<sup>28</sup> As Hall’s words clearly express it:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being.” It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.<sup>29</sup>

If identity cannot solely be grounded in an essence but is simultaneously a construction of ourselves as certain subjects, one of the sites for this production is within discourses of representation, including language and artistic practices like films.

### **Luis Valdez and *Zoot Suit* (1981)**

It is within the context of cultural nationalism that Luis Valdez’s artistic productions take shape. Not only was he present at the Denver Youth meeting mentioned earlier, but he took an active role in shaping the ideology of Chicano nationalism, for Valdez was one of the four authors of the Plan Espiritual de Aztlan – the blueprint of nationalist ideology for the liberation of the Chicano nation. It is thus no accident that the figuration of the new “revolutionary subject” envisioned by cultural nationalists culminates in his filmed-version of the play *Zoot Suit*. The main characters of the film are, in fact, reversals of the negative ways Chicanos had been positioned within the dominant regimes of representation. In *Zoot Suit* the production of cultural identity is intimately linked to the antiracism politics of Chicano nationalism. Yet, it is also problematically informed by cultural nationalism’s universalizing of certain forms of masculinity for Chicano cultural identity. In other words, the problem of Chicano cultural identity remains figured in the masculine terms of cultural nationalism.

An adaptation of its earlier stage performance, *Zoot Suit* (1981) was Valdez’s first feature-film.<sup>30</sup> The film recounts the Sleepy Lagoon Trial of 1942, the first case in U.S. history of imprisonment on charges of conspiracy.<sup>31</sup> And while the overt subject matter recounts the trial, incarceration, and appeals process of the 38th Street Club members, exposing the racism of the police and judicial system during the period, *Zoot Suit* is as much about the Sleepy Lagoon Case as it is about cultural identity. An examination of how the narrative is framed discloses its implicit concern with cultural identity. The narrative unfolds through a fictitious psychological struggle between two main characters, Hank Reyna and the Pachuco, two protagonists whose representation reverses the negative position of the Chicano “gang” member in

dominant discourse. the character, Hank (Daniel Valdez), is based on the actual leader of the 38th Street Club, Hank Leyvas, whereas the other main protagonist, the Pachuco (Edward James Olmos) is an unconventional character,<sup>32</sup> a mythical figure whose presence on film is only accessible to Hank and to viewers. It is in their relation, namely the structural contrast the film establishes between Hank and the Pachuco, that Valdez theorizes the nature of cultural identity.

Earlier I cited Hall's theoretical reflections of the problem of cultural identity. To reverse the negative subject position in dominant culture, subaltern groups, according to Hall, usually undertake a search for "origins." Yet as Hall reminds us,

This "return to the beginning" is like the Imaginary in Lacan – it can never be fulfilled nor required, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery – in short, the reservoir of our cinematic narratives.<sup>33</sup>

Luis Valdez begins his film precisely with this recognition. *Zoot Suit* allows us to see the mechanism by which cultural identity is produced by visualizing, throughout the film, the fantasy, the myth, and the multiple registers occupying the myth, particularly as these are inscribed onto the body of the Pachuco.

### **The Pachuco as desire**

The theatrical performance frames the film's narrative action insofar as *Zoot Suit* visually depicts an audience throughout the film. This is especially so in the opening and closing scenes. The incorporation of the audience within the filmic material (and as audiences for the court trial), serves to interpellate film viewers in a symbiotic relation with audiences of both the play and the court trial. In the beginning of the film, the Pachuco first appears as *Zoot Suit*'s omnipresent narrator, and his words function to propel the narrative action. Using a switchblade to tear apart a full-screen newspaper, the Pachuco addresses viewers:

Ladies and Gentlemen. The *mono* [slang for "movie"] you're about to see is a construct of fact and fantasy. But relax, weigh the facts and enjoy the pretense. Our pachuco reality will only make sense if you grasp their stylization. It was the secret fantasy of every *bato* [guy] living in or out of the *pachucada* [pachuco reality] to put on the zoot suit and play the myth. *Mas chucote que la chingada, orale.*

As the Pachuco begins his monologue, a shot-reverse-shot pattern is established between the character and audiences. Yet the only discernible audience-members are rendered in a single two-shot of a father-son couple. The self-reflexivity of the film, as expressed by the Pachuco, its disclosure of the mechanism by which cultural identity is produced, signals the extent to which a masculine content governs the production of identity. This film is about men, for men. The pachuco personifies the “myth.” Displacing dominant culture’s positioning of the masculinity of gang-members as “inherently violent,” the Pachuco systematically intervenes to halt violence among other Chicano “gang” members. In the Pachuco character, transgressions like “sexual promiscuity” and “defiance” figure as masculine strengths rather than as marks of pathological masculinity.

Within the film’s corpus of narrative action, we are privy to the way in which *Zoot Suit* foregrounds the male subject by essentializing male desire as the Pachuco. For, “the secret fantasy of every *bato*,” as the opening lines indicate, “is to put on the zoot suit and play the myth.” And in the movie that ensues, we discover how the Pachuco in fact “plays out” a male-centered fantasy about the *pachuco* reality. The Pachuco functions as Hank’s unconscious; he is a character who only Hank can speak to and see. If for Lacanian psychoanalysis “the other” is part of the construct of the unconscious, rather than an identity with the referent, Valdez exteriorizes “the other.” The Pachuco is both a character (an identity with the referent) and Hank’s “other” (the construct of his unconscious, his alter-ego). As a construct of Hank’s imagination and desire, the Pachuco represents the literal embodiment of Hank’s unconscious.

Valdez’s work is less a self-reflexive application of psychoanalytic insights about the fractured nature of identity than a result of his earlier efforts in theater. The recourse to unconventional characterization derives from Valdez’s previous experience in the collective ensemble, El Teatro Campesino. In its initial stages, the Teatro developed as a political theater collective, supporting the unionizing and boycotting efforts of the United Farmworkers Union. Shortly afterwards, Teatro Campesino members undertook extensive spiritual training in Mayan and Aztec philosophy.<sup>34</sup> According to Broyles-González, the Pachuco character is taken from the teatro’s repertoire of stock characters and encapsulates Valdez’s application of studies in Mayan and Aztec mysticism, particularly the Mayan religious principle of *In Lak’ech*, which roughly translates as “you are my other self.” Reminiscent of the

Rastafarian notion of “I and I,”<sup>35</sup> In Lak’ech re-configures identity as inextricable from the notion of Chicano collective. Indeed, the premise behing In Lak’ech is one of identity as a subject who is self-identical to an-other. And, this other identity occupies a relation to the referent as much as it is a construct of the unconscious. Thus, *Zoot Suit*’s intelligibility requires knowledge of Valdez’s experimentation with hermetic philosophical systems. The narrative application of the Native-Mayan principle within cinematic discourse takes concrete form in the conflict depicted between two characters. Symbolizing two sides of the same coin, Hank and the Pachuco are thereby emblematic of indissoluble unity, that is to say, together, they are one.

Thus, the notion of identity as a struggle between the self and the other is reproduced in the Pachuco (as thought) and Hank (as being), between two characters whose relation is mainly ridden with conflict. The Pachuco is contentious with Hank, ridiculing his patriotism (i.e., Hank’s plans to join the Navy) and his optimism about a favorable outcome in the trial. As a concrete identity, Hank represents the naiveté and inexperience of the barrio youth; the Pachuco, the wisdom of an older street-wise-warrior. The latter is endowed with qualities of the mind (i.e., cool-detachment), so that, ultimately, Hank turns to the Pachuco for guidance, counsel, and explanation. Additionally, the Pachuco signifies Hank’s wish-fulfillment: the Pachuco acts out and verbalizes what social codes and conventions would sanction in Hank (for instance, making disparaging sexual comments about women, incessantly smoking a joint; or sitting when the judge enters the court chamber requiring all to stand). And, the Pachuco’s capacity to effect cinematic transitions in time and space with the snap of a finger, to be present in multiple spaces, and his inordinate power for moving narrative action forward or backward couples him with memory. Thought, fantasy, and myth crystallize in the Pachuco’s persona whereas Hank represents the conscious elements of being. Through the Pachuco’s agency, Hank’s accessibility to the past or to the future takes concrete actualization. Given *Zoot Suit*’s re-construction of the relation between the self/Hank (the identity with the referent) and the other/Pachuco (the construct of the unconscious) as non-homologous, as disruptive, the film self-reflexively reveals the mechanism by which cultural identity is produced. However, this production is simultaneously regressive in nature, turning against itself.

Fundamentally, the film’s production of cultural identity is grounded in an archeology, in a return to the pre-Columbian origins of cultural iden-

tity. During the “Marihuana Boogie” scene, for example, the Pachuco ironically remarks, “This is 1942 or is it 1492? – a reference to the European “discovery” of the Americas. Valdez further imbues the Pachuco with pre-Columbian signifi- cance by choosing for the Pachuco’s zoot suit the colors black and red, thereby imputing the association with the Aztec deity, Tezcatlipoca.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the film’s formula- tion of cultural identity in terms of a “search for origins” is illustrated in the climatic scene of the movie, the Marine beating of the Pachuco.

In a scene with clear reference to the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943, a group of Marines gang-up on the Pachuco, violently beating him and strip- ping him of his zoot suit. A witness to the action, Hank approaches the Pachuco, gesturing assistance. The body of the man laying in a fetal position, weeping, turns out to be of Hank’s brother. Puzzled, Hank makes a second attempt to assist his brother. This time however the image of the Pachuco once again occupies this second-shot. The Pachuco then stands up defiantly. Dressed in the groin cloth of an Aztec warrior, his image moves to the foreground, towards the “Aztec” sun. A musical score of Native rhythms accompanies the over-the- shoulder shot of Hank facing the Pachuco. The superimposition of two characters (the Pachuco and Hank’s brother) signifies the symbolic convergence of two historical events: the Marines’ attack on Pachucos (1943) and the Spanish conquest of the Aztec nation (1519). Branding first the Zoot Suit riots and, subsequently, the Conquest onto the Pachuco’s body propels the notion of identity as an archeology. For, the “authenticity” of the more recent historical events rests on the “author- ity” of the more distant Aztec past. Furthermore, by inscribing the Aztec warrior onto the body of the Pachuco, multiple identities are collapsed into one subject. His confinement in jail had already marked him as a *pinto* (ex-convict). In summary, the Pachuco is essentially all of the identities of the revolutionary subjects envisioned by cultural nationalism: he encapsulates the fusion of the *pinto*, the Aztec warrior, and the Pachuco.

Prior to narrative closure, in the solitary confinement scene, Hank undertaken an inward journey to the psychic realm of the self. Appear- ing fully transformed at the end of the film, Hank becomes his desire, embodies the myth of *pachuquismo*, and in so doing reproduces for the film the central problematic of cultural nationalist discourse, namely that Chicano brotherhood, existing to time immemorial, involves the symbolic elevation of the Pachuco as a form of desire.

The cultural nationalist strategy re-articulated in *Zoot Suit*, consequently interpellates all subjects, Chicanas and Chicanos, into new discursive relations, into inhabiting the brotherhood of *Chicanismo* by privileging the masculine. The Pachuco as desire normalizes a masculine content for cultural identity. And, in the configuration of an oppositional discourse, the female desire is nothing more than a universal male desire. *Zoot Suit* ultimately offers a masculine discourse masking itself as politics. Indeed, the film transforms the negative positioning of the Chicano male in dominant discourses into a new Chicano “positive” subject. The transgressive nature of Chicanos as “gang-members,” formally articulated as a pathological masculinity in dominant discourse, is re-articulated into the positive masculine attributes of brotherhood and Chicanismo. Yet by positing Chicano desire as a universal one (i.e., the final lines of the film, “The Pachuco, the myth, still lives.”), the film marginalizes the female subject as well as the members of the Chicano collective who do not desire this myth. Thus, the film’s reversal of the negative Chicano subject, imbuing it with male-content, offers an essential Chicano cultural identity with masculine attributes. Valdez was not, however, isolated from more general currents in Chicano cultural politics. As Angie Chabram has noted, cultural nationalist discourse generally configured the male as the essential subject whereas the identity of the Chicana was relegated to the status of split-subject.<sup>37</sup> In representing the Chicano as an essential Pachuco (or Aztec warrior, or *pinto*), cultural nationalists marginalized the Pachuca (the female counterpart). The discourse of cultural nationalism positioned the Chicana as the subject whose object of desire was also the Pachuco, subsuming female-subjects within a universal Chicano male cultural identity.

To the extent that Valdez was an exponent of the ideological premises of cultural nationalism, he was also deeply motivated by broader formulations for decolonizing Chicano consciousness from dominant ideology. The cultural nationalist configuration of the new Chicano subject by way of a journey to the authority and authenticity of the pre-Columbian past led many cultural nationalists to the study of ancient Aztec and Mayan rituals.<sup>38</sup> The re-discovery of the authentic Native traditions became not just a way of re-constructing an authentic Chicano, but also of thinking about identity as an essence. In its most extreme formulations, the true “essence” of the Chicano lay buried deep within the inner-psyche. Valdez was clearly a part of the project of a broader phenomenon in search of mythical origins, and, as his words attest, he was also implicated in its essentializing strategies:

Most of us know we are not European simply by looking in a mirror... the shape of the eyes, the curve of the nose, the color of skin, the texture of hair; these things belong to another time, another people. Together with a million little stubborn mannerisms, beliefs, myths, superstitions, words, thoughts ... they fill our Spanish life with Indian contradictions. It is not enough to say we suffer an identity crisis, because that crisis has been our way of life for the last five centuries.<sup>39</sup>

However, contrary to the attempts for rediscovering Chicano subjects in the “authority” of the past, cultural identity could only be re-constituted in the present. Chicano cultural identity was not an essence but a positioning of Chicanos as certain subjects within discourse. Despite the archeological project of cultural nationalism, cultural discourses like poetry, art, drama, and film represented the major sites for the reproduction of alternative subject positions. For although alternative notions of identity are available through practices and memories of resistance, the process of their constitution requires a “retelling,” performed in the present. There is no Chicano core-essence, awaiting that inward journey of discovery, without a language or codes, or located outside of history.

The positive feature of cultural nationalism is the fact that Movement intellectuals excavated a historical past and constructed and reconstructed memories of a Mexican culture of struggle and resistance in order to develop a cohesive group identity that would shield them from racist ideology and oppression. Often however, the re-telling of stories re-constructed Chicano identity in a debilitating fashion, marginalizing and excluding other subject-positions from a Chicano counter-discourse. The task remains for an identity politics that is able to incorporate the heterogeneity of the Chicano and Chicana experience, reconstructing the multiplicity of alternative identities in ways that empower Chicanos *and* Chicanas as creative subjects of history. Cinematic representation plays a formidable role in such a project. As I have underscored throughout this essay, one of the major sites for the production of cultural identity lies in popular cultural forms such as film.

## Notes

1. For an expanded analysis of this film, see Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minn. Press, 1993).
2. This quote is taken from D. G. Solorzano, “Teaching and social change: Reflections on a Freirean approach in a college classroom,” *Teaching Sociology* 17 (April 1989): 218–225, 219. For social science research on Chicanos see C. Heller,

- Mexican American Youth: Forgotten Youth at the Crossroads* (New York: Random House, 1966); N. C. Vaca, "The Mexican American in the Social Sciences: 1912–1970," *El Grito* III/3 (Spring 1970): 3–24, and IV/1 (Fall 1970): 17–51; O. Romano, "Social science, objectivity and the Chicano," *El Grito* IV/1 (Fall 1970): 4–16; J. B. Cuellar, "Social Science research in the U.S. Mexican community: A case study," *Aztlan* 12/1 (Spring 1981): 1–21; for media portrayals see, United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1977 and 1979); A. Woll, *The Latin Image in American Film* (Los Angeles: Latin American Studies Center, 1977).
3. See L. Trujillo, "La evolución del "Bandido" al "Pachuco": A critical examination and evaluation of criminological literature on Chicanos," *Issues in Criminology* 9 (1974): 43–67.
  4. The urban-violence films of the seventies and early eighties include *Walk Proud* (1979), *Boulevard Nights* (1979), *Defiance* (1980). Also, see Solorzano, cited earlier, for information on media's exaggerated coverage of the "gang" problem. On 26 April 1991, at a talk for the seminar "Popular Culture and Latino Identity in the U.S." at Northeastern University, I gave a presentation on Chicano cultural identity and its representation in film. After my talk, a student from New Jersey approached me with a great deal of confusion. He thought that "Latino" was the self-designation for "Hispanic" whereas Chicano meant "gang." Thus, everytime I used the word Chicano, the term evoked for him the image of a "gang member."
  5. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).
  6. S. Hall, "Cultural identity and cinematic representation," *Framework* (36) (1989): 68–81, 71.
  7. See L. Segal, "Men and masculinities," T. Carrigan, B. Connell, and J. Lee, "Toward a new sociology of masculinities," *Theory and Society* 14 (1985): 551–604.
  8. M. Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
  9. Quoted in T. Carrigan, B. Connell, and J. Lee, "Toward a new sociology of masculinities," 590.
  10. B. Connell, "The Big Picture." Connell's trenchant historical analysis discusses the multiplicity of masculine identities available to the dominant race and class of Europe as well as the U.S. For instance, the "gentry masculinity" prevalent in the eighteenth century during the dominance of the Aristocratic class was displaced with the rise of the entrepreneur class and individualism, positing a calculated, rational, and regulated masculinity linked to the consolidation of modern capitalism. The masculinity based on individualism found various forms of expression in social types such as the "bureaucrat" and the "businessman" but it was also expressed in other manifestations associated with colonial expansion as in the cultural form of the "frontier masculinity" as either "brawling single frontiersman" of the "settled pioneer farmer." The rise of the mass (professional) armies paved the way for modern forms of masculinity as well, such as those "marked by irrationality and personal violence" prevalent in fascist regimes. The consolidation of the family as an institution as well as the separation of public and private spheres opened up new forms of masculinity tied to working-class culture ("bravado of pub") and it also progressively linked manliness to heterosexuality or the family institution. In this manner, Connell's details of the masculine identities available throughout the modern history of the "Western" world references the extent to which hegemonic masculinity co-existed with sub-ordinated forms derived from working-class culture and other marginal racial/ethnic and sexual groups.
  11. T. Carrigan, B. Connell, J. Lee, "Toward a new sociology of masculinities," 590.

12. Connell cites the "Conquistador" as the first masculine type in European history. While he mentions that "Conquistadores" of other European ethnic groups followed (e.g., Portugal, Holland, England and France), it is nonetheless interesting that the Spanish empire serves as the model for the first manifestation of a violent and unruly masculinity. And one wonders to what extent this is not a wholly external view of masculine identities imposed from outside onto Spain. Internal to the Spanish empire, other masculinities were available, for instance the type embodied in religious figures like Fray Bartolomé de las Casas. And while he is cited by Connell as protesting the treatment of the Conquistadores toward the indigenous population in the Americas, one has to wonder why Las Casas does not qualify as an alternative masculine type to that of the Conquistador. Moreover, other masculinities were operative in Spain at the time of the Conquest, particularly those figured in Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* – a brilliant parody of chivalry and Conquistador masculinities.
13. See, for instance, A. De Leon, *They Called them Greasers*, (Austin: the University of Texas Press, 1983).
14. In Spanish, the term *macho*, literally means "male." And its gender equivalent is *hembra* for female. Given that, as a Romance language, Spanish is an explicitly gendered language, *machismo* refers to the male domination of females. And while the word *sexismo* exists in Spanish as a synonym for *machismo*, the equivalent English translation for *machismo* would be "maleism" – a term I urge those of us working in critical feminist tradition to adopt. For, as a signifier, I am convinced that *machismo* does not necessarily slide, but stops at the signified, Chicano, Latino, perhaps even male of color, *content*. And it is such embodiments that, in this critically discursive age, are entirely problematic. And this is an objection that does not at all minimize the problems Chicanas do have with sexism.
15. Quoted in D. Segura, "Familism and employment," in *Mexicanas at Work*, ed. M. Melville (University of Houston, 1988), 31. See this for an overview of the Chicana feminist writers who have problematized the way in which dominant discourse positions Chicanos as the epitome of patriarchy. Feminist sociologists are consistently having to distinguish between patriarchy or "male authority over women," and machismo, criticizing the explicit racism of fictional and scholarly literature that construct machismo as inherent in Chicano culture. The emphasis has been to single out that, patriarchy is no more violent for Chicanas than for other women, but also to contest the positioning of Chicano and of Latin culture in general as structure/model/system for the pathological transgressions of that Order.
16. See the work of Maxine Baca-Zinn for more on this issue.
17. C. Muñoz, Jr., *Youth, Identity and Power* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 76.
18. See P. Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (U.K.: Zed Books, Ltd., 1986).
19. S. Hall, "Cultural identity and cinematic representation," 69.
20. *Ibid*, 80.
21. W. Godzich, "Forward: The further possibilities of knowledge," in M. deCerteau, *Heterologies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), vii.
22. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 16.
23. T. T. Min-ha, "Not you/like you: Post-colonial women and the interlocking question of identity and difference," in *Making Faces, Making Soul*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990), 371.
24. S. Hall, "Cultural identity and cinematic representation," 69.

25. Quoted in C. McCabe, *Tracking the Signifier* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 9.
26. A. Gordon, "Masquerading in the post-modern," in *Cross Currents*, ed. E. A. Kaplan and M. Sprinker (London and New York: Verso, 1990), 72.
27. S. Hall, "Cultural identity and cinematic representation," 70.
28. *Ibid.*, 71–2.
29. *Ibid.*, 70.
30. In 1979, Valdez obtained the budget of \$2.5 million from Universal Studios to produce a filmed-version of the highly successful theatrical performance of "Zoot Suit."
31. M. Mazon, *The Zoot Suit Riots: A psychology of symbolic annihilation* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1986).
32. Valdez imputes onto the Pachuco three narrative functions: as cinematic technique, as narrator, and as Hank's unconscious. In his role as cinematic technique, the Pachuco supplants traditional film-editing devices. For instance, rather than resorting to the more conventional techniques of dissolves or slow-motion shots to signal transitions in time or memory/dream-effects respectively, Valdez employs the Pachuco as a literal visual marker of time passages. With a snap of his finger, the Pachuco freezes narrative action, particularly those involving violence. The Pachuco is also used to signal transitions in narrative space. In an early jail scene, the Pachuco marks a transition to a previous narrative event. As Hank begins to tell the defense lawyer about the events leading up to the Sleepy Lagoon incident, the camera cuts to a medium shot of the Pachuco who snaps his finger. The camera then cuts to the dance scene. And although the Pachuco's figuration is, according to Luis Valdez, inspired by cinematic techniques, his function as the film's narrator is taken from Brechtian theater. The opening segment of the film establishes the Pachuco's function as Zoot Suit's narrative voice.
33. S. Hall, "Cultural identity and cinematic representation", 80.
34. For an in-depth account of the spiritual/philosophical training of El Teatro, see Y. Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino: An oral history of the ensemble* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, forthcoming).
35. As Leonard Barrett writes in his account of Rastafarian philosophy: "The existence of the I and the speaking of I are one and the same thing. When the primary word is spoken the speaker enters the world and taken his stand in it ... [T]he language of the Rastafarians is a soul language in which binary oppositions are overcome in the process of identity with other sufferers in the society." *The Rastafarians* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977), 144.
36. See Y. Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino* chapter two.
37. A. Chabram-Dernersesian, "I throw punches for my race, but I don't want to be a man," *Cultural Studies*, ed. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, and P. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992).
38. The revival of hermetism or the occult sciences, today known as New Age, was part of the broader cross-cultural hippie movement in the 1960s. Both counter-cultural exponents and Chicanos followed the teachings of Don Juan and a general return to Nativism.
39. Luis Valdez, "The tale of la Raza," *Bronze* 1/1, (25 November 1968).