

Review of *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front* by Elizabeth Escobedo

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Escobedo, Elizabeth. *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. xi + 229.

Monographs on World War II history are a concentrated market, but Elizabeth Escobedo's *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front* focuses on the vastly unrepresented perspective of Mexican American women. Using a synthesis of oral histories, family histories, federal and state records, and English and Spanish-language newspapers, Escobedo chronicles the experiences of Mexican American women living in the 1940s and 50s Los Angeles area. Escobedo argues that the World War II home front expanded opportunities for Mexican American women to defy traditional gender norms and navigate their own American and Mexican identities. *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits* uncovers the pivotal role Mexican American women undertook while unraveling important concepts in Mexican American studies, such as identity, cultural negotiation, and autonomy.

"Pachuca" culture is foundational to women's defiance of traditional gender norms in *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*. The pachuca, also known as the "female zoot suiter," represented a figure that challenged traditional notions of Mexican feminine decorum and was distinct from mainstream American culture.¹ Escobedo uses anecdotal accounts from oral histories and newspapers to illustrate how Mexican American women were policed by Mexican families, the Los Angeles judicial system, and local media sources. On one hand, first generation and immigrant generations detested the female zoot suiter and likened it to the "La Malinche" archetype because pachucas were an embarrassment to their families and traitors to the Mexican

¹ Elizabeth Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 18.

people.² Comparatively, English-language newspapers fueled miscegenation fears by emphasizing the immoral promiscuity that pachuca's embodied. Court documents and juvenile records demonstrate how the label "pachuca" or "zoot suiter" was used to racialize young Mexican American women in incarceration, regardless of whether the women participated in pachuca culture.³ Escobedo demonstrates how to pachuca culture became an outlet of liberation and autonomy by which Mexican American women used to construct new identities.

From Coveralls to Zoot Suits falls short in explicitly recognizing how pachuca subculture defied heteronormativity during the World War II era. Escobedo describes the pachuca figure as someone who "played with sexuality" by donning masculine clothing.⁴ During the early twentieth century, most women exclusively dressed in a feminine and modest manner, but the zoot suit, conversely, reflected non-gender-conforming dispositions. Escobedo only focuses on how the pachuca figure was oversexualized, stigmatized in the media, and perpetuated panic of premarital relations and miscegenation.⁵ Akin to racist sentiments that discouraged Mexican American women from fraternizing with men, cultural standards of femininity and procreative sex forbid women from exploring masculine identities and homosexual relations.

Nonheteronormative expressions and masculine roles that the pachuca subculture represented are crucial to the analysis of autonomy and identity that Mexican American women navigated during World War II.

Escobedo draws several eminent scholars in Mexican American studies, such as Vicki Ruiz and George Sanchez, by employing theoretical concepts such as "the constitutive other"

² Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*, 29.

³ Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*, 25.

⁴ Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*, 9.

⁵ Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*, 30.

and “cultural coalescence”.⁶ *Coveralls to Zoots* is a perfect example of how cultural coalescence, the process of immigrants and succeeding generations preserving, assimilating, rejecting, and constructing certain cultural forms, is integral to the documentation of Mexican American history. Escobedo indicates how daughters of immigrant parents negotiated their place in American and Mexican society by rejecting conventional American beauty standards, denouncing chaperonage as a “method of control”, and embracing work culture outside of the domestic sphere.⁷ Chapter two, “Americanos Todos,” illustrates the paradox of state-sponsored Americanization campaigns that espoused a homogenous “Americans All” and the lack of citizenship and welfare eligibility that Mexican American women endured.⁸ The complex intersectionality of Mexican heritage, American patriotism, womanhood, familial duty, and an “almost white” social status is important to understanding the different roles Mexican American women mediated in their private and public lives. These themes are critical to contemporary discourse about Mexican American representation in U.S. history and generational family dynamics.

From Coveralls to Zoot Suits is an exemplary addition to the field of women’s history, wartime history, and Mexican American studies. Complementary to the vibrant exhibit of historical research, oral histories, and storytelling, every chapter is decorated with photographs of Mexican American women “jitterbugging” at the dance hall, being detained by police, working on aircrafts, and socializing at organizational events.⁹ Not only are the photos a wonderful visual aid, but each photograph also illustrates the different ways Mexican women on

⁶ Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*, 4.

⁷ Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*, 145.

⁸ Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*, 45-46.

⁹ Escobedo, *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits*, 23-24, 27, 83, 119.

the home front created space for themselves in American society. Escobedo's analysis of Mexican American women's contributions and experiences in Los Angeles exemplifies the necessity of local history during World War II.