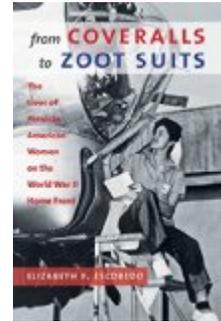


Elizabeth R. Escobedo. *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 240 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-0205-9.

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From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front

After reading Elizabeth R. Escobedo's *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front*, readers will understand the significance behind Mexican American women's home front participation during the war in Los Angeles. Scholarship on women's involvement in World War II has generally focused on Anglo or African American women. Using rich oral histories, archival material, newspapers, and government documents, Escobedo broadens this perspective with a fascinating analysis of Mexican American women's struggles and triumphs by illustrating their networks in relation to Los Angeles's social and cultural landscape. She explores how Mexican American women created a blended form of citizenship through their intercultural and interracial work spaces and social networks, and outlines reasons why Mexican American women chose to labor in home front initiatives and why they chose to openly disrupt traditional Mexican American cultural values in order to navigate wartime society. As Escobedo points out, "Inasmuch as wartime conditions facilitated beneficial new freedoms for second-generation daughters to exercise control over their lives, long-standing gender and racial norms—both within and outside the Mexican community—circumscribed their new wartime options to one degree or another" (p. 3). Focusing primarily on trying to uncover Mexican American women's wartime identities, Escobedo incorporates Mexican American studies, women's history, and labor studies in her examination of Mexican and Mexican American women's ability to embrace and challenge pachuca

identities, ideas of respectability, and the intertwining of Mexican and American social worlds.

Images of pachucas and zoot suitors have been highly ingrained in the American cultural conscience as subversive, but for many second-generation Mexican American women, the pachuca figure represented changing ideas about racial and gender ideologies during World War II. Escobedo intriguingly explains how the pachuca lifestyle challenged Mexican American values pertaining to community, family, and individual responsibility. Many women who resembled or associated with the pachuca image were labeled by the popular and local press as misfits in society, particularly because of the stigma associated with the riots between male zoot suitors and military men stationed in California. However, many women who wore pachuca clothing did not always self-identify as pachucas. The wartime period also paved the way for Mexican American women to claim entry into Los Angeles's public social life. Mexican and Mexican American women participated in dance hall culture, fashion, beauty, and conversations related to changing ideas about Mexican American womanhood. Escobedo finds that Mexican and Mexican American women who labored in war industries redefined notions of good and bad respectability. For example, some women of Mexican descent used leisure activities as a way to express their new liberated identities, and their participation in supporting the wartime effort helped many of them to gain social respectability through attendance at movie

theaters and dance halls.

Escobedo's examination of how Mexican American women created a normalized image of a Mexican family is also a valuable contribution to her study of World War II society. Many Mexican women who identified as mothers were idealized for their patriotic contribution to the war effort. Furthermore, Escobedo found that Mexican mothers were seen "as the primary nurturer[s] and caregiver[s] of the second generation," who "alone held the key to producing citizens that would ultimately adopt American values and customs, and thereby lessen the prospect of future interracial tensions" (p. 61). Many Mexican women also sought the help of federal government agencies, such as the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, to further their engagement with inclusion and respectability in their communities.

Some women of Mexican descent sought employment in defense factories for personal satisfaction, better pay, clean work spaces, and steady hours. Many of the women interviewed worked at the Douglas Aircraft Company and Lockheed Martin in south Los Angeles. Escobedo maintains that working in defense factories became a life-changing event for these women. Some found an opportunity to take charge of their pre-

viously sheltered life. Others broke down gender barriers and demonstrated confidence and social autonomy in their environs. Several Mexican and Mexican American women worked in factories that constructed bombers, punch presses, and rivet guns, and assembled aircraft. Defense factories, Escobedo argues, helped bridge the racial gap. African American, Mexican, Mexican American, and Anglo women all worked together, thereby breaking down the racial division of labor.

From Coveralls to Zoot Suits is a significant contribution that has recovered the experiences of Mexican and Mexican American women during World War II. Escobedo skillfully highlights how important it was for women of Mexican descent to showcase their heritage and identity as active participants in the wartime effort. Mexican and Mexican American women created a blended identity that embraced Mexican ideals about heritage and culture, as well as American loyalty and patriotism. Escobedo proves that these women were integral historical actors who shaped the World War II era and who helped redefine notions of what it meant to be an American during and after the war. Escobedo's monograph should inspire other scholars to explore the participation of women of Mexican descent in the military as well.

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