Article

# FROM ZOOT SUITS TO HIP HOP: TOWARDS A RELATIONAL CHICANA/O STUDIES[1]

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## Abstract

*This article traces cultural exchange between Chicana/o and Latina/o, African American, and Asian American youth since World War II, including analyses of zoot suit, civil rights movement art, and hip hop cultures. Drawing on theories of zapatismo as critical cultural practice, I explore how the cultural poetics of racialized youth functioned as a struggle for dignity. Rather than dismiss different youth cultures as too disjointed for any kind of productive dialog, I propose that we listen to what each might teach us about addressing crises of resources and domination in the academy. If Chicana/o, Latina/o, and Ethnic Studies are at crossroads in how they respond to increased funding cutbacks, battles over affirmative action, and the intellectual saliency of "new" fields like Borderlands Studies, I argue that a relational approach to Chicana/o youth culture provides clues to retool the theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical arsenal of these fields to regenerate them as a site of social struggle.*

## Keywords

youth culture; dignity; zoot suits; hip hop; Chicana/o studies; ethnic studies

## Introduction

On March 20, 1944, more than two years after thousands of American citizens of Japanese descent were forcibly incarcerated for suspected disloyalties to the US, *Life* magazine published the first feature article on

1 Although I use the term "Chicana/o" because it is commonly accepted in the field, I agree with the critique raised by Chela Sandoval when she employs the term "Chicana@" in its place. Sandoval explains that the "@" is meant to politicize the term "Chicano" or "Chicana/o" to embody the "re-gendering," "matrixing, trans-ing, and de-compartmentalizing" of the knowledges we call Chicano Studies, thus helping cultivate "a politics that not only seeks to understand race, colonial, and social powers in the Americas, but also – as indicated by the @ – represents a transdisciplinary recognition of gender and sexual difference."

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I similarly understand the terms "Latina/o," "Filipina/o," etc. See Davalos *et al.* (2002).

Japanese American internment to appear in a major American periodical. Accompanying the article was a photo depicting five male Japanese American interns with a caption that read, in part, "These five Japs are among 155 trouble makers imprisoned in the stockade within the Tule Lake Segregation Center." Known as the most notorious of internment locations because it housed the most fervent resisters to executive order 9,066, Tule Lake was home to hundreds of the so-called "No No Boys," those predominantly young Japanese American men who responded negatively to questions on loyalty questionnaires that asked if they would serve in the US armed forces and swear allegiance to the US. Although an older man clutching a pipe is part of the group in the photo, the others appear to be in their teens or early 20s. All appear to be encircling and looking down on the photographer, as if their racialized and masculine bodies should strike fear in and pose a threat to those that cross their path.

This may seem an odd place to begin an essay on Chicana/o youth culture, but the *Life* magazine photo provides a useful starting point for thinking about how the cultural politics of Chicana/o youth since World War II have influenced, been shaped by, and intertwined with the lives of young people from multiple racialized communities. Indeed, in her book, *An Absent Presence*, cultural critic Caroline Chung Simpson (2001, 24) notes that all five men in the photo wear clothes that are rumpled and slightly ill-fitting, with the dominant figure in the posture and garb of a "greaser" as he "wears a leather bomber jacket and his hands are stuffed in his pockets as he acknowledges the camera's presence with the barest hint of amusement." Along with his long hair, goatee moustache, and beard, the youth's style and apparently defiant attitude suggest cross-racial identification in the form of shared style and a critical stance towards authority with Filipino, Mexican, and African American youth of the time, many of whom were similarly deemed threats to home front stability for their flashy zoot suits and public perceptions that they were hyper-sexual, criminal, and refused to participate in the war effort.

Tracing the experiences of "No No Boys" and zoot suiters in the 1940s through hip hoppers in more recent years, this article investigates the ways Chicana/o youth have engaged other ethnic youth groups and the world around them. Rather than assume that the sharing of style always leads to social interaction, much less political collaboration or agreement, I propose a narrative framework for Chicana/o youth culture since World War II that outlines how Chicanos share moments of cultural exchange, conflict, and a myriad of social relationships with African Americans, Asian Americans, and other Latinos. Drawing from a range of historical and cultural studies, I investigate three eras of Chicana/o youth cultural production: (1) the zoot suit and jazz scenes of the 1940s; (2) the art and poetry scenes of the Civil Rights Movement; and (3) the hip hop and underground music scenes of the postindustrial era. This survey of youth culture since World War II suggests

that Chicana/o identity is deeply shaped by how Chicanos relate to other racialized groups. I ultimately argue that part of what binds Chicanos and other non-white youth in the post war era is not just their shared experiences of racialization or cultural style, but a more profound connection between their efforts to reclaim dignity amidst difficult life conditions, including internment, discrimination, and poverty.

Borrowing from theories of dignity espoused by the Zapatistas in Chiapas and a growing number of scholars investigating zapatismo as political and cultural praxis (Holloway, 1998; Esteva, 1999; Callahan, 2004; Zugman, 2005), I understand dignity less as a static quality of being worthy, honoured, or esteemed and more as a lived struggle for pride, hope, and humanity against poor life chances. The cultural expressions of zoot suiters during World War II, movement era artists, and contemporary rappers and musicians simultaneously function as a struggle for dignity and against its denial. These cultural practices are, in part, a politics of refusal: a refusal to accept humiliation, a refusal to quietly endure dehumanization, and a refusal to conform. The inter-ethnic nature of Chicana/o youth culture since World War II, moreover, reveals that youth struggles for dignity are not always circumscribed by racial or ethnic borders.[2] Seemingly, disparate youth can thus be viewed as a unique class that reaches beyond regional or even temporal boundaries, where class, as theorized by social scientist John Holloway (1998), is not assumed to be a predefined group of people based on their similar relations of subordination or exploitation to capital, but might also be a group based on their *insubordination* to domination. Rather than simply celebrate how Chicana/o youth resist poor life conditions, however, viewing Chicana/o youth culture as a struggle for dignity also recognizes how those involved might have unself-consciously chosen a particular style simply because it was the trendy or "cool" thing to do or, importantly, how Chicana/o youth cultural practices often reified gender, sexual, class, and racial hierarchies.

By viewing Chicano youth culture as an arena of inter-ethnic relationships and struggle for dignity, I follow cultural critic Sunaina Maira's (2004, 209–210) call for scholars to consider how youth culture studies "revitalizes discussions about youth cultures and social movements while simultaneously theorizing the political and social uses of youth."[3] The cultural practices of Chicano youth serve as a window into their changing ethnic and racial identity, social relationships, and, at times, political orientation because, as Maira argues in collaboration with an urban education scholar Elisabeth Soep (Maira and Soep, 2004, xv), youth culture functions as "a site that is not just geographical or temporal, but social and political as well, a 'place' that is bound up with questions of power and materiality." Analysis of Chicano youth cultural expression thus offers unique insights on debates over citizenship and nationalism, consumption and resistance, and popular culture since World War II. In particular, this article reveals how Chicana/o youth cultural identity

2 Throughout this essay, I use the term "inter-ethnic" rather than "multi-ethnic" or "cross-ethnic" to underscore the intersection, overlap, and engagement between multiple ethnic groups.

3 On related theories of youth culture and youth as a category of analysis, see, for example, Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (1993); Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Willard (1998).

was dependent on the shifting nature of social interaction between different racial and ethnic communities.

If Chicana/o youth culture does indeed have something to teach us about the myriad of ways that ethnic groups interact, another goal of this article is to consider its impact on Chicana/o Studies, specifically, and Ethnic Studies, more generally. As fields that have historically focused on a single group or community, one common assumption in Chicana/o and Ethnic Studies is that their objects of study are bounded by ethnic or racial markers. Too often, the fields have been structured in a kind of silo or vertical model of organization, with each field left to produce knowledge on a particular race or ethnic group without much consideration to how different groups engage one another. Moreover, when inter-ethnic experiences have been the focus of research, more often than not, the concentration is on the relationship between one "minority" group and a generalized "white mainstream." Such an approach can be limiting because it risks ignoring the rich history of conflict and cooperation between different racialized groups, implicitly frames race and ethnic relations within an artificial analytical binary (e.g. black-white or brown-white), overlooks whiteness as its own racialized and fractured identity, and glosses over the class, gender, sexual, regional, and generational differences within different racialized groups. Building on the work of several recent historically specific case studies on Chicana/o youth culture (Viesca, 2000; Matt Garcia, 2001; Johnson, 2002; Macias, 2003, 2004; Viesca, 2004a), however, I suggest that exploring inter-ethnic relationships illuminates the myriad of social and cultural influences that might inform identity and has serious implications for conceptualizing theme and theory in Chicana/o and Ethnic Studies.[4]

4 For a recent collection of essays that explores a relational framework of ethnicity and race in contexts other than youth culture, see, for example, Nancy Foner and George Fredrickson (2005).

Rather than accept that Chicana/o and Ethnic Studies are best served by "circling the wagons," so to speak, and emphasizing a single group's social, cultural, or political position *vis-a-vis* the "white mainstream," the fields might benefit from actively interrogating how one group's experiences intersects with others. This echoes historian Eric Avila's (Davalos *et al.*, 2002, 144–145) demand for Chicana/o Studies to pursue "a deeper understanding of how the making of Chicano identity has been contingent upon the presence of diverse social groups" and "further attention to the racial ambiguities underlying the historical construction of Chicano identity." While maintaining an emphasis in Chicana/o and Ethnic Studies on excavating subjugated ethnic histories, it is equally vital to see how such histories intertwine with one another. This kind of horizontal model of Chicana/o and Ethnic Studies urges scholars to think about how cultural production and consumption, genocide, slavery, immigration, colonialism, and struggles for dignity operate across ethnic, racial, regional, and temporal bounds.

The remainder of this article sketches a relational narrative of Chicana/o youth culture since World War II. In separate sections, I briefly explore Chicana/o youth culture in the eras of World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, and the

post-industrial US city. Since this article aims to outline a framework for interpreting Chicana/o youth culture more than it seeks to provide a detailed account of specific cultural movements, all three sections are necessarily condensed. In each of the three sections, I briefly discuss the historical context, consider how the dignity of Chicana/o youth was denied and how they struggled to reclaim it through cultural expression, and the contradictions that arise from Chicana/o youth culture's inter-ethnic relationships. I conclude by speculating further on how Chicana/o youth culture might provide scholars in the field with clues to combat current crises in the academy related to representation and the production of knowledge.

## Fashion, music, and race in the wartime US

World War II occupies a critical place in Chicana/o historiography. Several scholars (Mario Garcia, 1989; Escobar, 1999) argue that the period was a watershed moment in Mexican American efforts to secure equal citizenship and national belonging. The participation of thousands in the armed forces and war industries fueled assimilation, solidified the emerging Mexican American middle-class, and sparked struggles for civil rights. The nature of Mexican American engagement with other ethnic groups, however, is often overshadowed by the relationship between Mexican Americans and the dominant US society. The "greaser" look modeled by the "No No Boys" from Tule Lake, and the zoot suit culture more broadly, alludes to a complex relationship among racialized communities in the wartime US. Pushing a relational analysis of Chicana/o youth culture further shows that attaining war industry employment, joining the armed forces, or struggling to assimilate into wartime society were not the only ways Mexican Americans traversed the early 1940s.

There was a demographic explosion in the 1930s and 1940s of Mexican, Latina/o Filipina/o, Japanese, and African American communities in metropolitan areas as a result of the wartime economic boom and related Great Migration, immigration from Asia, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, and the growth of first-generation US-born children. One important by-product was close-knit spatial relations among diverse populations in cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, Chicago, and New York. Sharing residential areas, frequenting the same night spots, and, in some places, attending integrated high schools led to a myriad of contacts among urbanites of color. Although geographic proximity did not always lead to social interaction, many young people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds did socialize, share fashion, and create musical styles together. One result was that Chicana/o youth, as well as their Asian American and African American counterparts, constructed identities that were relational or, in other words, at least partially based upon their interactions with other racialized youth and constitutive of their multi-valent cultural world.

Rather than advocate the virtues of youth cultural diversity, the popular discourse espoused by US politicians, media outlets, and the general public expected young people to consolidate their US identity in support of national unity and the war effort. Mexican American, African American, and Asian American youth often held a paradoxical position in the matrix of wartime rhetoric. While they were expected to serve in the military and work in war industries to help defeat fascism overseas, they were simultaneously subject to increasing violence and discrimination. To put it another way, many racialized youth struggled against the denial of their dignity on the home front; at the same time, others sought to claim dignity by serving their country on the battlefield. As a number of historians (Escobar, 1999; Pagan, 2003) demonstrate, juvenile delinquency during the early war years was often construed in racial terms as the activity of Mexican American and African American youth were conflated with dangerous behavior. Consequently, the lives of many youth were plagued by police brutality and discrimination in the workplace (despite increasing access by non-whites and women to war industry jobs). As I have argued elsewhere (Alvarez, 2005), many racialized youth were, in fact, deemed subversive to the war effort for allegedly being animal-like carriers of venereal disease, regular users of drugs and prostitution, and inherently violent and criminal. The everyday denial of youth dignity during World War II was underscored by dramatic moments such as Japanese American internment, the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial and ensuing Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles, and racial violence targeting African Americans in New York, Detroit, the deep South, and elsewhere.

Against propaganda for cultural homogeneity, violence, and discrimination, many wartime youth challenged negative representations of themselves and cultivated an alternative multi-ethnic vision of US identity. Among the most available strategies for thousands of young Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans, as well as many white youth, to reclaim dignity was to mobilize their physical bodies as the vehicle for a style that was all their own. One primary example was the zoot suit, with its finger-tip length coats, draped pants that ballooned out at the knees and were closely tapered at the ankle, and accessories of wide-brimmed hat and gold watch chain. As a number of scholars have shown (Cosgrove, 1984; Tyler, 1989; Kelley, 1994; Daniels, 2002; Pagan, 2003; Alvarez, 2005), the zoot style was particularly popular among young Mexican American males on the west coast and young African American males on the east coast. The improvisational and exaggerated qualities of the zoot subverted the heroic American masculinity of patriotic sailors, who in their all-white, tight-fitting, starched uniforms were starkly juxtaposed to the colorful and oversized zoot. Young women zoot suiters similarly challenged popular notions of femininity and female masculinity stemming from images of “Rosie the Riveter,” who with her heavy-duty work clothes and commitment to war industry employment clashed with women

zooters' short skirts, heavy make-up, and freewheeling attitude. Moreover, by dancing, dating, and, occasionally, building long-lasting relationships across ethnic lines, many zoot suiters flat out ignored the unspoken mandate of the period that they behave conservatively and not engage in "race mixing." In fact, according to *The People's Voice,* the newspaper published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the world famous Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, New York, long known as a hot spot for young zoot suiters who wished to jitterbug and lindy hop their nights away, was closed by city authorities in 1942 because of inter-racial dancing and socializing.[5]

As the Savoy closing indicates, youth were drawn to the extensive social world that included zoot suits, jazz music and dancing, duck tail, conk, and pompadour style haircuts, and unique speech patterns, a mix of English and Spanish known as calo among Mexican Americans and jive slang among both African Americans and Mexican Americans. Although predominantly considered a Mexican American and African American phenomenon, the zoot was also popular among Filipina/o, Japanese, and Euro American young men and women. As historians Valerie Matsumoto (1993) and Paul Spickard (1999) demonstrate, for example, many Japanese American youth in internment camps in places like Amache, Colorado and Jerome, Arkansas drew on pre-internment urban sensibilities by wearing zoots and cultivating a Nisei *pachuco* style as a substitute for lost pride and sense of belonging. One observer recalls that these Japanese American zoot suiters were "easily spotted…by their 'uniforms' and long haircuts and zoot suits, would crash social affairs, settle all personal grudges with physical assault…."[6] Along the Pacific coast, Filipina/o American youth were also active participants in crafting zoot style. In fact, as Linda Espana-Maram (1998, 118–135) shows in her important work on the McIntosh suit craze in the taxi dancehalls of Depression era California, Filipina/o youth had long used fashion "in their search for places that afforded them some sense of dignity and relative freedom of expression." As these snippets from the lives of Japanese and Filipina/o American youth suggest, the world of wartime youth culture included a matrix of Afro-Latino-Asian connections. Thus, Jackson Omata, a hip Nisei zoot suiter nicknamed the Jive Bomber, who cons, trades, and barters everything from toilet paper to Frank Sinatra records to improve his lot in the Heart Mountain internment camp in Wyoming in 1943 is not just a character in the long-running theatrical production "A Jive Bomber's Christmas," and a creation of the playwright's imagination, but also an integral part of the history of Chicana/o youth culture.[7]

The music that was such an integral part of zoot subculture also exhibited an inter-ethnic politics, as Mexican American, Latina/o, Asian American, and African American musicians often influenced one another and performed together. In the 1940s and 1950s, for example, Cuban composers and musicians influenced jazz artists like Dizzy Gillespie, mambo and jazz merged in

5 "Mixed Dancing Closed Savoy Ballroom," *The Amsterdam News*, May 1, 1943; "What's Behind Savoy Closing: Is it Police Move to Bar Whites from Harlem?," *The People's Voice*, May 1, 1943. For more on the closing of the Savoy, see Tyler (1989, 57).

6 Matsumoto (1993, 131).

7 For a synopsis of "A Jive Bomber's Christmas," see http://www.traaxproduction.com/jive/synopsis.html

California to form what historian Anthony Macias (2003) calls "Hollywood Latin," and Ritchie Valens blended Mexican folk music with rock 'n' roll. Similarly, the so-called pachuco artists like Don Tosti and Lalo Guerrero made the black tradition of scat singing their own by doing it in Spanglish, only to have black rhythm and blues artists like Chuck Higgins return the favor with songs like "Pachuko Hop." As historian Daniel Widener (2003) reminds us, there was also the Japanese American drummer Hideo Kawano who gigged at the Club Alabam in the heart of L.A.'s African American neighborhood on Central Avenue that was so popular among Latina/o, Filipina/o, and Japanese American youth. He also played with Mexican American groups and sat in on sets with musician and producer Johnny Otis, who even though he was the son of Greek immigrant considered himself "black by persuasion" (Lipsitz, 1990).

Young people's cultural practices were certainly motivated by a range of personal desires, probably ranging from simply wanting to be cool or impress a girlfriend or boyfriend to resisting parental authority to their support or non-support for the war effort. Their inter-ethnic cultural borrowing, whether conscious or not, however, might also be viewed as a collective statement against the often white supremacist and segregated nature of US society. Indeed, for the countless youth who spent many a night dressed to the hilt dancing to the sounds of Lionel Hampton, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and other jazz greats at the night clubs along L.A.'s Central Avenue or Harlem's Lexington Avenue or at internment camp dances, their body politics of zoot style was more than individual practice. By publicly performing the exaggerated style of the zoot with one another in dancehalls, movie theaters, malt shops, pool halls, and on street corners, non-white youth showed that another social world was possible. If even only for a moment, they were able to suspend Jim Crow segregation (White and White, 1998), refuse to be the good proletariat by reclaiming their own bodies and time by valuing leisure (Kelley, 1994), subvert longstanding familial patriarchy that confined young women to the home (Ramirez, 2002), and challenge wartime cultural and political consensus.

If cultural style during World War II was one method youth used to claim dignity in the face of poor life conditions, there was more than one way to do so and multiple ways they identified with one another. While some like the Tule Lake "No No Boys" performed their style to protest and avoid the army draft or expose the hypocrisy of home front democracy, countless others, zoot and non-zoot youth alike, no doubt joined the military as a way to claim dignity and prove they were worthy of national belonging.[8] What is more, of course, is that the world of zoot suits and jazz was far from any kind of utopia or radically democratic social space. While crafting a unique zoot style might have helped the racialized youth to live a more dignified life in the face of poverty and discrimination, it also often reinforced unequal race, gender, and class relationships. At the same time, zoot culture facilitated cross-cultural borrowing; it promoted often violent competition for ownership of style and

8 On the politics of worthiness, see Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas (2004).

neighborhood turf among Mexican American, African American, and Asian American youth. While the street-wise personas of young women zoot suiters might have challenged societal expectations that may be acquiescent to male authority and remain confined in the private sphere, they also faced objectification, sexual harassment, violence, and the denial of their dignity by male zoot suiters. As zoot suiters seemingly transgressed wartime capitalist expectations that they work as part of the proletariat, they also often strengthened the wartime economy by buying zoot suits and accessories on credit. Each of these contradictions points to the complex web of multi-ethnic relationships that helped make up wartime Chicana/o identity.

## Art, music, and internationalism during the movimiento

Of the youth who participated in the zoot scene of the 1940s, there is no way to tell how many, if any, developed a political consciousness based on their patterns of inter-ethnic cultural exchange. A few historians (Kelley, 1994; Daniels, 2002) have explored how the youthful zoot days of well-known individuals, such as Malcolm X in Harlem or Cesar Chavez in Central California, helped shape their adult participation in the Civil Rights Movement. Less has been said about how the inter-ethnic character of youth culture itself transformed in the years that followed World War II. Indeed, one of the seemingly magical qualities of youth culture is that while the individuals involved change over time, and may even grow to despise how they once behaved, young people in any given historical moment regenerate arenas of social experimentation and radical cultural expression. While young people in the late 1960s no longer donned zoot suits, they did create fresh cultural practices that, like those of their counterparts a generation prior, reflected both their inter-ethnic relationships and struggles for dignity.

As the Civil Rights Movement grew from the labor activism of the 1940s, non-white youth, some perhaps the children of former zoot suiters and wartime jazz aficionados, increasingly participated in the charged political atmosphere. In a country of social and political upheaval, young people quickly became a catalyst for social change and protest. Youth dominated the anti-Vietnam war movement, led African American, Native American, Asian American, Chicana/o, and Latina/o social movements through organizations like the American Indian Movement (AIM), Black Panthers, Brown Berets, and Young Lords, and spearheaded the transgressive rock 'n' roll and hippie lifestyles. As evident in the striking similarities between a pair of classic 1960s tunes – the exalted white folk singer Bob Dylan's popular "The Times They are a Changing" and the great black rhythm and blues artist Sam Cooke's vintage "A Change is Gonna Come"– young people from a wide spectrum of racial and ethnic backgrounds realized they had the power to alter US society.

Historiography of the Chicano movement (Chavez, 2002; Haney Lopez, 2003) focuses largely on how young people of Mexican descent shed their Mexican American identity label for a Chicana/o identity, a transition marked by the privileging of Mexican and indigenous ancestry, rejection of whiteness, and refusal to assimilate. Driven by the desire for better education, community empowerment, and the recognition of Aztlán as their historical, spiritual, and imagined homeland, young Chicanos articulated a distinct brand of cultural nationalism where Chicanismo, or the experience of being Chicana/o, deeply shaped one's politics. Emphasizing efforts for ethnic solidarity, literature on the Chicano movement stresses groundbreaking political organizations developed by young people in the Southwest US such as the student initiated Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), the anti-Vietnam centered Chicano Moratorium, and the community-based Brown Berets. Too often, however, these Chicana/o groups have been considered in isolation from other parts of the civil rights movement, including the struggles for Boricua, black, red, and yellow power. While some scholars, like historians Lorena Oropeza (2005), Laura Pulido (2006), and cultural critic George Mariscal (2005), have extended our conception of the Chicano movement by mapping the role of Vietnam in shaping Chicana/o politics and considering how Chicana/o political organizing mirrored and overlapped the organizing of other non-whites, less has been written about the inter-ethnic and internationalist cultural production of Chicana/o youth. It is in the movimiento's art, poetry, and music where yet another struggle for Chicana/o identity and dignity emerged, one not determined completely by ethnicity or cultural nationalism but one informed by relationships across ethnic, racial, and regional borders.

Cultural expression was, in part, a response to the denial of dignity suffered by young Chicanos and other racialized youth during the 1960s. If many of the social movements of the 1960s were about claiming dignity, they were also about how participants struggled against daily dehumanization. Youth involved in the Chicano movement faced obstacles similar to their predecessors from previous decades, including dismal educational opportunities, poverty, and discrimination. New problems also surfaced in conjunction with their more militant political activity, including increased surveillance by local and federal law enforcement, renewed outbreaks of racial violence in cities like LA and Detroit, brutality and public humiliation at the hands of police, and, of course, the ever-increasing pressure of the Vietnam War draft. Confronted with societal expectations to join the service and protect a country, many who argued failed to do the same for them, a number of young Chicanos increasingly reclaimed dignity in cultural terms.

While much of the empowerment of the era stemmed from ethnic pride, an ideological position that often privileged race and ethnicity over class, gender, or sexual preference, there were youth who crafted identities that crossed racial lines. An array of Chicana/o poets, for example, extended principles of cultural

nationalism to support the struggles of oppressed people around the globe. Through their literary production, young Chicana/o writers exhibited a cultural politics that reflected solidarity between the movimiento and anti-colonial movements in Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean. For instance, while perhaps the most well-known poem of the Movimiento was Corky Gonzalez's ultra-nationalistic and hyper-masculine "Yo Soy Joaquin," there were countless others in which the verses stressed the power of coalition building across lines of difference. The work of the pan-Latino literary collective Pocho-Che from the Bay Area, for example, linked the conditions of Chicanos with African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latinos. The impact of the black-beat generation poet Bob Kaufman on members of Pocho-Che, their passion for the mixed Latina/o and African American history of improvisation and riffing in jazz music, and their engagement with artists like Carlos Santana, Tito Puente, James Brown, and writers from San Francisco's Third World Communications, collectively illustrate that inter-ethnic communication and community formation was alive and well (Hernandez, 2002). The diverse and powerful body of poetry by Chicana feminists also demanded "la causa" take seriously the concerns and issues of women, gays, and lesbians, as exemplified in, for example, Marcela Christine Lucero-Trujillo's poem entitled "Machismo is Part of Our Culture" (R. Gutierrez, 1993).[9] Together with the internationalist dimensions of Chicana/o literary production, such work outlined a Chicano movement that was contingent upon the overlap of Chicana/o identity with multiple struggles for equality.

9 On Chicana Movement Feminism more generally, see, for example, Alma Garcia (1990).

In his essay on movimiento poster art, George Lipsitz (2001, 176) further draws our attention to the ways that Chicana/o youth culture crafted an inter-ethnic and international politics. Like the thousands of young Chicanos who took to the streets or walked out of schools to protest second-class citizenship, poster artists demanded they be heard by using their mobile, widely accessible, and inexpensive forum to occupy public space by plastering posters all over neighborhoods, college campuses, and local hangouts. While some echoed the nationalist sentiments of the time, others gave broad exposure to international issues. For example, Rupert Garcia's 1970 "Fuera de Indochina!" protests the Vietnam War, Malaquias Montoya's famous "Chicano/Vietnam/Aztlan" emphasizes the affinities between Chicanos and the Vietnamese, and Linda Lucero's 1978 poster "Lolita Lebron" pays tribute to the Puerto Rican struggle for independence. There were others like Louie "The Foot" Gonzalez's poster in support of the Salvadorian People's Support Committee, Yreina Cervantes' celebration of Chicana/o-Central American interactions in her "El Pueblo Chicano Con El Pueblo Centro Americano," and Mark Vallen's "Sandinista" and "Poetry for the Nicaraguan Resistance" expressing support for Nicaraguan forces under attack by US supported contras. All of these posters demonstrated the efforts of Chicana/o youth to forge solidarity with struggles for social justice by other aggrieved groups, no matter their national or ethnic make-up.

Recognition by Chicana/o poets and artists that their own struggle for dignity was not isolated from others was also seen in the more commercial character of "Brown Eyed Soul" music. The fusion of the Motown sound, soul, rhythm and blues, rock, and jazz with local musical traditions by Chicanos in Los Angeles, among other places, resulted in a rich mixture of African American and Chicana/o cultures. Artists from East Los Angeles like War, Brenton Wood, and El Chicano built on the tradition of multi-cultural bands in Southern California dating back to the 1940s and 1950s. Tejanos from the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, like the heavily do-wop and black soul influenced Sunny and the Sunliners, further stretched the spatial dimensions of this shared soundscape. All of these musicians, whether via protest songs or love songs, were part of a Chicana/o youth culture that at least momentarily pushed the ideology of cultural nationalism by acknowledging ties between diverse life experiences.

Of course, the inter-ethnic and internationalist dimensions of youth culture did not always, or even often, reflect the dominant ideological thrust of the movimiento. What is more, such cultural patterns also risked further entrenching more nationalist Chicana/o political strategies and social behavior. Some argued that attention to foreign, feminist, queer, and other US ethnic social movements detracted from the energy needed to grow the Chicano movement, thus hardening lines of cultural, gender, and sexual difference. Additionally, many of the same Chicana/o youth cultural producers and consumers who critiqued US society for an economic system that left non-white communities at the bottom were complicit with US capitalism when they bought and sold their written work, art, and music. The commodification of their cultural expression, moreover, often separated the poem or song from the multi-ethnic or internationalist milieu from which it originated. Despite the broad-based appeal of this youth culture, in other words, it was often considered to be the product and property of a circumscribed Chicana/o community, one with few connections to African American, Asian American, or global struggles. These contradictions, however, do not lessen the political or intellectual import of movimiento cultural production. In fact, such tensions and inconsistencies point to the multiplicity of Movimiento era Chicana/o identities and struggles for dignity. The era's youth culture also highlights how culture was often organically linked to social movements and played an important role in augmenting new ideas about how to effect change. Things happened in the realm of cultural expression, in other words, that may not have been possible in more traditional, political, or economic arenas. Just as Chicana/o scholars have argued that the movement was both revolutionary and reformist, so too was it both nationalist and internationalist, ethnically focused and inter-ethnic. Ultimately, the cultural practice of poets, artists, and musicians is an evidence that Chicana/o youth did not always form their politics from their identity, but often times formed their identity from their politics (Lipsitz, 2001, 176–177).

## Chicana/o youth and cultural politics in the age of globalization

Despite great changes in US society since the heyday of the Chicano Movement, youth culture continues to be a site of inter-ethnic relationships and struggles for dignity. The ever-deepening globalization of capital has resulted in the dizzying movement of goods, labor, culture, and ideas across national borders that have transformed the way people think about national politics and national cultures, requiring most of us to think in a transnational frame. If the poetry, art, and music of the Movimiento hinted at a cultural web connecting different anti-colonial struggles around the globe, the current flow of cultural commodities suggests an endless array of exchange and borrowing. More to the point, as immigration to the US from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean has intensified, US cities have become increasingly global in their ethnic, racial, national, and cultural make-up.[10] The continued growth of global cities like Los Angeles, New York, and Houston facilitates inter-ethnic cultural expression among resident youth, who often share schools and neighborhoods, yet also strengthens inter-ethnic conflict among working-class communities competing over jobs, housing, and urban resources.

10 For an excellent synopsis of the impact of recent immigration trends in the US since the 1960s see David Gutierrez (2004).

For its part, the field of Chicana/o studies has begun to recognize how local Chicana/o and Latina/o communities in the US often have deep economic, social, and political ties to populations and places far beyond their immediate surroundings. There remains, however, a need to further incorporate a relational lens in analyses of Chicana/o culture and identity. Though some fear such methods might shift focus away from Chicana/o subjects, a problem previously overcome when the field vigorously battled for legitimacy in the early 1970s, even a cursory analysis of contemporary Chicana/o youth culture reveals the commonplace nature of inter-ethnic relationships and influences that help make up Chicana/o identity.

The onset of globalization shifted the contours of Chicana/o youth struggles for dignity, including the emergence of both new forms of cultural resistance and oppression. The changes experienced by Chicana/o, Latina/o, Asian, and African American communities in US cities, in particular, have resulted in the denial of youth dignity in profound ways. Economic restructuring and deindustrialization has forced many in the urban US to face growing rates of unemployment, dilapidated and unaffordable housing, along with decreasing local, state, and federal resources for inner-city welfare, schools, parks, and healthcare. Since the early 1970s, the postindustrial crisis spurred the movement of jobs and heavy investment away from once vibrant downtown manufacturing centers and towards growing industrial areas along the US–Mexico border and in places as far away as South East Asia where workers are paid a fraction of wages once earned by their US counterparts, environmental regulations are looser, and profits are higher. Scholarship on the postindustrial city

(Kelley, 1994, 183–227; Rose, 1994; Lipsitz, 2001, 3–30; Sassen, 2001), moreover, reveals that the accompanying rise in gang violence, drug use, and crime parallels the militarization of big cities and increased surveillance of urban racialized youth as domestic terrorists. In many ways, popular discourse in the US during the 1980s and 1990s portrayed racialized youth as the epitome of what was wrong with the urban US.

In the face of such dehumanization, Chicana/o youth cultural expression continued to function as an inter-ethnic cultural vehicle to reclaim dignity. Perhaps the most recognizable youth cultural phenomenon over the last 30 years is hip hop, including rapping, dee jaying, break dancing, and graffiti writing. Following its emergence among African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Puerto Rican youth in the South Bronx in the 1970s, an urban area often depicted as the poster child of 1970s postindustrialism, hip hop rapidly spread across the country, as evident in the myriad of rap genres like West Coast gangsta rap, Chicana/o rap, and rap from the "Dirty South." More recently, of course, hip hop scenes have grown across Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Chicano hip hoppers, specifically, including Kid Frost, Cypress Hill (which also included Cuban and Italian American members), Lil' Rob, Aztlan Underground, A Lighter Shade of Brown, The Funky Aztecs, and countless others, turned to documenting their own encounters with postindustrialism through rhymes and beats, a cultural practice paralleled by both the experiences of African Americans, Puerto Rican, and Asian American youth. Chicano rappers have played a large role in helping hip hop explode the traditional black-white binary in US race relations, making it virtually impossible to view hip hop as solely a white, Latina/o, Asian, or even black cultural practice (Flores, 2000; McFarland, 2002; Rivera, 2003).

As cultural critic Pancho McFarland (2002) argues, Chicana/o rap music is one response by youth to the alienating and disempowering effects of globalization. Through their music, fashion, and style, hip hoppers have responded to the devastation of the post-industrial city, criminalization, and well-known patterns of police brutality and inflated incarceration rates by articulating a unique cultural politics. For example, rap lyrics that critique the state by mocking or cursing police tactics; the exaggerated fashion of baggy pants, retro sports jerseys, gold chains, and oversized jackets; and the occupation of public space by graffiti writers in the form of building walls or subway trains function as strategies for Chicana/o, Latina/o, African American, and Asian American youth to make themselves seen and heard in a time when the economic, political, and social mainstreams encourage their invisibility and silence. In the same vein, we can cite the cultural ingenuity of hip hoppers as another inter-ethnic strategy to craft a distinct aesthetic aimed at carving out autonomous social and cultural space. In the seemingly impossible bodily movements of the spinning, twisting, and popping of break dancing; in the making of music without instruments; in the use of technology like speakers and

commodities like albums in unintended ways; and in the pounding bass of car stereos that audibly occupy blocks of public space, Chicana/o youth have claimed for themselves at least a part of the dignity that the world in which they live has taken away from them.

If hip hop is one way Chicana/o youth in the US have created "room to maneuver" (Chambers, 1991) in their own lives, then another has been through the rebirth of local underground music scenes in cities like New York, Houston, and Los Angeles. Fusing a variety of different musical styles and traditions including hip hop, reggae, ska, dub, blues, jazz, Latin American folk music, rock, and rhythm and blues, a vibrant underground music scene emerged in 1990s Los Angeles, for example. As cultural critic Victor Viesca (2000, 2004a) chronicles, many of the individuals active in the establishment of the eastside Peace and Justice Community Center initially helped form this scene as part of bands like the Chicano, African American, and Japanese American Ozomatli, Chicano Zach de la Rocha's Rage Against the Machine, and the Chicana/o Quetzal. Ranging from the hard rock oriented sound of Rage to the hip hop fusion of Ozomatli to the more folk-influenced Quetzal, these bands exemplified the relational character of Chicana/o identity by blending a variety of cultural styles and including a wide range of ethnic participants. Like the movimiento artists before them, many of these Chicanos also made their deep ties to LA area social movements a central part of their cultural performance, drawing from experiences in local labor activism, Zapatista solidarity work, and immigrant rights issues. For instance, the music and politics of several members of Quetzal signifies their commitment to revitalizing the Afro-Caribbean intersections in both Chicana/o and Mexican history by resurrecting the classical son jarocho, a musical form native to the heavily African populated region of Vera Cruz, Mexico, and supporting Afro-Mexican political struggles (Viesca, 2004b). The cultural expressions of such underground and fusion artists acutely speak to the dehumanizing and deteriorating conditions of post-industrial LA and the city's unique conglomeration of global economic, immigration, and political forces, yet at the same time reflect their commitment to make the communities they live in better by thinking seriously about how Chicana/o identity and struggles for dignity intersect with others.

Like with World War II and Movimiento youth cultures, the social contradictions and political limits of contemporary Chicana/o youth culture are many. Without rehashing familiar debates over hip hop's place in the contemporary US as a negative or positive force, it is crucial to acknowledge the gendered, sexual, racial, and class complexities of recent youth culture. More than simply imperfections, these characteristics provide a window into the fissured struggles for dignity of many Chicana/o youth. Their seething critique of neoliberal economics is, for example, often illusory and undermined by the drive for money, commodification, and merchandise sales of many rappers and musicians. The frequent misogyny, homophobia, and sexism in

gangsta rap, for example, and the often patriarchal nature of the music industry make claims to dignity by heterosexual male youth sometimes synonymous with the denial of dignity for young women, gays, and lesbians. And, of course, as much as we might point to the cooperation of politically conscious youth across ethnic boundaries in certain situations, there are just as many, if not many more, instances where the relationships between African American, Chicana/o, Latina/o, and Asian American youth reflect the conflict between their larger communities battling for dwindling resources in many US cities.

Perhaps because of these contradictions, present-day youth culture helps us better see the multifaceted make-up of Chicana/o identity and struggles for dignity. That the efforts of Chicana/o youth to navigate the difficult life conditions of globalization and post-industrialism frequently intersect with the experiences of others suggests that contemporary Chicana/o youth are refashioning the inter-ethnic Chicanismo previously articulated in different forms by zoot suiters and movimiento artists. Moreover, the links exhibited by some Chicanos to labor and grassroots political organizing indicate that Chicana/o youth culture still has an important role to play in shaping social movements. I suspect as Chicana/o youth culture continues to regenerate itself in the future that it will increasingly foster bonds across ethnic, racial, and national boundaries, whether they be in cooperation, conflict, or both.

## Chicana/o youth culture and the shifting terrain of academia

By listening carefully to zoot suiters, Movimiento artists, and hip hoppers we see that youth culture is not simply about what one wears, how one dances, or the music one listens to. It is also where complex and contradictory identities grow from the convergence of ethnic differences and struggles for dignity. Rather than fetishize the zoot suit, poems, or music, we might better highlight the regeneration of youth cultural spaces and the plethora of shifting social relationships among them. Part of what links the Tule Lake “No No Boys” and Ozomatli, in other words, is not only their racialization and cultural commonalities, but their efforts and desire to claim dignity and cultural autonomy in the face of powerful forces.

From the cultural creativity of Chicana/o youth we learn that the identities and methods of social change are not singular, but plural; that struggles for dignity include everything from nationalism to internationalism, reform to revolution, and assimilation to alienation. But what, if anything, can the experiences of these youth cultural workers teach us about the trajectory of Chicana/o and Ethnic Studies? Relational frameworks of Chicana/o and Ethnic Studies are particularly critical at this moment, in part, because of the potentially dangerous and explosive conversation about race and ethnic identity that has surfaced in light of several recent and widely acknowledged publications. For example, Samuel Huntington’s (2004) recent piece in *Foreign*

*Policy* starkly draws an ethnic boundary between white Americans and Latinos by arguing that the inferiority of Latina/o immigrants puts all of US democracy and culture at risk. In another controversial debate, Nicholas Vaca's (2004) book *The Presumed Alliance* emphasizes the conflict between blacks and Latinos to the degree that any semblance of cooperation, communication, or community between the two groups appears virtually impossible in the present and less so in the future.[11] For certain, Huntington and Vaca tell a much different story about race, ethnicity, and nationalism than the one I have outlined and, to be fair, one can probably narrate the same historical period of youth culture I've addressed by emphasizing trends of ethnic conflict, racial violence, and sexism more than any moments of cooperation or resistance. In fact, though one might disagree with the politics and analyses of Huntington or Vaca or this author, it is of little use to ignore inter-ethnic relationships. It is critical, rather, to include the rich histories of inter-ethnic cultural expression as part of the story because they teach us that US race and ethnic history is neither a story of only conflict or togetherness, but a complicated mix of the two. Taking this point and case studies like Chicana/o youth culture seriously ultimately hold promise for how Chicana/o and Ethnic Studies might help us better understand the past, make sense of the present, and imagine a different future.[12]

**11** For a critical review of *The Presumed Alliance* see Ed Morales (2004).

**12** For an excellent treatment of inter-ethnic relations that offers one such critical perspective see Vijay Prashad (2001).

While much of the work of excavating the history of inter-ethnic struggles is already being done by scholars in Chicana/o, Latina/o, and Ethnic Studies, it is still crucial to ask, as Evelyn Hu-Dehart (2001, 107) reminds us, "Why do research and for whom?" If, as Hu-Dehart suggests, part of the answer is to correct omissions and distortions of mainstream academia, ensure that a plurality of voices are included in conversations about power, and involve racial groups in an articulation of their own history, then it is important to interrogate the thematic, theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical imperatives of Chicana/o and Ethnic Studies. If nothing else, the history of Chicana/o youth culture makes it clear that it is virtually impossible to capture the full complexity of the Chicana/o experience without accounting for how Chicanos relate to others and vice versa. This relational quality of Chicana/o youth culture requires us to address the complexities, nuances, and the messy reality of identity and community formation. Ramon Gutierrez (1995) similarly reminds us that it is critical to remember that all knowledge claims should be viewed as situated and partial, culture is not a unified system of shared meanings, but a system of multi-vocal, contested, and complex symbols in constant negotiation between various groups, and that the study of race and ethnicity is best understood by using comparative and interdisciplinary methods.

As the internationalization and comparative trajectories of fields like American and Borderlands Studies (Rowe, 2000; Donnan and Wilson, 2001; Lipsitz, 2001, 3–30; Vila, 2003) require Chicana/o Studies to acknowledge its own relational and transnational impulses, it makes increasingly more sense to

avoid rigid boundaries between different fields of inquiry. Similarly, perhaps because of its attention to a diversity of ethnic identities, varied immigration experiences, and historical struggles for pan-latinidad, Latina/o Studies (Caban, 2003; Poblete, 2003) challenges Chicana/o Studies to more effectively delve into questions of inter-ethnic relationships.[13] Conversations about race, globalization, and power in other fields should be viewed as a welcome addition to thinking through the multi-layered experiences of Chicanos, Latinos, and other ethnic minorities in the US.

13 See also the responses to Caban's essay by Deena Gonzalez (2003) and Felix Masud-Piloto (2003).

Indeed, one sound lesson we might take from the internationalists of the Chicano Movement is that we must not forget that new social relations, even in the academy, cannot be enacted unless they are envisioned first, even if only in embryonic form in the dancehall, a song's lyrics, or in how one fashions their body. This does not erase or ignore the power of ethnic or racial identification in Chicana/o or Ethnic Studies, but suggests that inter-ethnic and racial politics can be an equally important aspect of struggle. Relatedly, it is important to address how Chicana/o and Ethnic Studies have been increasingly disciplined by the academy and how the fields might reconnect with and help invigorate social movements outside of the university.[14] As the politics of Movimiento poster artists and poets or the fusion musicians of more recent times remind us, part of the uniqueness of Chicana/o, Puerto Rican, Latina/o, African American, Native American, and Asian American Studies is that they emerged organically from the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. This genealogical link to social movements makes these Ethnic Studies different from History, Anthropology, Literature, Sociology, and other disciplines. And the difference, I think, is more than a thematic focus on specific communities or a particular theoretical orientation to view society from the bottom-up. The grassroots connection to social movements also suggests a unique kind of pedagogical and methodological approach to how we research, write, and teach. Exactly how this manifests itself is probably different for all of us, though I am not sure if it is as central a debate in the fields of Chicana/o and Ethnic Studies as it was 30 years ago.

14 For a useful analysis of how radical grassroots of social movements can become academically institutionalized see Ellen Messer-Davidow (2002).

The bottom line is that like the zoot suiters and hip hoppers we marvel at, it is up to those of us in the academy to craft new kinds of social relations if we are to productively navigate the difficulties posed by the increasing corporatization of the university, attacks on affirmative action, decreased funding for minority hires and fellowships, and intellectual reformulations that pit different area and Ethnic Studies against one another. A relational approach might help enliven Chicana/o and Ethnic Studies as sites of social struggle or at least raise questions about how the fields will continue to play a role in efforts for change. Part of this challenge, I believe, includes recognizing the dignity of the historical agents we study, but also our own struggles for dignity, and that of our students, colleagues, and larger communities. To borrow again from theories of zapatismo, as elaborated by historian Manuel Callahan (2004), struggles for dignity in the academy might very well depend on how successfully we employ

a politics of refusal (perhaps recognizing our shared rejection of the individualistic and alienating character of academe), a politics of place (making note of our connection to local struggles at the same time seeking to learn from others), and a politics of listening (being careful to acknowledge a multiplicity of voices and perspectives).[15] These are the politics of refusal, space, and listening, that have been in one way or another central to Chicana/o youth culture since World War II. Although we may not be able to ever bring dignity and humanity to our writing, research, and teaching in ways that capture people's imagination like a flashily dressed zoot suiter entering the dancehall or the parade of funky horns and percussion by Ozomatli beginning a live show, it seems worth generating conversation about the thematic, theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical strategies that can begin to help us get there.

Part of my motivation for writing this essay stems from my experiences in an undergraduate course entitled "From Zoot Suits to Hip Hop: Chicana/o Youth Culture since World War II" that I taught in the spring semester of 2004 at the University of Houston. Over the course of those 15 weeks, it became increasingly clear to all of us in the class that the readings, discussions, and assignments were most empowering and interesting when they were about how Chicana/o youth engaged non-Chicanos, rather than about an ethnically, nationally, or politically circumscribed notion of Chicanismo. Part of what I learned from my students, of whom around 75% self-identified as either Chicana/o, Mexican American, Latina/o, or Hispanic, was that as much as they were interested in recuperating the history of Chicana/o pop culture, they were also deeply invested in thinking about how that history might help them forge their own political identities in the here and now, one that recognizes race and ethnicity, but does not assume them to define one's political commitments or community. Perhaps the most important result of reading a relational narrative in Chicana/o youth culture since World War II is to consider how we might make sense of the struggles before us as to think more clearly about our own.

15 Both Manuel Callahan and John Holloway argue that zapatismo as a critical cultural practice is one place to begin thinking about how scholars in the Humanities and Social Sciences, in particular, and members of the university community more generally, can build social relations that center on invigorated notions of dignity, hope, and radical democracy. See Manuel Callahan (2004, chapter 16); John Holloway (2002, 153–160).

## About the author

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