Pachuco, Pocho and Cholo: Symbolism and Nationalist Identity Conflicts.

The pachuco, pocho and cholo are three figures that have come to symbolize and represent a large segment of the Mexican Diaspora. The image and the identity of these individuals were forged on the margins of two cultures, and their presence has contributed to the formation of a border culture. The identity of the individuals of the northern part of Mexico, and their counterparts on the other side of the border were formed by scornful attitudes that have portrayed the pachuco, pocho and cholo as ambiguous and hybrid in nature.

The pachuco, pocho and the cholo transcend the limitations of an ambiguous identity; one that is understood as an element that is not clearly defined or determined. However, these icons embody the meaning of ambivalence, as they belong in a world that oscillates between cultures and territories. In existing between two cultures, they are compelled to forge and negotiate their own brand of identity, one that is characterized by an appropriation of its multiplicity.

In Mexico’s northern border, the identity conflicts of Mexicannes are not limited to one side of the border, that is to say, the border issues do not stop at a diving line, rather, they are a fluid conflict that moves back and forth with the individuals that transit this border. But beyond that, there are socio-linguistic elements that transcend social and geographical divides. Nevertheless, in spite of these transgressions, these figures are

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1 See appendix a: Hollywood’s closest representation of the pachuco is portrayed in Luis Valdez’ (1981) film *Zootsuit*. The characterization of the pachuco delivered by James Edward Olmos in *ZootSuit* was both defiant and assertive.

2 The cholo is portrayed in several films. However, *Boulevard Nights* is one of the representations that portray the cholo in East L.A. within the context of a “Barrio” culture.
ambivalent in nature, due to their fluidity, but not ambiguous in character. The multiculturalism that the pachucos, the pochos and the cholos represent does not dilute their identity, nor does it represent an ambiguous character.

Embracing cultural ambivalence does not imply a failure to choose or define an identity. However, it does manifest a cultural particularity that intends to delineate the cultural presence of the pachuco, pocho and cholo as one that is oscillating between two cultures and two territories. In doing so, these icons have appropriated ambivalence as they assert the origins of their multicultural nature. This creates a sense of agency as he simultaneously appropriates life experiences that are at once contradictory and polarizing in nature. Thus, this act exemplifies characteristics of a counterculture. Furthermore, this analysis interprets ambivalence as a confrontation and an appropriation of both Mexican and American culture; one that results from a constant negotiation and appropriation that takes place at the border. The multicultural aspects that are manifested in the pachuco, pocho and cholo do not dilute their identity, nor is their multicultural nature recognized as an ambiguous element. Having said this, being from the border does not dictate a sense of cultural fluidity, or adherence to the linguistic characteristics that have come to symbolize the pachuco, pocho and cholo.

This comparative analysis of the relationship between the pachuco in Octavio Paz’s, The Labrythnis of Solitude and the cholo in Luis Humberto Crosthwaite’s The Great Pretender reveals first, the formation and identity of the pachuco, followed by his successor the cholo and by extension of the pocho, since both are considered pochos by various entities. The Labyrinth is an essay that scrutinizes Mexican identity and it opens with a section called “The Pachuco and other extremes.” This section analyzes the image
of the Pachuco from the perspective of a nostalgic Paz, who was living in the U.S. at the
time he was inspired for this essay. According to Javier Durán: “The pachuco becomes
the cornerstone in his (Paz’s) conception of nation in The Labyrinth of Solitude because
Paz’s view of the nation derives from a homogenous, totalizing base that tends in
principle to exclude any elements of a transnational identity such as the pachuco from his
‘imagined community,’ a term Paz borrows from Benedict Anderson” (140). In fact, Paz
emphasizes the figure of the pachuco to analyze Mexican identity because like Rubén
Medina writes, “He is interested in the pachuco’s figure as a comparative element against
a Mexican character, that is to say, as an extreme metaphor of what a Mexican could, and
should not become once they cross the Rio Grand.” (70). Besides, Paz focuses on the
pachuco to analyze Mexican identity because according to him, “As I tried to understand
the traits of a modern day Mexican, I begin, with those for whom just being one is a
matter of life and death” (15). Thus, with statements such as this Paz recovers the image
of the pachuco characterizing him as Mexican. However, for Paz the pachuco undergoes
a cultural devaluation due to his exile on one side, and the North American cultural
intolerance on the other. Even today, in Mexico and in the United States, the image of
the pachuco has been based largely on Paz’s essay.

Since, this essay was written over 50 years ago, it is necessary, at this juncture to
read it from a different perspective, one that takes into account the historical evolution of
the Northern Mexican Border and of the origins and characterization of the pachuco,
since his identity is pertinent to the formation of a border identity. His presence has
initiated a debate over his origins and the appropriation of a border culture, as well as a
rejection of its representation in the context of both a Mexican national identity and its
existence as an American subaltern cultural icon. Durán States, “a close examination of the image of the pachuco... can provide useful insights about the role and position of the subaltern cultural expressions as they become integrated into a larger mapping of cultural production” (140). (Rossler)

Moreover, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* is singled out for this analysis because as Levinson states: “[It’s] the most influential—as infamous as it is famous—text in modern Mexican history. Yet, the work is also a “first” in a number of ways. Above all it is the first Latin American essay to entertain rigorously the idea that the key infrastructure of the Latin American nation is a territory that does not even belong to the nation: The border” (145). However, Crosthwaite affirms that “this essay is presently read only in the United States, since within the Mexican nation, it has lost any relevance” (Personal interview 2006).

From a different vantage point, Crosthwaite’s fictitious account, *The Great Pretender* shows the cholo as a fluid figure that crosses borders, but is nonetheless one that belongs on both sides of the border. Crosthwaite’s perspective about the cholo differs considerably from Paz’s perspective of the pachuco. Paz writes about the pachuco from a distance, creating an obscure and indifferent image misplaced and disoriented between two cultures, thus belonging to none.

Even though Crosthwaite is not a cholo, he is able to show the perspective of the cholo through a writing style that portrays his customs within the context and surroundings of the characters in *The Great Pretender*. With this approach, the author generates a more engaged and realistic image of this figure, and as Crosthwaite stated in a personal interview “As I write a story like *The Great Pretender*, I base all my characters
on my own experiences as a human being, the characters are simply human beings interacting in a closed space (the barrio).” It is worth noting that for Paz, the pachuco’s character constitutes a degradation of Mexican national identity, while for Crosthwaite the Cholo is a manifestation of the border and his circumstances. Consequently, Crosthwaite’s interpretation proposes a different paradigm than the one created in the *Labirynth of Solitude* by Paz.

**Pochos and “Pochismo”**

At the start of the twentieth century and even before being pachucos, these individual were categorized as pochos, a name charged with negative connotations that refer to Mexican-American culture. According to Guillermo Hernandez, “the terms pocho and pachuco acquire a great variety of connotations, depending on the context and the place where it is being used. José Manuel Valenzuela states: "The word pocho is a pejorative word which itself is a label given to the Chicano population and, in many cases to the residents of the Northern Mexican Border. The visible elements of the pocho have been the modification of Spanish and the cultural change associated with the Anglo-Saxon and American influences" (Decadence 126). Pocho is a term that in Mexico has been applied simultaneously to Mexican-Americans and the residents of the Northern Mexican Border. In the context of Mexican authors from the center (from Mexico City), pochismo describes Mexican-Americans and it extends to include individuals from the North of Mexico. Jose Vascocelos, stated that “The Northernism or “nortismo” was in fact the same as “pochismo”, a term used in California that refers to those casteless-
‘descastados’ who reject anything Mexican even though Mexican blood runs through their veins” (77).

Thus the fundamental characteristics of a “pocho” are reduced to a linguistic expression and to the way in which the pachuco, pocho and the cholo dress (179). As Madrid affirms,

To be a pocho was a complicated matter, with cultural, linguistic, class, social, regional, geographical, temporal and national implications. To our families any variance from the established Mexican cultural norms made us pochos. In his autobiography Barrio Boy, Don Ernesto Galarza recalls; “In our family when I forgot my manners my mother would ask me if I was a pochito.” (203) To Spanish-speakers those of us whose Spanish was deficient were pochos. (52)

At present, Pocho refers to a lack of cultural and territorial roots by some, and yet it is an expression of cultural individuality to others. To be a pocho means to belong to no one culture exclusively. This adjective has been applied to individuals that are labeled as little less than Mexicans, and that due to their origins, are not considered all together Americans either. Thus, it is a term designated to demean and denigrate the individual.

The pachuco, pocho and cholo are thus very closely interrelated and in a sense interdependent. The character of the pachuco came to be known nationally and internationally through two events: first, the “Sleepy Lagoon” and later during the “Zootsuit Riots.” The “Sleepy Lagoon” took place during the summer of 1942, while WW II was at its peak. José Diaz, a young Mexican American man was found stabbed to death at the Sleepy Lagoon reservoir in Southeast Los Angeles. There were no obvious
clues to identify a perpetrator, it was determined that this crime had been committed by other Mexican Americans. Thus, the pachucos were to blame.

In August 2nd 1942, the Los Angeles police department rounded up and arrested twenty two Mexican-Americans identified as pachucos. Seventeen were convicted of crimes and nine of them were sentenced to prison terms at San Quintin’s penitentiary. Two years later a superior court overturned the verdicts. However, this event initiated a period of anti-Mexican sentiment in the whole United States, and established the basis of an institutionalized discrimination and marginalization against the pachuco, Mexican Americans, Philippines and any others who did not fit a homogenous image. Thus, the maginitued the “Zootsuit Riots” set off a discriminatory wave that extended to other immigrant groups that didn’t fit into the homogenous image of Americanism. At present, the “Zootsuit Riots” have been renamed the “Marine Riots” because they were instigated not by the Zuitsuiters, but rather by members of the American Naval and Marine forces.

In his writing, Paz distorts the identity of the pachuco. Although, this individual was not heroic, and it is not my intent to romanticize him, neither is it to vilify and present him as a Maquiovellian figure responsible for the degradation of Mexican culture or its image in the United States. The problem with romanticizing or vilifying the pachuco or the cholo is that, since they are viable figures we offer Mexican and Latin-American youth an idealized image of the pachuco and the cholo. (Flores 51).

Notwithstanding, Paz’s innovation as he acknowledged the pachuco, the real impact and significance of The Labyrinth lies in presenting the pachuco as a

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4 As suggested by Christian Chester, “Paz and the Pachuco” (1992), and Javier Peruch in Hijos de la patria perdida (2001).
manifestation of a Mexican identity at a time --when to the majority of intellectuals the pachuco was as invisible as he was insignificant. Paz, however, pointed out the relevance of his presence, dedicating an entire section of The Labyrinth to him. Nevertheless, to the author, the mere articulation of the Pachuco was an act of fortuitous rebellion and he states:

Their sensibilities are like a pendulum… that has lost its reason and swings violently and erratically back and forth.… The pachucos are youths, for the most part of Mexican origin, who form gangs in Southwestern cities; they can be identified by their language and behavior, as well as their clothes….The pachuco does not want to become a Mexican again; at the same time he does not want to blend into the North American life (13-14)

Here Paz questions not only the pachuco’s mental health but his value as a citizen of either country as he denounces him as “a pendulum that has lost its reason”. Furthermore, he emphasizes that “The pachuco does not want to become a Mexican again;” or that “he does not want to blend into the North American life” either. Actually, these options were never available to him. Yet, Paz strips this individual’s sense of identity, since, according to the author they had to declare exclusive allegiance to one nation or the other. In his essay, Paz is able to recognize the pachucos inability to choose one culture over the other. Still, throughout his writing the author affirms the pachucos Mexicaness while at the same time he questions his allegiance to Mexico and its traditions.
Clearly, Paz has placed this figure in the center of an international debate. Isaac Rosler notes the resonance and the significance of this argument: “The ‘pachuco,’ willingly or unwillingly, is involved in an interpretative process that criticizes both American and Mexican cultures; it is this interpretative process which prevents him from fusing blindly with either American or Mexican society” (171).

In fact, the pachuco did not lack a heritage, as Paz stated, but as Durán points out:

Pachuco culture was a form of assemblage, a cultural affirmation rather than a nostalgic return to an imaginary original past, its strategies of survival—appropriation, transgression, reassembly, breaking and restructuring the laws of language with caló and pochismos—were also reflected in the codified language of space (marking territories with graffiti in the city, the barrio and the street) (186).

Consequently, the pachuco appropriates the negative stereotypes and the image that is forged of him to conduct himself with more confidence in an atmosphere that is dominated by others, but characterized by self representation.

**From pachuco to cholo:**

The pachuco’s existence as an agent of a marginalized segment of society is able to reinvent his image, as he has undergone a cultural metamorphosis into a cholo.

According to Espinoza: “A nostalgic pachuco and a desperate and tired Chicano give birth to a new individual: the cholo…, between the pachuco and the cholo there are similarities like between father and son, but it is the particularities of social development that dictate the differences” (22). It is this particularity in social development that gives
rise to the cholo, as he emerges out of the continuous socio-cultural marginalization that these individuals experience.

The pachuco and the cholo are the result of a clash and an encounter between two cultures. The cholo has perpetuated a tendency to form gangs, set in motion by the pachucos need to exist in groups. This practice has survived through the XXIst Century in extremely adverse circumstances. Both the pachucos and the cholos, are a socio-cultural manifestation that transcends cultural and geographical borders that extend from the US and deep into Mexico. “There are cholos in Tijuana, Mexicali, Culiacán y Ciudad Juárez. Their origins are unmistakeable: they are imitating california’s chulos, -- the prolongation of the pachucos” (Monsiváis, Cultura, 42). Furthermore, the appearance of the cholos, along Mexico’s northern border follow the same route as the Mexican migrant workers returning from the U.S.

According to Laura Cummings, “Contemporary chuco and cholo forms have now appeared in diverse places distant from the border in both the United States and Mexico; in addition to being in border towns and cities, they can be found in the Mexican states of Michoacán, Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Zacatecas. For some years now, they have also been influencing youth-culture forms in Central America” (1). For this reason, the cholo image is engendering roots not only in the border region, as Crosthwaite’s novel reveals, but as intellectuals like Monsivais and Cummings state they are forming deep ties that extend south of the Mexican border to other South American cities, as well larger cities in the United States.

The pachuco and cholo have resignified the image that has been imposed on their persona from a homogenous base. Brett Levinson notes about the appearance of these
individuals: He states “[He] becomes a threat not when he takes on or emerges as ‘All’ but when he takes or emerges ‘at all,’ as any kind of being” (152). Crosthwaite shows that the cholo’s mere presence and survival questions the importance of a center, or the very existence of one single center.

The cholo as an individual, as an archetype and as the legacy of the pachuco, is evidenced through Crosthwaite’s short story, *The Great Preténder* (1992). The story takes place in the border city of Tijuana, Baja California, seen through the collective lens of the “barrio” where the cholo is located. The plot tells the story of Jose Arnulfo, who later earns the nickname “el Saico.” (The psychotic one) The account focuses on details that shape the rise and fall of the cholo and his complex identity, in this city on the Northern Mexican Border.

El ‘Saico’ is the person who establishes and administers the norms of ‘el barrio’ as this fragment reminiscing on the qualities of el Saico illustrates: “The only truth is that ‘el Saico’ was the ‘worst felon-bato’ (guy-thug) in the barrio.” In fact, within the value system of the Barrio, you need to be the ‘worst felon-bato’, or the most criminal to occupy the primary place that ‘el Saico’ occupied. The dichotomy of this character is that because he is the “worst felon”, or the most criminal person in the ‘Barrio’, has the right and the responsibility to implement justice, distribute the goods (drugs, money) and solve the personal problems of other members of the ‘Barrio’, including women problems.

According to ‘el Saico’ “I am not an alcoholic, I’m at the edge of alcoholism, like everyone else in Tijuana, we live at the edge, or on the border, of this our tri-colored country” (2). However, there is more than one power influencing this zone. It is a “tri-color” state; where Mexico, the United States and the indigenous presence coexist in
harmonious dissonance. To Crosthwaite, Tijuana and ‘el Saico’ are connected and represent the margins of Mexican culture and society. This statement manifests the distance between the center and the periphery in a centralized yet multi-colored country, and thus multi-ethnic country, where everything outside of the Capital city of Mexico, according to Crosthwaite—is at “the border”, on the outskirts, or the margins of the order established by a centralized society. Pablo Vila points out the effects of centralism on border residents, “The [Juarenses] equate the Mexican policy of centralism in relation to the border region with the [paternalistic] behavior of Mexico city’s inhabitants” (53). As Espinoza underlines when he refers to the cholos’ lack of alternatives, “marginality and neglect are entangled conditions which are complicated by the use of drugs and violence” (23).

However, marginality and Mexicanism do not exist in terms of center and periphery exclusively, but as Monsiváis affirms, in terms of modernization vs. provincialism”. As he points out, “before, people from rural parts of Mexico would look to Mexico City, as a viable option for escape, now a days, their attention goes to the United States, and more specifically to the city of Los Angeles” (La identidad, apéndice 355). And more recently this migration has extended to other areas of the United States, particularly certain areas in the south and north east.

Like pachucos, cholos also distinguish themselves by forming youth gangs that uphold their own values, fashion and jargon. In addition, they experiment with drugs and establish their own governance and hierarchies,

Independently of the communities where they live. The socio-economic situation of the cholo in society is marginal. According to Valenzuela, “Cholismo highlights... the use of
symbolic elements as a way to delineate the cultural profile of what is Mexican... and as a form of recovering and reinventing the past” (Cultural Identities on the Mexico United States Border 92)⁵.

The alliances that chulos form replace family ties and ultimately the nation. As Crosthwaite writes in *El gran pretend* “In the barrio there are no bosses. In the barrio we are brothers, homeboys, raza (actually stands for peasantry, or) from this side” (106). This underlines the reasons for becoming a cholo. If there are no bosses, there are no hierarchies, and no margins. The critical point in the story is that “brothers, homeboys, raza,” all have equity within a closed system. Yet, within the gangs there are hierarchies and, in fact, there are bosses, and those who are closer or further from the center. Thus, the sentiment that this fragment expresses is illusive and misleading. Gangs, throughout Mexico, but particularly in the border region have taken on a far more dangerous and criminal nature than any of the initial pachuco or cholo group forms in the United States.

Gangs offer an accessible space for these individuals that do not fit in other circles. From his position of displacement the cholo has managed to create his own organized chaos, as he does not allow either Mexican or American society to enter this new order to which he belongs. Yet, the cholo is not defined solely by his stylistic tendencies or social characteristics; this constitutes a pitfall of stereotypes. Cholism and chulos comprise a dynamic culture that is multifaceted in nature, not all of them use drugs, steal, or live outside societal norms (Valenzuela, A la brave ese).

**Conclusions, Nation vs. Nationality:**

⁵ From this point forward all references made to "Cultural Identities on the Mexico United States Border" will be made using the first two words of this title.
As *The Labyrinth* shows in an American context the pachuco stands out as Mexican, inversely, the pachuco, pocho and cholo placed in a Mexican context, stand out as Americanized and as “the other”. Pablo Vila asserts: “On the border, similarities and differences meet, and the result is an unusually complex ‘common sense,’ in which people are forced to move from one cultural system to another, sometimes on a daily basis” (51). That is to say, border people often react to the environment in which they find themselves by altering or modifying their acts according to their locality.

The difference between Crosthwaite and Paz is that while Paz reflects upon the pachuco, Crosthwaite shows him through the vantage point of the cholo’s own life experiences. Between Paz’ *The Labyrinth* and Crosthwaites’ *The great pretender* there is a vast difference of style and content. Paz observes and describes the pachuco and his atmosphere, but he doesn’t seek to discover the particularities that shaped him, nor the forces that caused his isolation. While Crosthwaite creates a personal story from the vantage point of the cholo, his narrative does not openly criticize, nor does it condone the behavior of the cholo. Paz, however, criticizes and questions the pachuco’s morals, his integrity, and his loyalties. In fact, he questions his very reason for existing at all.

Finally, Paz and Crosthwaite both suggest that the cholo, like the pachuco, questions his reality, // because the hostile environment of the pachuco and that of the cholo have not changed. Both are cognizant of their position within contending polarizing societies and refuse to conform.

To look at the images of these two figures it is evident that the Pachuco’s inception started as a fashion, a dance craze, and a socio-linguistic difference. Instigated
by the desire to shift his image and create a new consciousness. Yet, in the juxtaposition of the two images the transformation is evident. The cholo has become more militant. Initially, there was a struggle withing himself, with his barrio and with illusive boundaries sought and created by these individuals in a search for belonging. Consequently, the territorial borders between nations and its boundaries must be defended from outsiders. Thus, in this paradigm the cholo confronts the self as “the other” in order to validate his own existence. At present, cholos still live outside the norms, but the stakes are higher. Many cholos choose the context of a gang and criminalized existence. This paradigm may replace societies norms and ultimately the family. Drug involvement for men and women are no longer a choice, but a way of life. In fact, gang activities now include drug abuse, drug trafficking, prostitution, and other illegal sources of revenue. The innocence of the pachuco and the early cholo presence have vanished to give place to a more violent and illicit figure. One that closely resembles the image of the pachuco initially forged by the mass media and notably perpetuated by Paz.
Bibliography


