

UNCANNY ENCOUNTERS: FACE TO FACE WITH “FAILED” ASSIMILATION

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The scene was 1930s Los Angeles, a swarming metropolis pulsing with the discordant voices of a plethora of backgrounds and cultures. Among the throng walked a youth who, approximately two decades later, would write one of the most important explorations of Mexican identity of the twentieth century. But at this time, in this place far from the Distrito Federal, Octavio Paz was destined to experience an unsettling encounter, one that would linger in his mind until the publication of his essay collection *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950). It was an uncanny encounter of the cultural kind that stirred such a strong reaction in the scholar. In the opening pages of *El laberinto de la soledad*, Paz describes finding himself face to face with a community of “rebeldes instintivos”, or natural-born rebels: young people who called themselves *pachucos*.¹ They had their own music, their own version of a dialect called Caló, their own outrageous fashion, and were often linked to violence and social disorder.² They clashed violently with Paz’s sensibilities: he claimed they had a furtive and restless manner, an attitude of shame toward their origins, and a ridiculous appearance thanks to their strange clothing, their gangster-like attitudes and their odd blend of English and Spanish.³

At around the same time, the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre was also travelling throughout the United States. In New York City he had an unnerving experience, which he describes in the Prologue to the first edition of his seminal work from 1933, *Casa-grande y senzala*. He describes its effects on him in terms similar to those we

¹ Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad y otras obras*, New York: Penguin Books, 1997, 34 (all translations in this essay are mine, unless otherwise indicated).

² *Ibid.*, 38.

³ *Ibid.*, 34.

find in Paz's account. After having been away from Brazil for more than three years, Freyre encountered a group of sailors he describes as "nacionales, mulatos y cafusos", names referring to people of mixed race, walking through the Brooklyn snow. In a North American context the sailors appeared strange and exaggeratedly different; he writes that they gave him the impression of being caricatures of men. On seeing them, Freyre recalled a phrase he had read in a book by an American traveller to Brazil, who described "*the fearfully mongrel aspect of the population*".⁴

What seems to have been at the root of the impressions on Paz and Freyre was the overt failure of these individuals to blend in. Freyre only mentions his lingering impressions of the Brooklyn encounter in passing, then abandons the experience as he moves on to his cultural analysis of the history of the Brazilian people. Paz, on the other hand, vehemently explores the source of his strong feelings of aversion toward the Los Angeles pachucos. In the first essay of *El laberinto de la soledad*, he writes about this cultural phenomenon that emerged from the US Mexican community in the 1930s and '40s, predominantly in the Southwest. He chastises their "grotesque dandyism and anarchic conduct", writing that the pachucos were not so much a symbol of injustice or of the failure of a society to assimilate them, as they were the result of their personal desire to be outsiders.⁵

The intensity of the negative reaction Paz had to the pachucos is intriguing, considering his experience as a seasoned researcher of manifestations of cultural mixing. The concept of *mestizaje* is a prominent element of the rest of *El laberinto de la soledad*. So why, then, did Paz have such an adverse reaction? Conceivably the aesthetically revolutionary experimentation of the pachucos could have been a source of positive inspiration for the writer. In the introduction he ponders the possibility that

If instead of asking ourselves, "Wouldn't it be better to create, to labor over a reality that does not give itself to the one who contemplates it, but instead to the one who can submerge himself in it?" What could

⁴ Gilberto Freyre, *Casa-grande y senzala*, trans. Benjamín de Garay and Lucrecia Manduca, Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1977, 7 (emphasis in the original).

⁵ Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*, 35.