

The Zoot Suit Riots: Exploring Social Issues in American History

JOHN J. CHIDO

University of Oklahoma, Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum, Norman, Oklahoma, USA

The Zoot Suit Riots provide students with a case study of social unrest in American history. The influx of Latinos into the Los Angeles area prior to World War II created high levels of social unrest between Mexican Americans, military servicemen, and local residences. With large numbers of soldiers stationed in the area during the Second World War, conflicts broke out between the young Latinos and the soldiers. The following material provides a short historical review of the events related to the riots, a lesson plan, and resources to engage the students in exploring the events of this time period.

Keywords: social unrest, Los Angeles, Zoot Suit Riots, World War II

By the beginning of 1943 the United States was well into World War II. In Los Angeles, Japanese Americans had been removed, but large numbers of Latinos had quickly replaced them as the dominant minority. Young Latinos, unlike their elders, were not content to stay within their “barrios” and began to venture out into downtown dance halls, movie theaters, and night clubs. Like the youth of every generation, they had their own distinct style of dress. They had distinctive hairdos (“duck tails”) and wore wide-brimmed hats, broad-shouldered long coats, high-waisted peg-legged pants, and long dangling chains (“Zoot Suits”). They called themselves “Pachucos.” They came into contact with another group of young men who wore another style of dress—military uniforms. Because of the war, Los Angeles had become a major location for military bases. Men from all over the country who had no previous experience with the Latino culture were now located in direct proximity to large groups of young Latinos. At first, the servicemen merely ridiculed the Latino males attired in zoot suits. However, this later turned into resentment because the zoot-suiters were not wearing military uniforms and fighting for their country. In addition, the local press had been promoting fear by asserting that a “Mexican crime wave” had hit the city and zoot-suiters and gangsters were one and the same (Waxman 1943).

On June 3, 1943, a number of sailors claimed that they were beaten and robbed by Mexican Pachucos. The following evening, a group of around 200 sailors set out for

East Los Angeles and began to beat up any Mexican male dressed in a zoot suit. Aided by a police department who seemed to approve of the violence, the initial attacks quickly turned into a riot that lasted for a period of nine days and has come to be known as the “Zoot Suit Riots.”

The Zoot Suit Riots provide a context for students to understand aspects of social injustice that accompanies times of war. When a country is at war, fear can develop in a society related to a minority group and create social unrest. What follows is a short review of the historical events related to the Zoot Suit Riots, a possible lesson plan, historical documents, and resources that are available to help teachers explore the topic of the Zoot Suit Riots.

History

The riots began in Los Angeles, amidst a period of rising tensions between American servicemen stationed in the city area and the Mexican American community. However, these tensions had a long history in the Los Angeles area. As the Great Depression set in, Los Angeles suffered deep economic problems. The economic crisis forced Mexicans to compete for work with local Anglos, as well as those who moved west from the “Dust Bowl” areas of the southern plains, and Blacks seeking more opportunities than they had in the South. The deepening economic situation sparked a public clamor for the expulsion of Mexicans. Officials in Los Angeles seized upon Mexican repatriation as a popular response to the growing economic problems. Los Angeles County offered to pay the passage of persons desiring to return to Mexico as early as 1931 (Lopez 2003). Despite deportation and threats by whites, by the late 1930s

Los Angeles still had the highest concentration of Mexicans outside of Mexico.

With the advent of World War II, tensions in Los Angeles once again began to rise. The bombing of Pearl Harbor intensified reactions of white Californians to purify their cities and towns from their enemy (Pagan 2003). The first victims were the Japanese who were uprooted from their homes and interned in distant concentration camps. Shortly after the removal of the Japanese population from Los Angeles, newspapers shifted their xenophobia back to Mexican Americans. In the spring of 1942, the *Times* and the Hearst press featured many stories on crime and juvenile delinquency among Mexican Americans (Sitton 2005).

The coming of the war in 1941 further complicated the city's social dynamics. White men went off to fight in a segregated military, and women and people of color filled the jobs in the defense industry previously reserved for white males. While wartime conditions reconfigured gender and racial boundaries, civilian and military leaders in Los Angeles saw these changes as a threat to civil order (Pagan 2003). At the same time that white residents of Los Angeles felt threatened by both external and internal groups, there was a sense of security provided by the military. Southern California served as a key location for the military, and at any given time, 50,000 servicemen could be found in the Los Angeles area (Pagan 2000).

Independent of the social tensions, young Mexican Americans were beginning to develop a counterculture fueled by jazz and its related dress (Peiss 2011). The zoot suit with its broad shoulders, narrow waist, ballooned pants, long key chain, and thick shoes became the dress of choice of young Mexicans in the Los Angeles area. Many white Angelenos objected to the zoot-suiters, including older generation Mexican Americans, whose communities were traditional and conservative. Critics saw the Mexican American youths as cultural rebels and delinquents who openly defied American values and customs.

Tension between the servicemen and civilians continued to rise as more and more military men began to pour into the Los Angeles area. They viewed the city as a place to "let off steam" before they shipped out for the war zone. While many civilians tolerated them because of the war effort, others did not. In the ethnic enclaves of Los Angeles, servicemen met stiff opposition from young men and women who refused to defer to their presumed white privilege. While white military and civilian youths of all colors clashed in the streets, confrontations were most frequent with Mexican Americans. Drunken soldiers were often "rolled" by Mexican youths, who hoped to teach the soldiers respect for their culture. With equal animosity, sailors often insulted Mexican Americans as they traveled through their neighborhood. Rumors often spread in the barrios of sailors searching out Mexican girls, while on the military bases, stories circulated about the violent reprisals suffered by sailors who dared to date Mexican females.

In the summer of 1942, the Sleepy Lagoon case made national news when teenage members of the 38th Street Gang were accused of murdering a man named Jose Diaz in an abandoned quarry (Pagan 2003). The case created a large amount of anti-Mexican sentiment, and the nine men were convicted and sentenced to long prison terms. Many residents of Los Angeles saw the death of Jose Diaz as a tragedy that resulted from a larger pattern of lawlessness and rebellion among Mexican American youths. Much of this animosity had to do with the police and press characterizing all Mexican youth as "pachuco hoodlums and baby gangsters" (Del Castellio 2000). The city administration response to the Sleepy Lagoon arrests was one of complete support of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). The mayor had warned the city residents that he had received reports of a significant rise in gang activity and juvenile delinquency among blacks, Latinos, and whites (Sitton 2005). In addition, Captain Edward Duran Ayres submitted a gripping report regarding the inherently violent nature of Mexicans (Lopez 2003). All the "Mexican element" knows or feels, Ayres stated, "is a desire to kill or at least let blood . . . When there is added to this inborn characteristic that has come down through the ages, the use of liquor, then we certainly have crimes of violence" (Lopez 2003, 74).

Following the Sleepy Lagoon trial, a series of violent conflicts erupted throughout the state of California. Altercations took place between Mexicans wearing zoot suits and U.S. servicemen in San Jose, Oakland, San Diego, and Delano. In addition, violence erupted in Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Harlem where blacks dressed in zoot suits became targets of hate and prejudice. However, the most serious acts of violence broke out in Los Angeles. The dominant assumptions regarding race and class held by the white Angelenos, the prejudicial views of the LAPD toward Mexican Americans, and the sensationalism of the Los Angeles press was about to launch Los Angeles into a major riot (Pagan 2003).

In the spring of the following year, tensions between the servicemen and the Mexican youths were once again on the rise. On the evening of May 30, 1943, about a dozen sailors and soldiers were walking a downtown street. After spotting a group of young Mexican American women, they changed direction and headed toward the women. Between the military men and the young women stood a group of men in zoot suits. As the two groups passed each other, Joe Dacy Coleman, fearing he was about to be attacked, grabbed the arm of one of the zoot-suited men. He was immediately struck on the head and fell to the ground. Both groups then joined the fight with Coleman finally being dragged to safety. "The fracas lasted little more than a few minutes, but the shock reverberated for days" (Pagan 2000). The details of the fight grew larger and more violent with each retelling of the story until it wasn't long before the sailors began to organize a retaliatory strike against the zoot-suiters.

On the night of Thursday, June 3, around fifty sailors left the armory with a variety of makeshift weapons. They proceeded to the nearby neighborhood of Alpine Street, which was the scene of many previous confrontations. Unable to find any zoot-suiters, they moved toward downtown and stopped at the Carmen Theater. There they found several zoot-suiters. The sailors beat their victims, tore off their suits, and burned the clothing (McWilliams 1943a). They then moved on, looking for other young Mexican American men.

On June 3, another altercation occurred. A number of sailors claimed that they were attacked on Main Street by a group of zoot-suiters. The following evening about 200 sailors hired a fleet of taxi cabs and rolled into East Los Angeles to beat up any young Latino males that they could find. When the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) responded to the incident, they made a few token arrests, but the sailors were quickly released. Many of the police officers were members of a group called the "Vengeance Squad," which was "seeking to clean up Main Street from what they viewed as the loathsome influence of pachuco gangs" (Pagan 2003). For several subsequent nights, mobs of sailors were joined by soldiers and marched down the streets of the Mexican neighborhoods stopping in bars and theaters searching for any young Latino males.

As the violence escalated over the ensuing days, thousands of servicemen joined the attacks, marching abreast down the streets, entering bars and theaters, and assaulting any young Latino males they could find. Although the police accompanied the rioting servicemen, they had orders not to arrest any of them. After several days, more than 150 were injured, and the police had arrested more than 500 "Latinos" on charges from "rioting" to "vagrancy" (Griffith 1948).

A witness to the attacks, journalist Carey McWilliams wrote:

Marching through the streets of downtown Los Angeles, a mob of several thousand soldiers, sailors, and civilians proceeded to beat up every zoot-suiter they could find. Pushing its way into the important motion picture theaters, the mob ordered the management to turn on the house lights and then ran up and down the aisles dragging Mexicans out of their seats. Streetcars were halted while Mexicans, and some Filipinos and Negroes, were jerked from their seats, pushed into the streets and beaten with a sadistic frenzy. (McWilliams 1943b, 819)

The local press praised the military rioters for confronting the menace of the "Mexican crime wave." "Zoot Suiters Learn Lesson in Fight with Servicemen," declared the *Los Angeles Times* (Sherman 1943a). One paper even printed a guide on how to "de-zoot" a zoot-suiter: "Grab a zooter. Take off his pants and frock coat and tear them up or burn them" (*Los Angeles Daily News* 1943, 1). The Los Angeles City Council issued an ordinance banning the wearing of zoot suits, punishable by a thirty-day jail

term. "The zoot suit has become a badge of hoodlumism," explained Councilman Norris Nelson. "We prohibit nudism by an ordinance and if we can arrest people for being under-dressed, we can do so for being over-dressed" (*L.A. Almanac* 2010, 1).

Although groups of armed servicemen roamed the streets of Los Angeles attacking civilians, the military seemed more concerned with regaining control over their men than with the violence they were committing. Leery of the negative press that would result from mass arrests, Admiral Bagley, the commanding officer, appealed to his sailors' "common sense" (Pagan 2003, 176). Finally, on June 7 the military authorities intervened. The Navy and Marine Corps command staffs issued an order confining sailors and Marines to barracks and declaring Los Angeles as off-limits to all military personnel with enforcement by U.S. Navy Shore Patrol. The official position of the military was that their men were acting in self-defense (Sherman 1943). The military authorities simply failed to appreciate the seriousness of the nightly rioting: this may have been related to where the riot took place and who was being attacked. Long-standing tensions between military men and civilian youths played an important part in the mob violence. Many of the local military leaders and civilians also believed that the LAPD was not capable of controlling the rebellious minority youths (Pagan 2003). The ineffectual responses by the LAPD caused by personnel reductions due to the draft and assumptions of race and class assisted in perpetuating the riot. Thus, it was ironic that in the name of law and order servicemen rioted in Los Angeles.

Nationally, there was a condemnation of the actions of the military and the local authorities. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt commented, "The question goes deeper than just (zoot) suits. It is a racial protest. I have been worried for a long time about the Mexican racial situation. It is a problem with roots going a long way back and we do not always face these problems as we should." The *Los Angeles Times* (Sherman 1943c) responded with a June 18 headline, "Mrs. Roosevelt Blindly Stirs Race Discord." The editorial page accused the First Lady of communist leanings.

When the riots ended, an official investigation took place by the County Board of Supervisors. In 1943 the committee issued its report; it determined that racism was at the central force involved in the riots. Little came of the investigation other than the police department was instructed to train its officers to treat all citizens equally. The mayor of Los Angeles, Fletcher Bowron, responded to the protests by the Mexican Embassy by downplaying the racial nature of the incidents and blaming the local Mexican youth gangs for starting the riots (Davies 1943b).

What did the servicemen hope to accomplish through the rioting? It would be easy to say that it was simply military men "blowing off steam" or they were acting out their anxieties over military service. However, the significance of the riots may be in the zoot suits themselves. The zoot suit had clearly become the symbol of criminality and violence

from the viewpoint of the LAPD and the press. Yet, when one looks at the riot, there were no deaths, no serious damage to property, and few serious injuries. Rather, the mob was for the most part, engaged in seeking out and destroying zoot suits. The zoot suit had become a symbol of the young people who were blurring the lines of race and class (Pagan 2003). Thus, destroying the zoot suit was a show of power designed to reassert the social norms of privilege and remind Mexicans of their place in segregated Los Angeles.

Lesson Plan: Zoot Suit Riots

The following lesson plan is provided to assist teachers in helping their students understand how elements of racial prejudice and intolerance many times accompany a nation's participation in a war. Governments attempt to rally the population to support their cause. Those who do not support the cause or who are members of the ethnic or racial group the government is fighting may come under persecution or acts of intolerance by the government or the citizens who support the government's war effort. In the Zoot Suit Riots, the growing numbers of Latinos in California, and especially in the Los Angeles area, were viewed as un-American and not supportive of the war effort. Their unique dress further set them apart from mainstream America and led to racial tension and the eventual riot. Teachers can add to this lesson by using both Internet sources and print materials. The Library of Congress (American Experience) is a good source for visual materials as well as websites for the Los Angeles newspapers. An excellent print source for the topic is a book by Eduardo Pagan, entitled *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* (2003).

Rationale

Understanding the events that took place regarding the Zoot Suit Riots will not only give the students an insight into the complexities of war, but will also add to their comprehension of how intolerance and prejudice can lead to racial tension and eventual conflict. The dress of the young Mexican males at the time created an image that was soon associated with gangsters and was in direct contrast to the dress of the soldiers who were supporting the war effort. Parallels may be drawn to the dress of the "hippies" during the Vietnam era, as well as our recent racial profiling that has taken place in the post-9/11 era.

Objectives

The students will be able to do the following:

- Describe the events related to the Zoot Suit Riots.
- Describe the characteristics of a zoot suit, why it was adopted as a form of dress for Hispanic males, and explain how it led to be a symbol of antiwar dress.

- Draw comparison between the dress of the zoot-suiters, hippies, and recent groups (e.g., skinheads, Goths, and punk dressers).
- Explain the role of the newspapers in the development of the racial conflicts in Los Angeles and the eventual riot.
- Explain the position of the L.A. police department before, during, and after the riot. Make a judgment as to why they took such a viewpoint.
- Explain the position of the military regarding the riot and why it took them so long to act.
- Understand how racism and intolerance can lead to social unrest.

Materials

A variety of materials may be used to teach the lesson on the Zoot Suit Riots. The lesson requires the use of the historical documents provided along with this plan, as well as the attached photographs. Teachers may also want to add additional resources by going to various websites or consulting the various sources listed in the reference section. The specific materials included as part of this lesson plan are as follows: photos of men in zoot suits, "Power Dressing" article (Appendix A), photos of the riot (Appendix D), newspaper accounts of the riot (Appendix C), and the lyrics to the song "Zoot Suit Riot" (Appendix B). Teachers may also want to use the introductory material provided in this article as background reading for their students.

Procedures

The lesson can be taught as part of a unit on World War II, or it can be used in some combination with a unit on civil rights, or simply as part of a unit that deals with intolerance and prejudice throughout our history. Instruction can be conducted as a whole group, or the teacher can assign students to cooperative learning groups. To begin the lesson, the teacher should pass out the photos of the men dressed in zoot suits. Students should be asked to describe the key features of the zoot suit (long coat, hat, long chain, etc.). Students should then read the article on power dressing. The teacher will then lead a discussion of why groups develop a form of dress that causes them to be different from the norm. Comparisons can be drawn between the zoot-suiters, hippies, skinheads, Goths, and punks. The students can look at their own dress and how they attempt to develop their own identity.

At this point, the teacher may choose to conduct the lesson following either a guided discussion or a Web procedure. If a guided discussion is used, the teacher would pass out the attached documents, pictures, introductory readings, and other documents they chose to download from the Web regarding the topic. The teacher should begin by playing the song "Zoot Suit Riot" and passing out the lyrics. Students may read the background material

provided, the newspaper articles, and the pictures of the riot. Once the students have a background on the events, the teacher may want to return to discuss the lyrics of the song and play the song again. The questions in the following section (research questions) can be used as a basis for a discussion regarding the riots and the broader societal concerns.

In place of a guided discussion approach, the teacher may opt to have the students complete a Web activity. The lesson would start in a similar fashion, in that the teacher would play the song “Zoot Suit Riot” and discuss the lyrics. However, at this point the teacher would provide the students with the “research questions” (next section) for the Web activity. Students working in groups would search the Web for documents that would help them answer the research questions. Groups are asked to complete the questions in written form and document their sources. A general discussion would take place when the groups complete their research.

Research Questions

- What were the events that led up to the Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles?
- What were some of the obstacles that Mexican American youth faced living in L.A. during this time period?
- What caused the friction between the military men and the Latino zoot-suiters?
- What was the position of the L.A. police department before, during, and after the riot? Make a judgment as to why they took such a viewpoint. Do you think the initial lack of intervention in 1943 by the police could happen today? Explain your answer.
- What was the role of the newspapers in the riot? Cite examples. How did the newspapers affect the events of the riot and the follow-up to the riot?
- Are there magazines, newspapers, or websites today that practice a form of “yellow journalism?” Provide an example.
- Describe current events that have been sensationalized by the news, how they were portrayed by the media, and what were the implications of the portrayal.
- Explain the position of the military regarding the riot. Why did it take them so long to act? What influenced their position regarding the actions of the soldiers?
- What are some parallels between the racial discrimination experienced by Mexican American youth in the 1940s and current perceptions of underrepresented groups in our society? Think of the ongoing “War on Terrorism” and the subsequent Patriot Act.

Expansion

The teacher may wish to expand on the lesson by showing a video produced by PBS on the Zoot Suit Riots (2001). Produced and directed by Joseph Tovares, the film gives an excellent overview of the events leading up to the riot, as

well as the events of the riot (www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/zootsuitriots).

Evaluation

There are a variety of ways a teacher can assess the students’ understanding of the lesson on the Zoot Suit Riots. Students may respond to the questions posed by the teacher by providing a written response. Other activities are as follows. Write an editorial in which you present and defend your position on whether racial profiling should be permitted. Write a first-person account from the perspective of a young zoot-suiter in which you describe your feelings about being caught between your parents’ fear that you are becoming “too American” and others’ fear that you are “not American enough.” Hold a class discussion, or have the students write an essay on what might cause people to participate in destructive acts such as the Zoot Suit Riots. Finally, students can research ads/commercials of products geared to teenagers. Have them explain if the ads/commercials make the teenagers more popular, or more powerful, or more desirable? Have the students compare the ideas and messages in the ads/commercials to the handout on “Power Dressing: Zoot Suits.”

Conclusion

The lesson on the Zoot Suit Riots was pilot-tested in four tenth-grade American History classrooms as a part of a unit on World War II. Two of the classes were taught using the guided discussion approach and two were taught using the Web approach. Two teachers (one for each method) and approximately 100 students used the materials and the plan provided. The results were extremely positive for both groups. All four classes enjoyed listening to the song “Zoot Suit Riot” and viewing the pictures of men in zoot suits. Lively discussions took place in all classes comparing the zoot suits to teenage clothing of today. The issue of racial profiling was also a hot topic related to this lesson. Students brought up examples of their own peers being judged by their appearance. Discussions flowed between the zoot-suiters, Hispanics, Muslims, and teenagers. The lesson seemed to raise the students’ consciousness related to the topics of intolerance and racial prejudice. From the perspective of the students, it didn’t seem to matter if the guided inquiry or the Web approach was used. However, from the teachers’ viewpoint there was a difference. The teacher who used the guided inquiry approach completed the lesson in one fifty-five-minute class period. The following day she reviewed the evaluation assignment where the students were asked to write a first-person account from the perspective of a “zoot-suiter.” For the second teacher who used the Web activity, approximately thirty-five minutes were used in playing the song, discussing the pictures of the “zoot-suiters,” reading the “Power Dressing” article, and

discussing the Web assignment. This took place on a Tuesday and the following Monday the students presented their work during the entire class period. For the second teacher, the Web assignment also functioned as an evaluation.

The main part of the discussion between the two teachers was simply how much time do you allocate for the lesson? In addition, they discussed the fact that in the Web activity you proceeded with other topics but then had to go back to complete the lesson. Both teachers felt their students learned about the historical event and how social issues can accompany times of war. From the teachers' viewpoint, the decision of which approach to use simply came down to teacher preference.

References

- Davies, Lawrence. "28 Zoot Suiters Seized On Coast After Clash With Service Men," *New York Times*, June 7, 1943a.
- . "Not A Race Issue, Mayor Says," *New York Times*, June 10, 1943b.
- . "Seek Basic Causes Of Zoot Suit Fray," *New York Times*, June 11.
- . "Los Angeles Group Insists Riots Halt," *New York Times*, June 13, 1943c.
- Del Castillo, R. "The Los Angeles 'Zoot Suit' Riots Revisited: Mexican and Latin American Perspectives." *Mexican Studies* 16 (2000): 367–91.
- Griffith, Beatrice. *American Me*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943.
- L.A. Opinion. "The Battle Between Marines And Pachucos," June 1943. <http://web.mala.bc.ca/davies/h324war/zootsuit.riots.media.1943.htm>
- Lopez, Ian. *Racism on Trial: The Chicano Fight for Justice*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Los Angeles Almanac*. "Los Angeles Suit Riots," 1, 2010. <http://www.laalmanac.com/history/h.07t.htm>
- Los Angeles Daily News*. "Guide To De-Zoot A Zoot Suiter," June 7, 1943.
- McWilliams, C. "The Zoot Suit Riots," *New Republic*, June 21, 1943a, 818–20.
- . North from Mexico. 1943b. Quoted in Richard Griswold del Castillo. "The Los Angeles 'Zoot Suit' Riots Revisited: Mexican and Latin American Perspectives." *Mexican Studies* 16 (2000): 378.
- Pagan, Eduardo O. "Los Angeles Geopolitics and the Zoot Suit Riots, 1943," *Social Science History* 24, no. 4 (2000): 223–56.
- . *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riots in Wartime L.A.* Charlotte: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.
- Power Dressing: Zoot Suits. http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/periods_styles/hiddenhistories/zootsuits/index.html
- Peiss, Kathy. *Zoot Suits: The Enigmatic Case of Extreme Style*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.
- Sherman, Gene. "Mexican Crime Wave," *Los Angeles Times*. June 3, 1943a.
- . "City, Navy Clamp Lid On Zoot Suit Warfare." *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 1943b.
- . "Mrs. Roosevelt Blindly Stirs Race Discord." *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1943c.
- . "Youth Gangs Leading Cause of Delinquencies." *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 1943d.
- Sitton, Thomas. *Los Angeles Transformed*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005.
- The Cherry Poppin' Daddies. *Zoot Suit Riot*. www.lyricsondemand.com/zootsuitriotlyrics.html
- Tovares, J. "Zoot Suit Riots, American Experience." WGBH Educational Foundation, 2001. www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/zootsuitriots
- Waxman, A. "Race Incitement to Violence—An Eyewitness Account." *Peoples Daily World Newspaper*, June 10, 1943.

Appendices

Appendix A: Power Dressing: Zoot Suits

The origins of the zoot suit are unclear. What is clear, however, is that as a style it became strongly associated with young working-class Black, Hispanic, and Filipino men living in urban areas of North America in the early 1940s. "Zoot" meant something worn or performed in an extravagant style and the zoot suit was an exaggerated, elaborate form of dress. The suit consisted of a long jacket with wide lapels and padded shoulders and high-waisted, wide-legged, tight-cuffed pegged trousers worn with a flat-crowned, wide-brimmed hat, a "ducktail" hair style, thick-soled pointed shoes and a long watch chain. The attitude adopted by the wearer of the zoot suit was equally important. As writer Thomas Sanchez had one of his characters in his 1978 novel *Zoot-Suit Murders* declare; "You got to be tricking yourself out like the dude, get yourself up in some pants with stuff-cuff, reet-pleats, look like a Zoot, walk like a Zoot, talk like a Zoot." In his autobiography, Malcom X (then Malcolm Little) recalled the excitement of purchasing his first zoot suit at the age of fifteen. His description emphasizes the importance of "striking the pose."

"I was measured, and the young salesman picked off a rack a zoot suit that was just wild: sky-blue pants thirty inches in the knee and angle narrowed down to twelve inches at the bottom, and a long coat that pinched my waist and flared out below my knees. As a gift, the salesman said, the store would give me a narrow leather belt with my initial 'L' on it. Then he said I ought to also buy a hat, and I did—blue, with a feather in the four-inch brim. Then the store gave me another present: a long, thick-lined, gold plated chain that swung down lower than my coat hem. I was sold forever on credit . . . I took three of those twenty-five cent sepia-toned, while-you wait pictures of myself, posed the way 'hipsters' wearing their zoots would 'cool-it'—hat angled, knees drawn close together, feet wide apart, both index fingers jabbed toward the floor. The long coat and swinging chain and the Punjab pants were much more dramatic if you stood that way."

One of the reasons behind the adoption of the suit by the young and disenfranchised was related to self identity . . . The self-confidence and assertiveness shown by young zoot-suiters, most of whom were from communities marred by poverty and racial discrimination, hit a nerve in wartime America. So too did the extravagant amount of cloth used in the creation of zoot suits, which contravened rationing regulations introduced in 1942 . . . Perhaps predictably, following the relaxation of rationing regulations after the war

ended, the zoot suit reentered the fashion scene, now as a mainstream style. By 1948 a slimmed-down version of the suit was being marketed by the American fashion industry as a new, postwar bold look for the average (white) man. In this way, the zoot suit reflects a “bottom up” movement rather than “top down” in the diffusion of fashion.

From: http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/periods_styles/hiddenhistories/zootsuits/index.html

Appendix B: “Zoot Suit Riot” By The Cherry Poppin’ Daddies

Who’s that whisperin’ in the trees?
It’s two sailors and they’re on leave
Pipes and chains and swingin’ hands
Who’s your daddy? Yes I am

Fat cat came to play
Now he can’t run fast enough
You’d best stay away
When the pushers come to shove

Zoot suit riot throw back a bottle of beer
Zoot suit riot Pull a comb through your coal black hair
Zoot suit riot throw back a bottle of beer
Zoot suit riot Pull a comb through your coal black hair
Blow Daddy!

A whipped up jitterbuggin’ brown eyed man
A stay cat frontin’ up an eight-piece band
Cut me Sammy and you’ll understand
In my veins hot music ran

You got me in a sway
And I want to swing you done
Now you sailors know
Where your women come for love

Zoot suit riot Throw back a bottle of beer
Zoot suit riot Pull a comb through your coal black hair

You’re in a Zoot suit riot
You’re in a Zoot suit riot
You’re in a Zoot suit riot

Oh you got me in a sway
And I want to swing you done
Now you sailors know

Where your women come for love

Zoot suit riot Throw back a bottle of beer
Zoot suit riot Pull a comb through your coal black hair

You’re in a Zoot suit riot
You’re in a Zoot suit riot
You’re in a Zoot suit riot

Lyrics from: www.lyricsondemand.com/zootsuitriotlyrics.html

Appendix C: Zoot Suit Riots: Newspaper Articles

LOS ANGELES TIMES, JUNE 2, 1943

YOUTH GANGS LEADING CAUSE OF DELINQUENCIES

By Gene Sherman

Fresh in the memory, of Los Angeles is last year’s surge of gang violence that made the “zoot suit” a badge of delinquency.

Public indignation seethed as warfare among organized bands of marauders, prowling the streets at night, brought a wave of assaults, finally murders.

Gang activities constitute an important part of the juvenile delinquent problem in Los Angeles. Next to “desire for adventure and employment” the Police Department lists gangs as the chief cause of delinquency.

Many over 18 in Gangs

There are, however, two exceedingly important things to remember when dealing with gangs—a large group of the membership of gangs comprises youths over 18 years of age and although many gang members wear “zoot suits,” thousands of “zoot suit” wearers are non-delinquents.

At the beginning of the year it was estimated that there were 30 gangs in the country, including approximately 750 juvenile boys.

This estimate is at variance, however, with the police statistics which blame gang activity for the booking of 811 juveniles last year and the investigation (without booking) of 115 more.

Mark of “Distinction”

Although “zoot suits” became a uniform of delinquency because of their popularity among the gangs, their adoption by some of the city’s youth was more a bid for recognition, a way of being “different,” in the opinion of Heman G. Stark, County Protection Office chief of delinquency prevention.

Stark and Superior Judge Robert H. Scott of Juvenile Court concur in the belief that the formation of gangs was an outgrowth of a feeling of inferiority on the part of minority groups.

Whitfeiffer, executive-secretary of the Council of Social Agencies, points out that, between native-born youths of native-born parents and native-born youths of foreign-born parents, the latter always poses the greater delinquency problem.

Language Marks Difference

Juvenile files repeated show that a language variance in the home—where the parents speak no English and cling to past culture—is a serious factor of delinquency. Parents in such a home lack control over their offspring.

Motives for gang warfare are ridiculous in adult eyes but sometimes lead to planned and bloody fighting. One youth rallied his gang when a member of another East Side band made disparaging remarks about his automobile. A knife fight almost resulted when a member of one gang bumped into a member of another on Main St.

Many of the gang fights reported in newspapers have been planned conflicts with clubs, rods, lengths of pipe, knives and even guns—planned much like a football contest would be.

Detective Work started

Using the gang idea, much has been done to direct the energies of groups of idle boys into constructive channels.

A plumber on Third Street not long ago was troubled by boys who broke his windows and raided other stores in the block. The plumber corralled the leader of the group, invited the whole group to have dinner with him, planned the organization of a club and personally raised money for athletic equipment.

Window-breaking ceased and the merchants had the fun of backing a winning softball team!

The gang theory is used to superlative advantage in the Boy Scouts, Wood-craft Rangers, Campfire Girls and other youth organizations. Juvenile officers report instances where whole gangs, engaged in assorted depredations, have been formed into merit-badge-winning Scout troops . . .

NEW YORK TIMES, JUNE 7, 1943

By Lawrence E. Davies

28 ZOOT SUITERS SEIZED ON COAST AFTER CLASHES WITH SERVICE MEN

Subdued and no longer ready to do battle, twenty-eight zoot-suiters, stripped of their garish clothing and with county jail barbers hopefully eyeing their flowing duck-tail haircuts, languished behind bars today after a second night of battle with of fleers and service men.

The arrests came after a “war” declared by service men, mostly sailors, on zoos-suit gangs which have been preying on the East Side as well as molesting civilians. Impetus was given to the clean-up campaign when the wives of two sailors were criminally attacked by the youths.

Cruising in taxicabs and cars, and occasionally spearing into enemy territory on foot in precise platoon drill, the service men routed the gangs, depriving them of crude weapons.

Favored for fighting by the youths were lengths of rope weighted with wire and lead, tire chains and wrenches, hammers and heavy bottles, some with the tops broken off.

Deputy sheriffs and police riot squads patrolled the “No Man’s Land,” breaking up fights where possible.

Sixteen Mexican youths, all armed with some sort of bludgeon, were arrest-ed. They were said to have tried to keep Deputy Sheriffs Foster Kellogg and E. N. Smith from arresting one of their number.

The entire lot was booked in the county jail on riot charges after flying squadrons of officers arrived on the scene.

The suspects, who were in a truck, said they were on their way to “have it out” with a bunch of sailors who had sent word they would be at California and Temple Streets to accommodate any of the zoot-suiters who thought Uncle Sam’s fighting men were not just that.

LOS ANGELES TIMES, JUNE 9, 1943

CITY, NAVY CLAMP LID ON ZOOT-SUIT WARFARE

By Gene Sherman

. . . Throughout tense hours last night the zoos-suit war was held to sporadic clashes by a combination of strong police patrols and a Navy order listing Los Angeles as a restricted area for men of the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard.

Nearly 1000 uniformed and special officers took up assigned positions throughout the downtown and East Side sections of the city at dusk. Others patrolled the streets in cruising cars, keeping a throng of sight-seers moving.

Crowds were dispersed almost as soon as they gathered and few youths in zoot suits were seen as groups of soldiers moved through the district with the watchful eyes of men looking for trouble.

Sailor’s Nose Broken

There was little violence reported alter dark.

One sailor, Harold Tabor, 32, was beaten by a group of zoot suiters at 103rd and Graham streets and treated at Georgia Street Receiving Hospital for a broken nose. George Lorigo, 19, of 9533 Wilmington Ave., was arrested on a battery charge in connection with the assault.

Lewis D. English, 23-year-old zoot-suit wearer of 844 E. Fifth St., was arrested by Officer R. F. Brady for carrying a 16-inch razor sharp butcher knife “for protection” and a 16-year-old lad was taken into custody for carrying an iron bar and a knife.

M.P.’s Patrol in Groups

Military police patrols roamed the streets on foot and in jeeps, augmenting the work of city police. Many women

and girls strolled the sidewalks with soldier escorts and the bars were crowded with servicemen awaiting the sound of a police whistle or a scuffle.

Only a sprinkling of sailors was seen, however, as the ban ordered by Rear Admiral D. W. Bagley, commandant of the 11th Naval District, went into effect.

Admiral Bagley issued the "precautionary measure" as a result of clashes between Navy men and the youths.

The official Navy announcement described the sailors as acting in "self-defense against the rowdy element" and defined the order as applying to all Navy personnel except those granted special authorization by commanders of naval stations in the area

Navy Men Taunted

Yesterday's incidents in the zoot war included insults hurled at Navy men in the Chavez Ravine area After shouting taunts and abuse mixed with dire threats, the youths sped away.

Earlier in the day police reported that Donald J. Jackson, 20-year-old sailor, had been knifed by a gang of youths at First St. and Evergreen Ave. shortly after noon, while his companion, James R. Phelps, 19, another sailor, escaped injury by fleeing.

The attack was reported to the Hollenbeck Heights police, who began a roundup of suspects in the vicinity. Jackson received a five-inch cut in the stomach and a slight cut on the head and was treated at the Georgia Street Receiving Hospital, where his condition was said to be serious.

Shortly after, D. A. Mainhurst, 23, a sailor who had just reached the city from San Diego, reported to Newton St. police that he was beaten and kicked by a gang of zoot suiters at Central Ave. and Olympic Blvd. as he was waiting for a bus

Attacked from Behind

He told police that about eight men attacked him from behind, knocked him down and kicked him. He escaped and took refuge in a service station, from which the gangsters dragged him and began beating him when nearby residents came to his rescue and the gang fled.

Phelps and Jackson said they were walking peaceably along the street at First St. and Evergreen Ave. when at least 15 zoot suiters jumped from auto-mobiles and attacked them, slashing Jackson.

All this occurred shortly before Army and Navy officers conferred with Mayor Bowron and Chief of Police Horrall in the Mayor's office regarding plans for halting the disturbances. Full cooperation was pledged by the military officials, who were not aware at the time that Admiral Bagley had made Los Angeles a restricted area for his personnel

. . . .

Scores Beaten

In the Monday night rioting which blocked traffic on S. Main St. and Broad-way for a time, at least 50 zoot-suit youths were beaten and, in many cases, stripped of their outer clothing.

Thousands of civilians assembled in the area and, according to Chief Horrall, "egged on" the servicemen, who banded together and took on all persons they found clad in zoot suits.

In the police roundup which followed, more than 200 youths, only a few of them in zoot suits, were arrested and booked in the Georgia Street Juvenile Bureau on suspicion of inciting to riot. Nearly 500 servicemen were taken in custody by military authorities and police but these were sent back to their stations early yesterday.

LA OPINION, JUNE 9, 1943

THE BATTLE BETWEEN MARINES AND PACHUCOS

. . . The Coordinator of Latin-American Youths . . . informed us . . . that during a meeting in which the situation created by the riots between the "pachucos" and the marines was discussed, a decision was reached to send the following telegram to Mr. Elmer Davis, Head of the Office of War Information in Washington; to Mr. Alan Cranston, Head of the Division of Foreign Languages, of the same office, and to President Roosevelt at the White House. Here is the message:

Since last Thursday evening various groups of marines and soldiers have attacked Mexican zoot suiters throughout the city of Los Angeles. Although the youth did nothing to provoke the attack or for that matter to resist the attack, many were severely wounded, including women and children. Supposedly the attack has been motivated by past conflicts between the two groups and has been amplified by the press claiming that Mexican youths have been disrespectful toward the servicemen, a claim without any foundation.

Despite precautions taken on the part of the military police and local authorities to control the situation, the servicemen continue to walk the streets of Los Angeles armed with clubs and appear to be tacitly supported by many city and local officials in charge of keeping the peace; their attacks have now expanded to include blacks. This situation, which is prompting racial antagonism between the Mexican, Anglo-Saxon and Black communities will undoubtedly have grave international repercussions which will inevitably damage the war effort and thwart the gains made by the Good Neighbor policy. We urge immediate intervention by the Office of War Information so that it moderates the local press which has openly approved of these

mutinies and which is treating this situation in a manner that is decidedly inflammatory.

Eduardo Quevedo, president of the Coordinating Council of the Young People of Latin America.

<http://web.mala.bc.ca/davies/h324war/zootsuit.riots.media.1943.htm>.

NEW YORK TIMES, JUNE 11, 1943

SEEK BASIC CAUSES OF ZOOT SUIT FRAY

By Lawrence E. Davies

LOS ANGELES, June 10—Service men and young zoot suit wearers engaged in new outbreaks today as State investigators, under orders from Governor Earl Warren, began probing for the basic causes of a week-long series of disorders which have placed Los Angeles “out of bounds” for most Navy personnel.

Community leaders held meetings in an effort to get the city “back to normal” and to present evidence that the street battles represented a symptom not of racial discrimination but of an increasingly serious State-wide juvenile delinquency problem.

A legislative committee sought evidence that might link subversive agents with the gang activities.

Meanwhile, there was no indication that Rear Admiral D. W. Bagley, commandant of the Eleventh Naval District, would countermand his order restricting liberty in this city for Navy personnel. He took this action on Tuesday afternoon as a result of dozens of retaliatory dashes between “zoot suit” hoodlums and Navy enlisted men.

C. B. Horrall, chief of police, declared that the situation was well in hand but about that time two “zoot suit” wearers at the Plaza had their pants stripped off by a group of sailors “just traveling through.” Several other minor incidents marked the day.

Rise of Disorders Traced

The series of disorders actually began in December in San Pedro, according to Navy sources, when lone sailors were waylaid in dim-out areas, beaten and robbed. According to police records, there have been twenty-six attacks on service men since March; Navy officers believe that the number has exceeded fifty since Jan. 1.

The retaliatory action began about a week ago. According to one version, a small group of sailors was chatting with a group of young women of Mexican descent when zoot-suited friends of the girls intervened, brought reinforcements and routed the sailors. The sailors went after reinforcements and beat up the zooters. A series of retaliations followed. In some versions women did not figure

By Monday night taxicab fleets of sailors were hunting for zoot-suit wearers.

Navy men emphasize, and police agree, that in most instances the sailors, aided in a few cases by soldiers, and sometimes by taxicab drivers, showed a spirit as of a college fraternity initiation. Petty officers were almost wholly missing. The uniformed participants were seamen who, for the most part, had been in the Navy from one to six months.

As for the zoot suit wearers, according to some observers, hundreds had in recent years roved in organized bands. These gangs engaged in thievery, petty crimes and now and then knifings. For the most part bands were content to war with one another. Members ranged in age from 16 to 20 years . . .

NEW YORK TIMES, JUNE 13, 1943

LOS ANGELES GROUP INSISTS RIOTS HALT

By Lawrence E. Davies

Race Prejudice Factor Cited -

Governor Warren’s committee found it to be “significant” that most of the persons mistreated during the recent incidents in Los Angeles were either persons of Mexican descent or Negroes.

“In undertaking to deal with the cause of these outbreaks,” its report said, “the existence of race prejudice cannot be ignored.

“Youth is peculiarly sensitive. To be rejected by the community may throw the youth upon evil companions.

“Any solution of the problems involves among other things an educational program throughout the community designed to combat race prejudice in all its forms.” . . .

“The wearers of zoot suits,” the report went on, “are not necessarily persons of Mexican descent, criminals or juveniles. Many young people today wear zoot suits.

“It is a mistake in fact and an aggravating practice to link the phrase ‘zoot suit’ with the report of a crime. Repeated reports of this character tend to inflame public opinion on false premises and excite further outbreaks.”

Rise in Juvenile Delinquency—

“All juvenile delinquency has increased recently in Los Angeles. This includes crimes committed by youths of Mexican origin. But the fact is that the increase of delinquency in the case of youths of Mexican families has been less than in the case of other national or racial groups and less than the average increase for the community.

“Between 1914 and 1929 all of California, and Los Angeles County in particular, had a rapid increase in

Mexican population. The tremendous difficulties experienced by immigrants in making adjustments to their new surroundings are well known. We have learned that the problem is especially acute in the case of the second generation. The foreign-born parent loses authority over his American-born child; families tend to be broken up; and if

the children are not completely accepted by their neighbors; they are often without responsible guidance.

“These facts shed light on the youths of Mexican descent in Los Angeles. Many of them are second generation. About 98 per cent of them are American born.

Appendix D: Zoot Suit Photos







Copyright of Social Studies is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.